

Layoffs lower morale

FSU faculty members question implications, lasting effects of record-breaking layoffs

Courtney Griffin • Senior Staff Writer • March 4, 2010

Florida State University's Budget Crisis Committee proposed a plan calling for as many as 200 faculty and staff layoffs, including 25 tenured professors, to cut a staggering \$56.6 million in early June 2009. After approval from the Board of Trustees, the plan is still taking effect across the university.

"In oceanography, we had been warned indirectly by what we were reading in the papers and reading in various things being sent by upper administrators that oceanography was at risk," said Philip "Flip" Froelich, Francis Eppes professor of oceanography. "So those of us in oceanography were very afraid that the entire department would be shut down."

Froelich's fears have in part come true. The departments of geology, oceanography and anthropology have been individually disbanded and merged in a new Earth and Atmospheric Sciences unit.

Froelich, a tenured professor, was also one of the five faculty members in the department to receive a layoff notice.

He said that he was most shocked by the layoffs of the three tenure-track assistant professors, two of whom had only arrived in December 2008.

"Something's really wrong when you bring in highly recruited junior faculty on a tenure-track line and the unwritten rule is they've got six years to prove themselves to make tenure, but then you fire them six months later," Froelich said. "As far I know, that has not ever happened anywhere before."

Froelich said the overall view of the faculty is that this is a travesty. He said that these events will leave a black mark on the name of FSU both nationally and internationally for at least a decade.

"I told my fellow members of the Board of Trustees that the layoffs of 21 tenured faculty members was an action without precedent in my quarter-century at FSU," said Eric Walker, president of the Faculty Senate and assistant professor in English. "At the November meeting, I repeated the warning that FSU was attracting very negative publicity nationally by this action."

Walker said the English department has lost several full-time teaching positions in the midst of the budget reduction, and class sizes are rapidly expanding to compensate for the loss. Aside from this, recruitment has been discontinued, and faculty morale is reaching increasingly low levels.

"At the very least, the legislature needs to fund universities at their current level for next year instead of imposing a further round of severe cuts," Walker said. "Then they need to figure out how to fund a higher education system the state of Florida can be proud of."

FSU is letting go of more tenured faculty than any of the other 10 schools in the State University System combined.

The University of Florida reported the release of only 20 faculty members, and although the University of Central Florida did not provide a definite number, it has avoided further program and job cuts by leaving 200 staff and faculty positions unfilled and drawing on savings instead.

“Across the whole State University System, everyone was faced with the same budget cutbacks,” Froelich said. “Yet FSU is the only one to fire more than just one or two tenured faculty, so there’s something really wrong with how it was done here.”

Froelich said to make matters worse, the whole plan appeared to be derived in secrecy. He said a complete list of layoffs has yet to be published, and it’s still very difficult to determine who was let go.

“Information regarding important events involving the future of many of the departments on campus was first heard through the local newspaper (the Tallahassee Democrat),” said Austin Todd, graduate research assistant in oceanography. “The university should have been the first to transfer this information to the affected departments.”

Todd said that students are most worried about the reputations of their respective departments, and want to be sure they will be receiving a reputable degree.

“With so many layoffs, we have lost specializations in several areas, and this is a cause of concern for many students,” Todd said. “In addition, students are upset that they will not be able to finish their degree with the professor with whom they are working.”

Froelich said that he believes it is the students who suffer most, especially with the lack of promising junior faculty. He added that a university functions effectively from the young end up.

“It’s the assistant professors that really keep the university going,” Froelich said. “The university administration has torn the fabric of the faculty, there’s no trust between the faculty and the upper administration of this university.”

Ned Stuckey-French, assistant professor in English, said that laid off professors are now forced to search for work elsewhere.

He said the faculty union sees these layoffs as a violation of the contract and is fighting them.

However, this is only the latest round of budget cuts. Stuckey-French said that the only hope is if faculty, students, administrators, staff, alumni and parents work together to enlighten the legislature.

“Faculty and administrators are working to do the best they can in a difficult time, but morale is down,” Stuckey-French said. “On the whole, I think everyone at the university agrees on the need to pressure the governor and the legislature to have the courage to do what is right and defend higher education.”