

COLLEGE LEADERSHIP

New Dean Named

A linguistics professor who has helped lead efforts to increase faculty diversity has been named dean of the College.

Jeffrey Runner, who joined the faculty in 1994 and who has chaired the Department of Linguistics since 2014, was introduced this spring.

As dean, he oversees academic and cocurricular programs for undergraduates in Arts, Sciences & Engineering. He succeeds Richard Feldman (see pages 14–15).

As faculty development and diversity officer for Arts, Sciences & Engineering, Runner has worked with University leaders and faculty to develop strategies for the hiring and retention of underrepresented faculty.

He has also directed the Center for Language Sciences and has been a faculty associate of the Susan B. Anthony Institute for Gender and Women's Studies.



This has led to interest in putatively more “relevant” measures, such as earnings after graduation. Several surveys, including the College Scorecard published by the US Department of Education, and others such as the PayScale College Salary Report, compare colleges and universities on graduates’ average salaries. Salary is an important measure of success, but absent context is a flawed and misleading indicator. First, the published measures take no account of the fact that some universities admit much better-prepared students than others, and those better-prepared students are likely to do better after graduation; second, for students who attend graduate school (as do a majority of Rochester students and students from similar universities), a focus on early years after graduation will catch many at points that don’t give a meaningful indication of their careers; third, measures of average salary obscure large variations across occupations, so, for example, universities that graduate many engineers will look more potent than those that graduate fewer.

These concerns lead to more fundamental questions about what we should evaluate and when to do it. If we want to measure success in equipping students for careers, surely we should be most interested not in average salaries, but in how well a university prepares its graduates for intellectually demanding occupations, not all of which are highly remunerated—and we should make our assessment when their careers are well-enough developed for their trajectories to be clear.

We want to know where people stand 10 to 15 years after graduation, what degrees they obtained, from which university or college they obtained them, their background and qualifications on entry as freshmen, and what activities they pursued. Such information is not easily gathered, though social networks, notably

ones like LinkedIn, have a great deal of it and are a potentially rich source of information about where most value is added. Moreover, because social networks embrace a very broad population—including people who never attended college—their data might enable a richer characterization of the benefits of attending college.

A comparative analysis along these lines would help us better understand the value of two key attributes of undergraduate education at major US universities: the liberal curriculum and the residential experience. It might well tell us that US graduates are better equipped than those elsewhere. But that’s not enough. For the full picture, we need to compare outcomes in relation to the costs of delivering education. With such information, we would be in a position to decide whether better US outcomes were worth the investment, and we would be in a position to more clearly articulate the value of that investment—to students, to families, to policymakers, and to the public at large. **R**

Peter Lennie, who this summer was appointed the Jay Last Distinguished University Professor, served as the Robert L. and Mary L. Sproull Dean of the Faculty of Arts, Sciences & Engineering from 2006 to 2017. As a member of the Rochester faculty from 1982 to 1999, he was the founding chair of the Department of Brain and Cognitive Sciences. He returned to Rochester as dean in 2006 after serving as dean for science at New York University. He also served as provost from 2012 to 2016.

Lennie, who also holds a faculty appointment in the Department of Brain and Cognitive Sciences, plans to undertake a project to address the problems outlined in this essay. He will spend the 2017–18 academic year in the UK and Australia, first at the University of Leeds and then at the University of Melbourne, before returning to the Rochester faculty.