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Program Deactivations at the University at Albany

Ivan D. Steen, University at Albany, SUNY

In 1962 Nelson A. Rockefeller, Governor of the State of New York, symbolically removed a shovelful of earth from the ground of what had been the Albany Country Club, to mark the beginning of construction of a new campus for the State University of New York at Albany (now the University at Albany). That institution, which was to be one of the four university centers of the State University of New York, formerly had been the New York State College for Teachers, with roots going back to 1844. Although its primary mission was to train teachers, the college had a long history of excellence in the liberal arts, and it provided an outstanding general education to thousands of New Yorkers, especially those who could not afford to attend the state’s costly private institutions. Like the rest of the State University of New York, the Albany campus grew and prospered under Governor Rockefeller. For the most part, though, his successors have shown less enthusiasm for the university he essentially created. Over the years, tuition has increased, albeit erratically, and the proportion of operating funds appropriated by the state legislature has declined. At the University at Albany, inadequate funding has resulted in a decline in the proportion of full-time, tenure-track faculty, an increase in part-time and non-tenure-track faculty, and an increase in the size of classes.

This year, the State of New York has had a substantial decline in revenue and thus a huge budget shortfall that shows little sign of improvement in the near future. An already underfunded state university system is being cut even further. That situation has not been helped by the actions of the statewide system’s administration. The chancellor has placed primary emphasis on her plan for the future of the university, a plan that is opposed by United University Professions, the union representing the academic and professional faculty of the university. Rather than seek compromise, she has taken an all-or-nothing approach. Only when it became clear that the legislature would not pass the needed legislation to enact her plan, did she seek additional funding for the university system, and that funding has not been forthcoming. The campuses have been left to manage with far less than they need, and many will have to make sometimes draconian decisions about how to cut costs.

At the University at Albany there is little doubt that the fiscal situation is serious. The colleges have been asked to come up with cost-cutting scenarios, and a university-wide Budget

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Advisory Group (BAG), with faculty representation, was formed to advise the administration. Although substantial additional cuts are to come later, the campus administration has announced the first phase of its plan to reduce operating costs. That plan involves phasing out Project Renaissance, a first-year student experience program, and discontinuing majors and graduate work in Theater, French, Italian, Russian, and Classics. Why these programs?

Project Renaissance appears to have been a successful program, but from a management perspective it is a rather easy one to eliminate. None of the faculty in that program hold tenure-track appointments—even though some have been on staff for as long as a dozen years—and so they simply have not had their contracts renewed. The Theater Department enrolls a fair number of students and has a real presence on the campus; but the administration notes that its faculty has shrunk over the years, and that it would be too costly to add sufficient staff to make it viable. Classics is not a department, although it once was, and the few faculty members involved are scattered over several departments. Lack of student interest, we are told, is the reason for proposing that it be discontinued. That also is the reason given for elimination of majors and graduate work in the targeted languages. It should be noted that none of these languages are distinct departments. Some years ago, ostensibly as a cost-saving measure, these languages, along with others, were combined into a Department of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures.

This situation is a very difficult one for a union. Since Project Renaissance staff are all on term contracts, renewal or nonrenewal of those contracts is a management decision. Academic decisions, such as continuance or discontinuance of programs also are not within the province of unions. Termination of employment of staff with tenure or permanent employment or while under contract are union concerns; but as of now, retrenchment has not been announced, and none of those employees have been notified that they would lose their jobs. Of course, the handwriting would appear to be on the wall. If, for example, students will no longer be able to enroll as majors or graduate students in French, there will not be a need for many—if any—faculty in that discipline. The union can not move to protect a person’s employment if that employment continues to exist. So how might management reduce that portion of the workforce without instituting retrenchment? There are several ways. Management claims that basic courses in these disciplines might continue to be offered, and that some members of the current staff might be doing that teaching, and others might be able to be placed in other departments. But for some, these would not be attractive alternatives, and they might choose to seek employment elsewhere or to retire. Management actually is encouraging these possible choices by announcing its plans in the fall. This would permit an early entry into the job market. Also, the State of New York currently is offering a monetary incentive to eligible university employees who retire by the end of December, and some may choose to take advantage of that. If enough of the affected faculty choose either of those options, from management’s standpoint the problem is resolved. Retrenchment will not have taken place, and the union will have had no basis for intervention.
Certainly, there are serious academic issues here, though. Practically speaking, how will undergraduate students fulfill their foreign language requirement if three major language programs are deactivated? That, of course, is why management is considering offering basic language instruction. But will they do that in all three of the targeted languages? If not, will there be a sufficient number of places available in other language courses to meet student demand? What about graduate students, especially those studying for doctorates in disciplines that require foreign language competence? Will that have a negative impact on applications for graduate study in those disciplines? And, if so, will declining graduate enrollments lead to downsizing—or worse—for affected departments? Then too, some have pointed out that deactivating study of major foreign languages is a strange choice for a university that has adopted a slogan: “The World Within Reach.” Some similar arguments might be made concerning the proposed deactivation of Theater. While students are not specifically required to take courses in that area, students in other departments—Music, in particular—often are advised to enroll in Theater courses. Further, Theater has been an important component in the life of the university; so much so that a number of the University at Albany’s alumni have had distinguished careers in the theatrical world—a fact that the university often notes with pride. For many, though, these proposed deactivations are seen as an attack on the humanities, and coming from an institution that should value them. While probably that is not the case, management’s business-model approach, in actuality, does devalue the humanities. Enrollment is seen as revenue generating, and the languages and classics are not high enrollment areas. Moreover, the humanities, unlike the sciences and some social sciences, do not generate significant revenue through grants. And wider societal support for the humanities is weak, since they are not perceived as having immediate practical applications—such as being important for creating economic growth.

But for the future of collective bargaining in higher education, the proposed actions being taken by management at the University at Albany have serious implications. No issue is more important for unions than protecting the jobs of their members. Yet for members who hold term appointments, there is little a union can do in that regard. If deactivation of programs results in tenured faculty leaving or retiring, it is likely that even if courses are taught in those areas, most—if not all—of them will be taught by part-time, term-appointed staff. The number of staff holding tenure or permanent appointment, already in decline, will continue to diminish. The challenge to higher education unions is to find ways to counter that trend, and at the same time to develop mechanisms to secure better protection for term-appointed staff.