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Can Closing a Humanities College Save a University?

By Eric Kelderman | APRIL 13, 2018

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U. of Central Missouri

Central Missouri and many other regional public universities have been stretched thin over the past decade by falling enrollments and stagnant state appropriations. n 2010, Charles M. Ambrose became president at the University of Central Missouri and led an effort to put the institution on firmer financial footing by recasting its mission and creating new initiatives to both become more efficient and create new revenues.

The result was called "Strategic Governance for Student Success," and it produced a wide range of measures with catchy names emphasizing the university's positive aspirations. "Learning To A Greater Degree,"

"Strategic Resource Allocation Model," and "Contract for Completion," to name a few.

The university also eliminated one of its five colleges, redistributing academic programs in health into a new College of Health Sciences and Technology.

In February, administrators announced another effort to improve the university's long-term financial outlook, relying mostly on budget cuts, including a proposal to eliminate the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences.

While the details have not been finalized, one result could be that departments such as English, history, and philosophy could be merged with programs from the College of Education. Art, music, and dance departments could share a college structure with a variety of sciences, statistics, and technology.



U. of Central Missouri

Charles Ambrose, president of the U. of Central Missouri: "You could easily say the fiscal pressure on the state budget puts higher education in the crosshairs."

Administrators are estimating the changes could save \$600,000 a year by getting rid of a dean and five department chairs. Though many of the people in those jobs would remain on the faculty, money would be saved from the stipend and release from teaching time the university grants those employees.

Ambrose said the changes are necessary to respond to declining numbers of international students, stagnant state appropriations, increasing health care and pension costs, and a state law limiting tuition increases to the rate of inflation.

Although the measure is still in draft form, Ambrose expects that the university's Board of Governors will vote on a final version at its April 27 meeting, just a few months after the

idea was introduced.

The relatively quick pace for making such changes is not only necessary, the president said, but desirable. "We are being very active and offensive in this plan so we don't have to keep doing it," he said in an interview.

Faculty offered predictably mixed reviews of the plan, especially its short timeline.

There is no doubt that the university needs to respond to its budget problems, said Michael Bersin, a professor of music and a former president of the Faculty Senate. But it's not clear that another reorganization is really the answer to the university's core problems, he said, and such a move could weaken the university's role as a regional comprehensive university.

Enrollment Plunge

Central Missouri is just one of many examples of regional public universities struggling both with their budgets and their academic identities. Such institutions have become stretched thin over the past decade by falling enrollments and stagnant state appropriations. At the same time, they are under public and political pressure to keep tuition low and tailor their academic programs to work-force needs.

The University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point is considering cutting 13 majors, primarily in the liberal arts, and some faculty to deal with a \$4.5-million budget deficit and declining enrollment.

A \$25-million shortfall at Eastern Kentucky University has led that institution's board to eliminate nearly two dozen degree programs, men's and women's tennis, and 153 positions.

The causes for the cuts are similar in many cases: declining enrollments and state budget woes. At Central Missouri, enrollments have fallen by more than 2,700 students since the spring of 2016, according to university figures.

What makes that statistic worse is that the shrinking enrollment is driven mostly by a loss of international students, most from India, who pay significantly higher amounts for their tuition. Since the fall of 2016, the number of international students on campus has dropped from 2,638 to 944, the university reported. Tuition from international students has fallen from nearly \$30 million in fiscal year 2016 to an estimated \$14.5 million for the current fiscal year.

Missouri lawmakers are now considering a state budget that is essentially flat for higher education but that limits tuition increases. Meanwhile, per-student appropriations for higher education remain more than 26 percent below what they were in 2008, before the most recent recession.

"You could easily say the fiscal pressure on the state budget puts higher education in the crosshairs," Ambrose said.

Bersin was more direct, saying that the state's elected officials have created an impossible situation for the university. "This was brought about by the General Assembly and a governor who do not know what we do, do not understand what we do, and do not care," he said. "They give lip service to the value of this institution but unfailingly vote for the things that contribute to the problems."

'A Moving Target'

Now, the university's faculty members are scrambling to understand the possible changes the president has proposed.

"It's happening very fast, and I think that's why people are nervous about it," said Katie Jacobs, an assistant professor of psychology and the president of the Faculty Senate. There is a wide range of issues that are not fully understood, she said, such as the amount of work the reorganization would mean for the faculty — for example to redesign tenure and promotion practices.

And some faculty members in the liberal arts are concerned that their work will be less supported under the new structures. Other members of the faculty are less concerned about the reorganization because no programs are being cut, Jacobs explained.

The Faculty Senate met Wednesday afternoon, but there was no final proposal to consider, she said. The group will meet again in a week, to consider voting for or against the administration's proposal and perhaps an unspecified alternative plan.

"It's hard to weigh in because it's a moving target," Jacobs said.

Along with the reorganization, the administration has recommended cuts to the athletics department and building maintenance, as well as eliminating nearly 100 vacant positions. A February estimate of all the cost-cutting measures added up to nearly \$11-million in potential savings.

All of this is part of the effort that was begun in his first year, Ambrose said: "One thing we did in 2010, we made a commitment to reshape public higher education for the state."

And while there is uncertainty over details and the speedy pace of the changes, Ambrose said he has tried to be transparent about the process, with several forums to hear concerns and input to shape the final proposal that the board will consider.

"The speed concerns some more than others," he said. "But I have had several senior faculty members say we will still be great faculty working at a great university. They understand these are not ordinary times in Missouri."

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