



## Faculty Advisory Council

### Illinois Board of Higher Education

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#### Recommendations by the IBHE Faculty Advisory Council on Program Prioritization and Consolidation

Endorsed Unanimously 4-19-19

Disinvestment in higher education in recent decades has put pressure on university administrators to cut academic programs, lay off faculty, and reorganize programs with an eye to cost-savings and efficiency as the only meaningful priority. As Ralph Martire of the Center for Budget and Tax Accountability notes, “State funding [for higher education] has declined by over 51% in real, inflation-adjusted terms since fiscal year 2000. In response, tuition at public colleges and universities in Illinois over that sequence has increased at a rate that’s 62.6% greater than the national average. So it should come as no surprise that over the last decade, enrollment in public institutions of higher learning has declined by 8.1% in Illinois, despite growing by 7.7% nationally.”<sup>1</sup>

Declining state funding and declining enrollments force universities to make cuts that lack academic integrity, even if they are justified in the name of efficiency or cost-savings. And insofar as private institutions in Illinois often rely on student MAP grants, they too feel the pressure to eat into their reserves to sustain students who lack enough funds to pay the full cost of tuition; this in turn adds to the pressure to downsize the school’s academic offerings by consolidating and realigning academic programs in ways similar to those that many public universities are beginning to do.

Four kinds of program prioritization and consolidation seem of particular concern: 1) efforts at state-wide or regional reorganizations of program offerings that encourage higher ed institutions to specialize in programs not offered elsewhere; 2) using Illinois’ Low-Producing Program Report to close liberal arts programs even when they serve broader student populations and are defining features of a university; 3) as a result of the above efforts, eliminating or outsourcing course offerings traditionally found at many locations (especially in the liberal arts and sciences); 4) by failing to involve faculty in meaningful, bottom-up ways in deliberations about program realignments, administrators often create weirdly hybrid departments in the name of efficiency rather than intellectual coherence.

In more fully describing below our concerns regarding program realignment, the Faculty Advisory Council of the Illinois Board of Higher Education urges the IBHE, university

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<sup>1</sup> Ralph Martire, “Difficult challenges await Pritzker,” *The State Journal-Register*,” 12-19-18.

administrators, university government liaisons, and the state legislative and executive branches to be mindful of the following with regard to program prioritization and consolidation, the outsourcing of General Education curricula, and the involvement of faculty in finding academically responsible and fiscally sustainable solutions for Illinois' colleges and universities:

## 1. On Efforts at Regional or State-Wide Consolidation of Programs

Some recurring efforts at program consolidation aim to divide up where degree programs are offered across different regional or state institutions. But such efforts can be impractical and detrimental to the quality and accessibility of educational opportunities.

- A. State-wide or region-wide efforts at consolidating programs make troubling assumptions about student mobility.** One third of American undergraduates change their major at least once, discovering their greatest strengths and strongest interests after taking coursework in a wide variety of academic disciplines.<sup>2</sup> Not only does the consolidation of academic programs (where, for example, geology or nursing programs might only be offered at a single campus) limit students' ability to explore their abilities, it also may prevent many students from changing majors. Quite simply, relocating to another school is not an option for many Illinois students.

The same concern applies for community colleges, especially where transportation mobility is time-consuming (especially for those with families or full-time jobs) or not readily available. Chicago's City College "Reinvention" experiment, which divided up program offerings across its community colleges, may have fostered improved graduation rates (although "City Colleges lowered some standards to boost those numbers"); but it was also accompanied by faculty discontent and by a dramatic enrollment drop of 32% (34,000 students) since 2010. Nursing enrollment alone dropped by 70% after nursing was offered exclusively at the Malcolm X campus. "Reinvention" moved Chicago's community colleges "away from its original mission: serving every one, at any level" in a locally accessible way.<sup>3</sup>

- B. State-wide efforts at consolidating programs preclude opportunities for interdisciplinary collaborations—which require a commitment to disciplines available at each university.** The interdisciplinary nature of much current research and

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<sup>2</sup> "Beginning College Students Who Change Their Majors Within 3 Years of Enrollment," U.S. Department of Education Data Point (NCES 2018-434)

<sup>3</sup> Kate McGee, "City Colleges of Chicago Are Being Reinvented. So Why Aren't Students Going?" *WBEZ*, 1-28-19 <https://www.wbez.org/shows/wbez-news/city-colleges-of-chicago-are-being-reinvented-so-why-arent-students-going/0c0d2484-3459-42cf-a606-97a7c8719bb3>

public reflection requires people with diverse training to be housed near one another in the same university. Here is the perspective of Eric Baack, a biologist at Luther College, about the trend to specialize programs at only one university – an experiment Iowa has been trying: "In Iowa, most of the ecology is at Iowa State University, which has the agriculture programs. Genetics, on the other hand, is strongest at the University of Iowa, which has the medical school. As a result, neither place has the sort of evolutionary biology that I would recommend to my students - one that unites a strong understanding of ecology with a strong foundation in population genetics and genetic tools.... Many scientific questions cross disciplines. The challenge of putting separate disciplines on separate campuses can make it challenging for students to find the faculty expertise in different areas to answer a question." Similarly, some scientists turn to philosophy to help them think through a problem in their own field. Many interdisciplinary programs for undergraduates also draw on expertise from diverse liberal arts and sciences fields.

## 2. On Program Prioritization Based on High-Enrolling Major Degree Programs<sup>4</sup>

### A. Using Illinois' legislatively mandated Low-Producing Program Report to prioritize program offerings has reduced liberal arts major offerings and inhibited the values of generating and preserving knowledge that are core to any four-year university or college.

While it is technically up to university administration to choose how to implement the legislatively-mandated Illinois' Low-Producing Program Report, some institutions have cited the IBHE's metrics of "40 majors"<sup>5</sup> a year as the primary factor when choosing to eliminate a major, even when good arguments have been made to preserve small programs that serve all students through General Education and that serve some students through majors which reflect long-standing commitments to

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<sup>4</sup> Another IBHE Faculty Advisory Council white paper expresses additional concerns about the use of the Low-Producing Program Report.

<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that the expectation of 40 majors to avoid being on a Low-Producing Program Report was *not* legislatively mandated, but an interpretation made by the IBHE in consultation with university presidents. See the mandates of Public Act 097-0610 (<http://www.ilga.gov/legislation/publicacts/fulltext.asp?Name=097-0610>), which amended 110 ILCS 205/7 and charged:

Each State university shall report annually to the Board on programs of instruction, research, or public service that have been terminated, dissolved, reduced, or consolidated by the university. Each State university shall also report to the Board all programs of instruction, research, and public service that exhibit a trend of low performance in enrollments, degree completions, and high expense per degree. The Board shall compile an annual report that shall contain information on new programs created, existing programs that have been closed or consolidated, and programs that exhibit low performance or productivity. The report must be submitted to the General Assembly.

understanding human history, culture, and meaning. Such programs range from African American studies to philosophy and many other areas of the humanities. Similarly, smaller science programs like physics and geology are under threat, as are social sciences like anthropology and economics.

Moreover, the liberal arts and sciences generate and preserve knowledge in a way that is not tied to immediate market values—such as knowledge about human history, culture, and meaning-making. Significantly reducing personnel who teach in these areas fails to serve the common good across the state, and diminishes the affected scholarly fields. Keeping a commitment to faculty in some low-enrolling fields preserves the flexibility to respond to new developments that require scholarly expertise in those fields.

This holds true for some applied fields as well; a doctoral program may need to support only a few experts in a particular area of human or veterinary medicine, but the loss would be great to the field, the state, and the nation if a doctoral program needed to meet a “low-enrolling” metrics number for that area of expertise.

**B. While an undergraduate student’s four-year major degree program reflects a short-term investment, a student’s broader General Education courses reflect a longer-term investment for both students and the common good of the state—and supporting those courses requires a commitment to the fields of liberal arts and sciences.**

A university is not a collection of high-enrolling major degree programs. Graduation requirements in General Education (or the liberal arts and sciences) are central to what it means to earn a four-year college degree not only because they foster broadly educated citizens who can continue life-long learning, but also because they cultivate skill sets, practices of independent and critical thinking, and habits of understanding the world from multiple points of view that can enable later career changes. While a stated commitment to General Education may not be directly threatened by program prioritization, eliminating majors in the liberal arts and sciences reduces numbers of faculty who invest in both courses and careers in these fields. And there is no reason *not* to offer majors in these fields if there are sufficient faculty to cover both a small number of majors *and* General Education course offerings—especially when even many tech companies (like those in Silicon Valley) are actively seeking liberal arts graduates with creative and people-oriented “soft skills.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Alex Chriss, “Don’t Ditch That Liberal Arts Degree: A liberal arts degree is an asset in Silicon Valley, not a liability,” *US News & World Report*, 1-19-18, <https://www.usnews.com/opinion/knowledge-bank/articles/2018-01-19/in-this-digital-age-students-with-liberal-arts-training-stand-out>

As one sign that reducing program offerings is not perceived as efficiency but as failure of opportunity, look at anecdotal reports that Illinois' high school guidance counselors have been using the Low-Producing Program Report and related program eliminations as a sign that a university is weakening.<sup>7</sup> A more comprehensive set of major degree offerings is appealing to students and guidance counselors alike.

### 3. On Outsourcing and/or Standardizing General Education and Other Courses

- A. Outsourcing and/or standardizing General Education courses is a byproduct of program realignment and faculty lay-offs in eliminated programs.** “Outsourcing” General Education options to online offerings, and/or to courses taught by adjuncts, means reducing or eliminating opportunities for majors in the disciplines that feed General Education offerings. It also relies on a contingent, underpaid, exploited labor force that lacks benefits and job security, prompting many adjuncts to abandon a career in the disciplines for which they trained.

Likewise, program realignments and consolidations may also seek to simplify and narrow course offerings in General Education, or to standardize the curriculum for core subject areas. This bypasses the expertise, initiative, and judgment of faculty members. It also mistakenly assumes that educators are like assembly-line workers who are doing their small part in putting together a product designed by “subject matter experts” from somewhere else.

Ending a commitment to particular majors and minors also creates conditions for hiring adjuncts with only Master's degree preparation (or less) in fields for which the terminal degree is a PhD—reducing the scholarly depth of the professoriate, and exposing students that much less to scholarly expertise in the classroom. This in turn can risk accreditation at some four-year institutions in particular.

- B. Dual Credit initiatives can reduce course enrollments in General Education courses, which puts pressure on university and college administrators to cut faculty members who teach courses in the liberal arts.** When Dual Credit courses are being offered through Master's-prepared faculty who teach high school students, students have less opportunity to study with faculty members who have earned doctorates in their fields. One of the main reasons to have faculty with doctorate degrees is that they are engaged

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<sup>7</sup> As reported in the November 16, 2018 minutes of the IBHE Faculty Advisory Council in a Q and A with former IBHE Executive Director Al Bowman: “The underperforming programs report and the budget concerns led to a perception of guidance counselors and families that institutions were weakened.”

in research and impart the knowledge and wisdom gained through their continued research to the students, which in turn improves critical thinking. Thus, the aim of enabling students to earn a college degree in a shorter time can have the effect of diminishing the overall quality of education for students, as well as affect the common good by reducing institutional spaces for entire disciplinary fields of expertise. Statistics on graduation rates, and numbers of years to graduation, are valuable only if there are common standards—including administrative and state support for high expectations of students at all levels of education.

#### 4. On the Importance of Shared Governance

- A. **Faculty members should be involved in any reorganization process** and not merely to carry out administrative commands to find ways of merging disparate fields<sup>8</sup>. Even if administrators have the final authority to make decisions, faculty senates and other shared leadership structures should have genuine (not merely reactive or coerced) input into any redesign of departments, programs, or colleges. As a general rule, faculty are eager to find academically responsible and financially sustainable ways forward; more than a job, our universities and academic departments are the communities to which we have dedicated decades of our lives. More importantly, faculty offer insights into the unintended consequences of reorganization plans. A “low-performing” major, for example, may offer indispensable pre- and co-requisites to other majors. When carefully utilized, faculty expertise may also provide new efficiencies and synergies not immediately obvious in a spreadsheet. When tenure can be protected, faculty members may be able to respect a long-term shrinking of the size of departments as retiring faculty are not replaced; but when a faculty member represents a body of knowledge not covered by other faculty, everyone suffers the consequences—from students, to a scholarly field’s ability to sustain itself, to the wider public who might know about particular ideas only because a relatively small group of scholars are dedicated to fostering and developing them.
- B. **Higher-education accreditation agencies expect shared governance.** Accreditation can be at risk if program consolidations or realignments bypass a genuine faculty role in university governance.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> For the significance of shared governance and faculty involvement in decisions in higher ed institutions, see Julie Bourbon, “Crisis of Confidence: Faculty no-confidence votes have risen dramatically in the past decade. What are the underlying reasons, and how should boards respond?” *AGB (Association of Governing Boards)*, November/December 2018, 25-29.

<sup>9</sup> For a summary of regional accrediting standards in relationship to shared governance, see “Regional Accreditation Standards Concerning Academic Freedom and the Faculty Role in Governance,” *American*

**C. Any program realignment should make intellectual sense, on academic grounds.**

Faculty members should be able to understand *why* a proposed program realignment or consolidation makes sense in academic terms. Administrative efficiency is not a sufficient reason. For instance, at four-year universities, it does not make sense to most faculty members to form a department that houses all or many humanities and social science programs together—especially if the university plans to support majors and minors in the programs housed within that conglomerate department. Consistently, faculty do not perceive intellectual coherence in creating hybrid departments like ‘History, World Languages, International Studies, Philosophy, Religious Studies’ (a department found at Indiana University East), or the Department of Geography, Sociology, History, African American Studies and Anthropology (at Chicago State). A “diffusion of innovation” can be set in motion before there is any assessment of the effects of particular approaches to academic reorganizations—as if “the need to try something new” is itself justification for dismantling and reforming higher education without consideration of effects or effectiveness.

**D. Be aware of the unintended consequences of particular program realignments, including the ability to attract and retain faculty.**

Faculty in some fields may be comfortable with—even energized—by their programs being housed together with different disciplines, while others will see program consolidations and department eliminations (especially those justified entirely on economic ground) as a dismissal or even a punishment, de-valuing long-standing programs that preserve and generate knowledge. This may have long-term implications for both students and faculty, as departments find it difficult to attract or retain excellent faculty, limiting the ability of faculty to share not only their knowledge but their enthusiasm with students.

## Conclusion

Many recent program realignments are modeled after management practices in the business world, which emphasize efficiency, cost savings, reducing “silos,” and fostering interdisciplinary collaboration.<sup>10</sup> Adopting such language wholesale from the field of business fails to do justice to the unique nature of higher education, and displaces faculty members from a sense of responsibility for and pride in their programs and their professions. The long-term success of higher education requires us to hold fast to the values of generating and preserving knowledge that are core to any university or college that is not a technical vocational school. The liberal arts and sciences are vital to these values, especially with regard to knowledge that

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Association of University Professors, <https://www.aaup.org/report/regional-accreditation-standards-concerning-academic-freedom-and-faculty-role-governance>

<sup>10</sup> See Jonathan Kramnick’s “The Interdisciplinary Delusion: Saving disciplines is the only way to save ourselves,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 11, 1018.

might not always be immediately applicable in the marketplace—such as knowledge about human history, culture, and meaning-making – but which provide the “future proof” skills of critical thinking, contextualization and communication on which our students depend for their future careers and contributions as citizens.

*Respectfully submitted to the Board of Higher Education on 4 June 2019,*

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