

Prioritizing Academic Programs

I know the faculty is deeply concerned about the prioritization process I have proposed for the campus. I am writing this to try to address some of those concerns. More detailed information is available on the Academic Affairs website at <http://www.humboldt.edu/~aavp/Prioritization.htm>

The Goal

The goal is to provide a three- to five-year plan for resource allocation to existing programs. Resource allocation for academic services, new programs and special initiatives will be part of the plan but will require other processes. Prioritizing existing programs is the first and largest part of the process.

The Process

The first step in this process is to define an academic program. Certainly degree programs would be considered academic programs. Distinctive minors and options within majors could also be candidates for program designation. Indiana State University, which recently concluded its prioritization process, defined an academic program as anything with at least six distinctive units. So, if a minor required only courses that were also required in the major, it was not considered a distinct program. Options within a major had to have at least six different units to be considered programs. We may choose to use this definition or some variation of it.

The next step is to develop criteria for ranking programs. This process in particular has to be broadly consultative. Two models for these criteria are on the web site; the one adopted by ISU seems particularly strong. The criteria must be broad enough to capture the strengths and weaknesses of our programs. They must be applicable across programs and be clear enough to ensure reliability and comparability among programs. They must fit Humboldt's situation, taking into account such things as budget, demand, quality, regional location, distinctive programs, quality of student learning, mix of programs and system pressures.

The next step is for programs to respond to the criteria. This will probably involve a document presenting evidence that addresses the criteria.

The final step is ranking those programs into broad categories. Again, I like ISU's approach to this process. It involved the academic senate, faculty in the colleges, the academic deans and the task force. It had strong quantitative elements but required a good deal of judgment about final decisions. We will have to develop our own process but it must as inclusive and fair as possible.

The Categories

The number of categories into which programs can be ranked and the percentage of programs placed in each category are variable. I have been using thirds for simplicity but I fear that has created a good deal of anxiety. Rest assured that my vision for Humboldt is not to eliminate or reduce support for one-third of the programs. ISU intended to use five categories but, once the ranking was completed, they found that programs had actually fallen into four distinct categories.

The top category or categories, depending on their number, are candidates for augmentation. These are the programs in which we are going to make a deliberate effort to invest. These are programs that we plan to grow or enhance. I believe that there will have to be a subsequent process to decide the order and method of program investment.

The middle category or categories are programs that are not going to be candidates for special consideration either in terms of augmentation or reduction. The difference between this group and the one above is that these programs are not specifically selected for augmentation. That does not mean that these programs will not grow or gain increased resources. As the university grows, they should grow as well. Increases for these programs will be determined a year-by-year basis and not as part of the three- to five-year plan.

The bottom category or categories are programs that are candidates for reorganization, reduced support or elimination. I suspect that the largest number of programs in this group will be those considered for reorganization. Examples of this would be overlapping curricula among two or more programs. Another would be a major option with few students. While I suspect this process will result in the elimination of some degree programs, I doubt that the number will be significant.

Why Now?

There are several reasons that this is the time to prioritize programs and services.

Probably the most important reason is the opportunity it gives us to shape the future of the University. As new enrollment-growth money becomes available, Academic Affairs should take the lead in determining what Humboldt State University will become and how we will grow.

At this point, there is no process in place that would allow us to do that. In fact, the lack of such a planning process was identified as a problem almost thirty years ago in the report of the 1990 WASC team:

HSU should develop an effective campus-wide planning process that begins with a clear sense of what the campus should be like in the next decade. . . . Campus planning should be linked to resource allocations and to the outcomes of program review and curricular assessments. (p. 25)

That passage was cited again in the 1997 report. Now we are beginning yet another review cycle, and we still have not done enough to resolve these concerns. With the current WASC review, we have an opportunity to connect resource allocation with a strategic plan that prioritizes our academic programs and services in a way that acknowledges our learning outcomes, mission and institutional goals.

The need for strategic planning goes beyond the requirements of WASC. Demographics in California suggest the number of college-ready students will decline in the near future. The twenty-three campuses of the California State University system will increasingly be in competition for students. Humboldt draws a majority of students from outside northern California and it is critical in this environment that we position ourselves strategically for growing enrollment. In order to do that effectively, Academic Affairs must have a plan for managing growth. The process of prioritizing programs will serve as such a plan.

The most obvious reason for prioritizing programs and services is our budgetary situation. Over the last few years, the campus has undergone a series of budget reductions and reallocations that have negatively impacted our programs and services. These reductions have been implemented piecemeal, for the most part, with the overall objective of maintaining FTES production. As a result, we have favored reductions in services rather than programs. However, even within programs, reductions have often been allocated across-the-board rather than targeted narrowly and this runs the risk of weakening all of our programs. Other reductions have been opportunistic, taking reductions that are easiest rather than ones that are strategic. Given the current budget climate, we cannot afford to maintain all of our programs and services at reduced levels of support, nor can we afford to restore them all. Prioritization will allow us to decide, as a community, which programs and services we will augment, which we will maintain and which we will recombine, reduce or phase out.

However, I do not see prioritization as a means of solving our immediate budget problems. The primary benefit from prioritization is that it allows us to identify those programs and services that will benefit from new enrollment-growth money as it becomes available. Recombining, reducing and phasing out programs and services will free up funds over time but not immediately.

Prioritization also allows us to address our mix of programs, another challenge for Humboldt State University. We have a higher percentage of high-cost programs than most campuses in the system, which makes it difficult for us to manage on marginal-cost funding. Past budget-reduction strategies have focused on these programs as a way of solving our budget problems. However, this ignores program strength, regional need and Humboldt's unique identity. A prioritization process, carefully done, should allow us to grow some low-cost programs, which in turn help support high-cost programs. This can only be done if we are strategic about growth, and that, again, requires a university-wide plan.

Done well, this process will provide us with a three- to five-year plan for allocating resources in Academic Affairs. That plan must be the result of a broad consultative process that allows the campus time to understand and shape the results.