

September 8, 2008

From: Russell K. Osgood

To: The Grinnell College Community

Re: Science Initiative

This year, to coincide with the October dedication of the Robert N. Noyce'49 Science Center, I plan to announce a focusing of our efforts and achievements concerning science education in the liberal arts. We know that Grinnell College is a national leader in educating scientists, and that over the past two decades the highly committed members of our science faculty have developed innovative and successful programs in undergraduate science education. The Grinnell Science Project, directed in recent years by Elaine Marzluff, has improved the success of students who were traditionally under-represented in science. We have a vital liberal-arts curriculum that engages nearly all students in the study of science, even though they are not required to take science courses in order to graduate. The learning of science at Grinnell College focuses on a process of discovery and inquiry while it also builds critical thinking, communication, and information literacy: core foci of liberal education. This fall we are dedicating the completion of first-rate facilities in the Noyce Science Center, which with the recently constructed facility at CERA, (whose 40th anniversary we will celebrate on Saturday, September 20), exemplify the study of science in a liberal arts context. Meanwhile, our curricular and pedagogical initiatives attract external validation and support. For instance, the College recently received substantial funding from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute to support interdisciplinary curricular efforts (a proposal developed by a faculty committee chaired by Mark Levandoski) and a second grant to support the continuing work of David Lopatto in assessing student learning in undergraduate research and inquiry in science. Jim Swartz has become project coordinator of the NSF funded Project Kaleidoscope Pedagogies of Engagement project.

In the next year, I have invited Jim Swartz to lead the planning effort to establish a new initiative to focus upon undergraduate science education. Its primary goal will be, through both local and national efforts, to increase the public visibility, effectiveness, and appropriate recognition of Grinnell College as a leader in undergraduate science education. This initiative may include hosting national and regional meetings, offering residencies for scholars engaged in relevant research, and finding ways to disseminate the results of successful projects. David Lopatto's work on assessment fits into this realm, as does Jim's current work with Project Kaleidoscope. I envision that Jim Swartz will also provide administrative support for the Noyce Visiting Professor program. Yet another part of what we hope to do is to forge better relationships with key secondary-school teachers and counselors. Other Grinnell faculty members are also engaged in efforts that will be invited to coordinate with this initiative.

The initiative is not yet named, but might well be called something like the center for science in the liberal arts. I am convinced that Jim is the right person to lead this effort. In his role as a Team Chair for accreditation reviews, he has evaluated a wide variety of undergraduate academic programs. Even before, but especially during his ten-year term as Dean of the College, Jim achieved national visibility as an expert on undergraduate science education, serving as a consultant to dozens of colleges and universities as they planned new science facilities and curricular development. Calling upon Jim's leadership, I hope that we can establish new prominence for the College in this area of important national need, while gaining appropriate recognition for the substantial accomplishments of our science faculty and programs.