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**COMMENTARY**

# What to Consider When Closing an Academic Program

*By Peter D. Eckel*  |  NOVEMBER 12, 2017

While not talking about academic-program closure, Machiavelli certainly could have been when he noted that "there is nothing more difficult to carry out … than to initiate a new order of things. For the reformer has enemies in those who profit by the old order, and only lukewarm defenders in all hose who would profit by the new order." When it comes to discontinuing academic programs, rarely do those involved consider themselves profiting, but the sentiment is accurate. In an environment of shared governance, little is more difficult than to disrupt the current academic order and establish a new one. The challenge is that in this era more institutions will be pressed into creating a new order for themselves.

For 20 years, I've worked with administrative and faculty leaders, and more recently with boards of trustees, as they position their institutions for the future. Here are some lessons to consider when it comes to program closure.

**Do understand if such a change is really necessary.** Program closure, while a viable option, can also seem like a solution in search of a problem. It is too easy for boards with a corporate mind-set and culture to consider the possibility of closing programs. Business leaders close lines of work in their corporations, and so it can seem reasonable to them to ask administrators to do the same. Pressed administrators can jump to such solutions without a deep understanding of why. They also should understand the possible costs — other than bad press — of such an effort: the uncertainty it generates on campus and among potential students who wonder whether they want to attend an institution that is struggling; the hunker-down ethos created at a time when the institution might need creative and divergent thinking; and the resistance from alumni and other program supporters.

**Don't close programs as a single response to financial constraints.** Program closure can (and should be) a difficult decision to carry out and will generate resistance. Such an effort is more acceptable to the institution when it has taken other serious steps to address its challenges. Closing a program may not yield much in short-term savings unless faculty positions are terminated, so it is best coupled with other cost-savings steps.

**Do make a clear and compelling case for why you are closing programs.** When explaining things to the college community, leaders need to work concurrently on the "what of change" (the decisions), the "how of change" (the process), and the "why of change" (the case). Of these three, the one that tends to get shortchanged is "why." Administrative leaders need to communicate the case for change consistently throughout the process.

**Don't skirt shared-governance processes.** While the culture of shared governance can range from one that is more administration-led to one that is firmly faculty-led, institutions are well-served to tap their current governance processes. Faculty involvement provides information into the process and helps avoid potential mistakes. Further, administrators who don't follow established processes open up debates regarding the legitimacy of their decisions and actions.

**Do acknowledge that closure processes are also about asking and answering other key questions.** Program closure raises a series of fundamental questions that leaders should acknowledge explicitly and create processes to deal with: What do we value and why do we value it (and what do we no longer value as much)? Who have we been as an institution and who are we going to be? An example of one question asked by leaders of a research university was, "What does it mean to be top-tier research university in a state with constrained resources?"

**Don't forget that this is a political process.** Such decisions will have detractors who do not agree with the directions being pursued. Understand how those stakeholders can create coalitions, advocate for their positions, and advance their perspectives. In today's world of social media, dissent will come through many channels.

**Do listen.** Administrative leaders often have information that others do not. At the same time, they have to remember that others at the college have information that they do not. Through engagement, assumptions can become revisited, initial ideas overturned, and preferences clarified. While there are very few truths of academic leadership, a longstanding one is that effective leaders listen and are open to wise counsel and influence. Twenty-five years ago, Robert Birnbaum's research warned leaders of becoming "jaded, self-centered, distant and sure of their judgement." The same holds true today.

**Don't overlook the point that making decisions and carrying them out are two different things.** Leaders rightly focus on rendering decisions about which programs and why. But they then must develop and attend to the process of bringing those decisions to action. The reality is that the best decisions are those that can be implemented, not those held up against a set of predetermined criteria.

**Do attend to the people involved.** Program closure can be a difficult and painful process for those immediately affected. Paying attention to the human element and the emotions of such an undertaking is important.

*Peter D. Eckel is a senior fellow and director of leadership programs in the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania.*

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