Closing Academic Programs: Pitfalls and Possibilities

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Closing Academic Programs: Pitfalls and Possibilities

Abstract

Takeaways

1 Closures of academic programs can have lasting negative fallout and the savings may not be as great as anticipated, but at certain points—and if done well—closures can provide an opportunity to refocus the institution.

2 While campus leaders typically are the primary drivers of the initial decisions to close programs and to craft the processes of doing so, boards of trustees have important roles to fulfill that can advance the efforts.

3 The current economic uncertainties may have shortened the time it takes for some campuses to recognize that the only way forward is to close academic programs and focus their offerings.

Disciplines

Community College Education Administration | Community College Leadership | Curriculum and Instruction | Education | Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research | Educational Leadership | Education Economics | Higher Education | Higher Education Administration

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CLOSING

Academic Programs:

Pitfalls and Possibilities

BY PETER D. ECKEL

TAKEAWAYS

1. Closures of academic programs can have lasting negative fallout and the savings may not be as great as anticipated, but at certain points—and if done well—closures can provide an opportunity to refocus the institution.

2. While campus leaders typically are the primary drivers of the initial decisions to close programs and to craft the processes of doing so, boards of trustees have important roles to fulfill that can advance the efforts.

3. The current economic uncertainties may have shortened the time it takes for some campuses to recognize that the only way forward is to close academic programs and focus their offerings.

AS PREDICTABLE AS HAND-WRINGING IN DIFFICULT financial times, the idea of closing academic programs is back on the table at some institutions. It is clear that program closure has appealed to administrators coping with difficult financial circumstances in years past. However, the strategy is difficult to carry out well in practice; even raising the idea can cause unexpected ripples through the
most previously calm campuses. Poorly executed, this strategy can result in votes of no confidence in administrative leaders during times when institutions can ill afford such turmoil. And yet there are times when the step makes sense and, if handled well, can actually improve a campus’s focus and mission.

Closing programs is the most severe of the three strategies campuses typically consider during difficult financial times: generating new revenue, making across-the-board spending cuts, or undertaking targeted cuts. In the current financial context, potential sources of increased income are likely to be limited. Across-the-board spending cuts are less threatening because they do not require judgments and comparisons of activities or priorities, and they do not force people to make or support unpopular decisions. However, this strategy by itself has limited utility because it ignores institutional priorities, strengths, and core competencies; does not position the institution strategically for the future; and may not actually generate adequate savings. Targeted cuts are the remaining option and, when pushed far enough, can include academic programs—potentially leading to significant savings and more focused goals for the institution.

Yet obstacles abound. First, program termination requires institutions to judge academic programs that are neither frequently nor easily compared. Not many agreed-upon metrics exist to compare philosophy to agriculture to physics. Second, program closures are extremely threatening to faculty members, alumni, and students of those programs targeted for closure. Each of these groups can exert pressure to reconsider what on paper might look like rational decisions. And to succeed, such decisions require the blessing of numerous key stakeholders, especially the faculty. Third, program closure falls into the grey area of university decision making. Administrators can claim ownership because it often is a fiscal decision; faculty members see it as their prerogative because it is about the curriculum; and trustees may see it as a strategic institutional decision and therefore their domain.

Only under rare circumstances can any one of these groups act unilaterally to close programs, and then such actions can leave lingering problems, low morale, and hard feelings that work against those responsible for the institution’s continued well-being. In addition, because program closure is a fairly rare occurrence, most leaders have little experience with it. While senior administrators have deep experience and strong track records, their successes usually come from efforts associated with growth: stronger student profiles, better faculty members, increased resources, and improved rankings.

In sum, program closure is a difficult decision, and looking at past lessons can be helpful for today’s boards and campus leaders. Case studies that I conducted on the last round of academic program closures during the fiscal stresses of the 1990s—at the University of Maryland at College Park, Oregon State University, Kent State University, and the University of Rochester—produced several considerations that may aid boards and administrations weighing program closures today or in the future.

Remember that the institution is likely fragile. Most consideration of closing academic programs occurs when an institution is already battered by economic downturn. At a time when the campus would best benefit by drawing on all of its capacities, engaging key stakeholders in constructive activities, and being innovative, the idea of program closure results in more disruption and people hunkering down. It exacts a high personal toll on those who are involved and affected. Said a faculty leader at Oregon State about program closures there in past years, “...everyone thought they were on the cutting block and no one really knew who was and who wasn't. So the rumors were just rampant.”

Academic program closures can have lasting negative fallout. At a time when institutions can least afford such things as negative publicity, disaffected alumni, skittish students, or discontented faculty members, program closures create negative consequences, even when “successful” (which, of course is in the eye of the beholder). Potential students may be leery of enrolling for fear their majors may disappear. Said one Oregon State faculty member, “For many parents and students ... the question was, ‘If I come to Oregon State, will the program that I want to major in still be there when I am ready to graduate?’ It created an image of

Leaders often decide against academic reductions in force (RIF) because removing tenured faculty may be too difficult to accomplish and may risk derailing the whole closure process.

program instability that lasted.” Alumni and donors may feel disenfranchised, particularly if they had a strong affinity for the closed programs.

Talented faculty members, essential to moving the campus ahead swiftly, may instead simply move on, seeking more stable institutions. For example, when the university closed the doctoral program in linguistics at the University of Rochester in the 1990s, five of the eight faculty members in the department eventually found jobs on other campuses. A faculty member there reported that the feeling among talented faculty members was that “this isn’t the place for me.”

The savings from program closures may not be as great as anticipated. To actually succeed in closing programs, institutional leaders may need to make some tradeoffs
that compromise anticipated savings. This is particularly true if decision makers are unwilling to lay off tenured faculty. The majority of expenses on any campus are linked to personnel costs, but leaders often decide against academic reductions in force (RIF) because removing tenured faculty may be too difficult to accomplish and may risk derailing the whole closure process. Although the University of Maryland at College Park succeeded in having the faculty senate itself vote to close two colleges and several other academic programs in the early 1990s, one administrator at Maryland noted at the time, “We probably could never have eliminated any departments if we had done this at the same time we were voting to get rid of jobs. Any money we saved would just go to the lawyers, as we would be in court for the next 10 years.”

Leaders often decide against such faculty RIFs to ensure that programs are closed. They decide that small gains are better than no gains at all. As was the case at Rochester, the anticipated personnel savings come from faculty members who voluntarily choose to go elsewhere. Said an administrator at Rochester after the program closures there in the 1990s, “As soon as you announce that you are not going to have a Ph.D. program any more, many of its faculty don’t want to be here. … It sounds rather impersonal and cruel, but … we certainly expected in a five-year period that those faculty would migrate away from those programs that had had their Ph.D. programs cut.” The downside, of course, is that the best faculty may leave and those unable to get positions elsewhere stay, often with animosities toward campus leaders.

Program closures can provide an opportunity to refocus the institution. While saving dollars in these tough times is important and the key motivation for such undertakings, program closure has the potential to evolve into consideration of much more fundamental issues regarding the mission and purpose of the institution. Closure efforts can be leveraged into broad strategic conversations about what is important to the campus now and into the future, and what the institution aspires to be, given the projected constraints in the environment. Campus leaders and trustees should take advantage of the natural campus-wide attention that discussion of closures generates to raise deeper questions about the institution’s purpose and identity, to focus the institution on its future, build consensus for that vision, and articulate what needs to happen to get there. As the provost at Maryland wrote in an open letter to the campus during closure discussions there in 1992, “Our ultimate goal must be to keep in mind the good of the entire institution. … The challenge is to emerge from this process with the best university that we can possibly have.”

A faculty senate leader at Maryland said at the time of the faculty senate’s closure votes, “You are not happy saying to your colleagues, we have to get rid of your program.” Yet, he added, “We had the courage to do it ourselves. I think it left a feeling that while we regret what had to be done—but we lost that huge sum of [state] money—there was a belief that we had done it openly, honestly, and with dignity and with class. And that served the university very well.”

What Trustees Can Do
While campus leaders typically are the primary drivers of the initial decisions to close programs and to craft the processes, boards of trustees have important roles to fulfill that can advance the efforts:

Reinforce the need for closures and support the leaders who made the decision. Trustees are essential in supporting and advancing the decision to close programs, which is never done lightly. Said a department chair at Rochester, “Board support in many ways was fundamental to faculty support. If the board says, ‘We believe in this plan; we believe in this administration; we are going … to support the plan,’ this buys a lot of credibility with the faculty.”

Help to make a clear and compelling case for why closures are inevitable. Part of the support boards must provide is helping to explain why closures are inevitable. They can put the right questions on the table and reinforce those being asked by senior administrators. Said a faculty leader at Maryland, “It is funny, when [the closures] look inevitable, no one fights it.” Similarly a department chair at Rochester said, “Too much of the leadership … knew we had a real problem and avoidance wasn’t an option. … Once you agree on change, you have won 95 percent of the battle.”

Ensure a culturally relevant and defendable process. Boards need to work with campus leaders to craft a legitimate and respected process. Leaders have to be conscious of not just what they are doing and why they are doing it, but also how they are going about it. Closure decisions generate resistance and poorly crafted processes open the door to charges that the outcomes were the results of faulty, exclusive, or unfair processes. Even the slightest bit of truth to those charges will stop a process in its tracks. Trustees can help campus leaders ensure they have developed a defensible process. Decision makers must not only outline clear, rational thresholds for determining what programs are closed, but they also must effectively navigate an often-intense political situation. Board members can serve as informed, but outside, voices and raise key questions and challenge assumptions.
to help leaders think about how they are going to bring about the changes.

*Deflect external pressure.* Alumni, donors, corporate partners, and community groups may all have a stake in programs being considered for closure. At Rochester, it was not the on-campus work of mathematics faculty members that resulted in reversing the decision to close the mathematics doctoral program, but rather their leveraging of off-campus supporters. Maryland, too, decided not to close programs that had strong off-campus support.

Said an administrator at Rochester, “Having the board of trustees meeting was absolutely critical because they all went away with the instructions for [what to do] when they get a phone call from professor X or when they get the phone call from some corporation.” The trustees essentially agreed to respond, “I am fully informed. I know what they are doing [and] I know they are doing the right thing.”

*Ensure that the people affected get the right attention.* In the push to reach agreement on which programs to close and to gain the necessary support, those affected by the decisions can easily be overlooked. Said an Oregon State administrator concerning the program closures there in the past, “There was a lot of stress and strain associated with this... both for the individuals who were not retained and also for the ones who were.” The latter faculty members had a deep sense of loss, almost a sense of guilt in some cases, he said, because they knew that, “Although I survived, my colleague across the hall didn’t.”

Boards can play important roles in ensuring that the human side of program closures gets adequate attention. Trustees who have gone through recent corporate downsizings may offer helpful experience, such as knowing about out-placement services that the institution does not have or may not know how to obtain.

**Make sure program closures are the right decision.** Finally, trustees can work with senior campus administrators to make sure program termination is the best decision for the campus. What may seem like a good idea at the beginning may turn out to be less favorable once the process is under way. That said, program closure can they seek to accomplish may influence the processes of how they go about large-scale closures.

Further, in the heightened competitive environment, institutions may view program closure not only as a cost-saving strategy, but also as an essential step in becoming better able to compete with their peers through offering fewer, but higher-quality, programs. This could mean that campus leaders may decide to close programs more quickly, rather than waiting until they find themselves in dire financial straits after pursuing other cost-savings measures first.

Finally, technology-facilitated communication may change the nature of resistance to proposed changes since it allows disparate groups of people—students, alumni, donors, media representatives—to connect more easily. The more meaningful protests and disruptions are likely to take place in electronic media, rather than on the steps of the administration building. On the other hand, today’s leaders may be able to effectively tap such technologies themselves to make their case, provide data to a wider group of people more easily, and involve a wider number and array of individuals in the decision-making processes.

Even in these changed circumstances, however, wise boards and administration should strive to make any consideration of program closures the entry point for much deeper inquiries as they position the institution to answer the questions: Who are we as an institution and what do we want to become given the new rules of the game?

**Contemporary Pressures**

Although large-scale program closures have happened relatively infrequently in the past, the current economic uncertainties may have shortened the time it takes for some campuses to recognize that the only way forward is to close academic programs and focus their offerings. In addition, institutions facing a serious financial crunch may seek larger financial savings from program closures than many institutions sought in the past, thus pushing institutional leaders to consider closing a greater number of programs, particularly high-cost ones. The magnitude of what

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Real Majority in Higher Education Today

BY PATRICIA A. McGUIRE

YVONNE IS A TYPICAL COLLEGE STUDENT IN 2010. She’s working on a paper due in her American Fiction course. She has to finish some reading for her Gender Communication course, and has a nagging worry about passing Statistics. She turns away from her computer to help her son, a second-grader, with his spelling homework, and then is distracted by her pre-school daughter’s insistence that she give equal

TAKEAWAYS

1. U.S. Department of Education studies reveal that, by various measures, almost 75 percent of college students today are “non-traditional.”

2. Most conversation in government and policy circles, however, still assumes nearly all students are full-time, traditional undergraduates.

3. Rather than relying on traditional metrics such as four- or six-year graduation rates, it would be better for boards and institutional leaders to draft specific plans for assessing educational outcomes for nontraditional students across a set of learning objectives tailored to workforce skills.
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* Evaluation by a past Endowment Institute attendee.

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