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FSU layoffs of tenured faculty cause a stir

Science layoffs at FSU making national news

By Doug Blackburn • DEMOCRAT SENIOR WRITER • February 19, 2010

Florida State University lured Mike Wetz away from the University of North Carolina with the offer of an assistant professor position in FSU's highly regarded Department of Oceanography.

Wetz's first day at FSU was Dec. 23, 2008. Less than six months later, in June 2009, Wetz received a layoff notice.

Wetz had done nothing wrong, by all accounts. He was one of five faculty members in his 15-person department whose positions were being eliminated as FSU decided to merge oceanography, geological sciences and meteorology in the wake of massive reductions in state revenue.

Two of his colleagues being terminated are tenured, which traditionally means their positions are secure.

Geological sciences fared even worse, losing six of 13 positions including four tenured faculty. No positions were eliminated in meteorology.

"As tough as it's been for me personally, the toughest part is seeing tenured faculty laid off," said Wetz, who days after receiving his notice learned his wife, Jennifer, was pregnant with their second child. "It's been very difficult for me to see this happen to tenured faculty.

"It's totally changed my view of how academia works."

FSU's decision to lay off 21 tenured and 15 additional tenure-track faculty isn't going unnoticed. The esteemed *Science* magazine last month detailed how the science programs at FSU have been affected by layoffs, and how FSU is letting go of more tenured faculty than the other 10 schools in the State University System combined.

Provost Larry Abele believes FSU was being pro-active when it adopted a three-year budget last June.

"Our plan minimizes the number of people we had to let go. It's painful to let someone go," Abele said. "We're trying to make it as palatable as possible."

Former FSU President T.K. Wetherell pledged to keep all targeted faculty on its payroll for two years, provided FSU receives a second year of stimulus money. However, Wetz and his colleagues in oceanography were told they would not receive a second year of funding.

That changed Wednesday when President Eric Barron addressed the Faculty Senate. Barron acknowledged that there had been confusion, and said all faculty would receive a second year of pay.

United Faculty of Florida, the union representing FSU's faculty, is challenging the termination of tenured members and hopes to have an arbitration hearing this spring.

Philip Froelich is the Francis Eppes professor in oceanography and one of the tenured faculty who received a layoff notice. He isn't sure if he'll return for a second year.

"There's something wrong here," the 63-year-old Froelich said. "To fire junior faculty like this is immoral — and that word is now around the country."

Eric Walker, an English professor and president of the Faculty Senate, isn't sure how layoffs in geological sciences and oceanography are playing around the country.

"I do know how this fact plays: We terminated 21 tenured faculty members," Walker said. "This is a fact that will get the attention of faculty members across the country."

"I haven't seen a whole lot of other institutions laying off 21 tenured faculty members. That's where we're making headlines."

FSU invested considerable resources in fall 2008 when it hired Wetz, Brian Arbic and Amy Baco-Taylor in oceanography and Davis Farris in geological sciences. Approximately \$1 million in "start-up" fees were earmarked for the four new faculty members, who have all received layoff notices.

"Universities that hire a bunch of young people and then lay them off quickly afterwards, obviously something went wrong there," said Arbic, who has accepted a position at the University of Michigan. "How many other universities around the country are taking the drastic step of laying off faculty? I think you'll find it's not a very long list."

Furloughs have been enacted at some top-shelf universities, including the University of Illinois. FSU administrators have said repeatedly they regard furloughs as a last resort for balancing the budget.

Leroy Odom, chairman of the Department of Geological Sciences, has seen his faculty roster shrink from 18 to six. He believes the hiring of Barron, formerly the director of the National Center for Atmospheric Research, was the best thing that could have happened at FSU.

"I'm not expecting any reversal, but I do expect we'll be treated better in the future," Odom said. "Somehow we went from a department that was good enough to deserve new faculty positions to one that didn't deserve to exist."

"I didn't see it coming. I knew there was a budget problem and they were considering faculty cuts and this and that. I didn't know they would all be coming from our departments."