

Western Washington University

3-29-10 Draft Process for Considering Proposals for Elimination of or Major Reductions in Programs

Background

Western Washington University has a “[Campus-Level Policy for Considering Proposals for Elimination of or Major Reductions in Programs](#).” That policy assigns responsibility to the President and appropriate Vice President for considering proposals for program eliminations or major reductions in both academic and non-academic programs.. As public discussion of certain eliminations can significantly and needlessly damage programs under consideration, the initial consideration is to be confidential.

The document that follows identifies the processes that the President and Vice Presidents are to follow in considering the proposals involving program elimination or major reduction and provides guidance to the President and others in fulfilling their obligations under the University’s policy. The process is further guided and directed by the policies of the university (including those procedures stated in Section V-B of the [Faculty Handbook](#)ⁱ), strategic budgeting priorities, and contractual obligations including those involving collective bargaining, with matters of university policy and obligation taking precedence over any process guidelines outlined below.

The process is intended to support decision-making that is the wisest possible in terms of the university’s overall mission, current strategic budgeting priorities, and standing obligations. Further, the process is designed to minimize unnecessary damage to programs; that is, that the only proposals made public are those most certain to stand after further, intense, public, and critical review. This includes the necessity of assuring thorough and documented review and analysis of proposed program eliminations deemed sufficiently likely as to warrant such public announcement and scrutiny.

We cannot simultaneously protect the health of our programs and also consider openly and transparently those program eliminations that, by the mere consideration, would become self-fulfilling prophecies. *Nevertheless, those with responsibilities to decide must be held accountable for following a process and applying criteria that are explicit, transparently developed in advance, and that the campus has participated in developing.* That is another important reason for preparing this “process” supplement to the existing policy and seeking advice and recommendations.

Scope

The processes that follow apply to proposals to eliminate or make major reductions in programs. For academic programs, the scope reaches to the level of the academic major (graduate and undergraduate).¹ Eliminations or reductions of components of academic majors (specializations,

ⁱThe document that follows as well as the language in the Faculty Handbook present procedures that do overlap regarding academic program elimination. They are complementary in that this document outlines processes to be followed by academic line administrators in confidentially identifying those recommendations that, then, would be further considered through established governance processes, including involvement of the UPRC. And, the criteria identified in Section V-B of the Faculty Handbook as of particular relevance are, also, incorporated within the process document that follows. As noted above, where university policy (including those stated in the Faculty

1 options, concentrations, minors) do not fall under the provisions of these processes or the overall policy
2 unless, in rare cases, they are of a magnitude that the damaging consequences of public consideration
3 are such that, in the judgment of the Provost, they should fall within the provisions of the policy for
4 program elimination.²

5 Our processes, and in what follows, are most developed as they apply to proposals involving academic
6 programs. That is because such potential reductions are likely to trip the “mere public consideration
7 would do serious damage” concern. Good faculty and staff and students would leave and good faculty,
8 staff, and students would be difficult to recruit to a program known to have been considered for
9 elimination. A self-fulfilling prophecy results.

10 *Observing that those considerations of program elimination most likely to trip this policy are academic*
11 *does not mean that that is where cuts would disproportionately be.* Exactly the opposite has been our
12 approach for the current biennium (and before) and that is as it should be given that our stated top
13 priority was to protect our capacity to fulfill our core mission. It simply means that extra caution is
14 necessary where we are considering the core components of the university’s mission.

15 Still, circumstances will arise for consideration of program eliminations that are not academic. Here,
16 there is no clear demarcation like, for example, “at the level of an academic major” to decide what falls
17 under the scope of the policy on major program elimination. We would not want to trip that policy for
18 every suggestion to drop a minor program component in order to continue higher priority
19 commitments. Here, we must rely upon the relevant vice president, consulting with colleague vice
20 presidents and the president, to decide if consideration of a program elimination or major reduction is
21 of a magnitude sufficient – in terms of effects on people, budget, core mission – as to require following
22 the process outlined below.³

23 While budget challenges may seem the most likely circumstances to cause the university to implement
24 policies and processes on program eliminations or major reductions, ours is a dynamic university
25 regularly evolving in response to changing societal needs and opportunities. Consequently, the process
26 that follows is designed to be used whether or not the precipitating reason for consideration of program
27 reduction or elimination follows from needs to reduce overall budgets.

Handbook) and provisions of the process that follows are in conflict, university policy takes precedence. That
having been said, areas of possible ambiguity do remain and certain provisions specified in Section V-B of the
Faculty Handbook are not in place; these needs will be addressed the initiation of the normal, broad-based
[university policy formation process](#).

¹ Universities, of course, also routinely phase out and then drop graduate and undergraduate majors in order to
phase in programs responsive to emerging needs and disciplinary evolution. Often such phase outs do not affect
positions, budgets, or students and are examples of eliminations or major reductions where the conclusion would
be that the special processes in this policy need not be followed (because serious damage would not result from
public consideration of such phase outs).

² Departments, as they adjust to changing academic and external circumstances, are regularly readjusting areas of
concentration. Such reviews are ongoing and best continue at the departmental level. Such efforts are
independent of matters of program elimination or major reduction that this document focuses upon.

³ Program eliminations deemed not to be of sufficient magnitude to trip this process would, then, simply become
part of the usual, transparent budget process.

1 **Steps to Follow**

2 The following general steps are to be followed as appropriate and as possible given circumstances
3 particular to individual situations:

- 4 1. Proposals to consider program eliminations may come from a number of sources: employees,
5 governance groups, University Planning and Resource Council (UPRC), Trustees, vice presidents,
6 the president. To be considered, the proposals would need to be received by the relevant vice
7 president. Where the relevant vice president believes that the proposal should be further
8 considered and if the program involved falls within the scope as described above, then the vice
9 president will inform the president.
- 10 2. The President, after full discussion with the team of vice presidents, will authorize or not
11 authorize further consideration of the proposed program elimination or major reduction.
- 12 3. In the event that further consideration is not authorized, that is the end of the matter at the
13 current time. Recognizing that circumstances may change, and that budgeting is often
14 undertaken during periods of great uncertainty and fluidity regarding the university's final,
15 appropriated budget, proposals may certainly be proposed for reconsideration at any time.
- 16 4. In the event that the President authorizes further consideration, the President will exercise the
17 obligations that exist within [the policy](#) to consult with governance leaders on the question of
18 whether or not public consideration of the proposal would, perhaps needlessly, damage the
19 program being considered.
- 20 5. Where the President concludes, after that consultation specified in step 4, that public
21 consideration of the proposal would not seriously damage the program, then the proposal
22 would be considered as a part of the usual, open budget process.
- 23 6. Where, after that consultation specified in step 4, the President concludes that significant
24 damage would result, then all further consideration of the proposal (until Step 11 below) is to be
25 done observing the strictest confidentiality in order to protect the overall quality of the program
26 should the decision (step 10) be to not proceed with elimination or major reduction. Only the
27 relevant Dean or Director, Vice President, and President are, initially, to be aware of the further
28 consideration of the program reduction or elimination. It likely will be necessary to bring others
29 into the confidential analysis and consideration of the proposal – e.g., to study budgets and
30 other data, to consider implications across college or other organizational boundaries, to assess
31 implications for philanthropic efforts, ... – and this may be done but only with the explicit
32 authorization of the relevant vice president and after that person has consulted with the
33 President.
- 34 7. Following from the necessarily confidential nature of the initial consideration go responsibilities
35 for data-informed analysis undertaken with upmost attention to accuracy, comprehensiveness,
36 documentation, and with anticipation of subsequent and most appropriate campus and public
37 expectations for full accountability. The analyses undertaken must anticipate (but are not
38 necessarily limited to) the factors that would enter into discussions provided for through
39 collective bargaining contracts.
- 40 8. The analyses are to be driven by the publicly developed criteria for strategic budgeting.
41 Guidelines for such analyses are a part of this document and are to be used during the analysis
42 phase.

- 1 9. Analysis must include preparation of a draft implementation plan of sufficient duration to fully
2 implement the change.
- 3 10. Upon completion of the analytic steps, the Vice President will make a recommendation to the
4 President, providing supporting documentation. If the President decides that the program
5 elimination or reduction should not be made at that time, then that is the end of the matter.⁴
6 Again, as circumstances change and our budget planning is undertaken under considerable
7 uncertainty, the proposal may, always, be reconsidered.
- 8 11. If the President decides that there is a strong likelihood that the program elimination or
9 reduction must be made, then that proposal becomes public and publicly considered. The
10 nature of that public consideration is specified in collective bargaining agreements and the
11 university's strategic budgeting process (including involvement of the UPRC). Where collective
12 bargaining agreements and the strategic budgeting process are at odds, the provisions of the
13 collective bargaining agreement would prevail.
- 14 12. Further consideration of the proposal for major program reduction or elimination will follow the
15 established budget process including presidential recommendation of an institutional budget to
16 the Board of Trustees after receiving campus feedback, and action by that Board as they adopt
17 an overall institutional budget. Board approval is also required for elimination of any
18 department.

19 **Criteria Driven and Data-Informed Analysis**

20 It is critical that any proposal for program reduction or elimination logically follow from the publicly
21 developed and widely understood principles for strategic budgeting. Those policy-level and publicly
22 developed commitments – and NOT this process document – drive the criteria that are to be applied
23 during the preceding steps. Currently, and in priority order, our strategic planning policy identifies
24 these criteria:

- 25 1. Protect programs most central to the mission of the university.
- 26 2. Closely intertwined and among programs of the same centrality, protect programs of highest
27 quality.
- 28 3. As possible given preceding considerations which are foremost, seek to protect occupied
29 positions.

30 The following guidelines are written with those three criteria in mind. If the public strategic budgeting
31 criteria are changed, then these guidelines would also need to be adjusted. We also need to accept that
32 every situation presents particular and unique circumstances that no one-size-fits all list of criteria can
33 effectively anticipate. Our purpose is to make the wisest possible decisions and not, simply, formulaic
34 ones; consequently, considerations not anticipated in the guidelines that follow may well also be
35 relevant. These are intended to be just what they are labeled: guidelines.

⁴ There will be no report of those programs considered for elimination (no matter how preliminarily) and found not to warrant further public consideration. To do so would vitiate the very rationale for the policy: that the mere discussion of a program's possible elimination would damage the program.

1 **Guidelines**

2 **Centrality**

3 For academic programs, indicators could include but are not limited to:

- 4 1. Current number of students in the major and historical trends.
- 5 2. Number of students in service courses (and historical trends) if that component is not proposed
- 6 for retention.
- 7 3. Consequences for the University’s overall reputation as the Northwest’s premier university of
- 8 our type and for the consequent ability of other programs to attract strong students.
- 9 4. Degree to which aspects of the program can be absorbed by or incorporated within other units.
- 10 5. Degree to which other academic programs depend upon the program under consideration for
- 11 service courses or interdisciplinary programs.
- 12 6. Degree to which the program advances the university’s vision to be the best university of our
- 13 type through the means we summarize as *engaged excellence*.
- 14 7. Degree to which the program is a significant component (statewide) in meeting critical state
- 15 public- and private-sector employment needs.
- 16 8. Degree to which non-academic programs depend upon the program under consideration.
- 17 9. Degree to which the program supports community service and outreach commitments.

18
19 For non-academic programs, indicators could include but are not limited to:

- 20 1. Relationship of program to obligations mandated by state or federal statute or in requirements
- 21 established by our Board of Trustees.
- 22 2. Degree to which program supports a safe campus and healthy working environment.
- 23 3. Degree to which the program is essential to, enables and supports the academic core mission of
- 24 the university, including attracting and retaining new students.
- 25 4. Degree to which aspects of the program can be absorbed by or incorporated within other units.
- 26 5. Degree to which other programs depend upon the program under consideration.

27 **Quality**

28 “Centrality” operates as a “first cut” but, by far, protecting areas of strength and quality is the most
29 important criterion when considering *academic* programs. For other programs, quality is also
30 important. And, in both cases, demonstrated effectiveness and efficiency are components of quality for
31 what does quality matter if there is no impact? Or if the costs are seriously out-of-line with comparators
32 of similar scope and quality?

33 Judgment is necessarily required, and it is human beings and not formulas or data that have the capacity
34 to judge. Here, the professional determination of line officers is foremost with the relevant dean,
35 director, or vice president taking the lead and supported by the evaluations of the Provost and
36 President, who must eventually decide. While it must and should come down to judgment, it must be
37 well-informed judgment.

38

1 Possible indicators for academic programs could include but are not limited to:

- 2 1. Strength of the faculty as indicated by:
 - 3 a. Proportion of the faculty who are tenure-track.
 - 4 b. Proportion of those faculty who have earned tenure.⁵
 - 5 c. Proportion of the faculty who have earned the rank of professor.
 - 6 d. Record of faculty, collectively, in maintaining leading edge and nationally recognized
 - 7 research and/or creative activity.
 - 8 e. Record of the faculty, collectively, in providing innovative and demonstrably effective
 - 9 learning.
 - 10 f. Record of the faculty, collectively, in serving the community, state, and nation.
 - 11 g. The composition of the faculty as it supports the university's commitments to that
 - 12 diversity which improves the overall quality and value of the Western experience.
 - 13 h. Record of faculty in generating extra-mural support.
 - 14 i. National and international reputations of the faculty.
 - 15 j. Adequacy of the number of faculty positions for supporting the current scope and
 - 16 commitments of the academic program.
- 17 2. Strength of the academic program as indicated by:
 - 18 a. Retention and graduation rates including historical trends.
 - 19 b. Indicators of alumni success including employment, post-baccalaureate educational
 - 20 attainment, and contributions to communities – local to global.
 - 21 c. Where professional accreditation is relevant, the conclusions of the most recent self-
 - 22 study and external evaluation.
 - 23 d. The conclusions of the most recent academic program review on the strength of the
 - 24 instructional program given current resources.
- 25 3. Strength of the support elements necessary to assure academic quality. Indicators such as:
 - 26 a. Adequacy of the facilities for the program (e.g., departmental and office spaces; field
 - 27 and other external research/instruction opportunities; labs, studios, other particular
 - 28 classroom types...).
 - 29 b. Adequacy of levels of non-academic staff support.
 - 30 c. Adequacy of equipment, materials, and supplies to support instruction and scholarship
 - 31 or creative activity.
 - 32 d. Adequacy of Library holdings.
 - 33 e. Adequacy of the current capacity of the university and college to meet other
 - 34 information technology requirements for the program.
- 35 4. Resources supporting quality:
 - 36 a. Resources required relative to programs among peers that are of similar scope and
 - 37 quality.

⁵ The president has taken the position that we will not eliminate occupied tenured faculty positions in any academic program elimination. Simply to do so would, in his estimation, seriously damaged our ability to recruit (and retain) top faculty for years and years. Further, though, our Board of Trustees would be required to declare "financial exigency." Decades of damage would then follow for only universities on their last legs take that step.

1 b. Where quality is not at levels comparable to Western’s premier standards, magnitude of
2 the resource investment that would be necessary to reach that level.
3

4 For non-academic programs:

5 For particular programs, there may be considerations pertaining to quality that are established by
6 federal or state requirements as well as those that are a component of contracts reached through
7 collective bargaining.⁶ Those would take precedence. Other possibilities might include but are not
8 limited to:

- 9 1. Quality of the program employees as indicated by:
10 a. Performance evaluations
11 b. Professional accomplishments, professional ranks, and recognitions relevant to the
12 mission of the program.
13 c. Effectiveness of the program employees (all, including supervisors) in working as an
14 effective, mutually supportive, and integrated team.
15 2. Quality of the program as indicated by:
16 a. Measurements of results
17 b. Record of innovation
18 c. Resources required relative to programs among peers that are of similar scope and
19 quality
20 d. Demonstrated effectiveness and efficiency.
21
22

23 **Protecting People**

24 Where budget considerations are driving the need to consider academic program eliminations or major
25 reductions, we understand that we are a “talent based” enterprise and most of the budget (over 80%) is
26 in salaries. Consequently, budget reductions or reallocations will have consequences not just for
27 positions but, also, for people – for colleagues.

28 The process (see step 11) assures that contractual obligations will be fully respected. We also hold,
29 though, that the priority is to protect people across the board. With those considerations in mind, the
30 following factors should be considered, necessarily undertaken within the constraints imposed by the
31 budgetary requirements driving the need to consider a program elimination or major reduction.

32 Possible indicators, for both academic programs and non-academic programs could include but are not
33 limited to:

- 34 1. Number of occupied positions being affected.
35 2. Opportunities for those in occupied positions to serve the university through transfer to
36 currently vacant (or expected soon to be vacant) positions.

⁶ Please also understand that, while staff qualifications are a component of program quality, these guidelines apply to assessing programs and not individual employees.

- 1 3. Opportunities for those in occupied positions to serve important needs that would remain after
2 the program *per se* were eliminated.
- 3 4. Possibilities for voluntary reductions in FTE and voluntary attractiveness of incentives for
4 retirement (early or otherwise).

5 **Budget Implications**

6 The foregoing criteria pertain to those factors publicly established as our top commitments. Still, in any
7 budget process – whether a budget reduction or a need to reallocate to emerging higher priorities – the
8 actual budget consequences must be weighed against the foregoing criteria. The considerations
9 preceding help us assess how much damage would be done by the proposed academic program
10 reduction or major elimination. We also must ask: Do the budget savings (relative to other budget
11 possibilities) justify the damage? These considerations may include but are not limited to:

- 12 1. Savings from staffing changes, support budgets, facilities and equipment provision and
13 maintenance.
- 14 2. Additional costs stemming from effects for other programs.
- 15 3. Phase out costs including, for academic majors, the university’s commitment and obligation to
16 continue to serve students admitted to the major being eliminated or reduced.
- 17 4. Affects upon funding sources: philanthropic, foundations, state general fund support, federal
18 grants and contracts.

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