The Roundtable was an informal opportunity to meet with about 35 African American students on campus. Dr. Matt Ouellett (University of Massachusetts Amherst) facilitated this conversation with Leon Williams. Peter Felten was present as well. The conversation began with a focus on the academic experience in classrooms but soon expanded to include general comments on campus wide climate and community. This report is an attempt to capture the highlights of the conversation and, where possible, to include representative statements. (This is an aggregation of the comments organized by themes and not representative of how the discussion actually unfolded.)

**What could be changed to improve your academic experience at Elon?**

Students respond better to being seen as individuals. For example:

- They don’t want to be singled out in class to talk on behalf of the entire African American community or for there to be an assumption that a particular attribute of the African American experience necessarily reflects their lives. (“What do you all like to be called?”)

- Some students have had the awkward experience of teachers assuming that they are from socially and economically distressed families and communities when topics came up in class (“Don’t assume it’s a miracle I’m here.” “No, I’m not ‘ghetto’.”)

- Students emphasized that many of them are at Elon based on academic credentials and support, not necessarily financial needs-based. (“I’m here as a Presidential Scholarship winner!”)

- One African American male student has had a recurring experience of faculty members assuming that he’s an athlete or here on an athletic scholarship. (“Just because I’m African American, male, tall and athletic looking.”)

Students felt faculty could be more flexible and understanding about communication style differences. Students reported feeling that some times they feel misunderstood or that they are misinterpreted because of communication style differences (i.e., body language, directness, word choice, or volume). For example:

- An African American woman described herself as talking directly and loudly and, in her experience, felt that some instructors appeared uncomfortable with these attributes.
An African American male described a similar fear that his leadership style in small group assignments was being interpreted as aggressive, when he felt he was just trying to get the project on course.

Students reported a preference for direct conversation and dialogue as opposed to their perception of faculty who “tip toe” around issues. (“I wondered if they were being truly honest with me or if they are perhaps afraid of African American students?”)

African American students felt that there were times in class that their comments were “left hanging” – not followed up on or expanded in the same way others’ were.

Students reported having some difficulty with faculty members who were not invested in academic advising duties. For example:

- Based on the advice of her academic advisor, one young woman took classes she didn’t need. When she found this out later, the student was left wondering if the faculty member was deliberating holding back good advice. (“I had to seek her out every time and when I did get her to meet with me I ended up taking classes I didn’t need. So, I started only going to her for signatures and going to other more helpful professors for ‘real’ advice.”)

Students reported that Elon tends to talk about rather than act on diversity. For example:

- Students expressed a desire to see more African American teachers. They suggested that more faculty members of color might also be able to help the faculty understand some of these concerns.

- Some students felt that Elon University does a great job of talking about diversity on paper, but isn’t yet tapping into the diversity already on campus and in classrooms. (“They teach it, but don’t do it!”)

- Experiences of Multicultural Weekend during recruitment felt misrepresentative to some new students. (“The weekend was great but that’s not generally what it’s like on campus.”)

What’s going well in your academic experience?

Students had many positive comments about what is going well on campus related to diversity issues.

Students reported experiencing a general culture of inclusion at Elon. For example:
▪ A number of students voiced a strong appreciation for how many of their teachers have assumed that there’s something special and promising about them. (“Everybody’s rooting for you.”)

▪ Students perceive almost everyone at Elon University to be very sincere and genuine, not “politically correct.”

▪ Friendliness of everyone, whether in class or not. (“Even the lunch ladies are friendly.”)

▪ Students feel confident that the faculty and staff at Elon committed to diversity. (“We feel like they’re open to dialogue if there’s a problem.”)

▪ Diversity is perceived of as a real goal. (“Everyone’s heart is in the right place.”)

▪ Students did offer examples of when faculty members had handled difficult topics well in class presentations or discussions. (“He talked to me before class about what we were going to be seeing and he didn’t try to diminish my feelings of being Black and female.”)

Students talked repeatedly and positively about faculty having high expectations of students. For example:

▪ African American students really appreciate it when faculty members express high expectations of them. (“They say they know I have potential and that I can do better work – that really helps me to strive higher.”)

▪ Students really appreciate being challenged and pushed by professors. (“Because that means they see something in you and I want to do my best.”)

▪ Some professors have really gone all-out in their effort to get to know about students’ progress and development and to help them. (“When I missed class, my teacher emailed me and asked ‘are you doing ok? I missed your face in class today.’”)

▪ Several students felt their faculty members had pushed them to be more confident and to reach higher, and to think outside of the box.

*Several students specifically cited Chalmers Brumbaugh (Political Science) and David Copeland (Communications) as exemplary faculty for their encouragement and attention to getting to know them.
Topics of particular interest to students in this discussion:

African American students noted that there are some interesting manifestations of socio-economic diversity on campus. For example:

- There is a perception that some White students feel entitled to be in college and to get good grades. Because their parents can easily write checks, they may not care about their grades or really applying themselves academically whereas African American students (by-and-large) perceive it an honor to be in college.

- They also expressed the perspective that this sense of entitlement by some White students may be able to influence who is successful on faculty and who is not. (They've [White students] gotten rid of faculty who make them work too hard.) (“If there were more poor students on campus there might be a higher consciousness about these issues. I was amazed when a student came into class using a $500 purse as a book bag…”)

Students were concerned about what they perceived to be shifts in institutional multicultural priorities. For example:

- Students are pleased with the many new resources on campus (e.g., the colonnades and fountains), but are concerned about keeping the focus on recruiting more students of color. (“When I got here there were three other African American students in the _____ Department. I thought there'd be even more by now but now I'm the only one.”)

- The global/study abroad option at Elon is very attractive to them, but some worried that international issues might take resources away from issues of diversity at home.

Students also had some miscellaneous but significant comments:

- African American students know that some White students don’t feel comfortable attending or know that they are welcome at events at the Multicultural Center and they’d like to change this misperception (“They think, “Oh, that’s just for them.”)

- The students suggested that it would be helpful for everyone if both students and academic advisors knew better what to expect of each other.

- Students need faculty to help facilitate difficult discussions between students in class and also between groups of students on campus (e.g., differences in communication styles, class differences, etc.)