News of Scuttled Programs Shocks Many at Emory - Faculty - The Chronicle of Higher Education

By Dan Berrett
September 17, 2012

chronicle.com

Shock, distress, and a sense of loss roiled the campus of Emory University on Monday after the announcement late last week that the Atlanta institution was shutting three departments and one program, and suspending graduate admissions to three other programs.

"It's sickening," said Maria Arbatskaya, an associate professor of economics and director of graduate studies. "It's like we've been shut down without us knowing."

News of the changes, which came Friday afternoon in a letter from Robin Forman, dean of Emory College of Arts and Sciences, surprised the leaders of many of the affected departments, though Mr. Forman said it was generally known that a longstanding faculty committee had been evaluating the strength of programs and that a reorganization loomed this fall.

Opponents of the moves started online petitions and held public meetings on the campus on Monday.

The changes are also notable because their intended purpose—though hotly contested by faculty—runs counter to recent trends in academe, in which students have flocked to disciplines, like business, that have a practical bent and boast a direct connection to a job, while liberal education has been on the defensive. "This," said Mr. Forman, "is very much an effort to invest in a liberal education in its truest sense."

Three departments are due to be closed over the next few years: the division of educational studies, the department for visual arts, and the department of health and physical education, which is already being phased out. Emory's degree-granting program in journalism will also close after two years. Graduate-student admissions will be suspended in economics, Spanish, and the Institute of Liberal Arts. Some departments have stopped accepting applications for the fall of 2013.

Hank Klibanoff, a professor and chair of the journalism program, said he disagreed with the idea that practical and liberal education were necessarily opposed. His program awards co-majors, in which students graduate with a degree in journalism and in another field, which equips them with both subject-area knowledge and journalism training.

"We consider ourselves a liberal-arts program," he said. "I guarantee our classrooms are far more than just how to write a compelling lead or how to fashion a really embracing kicker."

Describing the program's 160 students as "deeply, deeply shattered," he questioned the timing and rationale for the decision, especially if saving money was not the intended reason.

It wasn't, Mr. Forman said. He described the moves as helping to make the university stronger financially, while also noting that they follow several years of deficits at the college. Those deficits had been closed, he said, but several departments remained weak and without sufficient resources. Any money saved would be shifted to new programs in areas like contemporary China, digital and new media, and neuroscience, to bolster existing programs, or reboot the suspended graduate programs.

"I have no expectation that this will save money," Mr. Forman said. "It's about creating a compelling vision for investment."

A Decision 'Out of Nowhere'

Many faculty members said they felt blind-sided by the announcement of the changes.

"This was a decision handed down to us from out of nowhere," said C. Aiden Downey, an assistant professor and director of undergraduate studies in the division of educational studies. "As someone who studies democratic education, I'm aghast at the lack of process here."

The division, which studies urban education and reform, has 50 students in its undergraduate major and about 20 in its master's-degree program, plus a handful of doctoral candidates admitted in each year's cohort. Mr. Downey said his main concern was undergraduates, whom he described as being tearful and shocked by the news.

The change also represents a blow to his career. After three years as a visiting professor, Mr. Downey was in his first year on the tenure track. "It's back to the uncertainty," he said.

Mr. Forman acknowledged that some departments may not have known about the pending changes. In some cases, news may not have survived departmental leadership transitions, as one chair replaced another. He also conceded that the administration might have done a better job of announcing that changes were generally afoot without always making it clear which specific programs were at risk. "As to whether it was clear to units the precise decision we were making," he said, "it's fair to say it wasn't."

The review process had been under way for four years, Mr. Forman said. A faculty committee had been studying whether departments had achieved "academic eminence," what resources might be needed to bring them up to that level, how they served other disciplines and the general-education program, and to what extent they were "truly essential" to a liberal education program of the future.

"We tried to separate whether it had been essential for the last 200 years from whether it was essential for next 20 to 30 years," Mr. Forman said.

A Retreat From Its Legacy?

Such judgments confused supporters of the affected departments, and sent a poor message to the wider public, especially to some women and minorities. Some of the departments, these supporters noted, have amassed a strong record in attracting and retaining women and scholars of color, and have engaged in issues of relevance to Atlanta.

"At a time when public education is being increasingly contested, Emory is retreating from its own legacy, which is profoundly disappointing," said Vanessa Siddle Walker, a professor of history of American education and qualitative research methods. "This is tantamount to abandoning the community in which it lives."

While some faculty members were careful to say they understood the dismay of their colleagues, they also saw change as necessary, even when it involved their own program.

Karen Stolley, an associate professor of Spanish and chair of the department of Spanish and Portuguese, said her department had been involved in discussions about its future, and that the announcement did not come as a surprise.

Fewer foreign-language jobs are available, and the nature of those jobs is changing, she said. The training offered by her department has to change, too, she said. "We all see that the situation that has evolved was untenable."

Suspending graduate admissions will allow her and her colleagues to think through how to shift the program's emphasis, perhaps to reflect a blend of scholarship and outreach to the public, or to incorporate more study of linguistics. "There's a strong consensus that we're going to be OK," Ms. Stolley said, "that this is an opportunity that we're energized by."

Copyright 2012. All rights reserved.