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Planning Committee Report on Understaffed Programs April 22, 2024

Historical and Institutional Context: As a comprehensive liberal arts college, UMN Morris offers a broad suite of academic majors and minors. These reflect our pragmatic commitment to serve the wide-ranging career and personal interests of current and prospective students, along with our legacy commitment to great traditions in human thought and achievement.

A decade of uninterrupted enrollment decline and fiscal retrenchment has posed challenges to several of these academic programs, to the point where their sustainability and viability have been questioned. Since 2013-14 we have downsized the faculty by 21 full-time equivalents (FTEs).¹ Worse, according to reports we collected from Division Chairs, we have lost 29 tenure lines.²

During this decade of retrenchment no programs have been eliminated, and in fact faculty have added significant new, “resource-neutral” majors and minors.³ Moreover, a variety of sub-plans (within a major) have also been introduced to further broaden our offerings.⁴ These efforts have been undertaken to appeal more widely to current and prospective students and to help address our enrollment challenges.

Notwithstanding creative programming steps and faculty FTE reductions, the 45% enrollment decline over the last decade has reduced our student-to-faculty ratio from 14.5 down to below 10, which is below sustainable benchmarks for comprehensive liberal arts colleges.⁵

¹ The 2013-14 data (129 FTEs) comes from the 2017-18 UMM Data Book (the last year this series was produced), while the current data (108 FTEs) comes from UM Reports. There are several differences in methodology for counting FTEs, all of which make the current number appear relatively larger. The old Data Book, for example: i) did not count Division Chairs as FTEs, but recognized the 70% teaching reduction that goes with the appointment; ii) did not count sabbatical replacement hires as FTEs; iii) carefully reduced the FTE total to account for faculty assigned to alternative duties, such as Assessment Coordinator, ACE Office Coordinator, etc.

² Identifiable unreplaced tenure-line losses in **Social Science (-6 current, -2 pending)** include Sociology (-2) Econ (-1) Hist (-1) Anth (-1), Psych (-1); disappearing in May 2024 Econ (-2). Unreplaced losses in tenure lines in **Science and Math (-5)** include: Biology (-2), Chemistry (-1), CSci (+1.5), Math (-2), Physics (-2), Stats (+.5). Unreplaced tenure-line losses in **Humanities (-10, -2 pending)** include: Engl (-3, net); MUS (-3); CMR (-1); GER(-1); PHIL (-1); fall '24 ARTH (-1); THEA (-1). Net unreplaced losses in **Education (-4)** include teacher education (-5); Sports Management (+1).

³ Majors: Environmental Science; Medieval and Ancient Studies. Minors: Data Science; Creative Writing; Medieval and Ancient Studies; Jazz Studies; Sustainability Leadership.

⁴ See for example the ‘Philosophy, Politics, and Economics’, ‘Computer and Data Studies’, and ‘Legal Studies’ sub-plans within the Philosophy major.

⁵ Perhaps this is the place to point out that FTEs and student-to-faculty ratios are only proxies (and not particularly good ones) for the underlying economic problem they are imagined to address: namely, the instructional cost per student. With salaries on the Twin Cities campus 50% higher than at UMN Morris, for example, a 10-to-1 student/faculty ratio in Morris should be economically equivalent to a 15-to-1 ratio in Minneapolis.

While we all wish for the recovery of enrollment, in the short-term FTE cuts are the order of the day: if *flat is the new growth* in enrollment management circles, further FTE cuts will almost certainly continue, at least in the medium term.

It generally falls to the tenure-line faculty to do assessment, program reviews, program revisions, advising, scheduling (including identifying substitutes for courses that can no longer be offered), recruiting, hiring and mentoring of adjunct faculty, discipline coordination, etc. The new programs added in the last decade increase all of those costs for the remaining faculty, even though they are “resource neutral” from the point of view of academic payroll. For obvious reasons, then, the faculty in several disciplines are under stress in their efforts to continue supporting existing programs. In some disciplines, the responsibilities and expectations foisted on remaining faculty are now unreasonable and unsustainable.⁶

Development of this Report: In September of 2023, Chancellor Ericksen asked the Planning Committee to develop a “framework for considering the continuation of academic programs”, whether their challenges stem from low enrollments, faculty departures, changing faculty interests, or other factors. The initial request was met with some resistance by the Planning Committee, on the grounds that: i) a process sufficiently generalizable to evaluate all the different and dissimilar programs on this campus would ultimately not be particularly useful; ii) the Planning Committee itself has not historically been involved in *academic* affairs, and its membership is not particularly representative or well suited to this purpose.

In a second iteration, the Committee met with the Chancellor and VCAA/Dean Ng to get clarification for the request. In this meeting and through follow-up email, the Chancellor emphasized that the focus of our work should be researching and suggesting options that small academic programs can consider pursuing to maintain the strength and viability of their majors. [See **Appendix 1** for the Chancellor’s ultimate charge to the Planning Committee]. The final part of this report discusses some of the less objectionable options.

The Committee was also asked to develop a process that challenged disciplines could follow. After much deliberation, the Committee wants to clarify that the “process” needs to be a part of a campus-wide academic planning process – one that reconciles the breadth and depth of our program offerings with our actual resources – rather than a process that disciplines undertake individually or are subjected to. The Dean’s office is the logical home base for any such process and the Curriculum Committee is the logical campus governance body for decision-making about academic programming.

Before we address the range of possible options available to understaffed disciplines, we devote a few paragraphs here to describe how our current process works for determining new tenure-line hires, as well as some of the limitations of that process.

⁶ In addition to the extra service load resulting from the loss of 29 tenure track positions, faculty now face significantly higher expectations in terms of assessment and program review. While the amount of grading and advising has fallen (as a result of lower enrollments), additional faculty workload arises from the need to revise courses (in light of the learning deficits of our current students) and to manage the increasingly complicated landscape of student mental health challenges.

Current Process for Determining New Tenure-line Hires: Each spring faculty in the various disciplines fill out tenure-line requests, which they submit to their respective Division Chairs in late May. Some requests are for replacing faculty who have left, or converting temporary lines into permanent ones, while others are for building out new programs. The form itself requires detailed information about courses to be taught, previous enrollments in these courses, centrality of the discipline to the liberal arts, and other particulars. In consultation with their faculties, and armed with the data in the forms, division chairs sort and prioritize the requests from their division colleagues. In mid-summer, the division chairs meet with the Dean, and assemble a prioritized list across the divisions. The Chancellor has the ultimate say in authorizing the *number* of searches that go forward, based on the financial outlook and her perception of the University system politics.

In most years, attrition exceeds the number of tenure-line searches authorized by the Chancellor by a significant margin. (See *footnote 2* for a cumulative list of lost tenure lines over the last decade.) The prioritization of positions (agreed upon by the Dean and Division Chairs) relies on course and discipline enrollment data, the collective sense of how dire the need is (whether the discipline's curriculum can be feasibly offered without the new hire), and a more general sense of how the position fits with the campus mission.

Faculty Departures and Program Decline: In a general context of austerity and non-replacement, and particularly when attrition clusters in a discipline, our process can undercut a previously viable program and render it less attractive to students.⁷ Student numbers, in isolation, can be more an indication of a program's historical, gradual starvation, rather than a reflection of its desirability and viability. In other words, the first criterion (historical enrollments), taken out of context, is at best a dubious indicator.

Feasibility & Fit with Mission: The outcomes of our current process (e.g. the two authorized tenure-line hires in '23-'24) partially address the most immediate and acute program feasibility concerns. Disciplines whose hiring requests were not authorized are left in a sort of limbo: there is no consistent guidance regarding programs and curriculum (whether from Division Chairs, the Dean, or the Chancellor), making planning over a longer horizon effectively impossible.⁸ Since it is not known until very late in the process whether hiring within a discipline will be possible or not, and since programs are only revised on a two-year catalog cycle, it has become extremely challenging to match curriculum to staffing even on a year-to-year basis.

The third criterion (mission) is often a kind of an afterthought or possibly a tie-breaker, given the immediate urgency of the first two.

⁷ Physics, for example, lost 3 of 4 tenure lines recently (1 to resume this fall); English lost 4 of 8 (1 was regained last fall); Sociology lost 2 of 3, several years ago. Enrollments are sharply lower now in all three of these programs.

⁸ Faculty in disciplines suffering attrition are generally given little or no guidance on what they may expect in terms of the campus commitment to continuation of their program. Faculty in disciplines without attrition have little incentive to change their practices.

Managed Attrition: To summarize, then, our current process is largely one of managed attrition. Facing an overarching mandate to reduce faculty size, and facing the constraints posed by the institution of tenure itself, the path of least resistance is to accept most of the shrinkage through attrition, *when and where it happens*. The limited tenure-line hiring we are able to do ameliorates *some* of the randomness of attrition, but it bears noting how the process itself is essentially reactive rather than strategic. The 90 minutes or so that the Dean and Division Chairs devote to prioritizing tenure-line requests together is not a substitute for framing and implementing a strategic approach to the college's future.

On-going Discipline Discussions and Adjustments: Specific disciplines and individual faculty members can and do have discussions about how to find alternatives for required courses they can no longer offer, and what elements previously thought to be essential (as graduate school preparation, for example) will be dropped altogether from their curricula. This process, as a matter of necessity, is farther along in disciplines that have suffered unreplaced attrition.⁹ There has been no visible institutional approach to thinking about which streamlined suite of academic programs we can and should be contemplating. It is probably too much to ask that such a radical revisioning emerge spontaneously from discipline faculty themselves, who, after all, were trained to the highest level in their disciplines, were brought here to represent those disciplines, and who have not formally been disabused of the notion that their disciplines might undergo a revival of fortune on this campus at some unspecified future date.

The campus appears to be in the endgame of the strategy of managed attrition. The strains are visible everywhere. While the rest of the discussion here will be about short-run coping strategies for understaffed disciplines, perhaps with a new Dean starting this summer there might be the beginning of an institutional approach to what it means for academic programming and staffing if we are to be a permanently downsized institution.

Unless enrollment recovers dramatically and quickly (and hiring resumes), understaffed disciplines will be left facing a difficult predicament: namely, how can they continue to offer excellent programs in the face of this unrelenting retrenchment? And what types of support from administrators would allow these understaffed programs to continue to thrive?

Three Core Options Emphasized by the Committee:

1) Authorize Replacements: The ideal option would be for the administration to authorize tenure-line searches to replace those faculty who have retired or left. If our budget deficits prevent this from happening in the near future, the second best option would be to fill these lines with multiple-year contract adjunct faculty with Ph.D.s. Many of the small disciplines on campus were already stretched thin, even prior to this period of retrenchment, and barely covered the essential courses in their respective fields. Thus, failure to hire sufficient replacement faculty threatens the continued existence of these small disciplines. Asking these disciplines to continue to offer their majors when they are unable to provide coursework in core areas, moreover, would deprive students of the education they deserve, would make it difficult for us to compete with other liberal arts colleges, and might even raise the risk of our losing accreditation. In short, the

⁹ See for example Music, Business Management, Anthropology, Sociology, and Theatre, *inter alia*.

university must work to replace faculty in disciplines with insufficient staffing if it wants to continue to offer a comprehensive liberal arts education.

2) Utilizing Distributed Learning: If the university is unable to authorize replacements, then we recommend that the administration pursues two paths. The first is to work together with Eric Watkins, Vice Provost for Distributed Learning, to develop a system-wide plan to fill gaps in our course offerings by enabling students to take online classes offered on a regular basis by coordinate campuses. There are currently several major obstacles, however, to making this option work, such as the small number of online courses currently offered across the system, contrasting credit hours across campuses, as well as conflicting academic calendars. Eric Watkins has nevertheless expressed interest to the Planning Committee in exploring this option further with our campus.

3) Recommitting to Post-Doctoral Student/Graduate Student Training Program: A second path worth pursuing would be to hire pre- or post-doctoral students from the UMN-Twin Cities campus to teach in-person classes. Ideally, affordable housing options and meal plans would be provided for these instructors through our campus facilities. This would be a mutually beneficial situation in that these students would gain crucial teaching experience while we could fill some of the holes in our curricular offerings.

Recommended Process for Considering Further Steps: If these three core options prove insufficient in terms of allowing programs to continue to offer their majors, and the administration decides that these programs need to be reimagined or restructured, then the advice of the Planning Committee is that the following process be followed. The **first step** would be for the Dean and/or Chancellor to call an official meeting with all faculty members and articulate a set of general principles that could guide them in thinking about how to continue their programs in the face of retrenchment. This general framework and clear vision of the future of the campus would allow disciplines to make informed decisions and would prevent a piecemeal approach to the problem. The **second step** of the process would be for the Dean and Division Chairs to work directly with understaffed programs as they attempt to reimagine themselves according to the general framework and vision laid out in step one; moreover, we hope that some type of financial support would be offered to faculty in these downsized majors to assist them in these efforts, such as holding summer retreats or carefully studying the efforts made by similar programs at peer institutions.

Planning Committee Membership:

Voting members:

MARK COLLIER, CHAIR

Roger Rose

Stephen Crabtree

Elliot James

Nizhoni Marks

Laura Thielke

Emma Kloos

(3 student seats not filled)

Ex officio members

Bryan Herrmann

Arne Kildegaard

Bill Zimmerman

Appendix 1: Janet's Ultimate Charge to Planning Committee

Janet Ericksen <ericksja@morris.umn.edu>

Oct 23, 2023, 8:53 AM

to Bryan, Denise, Peh, Mark

Hi, Mark, Bryan, Peh, and Denise, whom I'm adding in to this conversation as Chair of Steering Committee,

We had a good discussion in Steering last week about my earlier request to Planning, and I want both to clarify that request a bit more--and an in person conversation could also be helpful--and take you up, Mark, on the offer to have spring semester meetings in Planning spend some time on this. The focus of my request is explicitly on continuing programs, not discontinuing them. The request came out of discussions that various faculty have had with me, with Peh, with Div Chairs and others. Some questions that have arisen in those discussions include: what happens when the number of faculty in a discipline reduces to a point where the program either needs to be significantly rethought and restructured or the faculty themselves think it should be discontinued? What other factors, if any, could prompt the dean or a div chair or the faculty of a discipline to revise its structure? Should external reviews be part of evaluating whether or not a discipline has sufficient faculty to staff a major? What all would go into deciding what "sufficient" means? If our enrollment stays at about 1000 for a few years, are there reviews we should be conducting that will help us explain to each other and to the UMN President and other UMN system administrators and others why we want to continue even small programs?

As I said in my opening to Campus Assembly last month, I have no intention of discontinuing programs ("Reluctantly and initiated by faculty rather than by administrators at any level, Curriculum Committee will be reviewing a plan to discontinue the German Studies major with the next catalog, although that will not affect any students who are currently in that program—we will ensure they can complete their major. Dean Peh Ng is also continuing discussions initiated last year by Sociology and Anthropology faculty about how we can best serve students in those areas given our limitations in hiring. Otherwise, I truly don't expect any changes in the number of majors we offer."). At the same time, faculty, staff, and others want to know WHY we aren't discontinuing programs given our budget and want guidance about how to make a discipline work with a smaller number of faculty. A process devised by Planning could help us answer that as well as helping people if the faculty themselves want to figure out

whether or not they are or can be viable. There's no nefarious plotting by the admin here, just a request to have governance involved in thinking about a helpful and open process.

Again, if you think it makes most sense for me to come talk with Planning about this request, I am willing to do so, and you could ask Denise as chair of Steering to come, too.

Thanks, Janet