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A University Without Physics and Philosophy?

Is a university without philosophy and physics really a university?

That's the underlying question that faculty critics at Indiana State University are asking in the wake of [a recommendation by the institution's provost](#) that undergraduate degrees in those two fields — which are core elements of most liberal arts curriculums — be eliminated as part of an overarching plan to reduce the number of programs the university offers to 150 from 214.

“This is almost a move to become a vocational school that is not only disturbing to people in physics and philosophy, but to people in other departments as well,” said Rocco Gennaro, interim chair of the philosophy department. “We’re outraged by this.”

Karen Schmid, associate vice president for academic affairs at the 11,000-student public university, said that [the general plan for eliminating and combining various departments and programs](#) had been thoroughly vetted with the faculty and comes after a multiyear process that culminated last September with [a list of priorities](#) from a campus task force. The final recommendations were released last week by the provost and must be approved by the Board of Trustees, who will meet in April.

Schmid said that the reduction is a response to criticism from the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, the university's regional accreditor. “When they last did our accrediting review, they said that we have too many programs for a university of our size and too many programs with low enrollment,” she said. In fact, the university has found that about 8,800 students are enrolled in 107 programs, and another 1,800 major in the remaining 107.

The physics program has only two tenured faculty members and three non-tenured professors, and only nine undergraduate majors. [Philosophy](#) has 19 majors and four faculty members.

Eric Preston, an assistant professor of physics, said his department is an average size for a physics program that offers only bachelor's degrees. And getting rid of physics, he said, "makes a pretty serious statement about the direction the university is going in." He added: "Can we really call this a university without physics and philosophy?"

David Schrader, executive director of the American Philosophical Association, said that dropping core programs like philosophy and physics "can't help but reduce the academic quality at Indiana State." He said that philosophy always attracts a small number of majors but that many students in other programs take philosophy classes. "So the contribution from a program like philosophy should be measured in overall enrollment in courses, not just the number of majors."

The elimination of the physics program comes at a time when numerous reports such as the National Academies' "[Rising Above the Gathering Storm](#)," call for increased investments in physical sciences, said Ted Hodapp, director of education and diversity at the American Physical Society. "So this institution is going against the grain of the national movement," he said.

Schmid said that students could still pursue an interest in both disciplines by majoring in liberal studies with a concentration in physics or philosophy. "Other institutions do not have these as stand alone programs," she said. "We are not alone."

Schrader disagreed with this assessment. "I've not heard of something like this at a major institution. Maybe at a community college, but for a major public university, I think that this is pretty much unprecedented."

— [Paul D. Thacker](#)

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