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## Disappearing Disciplines: Degree Programs Fight for Their Lives



Mark Wallheiser for The Chronicle

Flip Froelich (third from left), a tenured professor of oceanography at Florida State U., stands with other faculty members whose jobs will end this year because of budget cuts. "It's just immoral," he said of the university's decision to hire tenure-track faculty members and lay them off six months later.

*By David Glenn and Peter Schmidt*

Would you like to major in anthropology at Florida State University? Sorry: The department stopped accepting new students last year. What about economics at the University of Louisiana at Monroe? That major is also going out of business. Computational physics at Oregon State? Circling the drain.

Critics sometimes grumble that American universities' curricula constantly metastasize and never shrink. But that hasn't been true in this recession. Dozens of majors and doctoral programs have been suspended or terminated since last year, and many more have been under the shadow of the guillotine. Several state systems, including those in Pennsylvania and South Dakota, are conducting wholesale reviews of smaller degree programs, aiming to weed out the allegedly weak ones.

But who should decide whether a degree program lives or dies? The faculty, which is responsible for the curriculum? Trustees, who are responsible for a college's fiscal health? Or administrators, who straddle those two roles? In some recent cases, provosts have taken great pains to involve faculty senates. But in other cases, faculty activists say that they have been railroaded. Fundamental principles of shared governance, they say, are being placed at risk.

Ground zero for that quarrel is Florida State, where the Board of Trustees voted last June to suspend or terminate 10 undergraduate majors and three graduate-level programs. Sixty-two faculty members there, of whom 21 are tenured, have received notices that their services will no longer be needed after May 2010.



Paul Christopher Miller for The Chronicle  
Saeed Mortazavi (left), chairman of the Academic Senate at Humboldt State U., says faculty members there wanted to take the lead in identifying programs to be eliminated. "We decided that we wanted to be part of this decision, rather than the decision being imposed on us."

"The committee that came up with these closures included eight administrators but only three faculty members," says Jack T. Fiorito, a professor of management and president of the university's faculty union. "That doesn't sound very faculty-oriented to me." The union is now preparing for a May arbitration hearing on the layoffs.

One of the dismissed faculty members is Philip N. (Flip) Froelich Jr., a tenured professor of oceanography who joined Florida State's faculty in 1978. (The trustees voted to dismantle the oceanography department, though some of its courses will be folded into a new atmospheric-science program.) "I'm not complaining so much about my own situation," Mr. Froelich says. "I'm 63 years old, and my wife is still on the faculty here. But I'm appalled that the administration encouraged our department to hire two new tenure-track professors and then turned around six months later and laid them off. To a young faculty member, that can be a career-killer. It's just immoral."

Mr. Froelich adds that he understands that the university is in fiscal crisis. "I used to be an administrator at Georgia Tech, so I know that these decisions sometimes need to be made," he says. But he believes that if faculty members had been given more voice in Florida State's decisions, the layoffs could have been minimized or phased in over time. At the very least, he says, he would like for his tenure to have been revoked by a committee of his peers, rather than by administrative fiat.

The university's provost, Lawrence G. Abele, says Florida State is doing the best it can under adverse circumstances. (Its general-revenue appropriations from the state fell by more than \$43-million this year, with more cuts expected next year.) "This was a very difficult process," Mr. Abele says. "But it was also a transparent process. We had a town-hall meeting with representatives of virtually every program that might be affected." Placing all decisions in the hands of the Faculty Senate, he says, might have led to an unnecessarily politicized process.

### **Faculty Rules**

Mr. Abele's counterpart at Humboldt State University, in Arcata, Calif., has tried a different approach. The provost there, Robert A. Snyder, has granted the Academic Senate's wish to take the lead in identifying degree programs that might be cut. The senate has been instructed to find \$1.3-million in annual savings—90 percent from undergraduate programs and 10 percent from graduate programs. If the senate does not construct such a list by April 20, Mr. Snyder has reserved the right to make the cuts unilaterally.

"The faculty are really not happy with eliminating programs," says the senate's chairman, Saeed Mortazavi. "However, we decided that we wanted to be part of this decision, rather than the decision being imposed on us."

The downside of such involvement is that it has caused division within the senate as faculty members have lobbied for or against cuts. "This is a relatively small campus, so that when we decide to eliminate programs, we know exactly who are the colleagues who are going to lose their jobs," says Mr. Mortazavi, who is a professor of business administration. "I am sure that the emotional costs of these decisions are going to stay with us for a long time."

Is it wise for faculty senates to fight for such a role, as Humboldt State's has? Much depends on the specific institutional context, says Matthew W. Finkin, a law professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign who often writes on academic freedom and faculty employment.

In general, Mr. Finkin says, the faculty should be understood to be primarily responsible for the curriculum. "Any well-run institution ought to recognize the faculty's knowledgeability and the need to maintain the morale of the faculty" if programs need to be cut during a budget crisis, he says. "So the administration really should in due course rely quite heavily on a faculty's judgment in these matters."

But in some cases, he continues, administrators have been known to act in bad faith—for example, by withholding accurate information about the college's budget. In such cases it might be better for faculty senates to withdraw their cooperation from the process, he says.

"The faculty should insist on the observance of certain fundamental mutual understandings," Mr. Finkin says. "And if the institution is not willing to do so and is not willing to be transparent, then there is simply no purpose to be served. If the institution is seeking a faculty rubber stamp, a fig leaf of protection—if that's the scenario, under those circumstances I wouldn't participate in such a process."

### **Top-Down Decisions**

Faculty advocates worry about provosts acting unilaterally, but they are also uneasy about another process: Statewide commands to scrutinize all academic programs according to a single measure, such as the number of graduates or the average cost per student.

The 14 universities in the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (which does not include the Pennsylvania State University system) have been ordered this spring to review all of their "low completion" programs—that is, those with fewer than 30 graduates during a five-year period. The campuses are being encouraged to consider consolidating or suspending those programs.

"With the limited resources we have, we want to be sure that our academic programs are appropriate to our universities' needs and to the needs of the commonwealth," says Kenn Marshall, a spokesperson for the system. "We are looking long-term, to make sure that we can operate within a balanced budget."

Several of the small departments that have come under scrutiny are philosophy programs. Wendy Lynne Lee, a professor of philosophy at Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania, has been leading a campaign to protect those departments.

"A university without a robust philosophy major ... is simply anathema to the mission of a university," she wrote on Leiter Reports, a philosophy blog, in March. "This is not about enrollment; it is about what distinguishes a trade/professional/technical school from a university. Every single minute we are willing to play ball according to the chancellor's rules, which fallaciously link enrollment to program quality, we are in point of fact conceding to play by these rules."

Faculty members are also anxious in South Dakota, which is conducting a similar statewide review of low-enrollment programs. But one activist there says the process has actually been a rare chance for faculty members to gain the ear of the system's leaders.

Gary G. Aguiar, president of the South Dakota Council of Higher Education, the bargaining unit for faculty members at the system's six campuses, says that he often feels the system is managed in a top-down manner, but that in this case he believes the board is acting appropriately. He says he has assured faculty members who worry about indiscriminate program cuts that the system administration is using care in conducting the review process, which he characterized as a "show horse" intended "to demonstrate to the political system we are being frugal and prudent with public dollars."

He notes that where programs have fallen under minimum-enrollment thresholds—set, at the undergraduate level, as an average of fewer than five students per year during the past five years—the most senior faculty members in the program have had an opportunity to send the system administration a report explaining the low numbers. "It is unusual for us in South Dakota to have that opportunity" to influence system decisions, he says.

Louisiana is a state that has already done away with many small programs. Since January of 2009, the Louisiana Board of Regents has decided to eliminate more than 50 degree programs that were judged to have excessively low completion rates. Considered for such action were undergraduate programs that produced an average of fewer than eight graduates and doctoral programs that produced an average of fewer than two graduates in five years.

In a letter sent last month to a state commission established to plan a restructuring of Louisiana's higher-education system, Alvin G. Burstein, president of the Louisiana chapter of the American Association of University Professors, said he was troubled that programs were being judged by their completion rates, rather than their quality. He warned that the result might be pressure on academic programs to lower their standards so more students would graduate.

Mr. Burstein's letter also expressed concern about a December decision by the Louisiana regents to revise their policies to allow the system to declare fiscal exigency in connection with individual budget units or programs, rather than requiring entire institutions to be in such a state of financial crisis before making the sorts of work-force reductions allowed by exigency declarations.

"The absence of faculty involvement in the development and implementation of this shocking and dangerous change," Mr. Burstein wrote, "is a further rejection by the administration of the faculty's primary responsibility for curricular matters and its role as the guarantors of academic quality."

### **Muddle in the Middle**

The pace of program cuts is likely only to accelerate during the next year. Just last week, Brandeis University terminated five degree programs, and the University of Northern Iowa did away with 16 of them.

Scott R. Olson, provost at Minnesota State University at Mankato, is overseeing a review that will probably lead to the elimination of several degree programs. The process has been tough, he says, but some of the pain has been mitigated by involving faculty members at every stage. One program, an undergraduate major in social-studies teaching, successfully persuaded the administration to remove it from the list of potential cuts by demonstrating that the state needs more qualified high-school social-studies teachers.

"There are a lot of smart people on every one of the campuses in this country," Mr. Olson says, "and using that intelligence and using all of those wise, experienced minds to help with the known problem is only going to make the decision-making be better. It's not going to make it be perfect, it's not going to make it be easy, but it's going to make it be better."

But creating that kind of faculty-administration harmony is easier said than done. The most important thing, Mr. Finkin says, is for administrators to respect the faculty's right to shape the curriculum. "This kind of process can be done the right way, or it can be done the wrong way," he says. "In the end, it really is up to the players involved to decide how they're going to live with each other."

"There's no map in the sky that says this is the wisest path to take," says Mr. Froelich, of Florida State. "The best you can do is to try to maintain the integrity and value of the university going forward."

Mr. Abele, the provost whose decisions have made Mr. Froelich so unhappy, uses very similar language. "When we made these decisions, we wanted to preserve the unique cultural heritage of the institution," he says. "These were very painful cuts. To go any further would have been almost unthinkable."

*Jill Laster and Mary Helen Miller contributed to this article.*

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### **Weighing the Value of a Program**

Robert C. Dickeson, a higher-education consultant and a former president of the University of Northern Colorado, has advised many institutions about program cuts. Here are some elements that he thinks should be considered, taken from his book *Prioritizing Academic Programs and Services: Reallocating Resources to Achieve Strategic Balance* (Jossey-Bass, 2010). In addition to obvious factors, such as revenues and costs, he says, think about these:

- History, expectations, enrollment demographics. (For instance, does the program cater to part-time, older students to help them complete degrees?)
- Demand from incoming students
- Demand for program's courses to fulfill distributional requirements
- "Inputs," such as quality of faculty members, students, and curriculum
- "Outcomes," such as test scores and scholarly research
- Size, breadth, and depth
- Overall impact and "essentiality" to college's strategic plan
- Opportunity for saving or growing the program

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