Report of the Faculty Council's Immersion Subcommittee

April 27, 2021

Executive Summary:

The Faculty Council's Immersion Subcommittee has serious concerns about the current parameters of the Immersion program, and recommends the following reforms to Immersion be implemented as soon as possible:

1) That capstones, senior research projects, internships and study abroad programs be understood to be the default for Immersion.

2) That the Immersion Office coordinate students' registration in limited-enrollment capstone and senior research classes.

3) That positive credit be given for independent Immersion advising, and no penalty incurred for non-participation in consideration of promotion, renewal, annual review, raises or other matters.

4) That a plan be established for compensation and/or course release for independent Immersion advising.

5) That the deadline for approval of Immersion projects be moved to the junior year.

6) That funding be available to faculty, departments and programs to support Immersion projects.

7) That students be eligible for financial support for Immersion projects as part of the financial aid package.

8) That departments and programs cap independent Immersion advising by non-tenured faculty.

9) That the Immersion Office stress to undergraduates the Immersion default options, and provide stronger guidance about how and when to approach faculty.

10) That the Immersion Office collect data about faculty participation in Immersion on at least an annual basis, and share this data with the Faculty Council.

11) That additional staff be hired by the Immersion Office, particularly to administer the faculty dimensions of Immersion.

In addition, the Subcommittee recommends that the faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences consider the possibility of voting to make Immersion optional, rather than a requirement for graduation.

The Subcommittee also recommends that the second, follow-up vote on Immersion be scheduled for November 2023. If the vote is in favor of keeping Immersion as a requirement for graduation, a recurring vote should be held every three years thereafter.

The Problem of Unprovided Data

The Office of Immersion Resources was asked to provide up-to-date information about the specific breakdown of Immersion advising by faculty rank and other criteria once a year by the Immersion Subcommittee in its Spring 2020 report. Over the last month, the Subcommittee reached out to the Office, but it was unable to provide this data in time for the submission of this report. The gathering and sharing of this data are absolutely essential in terms of full faculty involvement in the implementation of Immersion. Our understanding is that the Immersion Office is currently understaffed, which may explain why this data was not available. As a consequence, we have had to proceed at this point with anecdotal and student-reported evidence on questions like faculty Immersion advising by rank, for example. To guarantee necessary data collection and transparency, we recommend below that additional staff be hired for the Immersion Office, particularly for faculty-facing aspects of the Immersion program. Whether or not such staffing can be obtained, the Office of Immersion Resources needs to take responsibility for gathering and providing this data to the Faculty Council every Spring.

In appendix II, we present limited data culled by our committee from student Immersion plans, though we recognize that it is incomplete and insufficient.

This said, the recommendations presented here are based on extensive consultation with faculty members in a wide variety of departments and programs, and are not dependent on what we understand to be partial and supplementary statistical information. Both the problems identified below, and the proposals recommended to remedy them, are grounded in clear and consistent patterns that we registered through in-depth exchanges with faculty members that are currently involved in Immersion as advisors, coordinators and department chairs.

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Overview, Problems and Recommendations

The Faculty Council's Immersion Subcommittee was tasked with reporting at the end of each academic year on the current state of A&S's Immersion Program and any policy changes affecting faculty, to gather and convey faculty input, questions and concerns about the program, and to make recommendations for changes to the program. Toward that end, subcommittee members were in contact with Dean Dan Morgan and Carolyn Floyd at the Immersion Office, and solicited and received faculty input from a range of departments and programs.

Our conclusion is that there are significant problems with the ways in which Immersion is currently being implemented which need to be addressed as soon as possible, in the interests of building a program that fulfills Immersion's stated goals, within the parameters voted upon by the faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences (see Appendix I), and in a way that serves the interests of students, faculty and the broader university. We are particularly concerned with significant gaps between the current implementation of Immersion and the specific language voted upon by the faculty in October 2017. Immersion as it is being implemented deviates in significant ways from

what the A&S faculty approved. Alongside other issues, many of these deviations have produced serious organizational problems when it comes to Immersion's operation.

This report outlines the main problems with Immersion's current parameters and makes concrete proposals which should be implemented as soon as possible.

Problems

Based on feedback from CAS faculty, the Subcommittee has identified the following as the most significant problems with Immersion as currently executed:

1) S**tudents and equity.** Faculty were seriously concerned about the Immersion program's inattention to the very different implications of Immersion, as a requirement for graduation, for undergraduates of different socio-economic backgrounds. Low-income students, including many students of color, have reported that they cannot afford to participate in unpaid, Immersion-credit work due to work-study and other commitments they need to undertake to ensure their success at Vanderbilt. These constraints on many students' time and resources have not been factored into the program's implementation.

2) **Faculty and equity.** Faculty expressed concern that undergraduates are seeking advisors primarily or disproportionately among junior or NTT faculty, out of exposure during introductory classes, or these faculty members' relative accessibility. These faculty members may not feel they can say no, out of a sense of vulnerability when it comes to promotion and renewal. Significant if anecdotal evidence suggests that the bulk of Immersion advising is indeed being carried out by NTT faculty who are already face demanding teaching loads.

3) **Lack of faculty compensation and/or course releases.** The original terms of the A&S Faculty vote made clear that faculty should be compensated for "substantial faculty effort" in Immersion. It states that departments "should propose additional

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compensation (stipends or course release) for faculty in their units who devote substantial effort toward Immersion (for, example, through supervision of numerous Immersion Projects.)" Although Immersion coordinators are being compensated, faculty are currently not being compensated in any way for Immersion advising, despite its involving of significant, additional, work by faculty members, on top of existing faculty teaching, advising, research and administrative responsibilities.

While faculty members in the laboratory sciences and some social sciences may benefit from undergraduate labor for Immersion credit, this is far less likely in the humanities and other social sciences, due to the different nature of academic research in these fields. Given Immersion's current status as unpaid faculty labor, the inadvertent practical result may be that Immersion benefits some faculty members, departments and programs at the expense of others. Many faculty members conveyed a sense that they will not regard Immersion as fully in their interests unless it involves some kind of compensation or course release in recognition of the significant faculty time and labor involved in the advising of independent Immersion projects. Most fundamentally, the current lack of faculty compensation and/or course release for Immersion advising violates the terms of the original motion voted upon by the Arts and Sciences faculty.

4) **Immersion support grants.** According to the motion initially voted upon by the CAS faculty, the college would "award grants of $1,000 to $10,000 to faculty or departments/programs in support of immersion activities." To date, grants are not being made available to faculty, departments or programs to support Immersion activities in any systematic and transparent way. Alongside representing a failure to live up to the terms of the CAS vote, this fact has serious equity implications for both students and faculty. The unavailability of these funds will make it more difficult for students with financial challenges to participate in Immersion programs where, if funds were provided, they could be paid for any Immersion-related work. For faculty, the absence of these funds is a problem, in particular, in light of the many NTT faculty who are currently working as Immersion advisors, but who lack access to faculty research funds with which to support Immersion programs.

5) **Understaffing.** Immersion is an extensive, complex, college-wide undertaking, but it is currently seriously understaffed. The original motion voted upon by the A&S Faculty

states that "at least one Immersion Coordinator will be appointed in each department or program." This has not happened; Immersion Coordinators are overseeing multiple departments and programs in many instances. The Office of Immersion Resources is also understaffed, particularly when it comes to its interactions with faculty, which makes necessary coordination and information-sharing unnecessarily challenging.

6) **Limited capstone slots.** Many departments and programs have developed capstone or senior research projects that would count towards Immersion, but in many instances student demand for these classes to fulfill Immersion requirements outstrips the number of available slots in courses and labs. In such cases, there has been a great deal of labor-intensive correspondence at the departmental and program level to work out availability for capstones and research projects, which detracts from faculty members' other work.

7) **"Double immersion."** Faculty reported that in many instances, students are developing independent Immersion projects alongside their completion of capstone or senior research projects that could count for their Immersion credit, in effect carrying out "double immersion." This unnecessarily multiplies faculty and student workloads. Students interested in pursuing independent Immersion projects who also take capstone or senior research classes take up slots needed by other students for their Immersion credit.

8) **Sophomore year deadline**. The original motion voted upon the faculty states that Immersion plans "must be approved before the end of the student's third year of study." Immersion currently requires students to submit approved Immersion projects by the end of their sophomore year. Across departments and programs, this is widely understood to create serious problems. Students have just declared their majors; some of these will come with capstone courses that can also count for Immersion. But other students' majors will not, which will make the current deadline difficult for them to meet. The current deadline at the end of the sophomore year means that research opportunities in certain departments and programs will not yet have been announced. Additionally, by the end of sophomore year, many students will not have had much opportunity   to take classes with prospective advisors. Because they will have taken introductory classes taught by junior faculty and NTT faculty, this will also lead to

greater inequities in terms of the faculty students approach to work with them as potential Immersion advisors.

9) **Under-prepared undergraduates.** Faculty noted that many undergraduate students, in their approach to faculty, did not seem to know how to develop a proposal or identify a mentor, or mass-emailed faculty with vague emails requesting advising, in effect fishing for an advisor somewhat at random. Many were not aware of existing prerequisites for work in specific labs, or the competitive nature of application processes. This has been frustrating for faculty, for the obvious reason that it creates unnecessary correspondence that takes potentially significant time and energy away from their other responsibilities in the classroom, in administration, in their research, and in working with their existing advisees.

Recommendations:

The Subcommittee recommends the following changes to the Immersion program be undertaken as soon as possible, in order to address the above faculty concerns and bring Immersion into compliance with the terms voted upon by the Arts and Sciences faculty.

1) **Capstones, senior research projects, internship and study abroad as the default.** Existing capstones, senior research projects, internship opportunities and study abroad programs should be understood as the default options for Immersion, and the ones which most students choosing Immersion will undertake. Independent Immersion projects should remain a possibility, but only in the case in which the student's intended goals cannot be fulfilled within these existing options. All messaging about Immersion to undergraduates should reflect this understanding, rather than emphasizing that undergraduates should pursue an independent, self-defined agenda as the default. This reform would go a long way towards solving the "double immersion" problem.

2) **Immersion Office coordination of capstones.** We recommend that the Immersion Office work directly with departments and programs offering limited capstone and research project slots, coordinating and keeping tabs on student sign-ups so that when these capstones or courses are filled, students can be informed directly through the Immersion Office, rather than through individual departments and programs.

3) **Positive credit for Immersion advising; no penalty for non-participation.** The Subcommittee recommends that faculty engaged in independent Immersion advising continue to have the opportunity to register their involvement in Immersion on TRS forms and elsewhere, and receive any credit and compensation. At the same time, we feel it is imperative, in strictly maintaining Immersion's status as optional for faculty, that no faculty members at any rank be penalized for non-participation in Immersion. This policy should be included in any orientation or introductory materials provided to newly hired faculty members.

4) **Plan for faculty compensation and/or course release.** We recommend that the university initiate as soon as possible the development of a fair, coherent, transparent plan for either direct compensation or course releases for faculty undertaking independent Immersion advising. Faculty members, for example, might receive a single course release for a certain number of student projects they advise. Given the varied character of Immersion projects across units, the university should develop this plan in close consultation with departments and programs.

5) **Junior year deadline**. In line with the faculty-approved motion, we recommend that the Immersion deadline be changed to the junior year, prior to the application deadlines for funding programs aimed at supporting undergraduate research. Having approved Immersion plans in place will allow students to apply for financial support in a timely manner.

6) **Immersion Office funding.** To bring Immersion in line with the faculty-approved motion, the college should begin as soon as possible to "award grants of $1,000 to $10,000 to faculty or departments/programs in support of immersion activities" such "include funding for field trips or field research, undergraduate laboratory or

opportunities, coordinated visits to archives or libraries, or other activities." The processes and criteria for the awarding of these resources should be transparent and widely circulated, and their distribution across university departments and programs be fair and equitable, keeping in mind the very different cost structures of research in different fields. Information on the distribution of these funds, including the faculty or departments/programs who received them, should be included in the Office of Immersion Resources' annual report to the Subcommittee on Immersion.

7) **Student immersion financial support arranged with financial aid.** To guarantee that lower-income students are able to participate fully in Immersion to the extent that they wish, we recommend that financial support for Immersion projects be built into the university's formation of financial aid packages for prospective students.

8) **Immersion and non-tenured faculty**. We recommend that departments and programs establish caps on the number of Immersion projects non-tenured faculty can advise; that departments and programs not consider Immersion advising when it comes to promotion, renewal, recommendations for raises, and other decisions; and that incoming non-tenured faculty be clearly notified of this policy during their orientation.

9) **Improved messaging.** We recommend that outreach and messaging to undergraduates about Immersion emphasize the default Immersion options (capstone/senior research project, internships, study abroad). In the case of students interested in independent Immersion projects, the Office of Immersion Resources should stress that students should not randomly cold-call faculty wholesale with requests for advising, but target specific faculty (ideally ones they've worked with), with specific projects suited to faculty members' areas of expertise. In the case of students who do call cold-call faculty, lines of communication should be opened between faculty and the Immersion Office, so that the Office reaches out to these students and reminds them not to do this. We also recommend Immersion fairs where undergraduates can have their questions about Immersion answered directly by Immersion Coordinators, and faculty members offering independent Immersion opportunities.

10) Data collection and transparency. Given the very clear request by the Immersion Subcommittee in its Spring 2020 report that the Immersion Office annually generate and submit basic data about the breakdown of faculty Immersion advising, the inability of the Office to provide this information in time for the submission of this year's report is striking. Once again, we strongly recommend that the Office generate and submit this data each year, in the interests of basic transparency, open communication, and accountability.

11) Additional recommendation on staffing for the Immersion Office: In light of this committee's request that the Immersion Office take on additional work when it comes to signing up students for limited-enrollment capstone projects, collecting and breaking down data on faculty involvement in Immersion, additional communication with students about when and how to reach out to possible faculty advisors, and the running of Immersion fairs, we recommend that the University hire additional staff, specifically tasked with administering these requests and, especially, with managing the faculty dimensions of Immersion.

These are recommendations that can and should be implemented right away. In addition, the Subcommittee recommends that the CAS faculty consider the possibility, as part of its 2023 vote, that **Immersion be made optional for CAS undergraduates.** Many of the above problems would be at least partially addressed by making Immersion optional rather than mandatory for graduation. By limiting Immersion only to those students who opted for it, it would reduce—potentially significantly—the demands on students, faculty and administrators. For students who are inclined to pursue Immersion and have the time and resources necessary to undertake it, Immersion would fulfill the program's core goal of providing unique opportunities for undergraduates to pursue in-depth research, internship, travel and learning opportunities.

<div align="center">Vote</div>

The original motion approved by the CAS faculty calls for a second vote on Immersion to take place during the 2023-2024 academic year. During this year, the faculty "will

review and vote on whether or not to continue the Immersion requirement for CAS undergraduates." This vote will take place in November 2023.

Additionally, if the CAS Faculty vote to approve Immersion in 2023, we recommend a recurring faculty vote on Immersion every three years. This would guarantee that the program is acceptable to a majority of faculty and registers faculty input. It would also encourage information-sharing and accountability about changing program parameters. A recurring vote is the only way to make sure that future changes to the program are satisfactory to the faculty, including to faculty who will be hired in the future.

This recommendation is also advanced in light of the circumstances of Immersion's problematic roll-out. During the first vote, the faculty voted narrowly in favor of Immersion, with the proviso that it would only go into effect following a faculty-organized review and assessment on the program's impact on faculty. The University then proceeded to institute Immersion prior to the completion of that review. The result is that there are serious, widespread concerns about process, the degree to which the University is listening to faculty input and, most fundamentally, the University's commitment to its agreements.

The University could go along way towards addressing these process concerns by implementing the above recommendations as soon as possible, and communicating these program changes to the Faculty Council and the CAS faculty as a whole.

Appendix I: Original CAS Motion on Immersion 2017

The faculty of the College of Arts and Science recognize that in-depth learning and the completion of significant projects are important and valuable components of the liberal arts undergraduate education. The curricular framework for Immersion outlined below aims to capture existing in-depth learning opportunities for students and to facilitate the design of new Immersion options.

Basic Features:
Definition of Immersion Project: An Immersion Project involves tangible demonstration of accomplishment in research, creative expression, civic or professional activity, or global or community engagement. Immersion comprises a group of individual or collaborative activities and/or courses that cohere around a theme and include the completion of a final project. An Immersion Project may be comprised of course work and/or approved Immersion activities outside of the classroom. An Immersion Project will consist of about 9 credit
hours or the approximate equivalent effort.

The College already offers numerous opportunities to students to engage in in-depth learning experiences that would qualify as Immersion. These include honors courses and other capstone projects, research of various kinds (including laboratory, field, and library research), and projects involving creative expression. The Immersion Program will encourage and support the development of other new forms of project-based learning as well.

Immersion Plan: Each student will develop a plan in consultation with advisors in the Office of Immersion Resources, department/program Immersion Coordinator, and relevant Project faculty supervisors. Students may begin to develop this plan during their second year of course work. Immersion plans must be approved before the end of the student's third year of study.

Implementation:
Immersion Project supervision: All faculty members in Arts & Sciences, independent of rank and academic unit, are invited to serve as Immersion supervisors and explore Immersion as an opportunity for new types of research and teaching experiences. Any Vanderbilt faculty member can agree to supervise an Immersion Project, as part of an existing course, as part of a specially designed course, or as an independent study. Any faculty member, regardless of rank, may decline to participate, without penalty.

Faculty Approval of Immersion Plans: An Immersion Coordinator appointed in each department and program will receive compensation to evaluate and approve Immersion Plans in relevant academic areas.

Immersion Project reporting: Progress toward and completion of an Immersion Project will be recorded through a simple procedure similar to that now used for recording honors enrichment. Separate grades for Immersion Projects will not be required.

Immersion Activities Outside the Classroom: Faculty will not be responsible for evaluating non-course-based portions of Immersion Projects. These will be evaluated and approved as completed according to procedures to be established by A&S Directors of Immersion in coordination with the Office of Immersion Resources. Only A&S faculty can approve Immersion Plans and Projects for A&S students; faculty will therefore have an opportunity to question students about the suitability of non-course activities.

Role of departments and programs: Departments and programs may wish to organize and designate special courses that offer students the opportunity to complete an Immersion Project. They may also choose to bundle courses (within their own units or together with other units) to highlight immersion options. Examples already proposed are Archaeological Field Studies and Shakespeare Immersion.

Programs and departments are expected to develop strategies to ensure a fair distribution of Immersion-related activities among their faculty members, recognize Immersion-related activities as a valuable service, and protect faculty in vulnerable positions from being drawn into participation in an inequitable number of Immersion activities.

Faculty Compensation and College Resources:

Compensation for faculty: Fairness and transparency must be guiding principles in implementing, supporting, and rewarding faculty engagement with students. Compensation for substantial faculty effort must be fair and transparent both across and within A&S departments and programs. Any new compensation arrangements should consider the full range of work that faculty do, beyond their regular teaching assignments, to support undergraduate education. This should include, but not be limited to, Immersion-related activities.

At the department or program level, at least one Immersion Coordinator will be appointed in each department or program, and will receive compensation for review and approval of Immersion Plans.

At the College level, four faculty members will be appointed as Directors of Immersion, one in each of the three CAS divisions and one to serve as principal liaison between CAS and the Office of Immersion Resources. Each will participate in approval of Immersion Plans and completed Projects and will receive compensation.

As needed, departments and programs should propose additional compensation (stipends or course release) for faculty in their units who devote substantial effort toward Immersion (for example, through supervision of numerous Immersion Projects). This approach recognizes differences in disciplinary and unit cultures.

An Immersion Committee will be created to oversee and periodically evaluate Immersion. The Committee will make recommendations to the Faculty Council and College and University administration for improving Immersion activities and resource distribution.

The A&S Faculty Council will convene and charge a subcommittee to review how to compensate faculty who devote substantial time to engagements with undergraduate students and undergraduate education beyond their regular teaching duties. This will include, but will not be limited to, Immersion-related contributions. While taking into consideration the wide diversity of activities among different disciplines and programs, the principles of fairness and transparency will guide the development of recommended standards and procedures for determining these compensation arrangements across and within programs in the College of Arts and Science.

Funds for immersion-related instruction: Each semester the college will award grants of $1,000 to $10,000 to faculty or departments/programs in support of immersion activities.

Examples include funding for field trips or field research, undergraduate laboratory or opportunities, coordinated visits to archives or libraries, or other activities.

University Resources: Funding in support of faculty compensation. The provost's office has provided CAS with funds that will be utilized for immersion coordinator stipends and meeting new instructional needs.

Office of Immersion Resources. This fall (2017), the Provost's office is opening and staffing an office that will serve to advise undergraduates as they draft Immersion Plans; to inform students about immersion opportunities; to sponsor events for students presenting their Immersion Projects; to record completion of noncourse, non-credit immersion projects; and to provide other assistance designed to meet each individual school/college's respective immersion needs and requirements.

Other university resources available to support faculty efforts in Immersion include funds for TIPS-based Immersion projects; Immersion-based courses developed through the Cross-College Teaching initiative and Commons iSeminars; programming at the Innovation Center/Wondry; internships through the Career Center, study abroad and the Global Summer Scholars in GEO; and undergraduate summer research project funding (VUSRP).

MOTIONS FOR A&S FACULTY VOTE:

Motion 1:
The faculty of the College of Arts and Science approves an Immersion graduation requirement, beginning with students in the incoming class of fall 2018, undergraduate transfer students who enter as sophomores in fall 2019 and undergraduate transfer students who enter as juniors in fall 2020.

Motion 2:
In the 2023-2024 academic year, the faculty of the College of Arts and Science will review and vote on whether or not to continue the Immersion requirement for CAS undergraduates.

Appendix II: Data

We here report preliminary data on Immersion in the College of Arts and Sciences, as self-reported by students on their submitted Immersion plans (student, school, major information and identified adviser) and culled from the Vanderbilt website (faculty school and rank). Given the nature of this data, it is imperfect at best. However, we can use these to gain some insight into whom students are approaching as faculty advisers in this first season of Immersion plans.
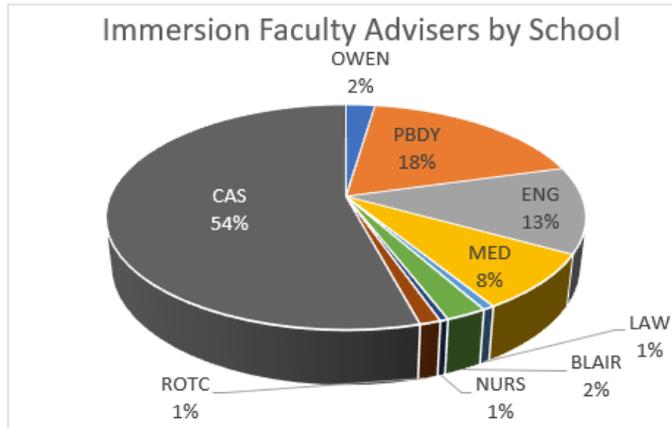

Figure 1: School of Faculty Immersion Advisers identified by students with a major in A&S who submitted an Immersion Plan by 4/19/21. Students' school and major data is self-reported on their Immersion plans. School affiliation for faculty identified as Faculty Immersion Advisers was retrieved from the Vanderbilt People Finder online tool using primary appointed department.

We draw attention to two very provisional findings, which will need to be tested when full data is made available. *First, it appears that faculty Immersion advising is highly uneven and concentrated among certain faculty, with only 303 A&S faculty members currently listed as advisors.* Second, the average NTT faculty members engaged in Immersion advising are supervising *a significantly higher number of Immersion projects (3.7) than the average tenure-track faculty member involved in advising (2.1). According to these preliminary figures, the average NTT advisor is advising 43% more projects than the average TT advisor.*

The data below are for the 1508 students who had submitted an Immersion plan as of April 19, 2021 and who either self-reported a major in A&S or who identify themselves as undeclared. We assume these latter are most likely A&S students, given the straightforward nature of Immersion plans in non-A&S schools. From the data available, it is not clear whether these are only sophomores, or whether it includes juniors for whom Immersion is optional. Anecdotally, many of the A&S sophomores who have not yet submitted plans are either planning to transfer out of Vanderbilt or take a leave of absence in the Fall.

- 815 of these students identify an A&S Faculty member as their Immersion Adviser
- 102 of these students do not yet identify an adviser on their plans

- 303 A&S Faculty are listed as Immersion Advisers for the 815 student plans
  - 187 tenure track faculty are listed as advisers, with a total of 395 student advisees (2.1 students per TT faculty on average)
  - 113 non-tenure track faculty are listed as adviser, with a total of 413 student advisees (3.7 students per NTT faculty on average)

We recognize the success in having most sophomores meet the April deadline. However, from a faculty perspective, we recognize it as problematic that only 303 A&S Faculty are participating in Immersion as Faculty Immersion Advisers. The imbalance of number of students per faculty between tenure track and non-tenure track Faculty Immersion Advisers is also worrisome, as after three more years of accepting advisees, this trend would result in 6.2 students per tenure track faculty and 11.1 per non-tenure track faculty. Some of this imbalance may stem from two practices: (1) some programs/departments assign all Immersion plans to one adviser to oversee the paperwork, but not actual projects, and these may more likely be non-tenure track faculty; (2) Immersion coordinators (perhaps more likely to be non-tenure track faculty) have been temporarily assigned students who struggled to identify a faculty adviser. More robust data is necessary to confidently understand the landscape of faculty advising for Immersion.