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Comment on requests to discontinue active programs
September 30, 2021

This is an individual statement.

I wish to comment on the requests to close active programs involuntarily. My comments are relevant to any program that was identified by KBOR as yielding too few majors in a process that became public in 2020 (referred to below as the “major count”). I will refer to the Humanities Program by way of example. My general contention is that KBOR’s dictum that a program must produce 25 majors to be considered viable is both arbitrary and capricious. As an extra-mural intervention that alters and diminishes the curriculum at KU, it is a violation of academic freedom, discussed in recent articles in the *AAUP Journal of Academic Freedom* as the collective right of the faculty to determine the intellectual merit of academic work. The imposition of a single, arbitrary metric for viability from outside the University violates that right.

Below I enumerate some reasons why the major count is not a valid metric of merit, and should not be the decisive factor for program continuance.

1. The major count applies a flat standard to differently-resourced units.

- A unit’s capacity for majors is related to its instructional budget. Faculty are needed to offer required courses and mentorship to majors. If a program was targeted for closure for graduating fewer than 25 majors, were units with twice the instructional budget expected to graduate 50?
- Without considering majors in relation to budget and personnel, the flat standard could easily be eliminating the most productive units that pull more than their weight.

2. The major count is an inadequate measure of the work of an academic unit, and of the content of undergraduate education.

- An academic unit is the home base for the work of its faculty. Publicly announcing the intention to close an entire unit is inevitably disruptive to that work. The fact that this process occurred in the shadow of KBOR’s effort to expand termination powers and circumvent tenure, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic, compounded that disruption in 2020-21.
- A typical tenure-stream faculty member is contracted to devote 40% of their effort to teaching. When faculty members teach non-major students, the effort devoted to teaching majors may legitimately be 20% or less. Thus the work of faculty in units targeted by the

major count was undermined on the basis of only a small fraction of their contracted effort.

- An undergraduate degree in CLAS requires 120 credit hours. It is plausible for a major to require 30 credit hours. In such a case, then, the major only represents 25% of the coursework for the degree. Reducing active programs makes it more difficult for students to complete the other 75%, and therefore discontinuance affects non-majors, potentially more than majors.

3. The major count capriciously replaced other measures of success that programs had been encouraged to pursue for years.

- Since the advent of the KU Core as a replacement for general education distribution lists, and extensive discussions of revised budget models over at least five years, there has been clear, long-term institutional pressure on units to produce SCH enrollments. In many cases, this goal required focusing efforts on non-major enrollment. Units that successfully moved in that direction, then, stood to be punished for their success by the sudden imposition of the major count standard by KBOR. If one metric is to be the single decisive factor in unit variability, then this must be announced in time for units to adjust their offerings and activities accordingly.
- The request to discontinue the Humanities Program acknowledges its “strong SCH production,” and the value of its courses. The request promises to “preserve these contributions” by moving courses to other units, but it is not clear how this move can be assured. Closing the program eliminates the curricular basis for its courses. Dispersing its faculty to other units that may not offer a curriculum identical to that of the Program will effectively eliminate distinctive courses.
- It is not valid to read the major count as an indicator of “student demand,” as the demand for majors and courses is shaped by decisions made beyond the unit level, including the structure of general education, college-level advising, and other factors.

4. The discontinuance request hints at a financial motivation, but the case has not been made that closure will produce savings.

- The request to discontinue Humanities mentions terminating 2.0 FTE positions, apparently contradicting the promise in the same sentence to preserve the courses that those positions cover.
- In at least one instance of media coverage, the provost publicly mentioned a dollar savings figure that is not elaborated or rationalized in the request.
- At no point has there been an accounting of the costs of closure, which include administrative labor, interruption of faculty work within the unit, loss of curricular and budget relief to other units that rely on Humanities courses for their own programs, reduction of opportunities to fulfill graduation requirements for students who enroll in Humanities courses as non-majors, and diminished recruitment value simply in the reduced number of offered programs.

It is clear that the request to close programs based on a major count is an intervention from off campus that the administration and faculty have been asked to endorse. Given the issues noted above, it appears that requests to discontinue programs based on the major count are motivated

by the aim of closure for its own sake. This is not an intellectually valid revision to the curriculum. Although this particular intervention targeted small programs, in the future some other arbitrary standard could be applied to close any program. Therefore discontinuance requests based on the KBOR major count should not be approved.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Ben Chappell".

Ben Chappell