

March 22, 2018 Town Hall Meeting – Small Group Discussions Summary

Overview:

APC planned a community Town Hall meeting on March 22, 2018. After a brief information sharing session with several key constituents, including the VPs of Academic Affairs, Admissions and Student Affairs, as well as the chair of Staff Council, APC asked participants to split up into groups and do a basic planning exercise, which is to think about the current opportunities and threats faced by Pitzer college. We further split up these discussion topics into internal vs. external dimensions to try and get feedback on the different kinds of forces we face. There were two groups¹ each discussing the four topics of Opportunities (internal and external) and Threats (internal and external). The following summarizes the notes put together that were reported back in the session. Participation was robust at the meeting and generated significant feedback.

Opportunities – external

The discussion groups looking at possible opportunities from an outward/external perspective took the discussion charge in many different directions and even had a wide variety of conceptualizations of what might be considered ‘external’ to Pitzer that scaffolded discussion.

Some dimensions of our ‘external’ environment included thinking about our surrounding communities and possible opportunities for the college with those relationships. Some ideas expressed in this vein are more recruitment in the Inland Empire, with more chances to invest in social responsibility and attract and support strong students not currently targeted/drawn to the college. In addition to this, more outreach overall to local community organizations beyond existing relationships was seen as another way to generate new educational opportunities for students and institutional development.

Another external connection highlighted was in our prospective students and families, who are not at the college yet and an opportunity for more, better outreach and communication about the college with these populations, to better harmonize their expressed interests with our resources and also reflect on changing national trends. Related to this, group members also considered our growing international student body, (current, prospective and alumni), as a population that could generate additional opportunities for the college, perhaps in terms of recruiting students from new countries and regions, or more coordination between study abroad programming and international student recruitment. More communication with our alumni population overall, who are now ‘external’ to Pitzer institutionally, was seen to represent an opportunity for more collaboration, funding, and other forms of external support for Pitzer activities. Discussants also

¹ With the exception of ‘threats internal,’ which was one, larger group.

identified the Consortium as an important potential source of ‘external’ opportunities, through the possible development of new 5C consortial programs, for example.

Finally, these groups considered the broad environment for liberal arts education overall in the national conversation as an external opportunity, in the sense that the narrative about the liberal arts is being generated mostly ‘externally’ to Pitzer, but we have an opportunity to interact with this conversation in a productive way, using our strengths to highlight the true value of a liberal arts education, as a form of proof by example. At the same time, discussants also recognized that we don’t exist in a bubble and we must better engage with how we benchmark to national expectations and standards for a liberal arts education, in terms of our day-to-day operations, maintaining an optimal level of support for our staff, students and faculty versus other peer institutions.

Opportunities – internal

The discussion groups charged with thinking about internal opportunities for the college identified many potential ‘internal’ adjustments to how we operate that are opportunities for better functioning and institutional strength. Many of the highlighted ideas took the form of different types of coordination and collaboration across existing entities at the college. Some examples include cocurricular collaboration in different forms: coteaching courses, including the First Year Seminar, faculty-staff coteaching, collaboration inside classrooms on student affairs issues. Related to this, discussants thought about opportunities to stretch funding and resources by coordinating across existing ‘internal’ structures: i.e. TLC, CLC for funding, for example, more coordinated communication efforts jointly from faculty, staff and students on important issues, thinking about timing of communication and programming to spread it out better over the course of a year to increase impact, rather than cramming everything in to orientation/the beginning of the fall semester. Also discussed in this theme was a desire to grow ‘thoughtfully’ not in a ‘virus-like’ manner.

Other ‘internal’ opportunity targets identified included shifting culture towards more strongly valuing collaboration and celebrating successes more overtly. Specific initiatives already underway that highlight some of these ideas are the IGLAS fellows program as a good mechanism to share feedback from students to faculty and staff on a host of internal concerns and ideas, as well as our First Gen program, and the Writing Center. The discussion groups felt that additional opportunities exist to support and expand these successful programs. The groups talked about opportunities to integrate across the humanities, social science and science curriculum, in terms of existing programming, as well as new potential programming (adding art to STEM → STEAM), putting a Pitzer spin on data science with social responsibility, highlighting more directly career paths for humanities, social science and science students, earlier on to allay student fears, as well as to introduce students to the whole curriculum offerings in a more structured way. Finally, the groups highlighted significant ‘internal’ opportunities to improve equity in terms of workload across faculty and staff, thinking about

these issues with respect to our governance and committee structures, as well as the discussions surrounding the implications of a 2/2 teaching load.

Threats – external

This discussion group identified many key ‘external’ threats to both Pitzer as well as to liberal arts education in general. Some Pitzer specific threats include: over-dependency on consortium partners, high transfer rates (i.e. why do we lose students?), rising tuition costs, emergency preparation and risk exposure to natural disasters if they threaten our ability to collect tuition. Also considered as ‘external’ threats to Pitzer were the current political climate, new changes to tax laws, and the end of the DACA program, in terms of their impacts on the success and well-being of our current students, as well as our ability to recruit new students (domestic and international), and maintain our current spending levels on our students with large unknown impacts of tax changes on our budget.

More broad threats to the liberal arts discussed included overall questions about the value of liberal arts education, in terms of relevance, the widening economic gap and economic inequality and changes in behavior of high school students, who apply to many more colleges than they did in the past and what this does to our ability to function and recruit.

Threats – internal

This group identified many important ‘internal’ to Pitzer threats that need further understanding and analysis. On the institutional side, our tuition dependence and generally limited financial resources for financial aid, internships, research, better facilities, staff retention, and student support occupied a lot of the discussion as major threats to the college. Separately from financial resource constraints, another strand of the conversation turned to expressions of severe time constraints across many dimensions, including staff overextension and burn out, lack of work-life balance, a culture of 24/7 accessibility to students, over-programming, lack of time to socialize/build social relationships, a culture of self-exploitation.

Another major theme emerged about mismatched expectations, priorities and experiences across different groups: institutional vs. donor priorities; students and parents expectations vs. institutional capabilities; tuition-driven budget model vs. student recruitment on other dimensions (interests and other aspects of fit for students, including courses/major demands); the COACHE survey, inequality in campus climate issues across different groups.

A final set of ‘internal’ threats identified fell into the category of turnover and leadership transitions and issues, specific to Pitzer that impact the college in important ways, including difficulties identifying institutional priorities, communication issues across institutional units, ‘territoriality’ in the context of resource scarcity, non-transparent decision-making.