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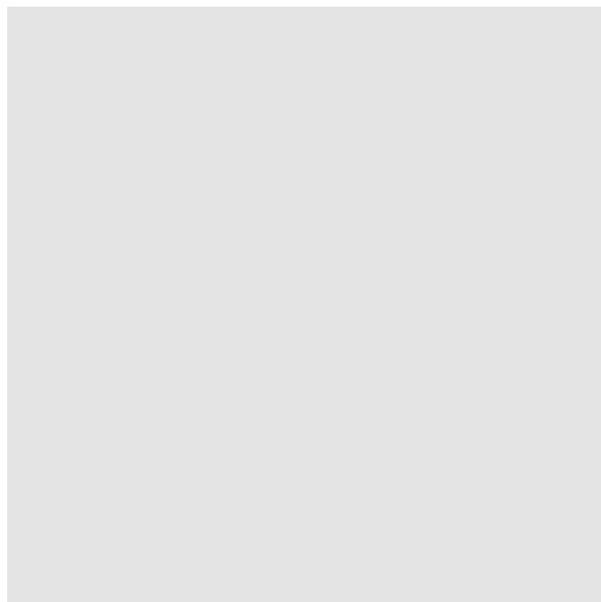
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WKU faculty wary of academic program review

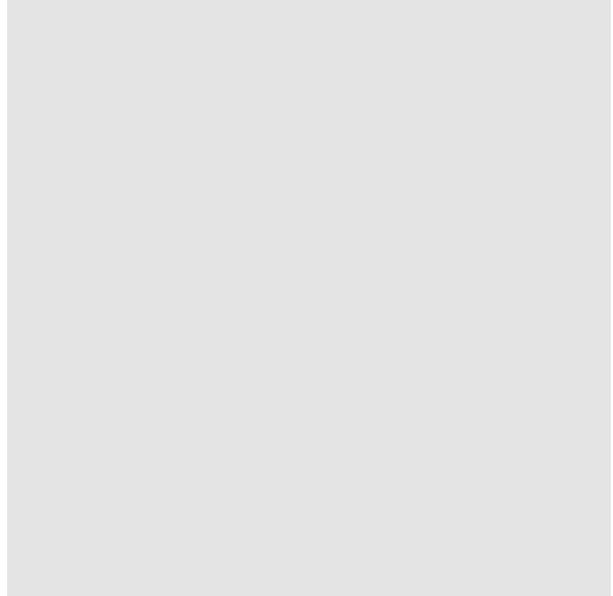
By AARON MUDD amudd@bgdailynews.com Oct 19, 2018



Terry Ballman

AARON MUDD

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Claus Ernst

Submitted

Western Kentucky University is weighing the fate of more than 300 academic programs this year through a process that has some faculty concerned it could lead to further budget cuts.

Many of the decisions about whether to suspend programs will be influenced by the university's enrollment.

"If our enrollment continues to decline, we may have to cut programs," said Claus Ernst, a mathematics professor who represents faculty on WKU's Board of Regents. "But we don't know that yet."

WKU hasn't released its official enrollment numbers for the fall semester. Bob Skipper, director of media relations at WKU, said a report could be released by Nov. 1, which is when the university will report enrollment to the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education.

WKU's Board of Regents will review information on "recruitment, enrollment and persistence" during its scheduled committee meetings Oct. 26, according to a meeting agenda.

The agenda also includes a report that notes first-quarter revenue this year is “slightly more than 4 percent higher” compared to the first quarter of the previous fiscal year. Additionally, it projects a fall tuition revenue shortfall of \$800,000.

However, with 360 academic programs total and not enough students to support each program, WKU Provost Terry Ballman said tough decisions will need to be made, regardless.

“We need to be able to grow in areas where there’s a real career and workforce need,” she said. “In order to grow in certain areas, we can’t just continue with all the programs that we have now.”

With the university strapped for cash, Ballman said it needs to distribute scarce resources more efficiently. She noted that WKU’s new strategic plan calls for the comprehensive program review.

Ballman said that in higher education, generally “we tend to create a lot of programs” without subtracting them.

“Even when they become inactive, they’re still on the books,” she said. “They’re technically still there and that’s not right. We should make sure that whatever we offer is active and appropriate for our students.”

For his part, Ernst said he sees no harm in looking at academic programs and how well they do with students.

“I have no problem with doing a program review,” he said. “The question is how is it going to be used, and there I would like to see as much transparency as possible.”

Ballman agreed that the process should be informative to the faculty. She noted that the university held an open forum about the process earlier this month that was attended by more than 100 people.

“We’re hopeful that every step of the way that everybody’s informed,” she said.

As for where the process is at currently, Ballman said she's met with the university's deans and department heads, along with some members of WKU's faculty senate.

The process will begin by developing the standards that academic programs are judged.

"This week we're finalizing the rubrics and the scoring," she said, referencing templates that will be given to department heads this week.

The templates were developed by associate deans and faculty and will eventually be completed with data from WKU's Office of Institutional Research. First, however, department heads will work with faculty and provide recommendations to their deans by Jan. 8. The deans will submit their own recommendations by Feb. 1.

"Each department is asked to make a recommendation on what it wants to happen on each of those programs," Ballman said. "Do they want it to grow? Do they consider this a growth area for students? Do they think it's a program that should just kind of continue as is? Do they think it's a program that should transform somehow or should it be suspended?"

After the deans score their college's programs, Ballman said it will go to a larger committee called the Comprehensive Academic Program Evaluation Committee, or CAPE Committee. That group will convene by Feb. 1 and include a mix of faculty, staff and community representatives.

After the group forms, teams of committee members will begin rating programs and presenting their findings to other members.

Programs will be scored across four standards, including program productivity, successive students, cost-effectiveness and how well it aligns with the university's mission and its distinctiveness. The scoring process would look at a program's enrollment, number of degrees granted and how well it aligns with careers, among several other metrics.

“If a program is recommended for suspension, that would be by March 11, those programs would be notified,” Ballman said. “Faculty or department chairs from those programs would be invited to present to hearings. So they would present their cases.”

If an academic program is eliminated, Ballman said the university would work to reassign faculty based on their academic background.

“We’re particularly mindful of protecting tenured faculty,” she said.

The university would also continue offering that program for a few years to allow currently enrolled students to finish.

“Any student who’s in a program, we will teach that program out,” she said. “We have that obligation to our students.”

By March 18, Ballman will receive the final recommendations from the committee and make her own recommendations to the administration before final review by the Board Regents in April and May.

While she admits the process isn’t easy, she hopes to make it smoother with faculty members’ support.

“I think together we can do it with data, integrity, information and come out the stronger for it,” Ballman said.

Ultimately it goes back to the university’s commitment to students’ success, she said.

“We do a great job working with them in our classrooms, but we need to be committed to making them successful when they leave us in career, workforce or in graduate school. It is our moral obligation to do so.”

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