

General Faculty President Report: HSU's Priorities

(this report is posted online at
<http://www.humboldt.edu/~jwp2/genfacpresreport409.htm>)

On February 27th, 2009, the Academic Program Prioritization Task Force released their final report and recommendations (hereinafter APP Report), available online. The Post-Prioritization process is included as the last appendix. The Provost has made recommendations to others follow up on programs he has identified from the APP Report to further examine them for either helping them out or reducing, combining, or eliminating them. Most of the programs to be considered for cuts are not majors or departments--instead they are options or minors, with some conspicuous exceptions. Those recommendations are also online, as are the deans' recommendations.

A coordinating committee will now set up subcommittees for each program to be evaluated and then that committee will read and review the subcommittees' reports and recommendations. The Provost has also directed deans and several of the departments to follow up on recommendations contained in the APP Report.

A lot, then, is going to happen in the next year or year and a half. One issue I address is whether what has happened so far can or will serve as a basis for future decisions reducing programs. Another I address is whether the most important issues and considerations are being addressed.

First, let's get the I-told-you-so part out of the way. In my General Faculty President Report in January this year (and in several venues before) I commented on serious problems with the Prioritization criteria regarding quality:

". . . programs are not being evaluated at all on teaching quality. Is this crazy or what? What faculty quality measures there are have been cribbed from research I institutions, which is false to our mission. When I said this before, early and often, it was clear it was discussed and, . . . and then it was backed away from because measuring classroom teaching quality is difficult. The word that kept being used was "subjective." This is a hoax. The word that should have been used is "difficult." There are reasons this is difficult, all of them old news. There are many different kinds of good teaching, from demanding and rigid insistence on high standards of work to mothering to powerful rhetoricians to gifted explaining to uniquely informed to modeling creative artistic processes to thinking up novel insights right before our very eyes, and others. We in the disciplines have preferences among the different kinds of good teaching, and don't trust others to pay attention to the kinds we prefer. There are similar variations in bad teaching. Besides the complexity of what is being evaluated, there are problems with methods. Students have limits as evaluators of teaching. Peer classroom reports are better provided they are impartial, but they are seldom impartial. It's hard.

Well, suck it up, people. "Difficult" means we are the ones for the job. There are tools at our disposal--student evaluations finally allow for wider comparisons, even though critical thinking as we read them is still, regrettably, required; detailed peer reports can tell a lot, and if they are fluff that can tell a lot as well; some faculty even tell the truth about their own teaching. We evaluate teaching all the time for RTP. There are experts and researchers, studies of breathtakingly poor quality and then sober studies of studies. . . . It really is difficult, but we could do a better job than most, given our history of fanaticism in demanding good teaching. Besides thoughtful use of students' evaluations and faculty self evaluations, we could institute a program of regular visits by chairs to classes in other colleges, or appoint retired faculty as evaluators, or train cheaper alumni. It can be done. For an institution that allegedly places . . . learning at the center of our work, prioritizing programs without using assessments of the quality of classroom

experience is mad."

There's more of the same in that report. Further, those comments help raise the most crucial issue for HSU for the near- and mid-term future, and it is an issue no administrators are touching. It is a more important issue than whether we acquire WASC accreditation (since of course we will). It is more important than, though closely linked to, how we implement required budget cuts. It is more important than program prioritization, though that is also linked, as are many issues from this little list. It is more important than improving the budget book. It is more important than putting together a new structure for supervising curriculum. It is more important than getting the state's taxpayers to properly appreciate higher ed. It is more important than the current losses of many of our best faculty. It is more important than meeting our enrollment targets. It is more important than implementing assessment of outcomes. It is more important than the preposterous and growing list of other worries we are being asked to address.

The issue is, ***Are we going to maintain enough areas of excellence that we can still claim to be HSU?***

The way things are going, the answer is No. If the answer is no, then all those other issues and worries are for much more paltry stakes. If the answer is no, then it matters less whether we make our students into competent writers, since they will have less to write about. If the answer is no, then the response to "Which programs shall we cut, which increase?" is "Who cares?" If the answer is No, then outcomes assessment, already a recipe for oversimplifying higher ed, will become even more of a charade than it already is. If the answer is No, then our record as a supplier of scholars to the nation's graduate programs will wither and die. If the answer is No, then our ability to catalyze changes in social structures and our ability to contribute to solving enormous and urgent global environmental problems and our ability to teach ambition in the public schools will fade to dark.

How could we try for Yes?

Support for a Yes will have to start with other than our administrators, probably with faculty. I have hopes too for help from students, staff, alumni, perhaps others in the community. But faculty have to direct attention to the issue and insist on action. I suggested at the meeting introducing the Cabinet for Institutional Change that we need an inventory of which programs are especially strong, which strong programs we have lost, which are threatened regarding their excellence, and consideration of what is required to prevent further erosion of areas of strength. The Provost, I think, denied that we have been losing areas of excellence. I attribute this to his translating excellence into budgetary vocabulary, which is, after all, part of his job. (I pass over the CSU Board of Trustees' tendency to do the same, with the result that our CSU Strategic Plan entitled Access to Excellence is now about access, hardly addresses excellence at all, and is currently largely rendered impotent both by its own structure and by budget cuts.) The faculty need to go public with reminders about what the terms, areas of strength and excellence mean.

But the main work is yet to be done. Some of it is present in the APP Report, though there are crucial sins of omission. That work will begin with an inventory strenuously addressing issues of quality. That means, especially, teaching quality. That inventory will take as its goal identifying HSU's areas of strength, and the main threats to those. Departments will publish evaluations of their teaching, using RTP processes and including how their teachers do on our new common student survey form. Claims that teachers strengths are not well measured by the forms are clearly often true but will need to be explicated and supported just as they are now in RTP processes. Departments will report their records of placing students into graduate programs, and will publish surveys of their graduates' appraisals of their HSU education. Departments will provide whatever arguments are relevant to establishing their strengths. The department's current situation will be reported with an eye to factors which have changed or may change the quality of the department's program. Then strong programs will state, based on these inventories, whether and how the University can prevent loss of strength, and will do so in specific terms. Now there's a priority.

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