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Major Changes on Campus

Clusters, Administration Cuts Face the New PSU

By Kelsey Davis, News Editor

On September 8, 2016

Major Changes on Campus

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Plymouth State University has begun implementing clusters into the university system. This new educational system will do away with the traditional model of academic departments, changing from 24 individual departments to seven clusters that work closely with one another. The majors will stay, but they will be restructured into interdisciplinary clusters. The overall goal of clusters is to have students be ready and to have the skills necessary to face the 21st century, and to be competitive in the global job market.

To begin implementing these clusters, changes were made to administration. This past June, 79 Plymouth State employees either retired, received a separation package, or were laid off. With the additional problem of the state cutting appropriations, the University took the hard stance and cut the number of employees. One goal the University has is to streamline and make the administration more efficient. Programs that performed poorly, despite being well-funded, were looked at critically. Many were cut or reduced.

The reduction in staff led to some apprehension among the faculty. "We've watched longtime friends lose jobs, and we've also had to deal with a lot of changes in how basic services are being delivered on campus, and some of that has not gone smoothly," said Robin DeRosa, PhD, chair of interdisciplinary studies. "But I am hopeful that an increased efficiency in administrative processes will serve to guarantee the continuance of our diverse academic programs."

"We don't like anyone who has had a career at Plymouth State have to leave simply because of restructuring," said Ann McClellan, PhD, English department chair.

There were also lateral changes within administration, where employees were given different positions. Some employees were given additional responsibilities. One example is Mark Fischler, who is the dean of first-year students and also the interim vice president of student affairs.

One concern is that if employees take on additional work, there is the possibility of things being overlooked due to the sheer amount of work.

"We understand people's concerns," said Paula Lee Hobson, the vice president for university advancement. "We have a support system in place for people like Mr. Fischler, so things like that do not happen. We are also taking the opportunity for faculty and students to volunteer and help out at events in an increased capacity."

Another change is the removal of academic departments. The introduction of an interdisciplinary approach to higher education leads to an interdisciplinary organizational model.

Right now, each department is in charge of curriculum, transfer requests, scheduling, hiring, tenure, internships, studying abroad, budget, and the assessment of staff. In the new system, it is proposed that there will be a head within the cluster that will handle these responsibilities.

It is unclear at this time whether the guides will be current faculty or newly hired administrators. Professors who are also department heads are required to teach a minimum of two classes a semester. It is unclear whether the workload of managing many different curriculums would be too heavy to be possible. However, some faculty members said they are leery of working under those who do not understand how their programs work.

Many curriculums do not fit easily into clusters, and in some cases, programs will be divided. In the English department, the overall English curriculum, the writing option, and the literature and film option all fit into the “arts and technology” cluster, while the English teacher certification concentration fits into the “education, democracy and social change” cluster.

Reactions among faculty are mixed. Many members of the faculty said they were excited about the opportunity to work closely with their colleagues on different projects, and for the chance to get students excited about their education. Others are more skeptical. Many faculty members are afraid that the focus of their specialization will be lost in the next few years.

“If all programs become interdisciplinary, will there be room for students to have an in-depth knowledge of their major?” said Ann McClellan. “And if every class in the English major has ties to other majors, in the end, what makes it English?”

All of these changes are part of a five year plan. President Birx is hopeful that the clusters will be fully implemented within three years. The first-year class entering in the fall of 2017 will be the first class to be a part of the cluster program.

It is unclear at this time what other changes this new program will produce at the University.