Size of the College
Fall 2005

Background

The student enrollment of Pomona College has increased slowly but steadily for several decades at a rate of 7-8 students per year. This increase is shown in the chart below, where the lower (blue) line represents only students taking classes in Claremont, and the upper (red) line represents enrollment including study abroad. The fluctuations of enrollment during this period were mostly unintentional—the result of unexpected changes in admissions, leaves of absence, or attrition (withdrawals)—but variations on the high side were frequently used in budgetary planning for subsequent years, leading to the growth seen in the chart.

This strategy of gradual growth was acknowledged and embraced by a task force appointed at the beginning of a strategic planning process in 1992. Members of that task force (including faculty, students, staff, and one trustee) concluded in their report:

“...we see enrollment growth not as an end in itself but, rather, as one potential element in an overall strategy for achieving other desirable goals that might emerge from the College’s planning efforts. In the event that curricular and other programmatic needs lead to a compelling case for planned enrollment growth, this preliminary study would put us in a better position to confront the consequences and embark on a strategic plan.”

Since that time enrollment has grown by about 50 students and the full-time faculty has grown by about 10. Now, more than a decade after completion of one strategic planning exercise we are about to begin another. The size of the college is one of our most important strategic statistics, so we propose to address the question once again early in the planning process.

The Context

Pomona College is one of the smallest institutions of its type—selective private liberal arts institutions committed primarily to undergraduate education in a residential setting. In fact, among the 13 very selective liberal arts colleges considered to be our primary peer group, Pomona is the 3rd smallest in size (counting undergraduate students only):

More relevant, perhaps, is the size of the faculty at each of these institutions. The chart below shows that Pomona College has the second lowest number of faculty in this peer group—the absolute lowest amongst the coed college members of the group:
Much has been written over the last decade or two about the prospects for survival of the residential liberal arts college. Although the sector has proven to be more robust than many predicted, and although Pomona College and its closest peers have, in fact, thrived over the last decade, we all still face real competition for the best students from the flagship public universities and the elite private research universities. Our greatest asset — relatively small size with personal attention from faculty and an emphasis on teaching and community-building — is weighed by many students against the extraordinary breadth and depth of curricular and extracurricular offerings available at other institutions.

At the same time there is increasing interest — both from external sources (for public policy reasons) as well as from our own faculty, students, and alumni — to continue the historical mission of Pomona as an engine of social mobility and societal benefit by extending our reach to as many students as possible. There has always been a tension between our desire to preserve the intimate and personal nature of the college community and our sense of obligation as a “public trust” to serve the greater community by reaching more students.

We now believe that our position as one of the smallest colleges in our peer group puts us at a significant strategic disadvantage, and that both of these factors — the size of the faculty, and the number of students we serve — should be reconsidered.

In order to maintain excellence over the next decade Pomona College must acknowledge its obligation to extend its reach when we can, and must respond to the curricular and extracurricular breadth and depth of our peers. These challenges must be met at the same time that we seek to maintain our distinctiveness (small, residential, and personal) in a very diverse universe of higher education options in the United States. These goals will require thoughtful and strategic enrichment of our curriculum and this, in turn, will inevitably require more faculty (including conversion of many existing part-time positions to full-time tenure track positions) and a larger student body.

Over the years Pomona has tried to offer a curriculum characteristic of a stand-alone liberal arts college. Our success is reflected in consistently high external measures of “academic reputation”. The Claremont Colleges help us primarily by broadening course offerings in departments already represented at Pomona, by providing occasional enrollment relief in impacted disciplines, and by allowing us to cover sabbatical leaves without automatically replacing every faculty member with adjunct faculty. In effect, the consortium extends our curriculum in directions that resemble a small university more than a liberal arts college, but it does not mitigate the need for us to create a curriculum, on our own, that is comparable to that of the other leading national liberal arts colleges.

Consideration of increasing the size of the college immediately raises concerns about the potential impact on admissions (selectivity and academic quality), class
size (frequently used as one indicator of quality of teaching), and finances (the net
cost or benefit of changes in enrollment or faculty numbers). These and other
concerns (the quality of extracurricular student life, the intimacy of faculty and student
communities, etc.) should be discussed and explored before a decision about future
enrollment growth is reached. These issues are introduced briefly below.

Admissions

Pomona College has strengthened its position in an increasingly competitive
admissions market over the last decade. The number of applications to virtually all
institutions in Pomona’s peer group grew dramatically, and Pomona’s applicant pool
doubled. At the same time, our yield (the percentage of admitted students who
choose to enroll at Pomona) increased substantially—at a rate that is significantly
greater than most of our peers. Currently, Pomona has virtually the strongest entering
freshman academic profile of our peer institutions (selective coed liberal arts
colleges). The following data provide more detail about the changes over the decade:

Freshman Admission Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Fall 1994*</th>
<th>Fall 2005</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Applications</td>
<td>3293</td>
<td>5054</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admits</td>
<td>1179</td>
<td>955</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admit Rate</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yield (% of admits enrolled)</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean SAT Verbal</td>
<td>690</td>
<td>722</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean SAT Math</td>
<td>690</td>
<td>721</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Scores for 1994 have been “re-centered” to make them comparable to 2005.

With applications and yield both increasing, we have been able to reduce both the
absolute number of admission offers and the percentage of applicants offered
admission. The percentage (often referred to as the “admit rate”) decreased from
36% to 19% over the decade—the natural result of a highly selective admissions
process. The absolute number of admission offers we are able to make to an
increasingly talented applicant pool is now the lowest it has been in 20 years—about
150 fewer than the average annual number of offers over that period of time. (See the
chart below.)

It is clear that there are quite a few more highly qualified applicants who would do well
at Pomona while maintaining both our academic strength and our competitive
position if there were room to admit them. The question, of course, is how many
additional students could be admitted without affecting the quality or the statistical
profile of the entering class. At the current yield of 40%, we would have to admit about
100 additional students each year to increase the size of each entering class by 40—an
increase of about 10% that would bring our average annual enrollment to about
1650. Is this a feasible and prudent increase to consider?
The next 100 students who would be admitted from the existing applicant pool under this scenario would not be identical in every respect to the 950 or so we are currently admitting. They would all be academically stellar and more than capable of succeeding at Pomona, but would not mirror the rest of the admitted pool in terms of other demographics (geography, ethnicity, athletics and other special talents, etc.). Fortunately, a number of efforts to increase the representation of some strategically important groups in the applicant pool (the "Keller initiative", the Posse program, the Questbridge program, etc.) are beginning to generate more applications from underrepresented and low income students, and we have been discussing strategies for increasing applications from international students. With these efforts, we believe that an additional 100 admits could ultimately bring more diversity of various kinds to the freshman class. The challenge would be to improve this diversity while maintaining academic strength so that our selectivity does not fall below that of our peers. We believe that we are in a very strong position to do this, and we believe that it is strategically important for us to do so.

Class size

Small classes taught by full-time tenure-track faculty are one of the distinguishing characteristics of Pomona College. We expect to utilize the large lecture pedagogy in a relatively small number of circumstances where it is appropriate and effective, and only rarely should the size of lecture sections exceed 50. We expect each student to have the opportunity to take several smaller classes (<10) where participation and engagement with other students and the instructor is most intense, and we hope to maximize the number of classes with enrollments under 20 vs. classes over 20. The factors that affect the distribution of class size include cross registration and coordination of course offerings within and among departments. The most critical factor, however, is the student/faculty ratio. If we are to consider increasing the size of the college, we must do so with attention to any impact on this ratio.

In addition to quality and pedagogical concerns, class size is important for competitive reasons because it is used in external rankings as one measure of quality. For example, U.S. News and World Report uses the "% of classes under 20" as one of its measures of "quality". Pomona's percentage has ranged from 73% to 80% over the last several years (see the chart below), and this has compared favorably with our peer institutions. It is a competitive issue that we should not ignore.

Data on the distribution of student course enrollments (the distribution of student course enrollments across the classes shown above) are displayed below for the two academic years 1994-95, and 2003-04. This chart shows that there has been a very significant reduction in the percentage of enrollments in classes with >40 students over the decade, and more than 50% of student enrollments are now in classes with <20 students. These are very favorable trends and it is a high priority for us to maintain them. Doing so will require active and aggressive management of course enrollments by departments and by the Dean's Office, as well as careful planning of both overall enrollment and faculty hiring to maintain the student/faculty
ratio at close to its current value of less than 9/1.

**Financial analysis**

If it is strategically important for Pomona College to increase the size of the faculty to a level that is comparable to our peers, we should assure ourselves that we can do so without draining financial resources from other college programs or priorities. The cost of new faculty should be matched by revenue received from additional students. We have conducted a detailed *pro forma* financial analysis of both sides of this equation — the total annual cost of a new faculty member, and the total net revenue received from additional students.

This *pro forma* analysis is based on the following principal assumptions:

- Faculty additions are at the assistant professor entry level.
- Office, laboratory, and teaching space are added for each new faculty member at a level equal to the average being provided in the most recent construction and renovation projects.
- Dormitory beds and related space are added for all additional students.
- The financial aid need of additional students is equal to the average need of current students.
- Other facility costs (parking, utilities, etc.) are added at the level currently provided for faculty and students.
- Non-teaching staff are added, where necessary, to maintain existing levels of staff support for faculty and students.

The results of this analysis are as follows:

- Each additional student generates net revenue of $8,911 in FY06 dollars. The principal annual costs balancing the nominal tuition and fee revenue of $40,284 are financial aid ($13,340) and dormitory space ($5,348).

- Each additional faculty member incurs an annual cost of $137,721. The principal components of this cost are salaries and benefits ($76,800) and academic/teaching space ($41,080).

The ratio of these two numbers, approximately 15/1, is the number of students who would have to be added for each new faculty member for the growth to be financially neutral. This is a worst case scenario that assumes that all new costs would have to be covered out of existing operating budgets. In reality, of course, many of these costs would be covered by new gifts — both endowment and capital — that would be solicited for specific projects. The actual ratio of new students to new faculty required for financial neutrality in the operating budget would be much closer to the current student/faculty ratio of approximately 9/1.