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What happened to collegial governance at Florida?

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Four years ago UF's Strategic Plan declared that if UF hoped "to become a great public research university" it must have a "top-notch" college of arts and sciences. Less than two weeks ago, the Faculty Senate, with the president's endorsement, passed the University's newly revised Strategic Work Plan, which affirms again that UF must "increase faculty size," particularly in the "core disciplines," and thereby reduce our "student-faculty ratio," which currently ties for last among 120 comparable universities.

The plan also affirms "the recognition that university faculty . . . are in the best position to make decisions about curricula, instruction, academic personnel, and research direction; that decisions about academic policy should be independent of short-term or political considerations; and that the perspective of faculty is essential for making sound decisions about allocating resources."

Yet about a week ago, despite almost no prior consultation with the faculty involved (or with the Faculty Senate for that matter), the dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences announced a plan, one apparently formulated by the upper administration, to radically reduce the number of faculty in teaching in CLAS, the college that houses most of the core disciplines that support the university's central research mission.

Under the dean's plan, only about 33 percent of the approximately 80 CLAS faculty scheduled to retire over the next three years would be replaced. Such faculty retrenchment will inevitably increase the student-faculty ratio; faculty will be assigned heavier teaching loads and have less time for preparation and research; and students will confront larger class sections and get less individual attention.

Furthermore, the dean of CLAS admitted that commitments in resources that have already been made to individuals and college departments or centers may not be honored. What he did not say, but what is widely acknowledged within CLAS, is that the total number of unfilled faculty positions may end up extending well beyond just retirees, if other faculty choose to leave in the wake of such shrinking resources and betrayal of students and faculty in core disciplines.

All of these consequences seem fundamentally inconsistent with key UF principles and goals - certainly they are inconsistent with the faculty's commitment to academic excellence. So why is Tigert Hall intent on forcing, in just three years, a net 10 percent reduction in the size of CLAS?

Why is Tigert willing to compromise the quality of both teaching and research, over the objections of faculty?

The reason cannot be primarily financial. UF is clearly investing in many major new initiatives. And even the administration concedes that the current CLAS budget deficit represents a fraction of the college's budget. Moreover, the administration has admitted that the deficit is due in part to the fact that the college has not been adequately funded.

Because CLAS faculty are represented by the faculty union (the United Faculty of Florida), certain fundamental individual rights are protected by the union contract. Because terms and conditions of employment such as assignment, workload, and restrictions on layoffs are covered by the contract, they are legally binding and enforceable. UFF will fight to ensure that these rights are respected and will pursue whatever legal means that prove necessary to enforce them in the event that they are not.

The administration clearly has a moral obligation to work with faculty through the established academic practice of shared governance. In abrogating that responsibility, they have not only disrespected the faculty but also betrayed the university's best interests.

As first-rate teachers and leading scholars, UF faculty have extensive knowledge about both their own academic disciplines and the needs of their students. The faculty perspective on how to allocate resources to best serve the UF's mission is invaluable.

The union calls on the administration to postpone implementation of the dean's plan for retrenchment until it engages in thorough consultation with the affected faculty and adequately addresses their concerns. As a preliminary step, the administration should provide the UF community with well-documented answers to the following questions:

1. Were CLAS' previous budgets adequate in relation to the demands that the college has been asked to satisfy over the past five years? If not, then why isn't Tigert providing a realistic budget, rather than cutting faculty to fit an inadequate budget?
2. How does the size of CLAS departments compare, relative to the student populations they serve, with comparable departments at the top 10 public universities? How can they expect to compete with top 10 universities if the college is diminished still further?
3. Given the top-down decision to decimate CLAS in a manner inconsistent with the Senate's Strategic Work Plan, why should faculty believe that the administration will honor that plan, or any faculty position, in the future?

UFF does not believe that the faculty have been given adequate answers to any of these key questions. The union cannot support the administration's current plan for CLAS without proof that this retrenchment plan is truly (1) necessary; (2) consistent with UF's mission and highest academic aspirations; and (3) supported by a majority of the faculty.

Diana Bitz is president of the United Faculty of Florida at the University of Florida. She drafted this statement in consultation with the chapter's Executive Council and bargaining team.
