Putting Students First:
The Solution to the Challenge of Program Discontinuance

Not surprisingly, given the extraordinary budgetary times we find ourselves in, the Academic Senate finds itself receiving more inquiries about program reduction and discontinuance than is typical. Faculty aren't contacting the Senate to find out how to jettison programs; rather, how can faculty defend vulnerable programs and the students they serve when programs are identified for reduction or elimination not on the basis of need, but on the basis of potential cost savings?

Help From Title 5
Title 5 is not silent on the question of program discontinuation. Title 5 §51022 requires that "Within six months of the formation of a community college district, the governing board shall adopt and carry out its policies for the establishment, modification, *or discontinuance* of courses or programs. Such policies shall incorporate statutory responsibilities regarding vocational or occupational training program review as specified in section 78016 of the Education Code" (emphasis added). Section 78016 in turn requires that "Every vocational or occupational training program offered by a community college district shall be reviewed every two years by the governing board.

A second Title 5 Regulation §55601 requires local governing boards to appoint advisory committees: "The governing board of each community college district participating in a vocational education program shall appoint a vocational education advisory committee to develop recommendations on the program and to provide liaison between the district and potential employers." This language suggests that local boards have a responsibility to receive guidance about the ongoing need for vocational programs before making decisions regarding their reduction or elimination. An active and effective advisory committee can be a very valuable asset in defending a program from discontinuance since it provides a direct link to the specific community need each program serves.

Thus the first line of defense for targeted programs is the district's own policy and procedure. What process has the local board established to deal with program discontinuance? In recognition of how regularly this challenge arises, the state Chief Instructional Officer board and the California Community College Association for Occupational Education (CCCAOE) assembled sample procedures from several California community colleges in December 2003, and those local policies are available for review at: www.asccc.org/Events/VocEd/2007/Program_Discontinuance_Models.doc.

A related question concerns the degree to which a college may curtail a program. On this point, the *Program and Course Approval Handbook* (2009) asserts that in proposing a new program, a college must indicate that it has resources to allow it to "commit to offering all of the required

courses for the program at least once every two years" (p. 6). Thus there seems to be an expectation in principle that a program is still viable if courses are offered biennially. A district could argue that it still meets the spirit of the regulation if required courses are offered only every other year. No requirement in Title 5 requires a college to offer as many sections as student demand would warrant, and current budget cuts have made it impossible for colleges to meet demand.

Help from the Accreditation Standards
There is also a discussion of program discontinuance in the 2002 Accreditation Standards that would seem to prohibit a district from eliminating programs too hastily: "When programs are eliminated or program requirements are significantly changed, the institution makes appropriate arrangements so that enrolled students may complete their education in a timely manner with a minimum of disruption" (Standard II.A.6.b). This requirement is broader than the one established in Title 5. By specifically obligating a college to meet the *needs of enrolled students,* there is the implication that required courses must be offered in sufficient number to meet the needs of students the college has permitted to enter the program.

Perhaps most relevant and most challenging to meet in a fiscal crisis is the accreditation expectation that requires colleges to plan and budget effectively. The introduction to the accreditation standards requires that "The institution provides the means for students to learn, assesses how well learning is occurring, and strives to improve that learning through ongoing, systematic, and integrated planning." Nothing could be more contrary to this principle than reducing or eliminating expensive or vulnerable programs as the easiest path toward cost reduction. Unfortunately, unless a college is scheduled for a site visit in the near future, the vague threat of an accreditation sanction probably pales in comparison to the budget shortfalls colleges are facing now. It is (1) the effectiveness of the planning processes and (2) working relationships local senates develop in their colleges *before* a crisis arrives that are probably the best foundation for a thoughtful approach to the threat of program reduction or discontinuance.

Help from the Academic Senate
The Academic Senate has a longstanding position about program discontinuance that recommends a process that is *distinct* from program review. Program discontinuance raises issues broader than those addressed by program review and questions which are likely to require the participation of the collective bargaining representative (who should *certainly* be involved in any campus discussion about program discontinuation). Rather than focus on the negative aspects of program discontinuance some colleges have chosen to focus on the question of program vitality. A program vitality process focuses on how a program can improve, reexamining community needs, other college processes, and data that indicates the program is still viable. This examination should seek to ensure resources whereby the program can effectively meet the need for which it was initially developed. The Senate's paper on the topic of program discontinuance can be found at: http://www.asccc.org/Publications/Papers/Program_discontinuance.html. Because program reduction or elimination is also related to enrollment management, readers should also review Enrollment Management Revisited, which can be found at: http://www.asccc.org/Publications/Papers/Downloads/Enrollment-Mgtmt-Spring09.pdf.

There are few prospects that can put faculty more at odds with their constituent partners than the idea of reducing or eliminating a program. Our ideals of professionalism and supporting student success must guide the tenor and goals of campus decision-making processes. Fiscal challenges to colleges can lead to drastic consequences for every program, employee, and student at a college. In times of draconian budgetary reductions, choosing between across-the-board cuts versus eliminating one or two struggling programs can be a difficult choice. In spite of the challenge it is never appropriate to treat others unprofessionally. We must recognize that all sides of this process have very real reasons for feeling threatened as we and our colleagues wrestle with these challenges. In the end, decisions must be made for the right reasons. A program that is discontinued because it was only staffed by part-time faculty or had high equipment costs *in spite of the fact that it was effective and met community needs* is a bad decision, even if it might have been expedient. Budget crises are generally temporary in nature, but sadly the havoc they wreak is often permanent. Putting student needs at the center of our decision-making processes is our most powerful guide in seeking the right policy and practice.

References
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