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Town Hall Meetings Talk Budget

President Cabinet Members discuss budget, clusters and open labs

By Elizabeth Barden; News Editor

On March 28, 2016

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President Don Birx speaking at the Town Hall meeting held on March 23

CLOCK PHOTO/ELIZABETH BARDEN

On Wednesday, March 23, two Town Hall meetings were held in the Silver Center at 2pm and 3:30pm. President Birx and the President Cabinet Members addressed the current budget, budget plans, department strategic clusters and open labs.

Three main topics were in question: What is the impact of repositioning the University into Strategic Clusters and Open Lab? What are the results and recommendations from URSA process: credit and non-credit programs? What are the short- and long-term strategies to reposition the University and get us back on financial track?

Administration is working to improve the University's financial position and its overall structure as "PSU is in a period of transformation."

Currently, the University is under spending. Though, not a new occurrence, there have been vacancy savings due to the University not filling positions as quickly as it has in the past. There have also been lower utility costs due to the warm winter and decision to go with natural gases and fuel source, as well as one-time savings, meaning non-reoccurring expenses.

Looking forward, the budget plan for the fiscal year for 2017 is still under development, but the University shouldn't be expecting position margins in the next three years. The strategy to reduce the expenditure by \$5 million is to minimize growth in expenses, and restructure processes and positions to ensure investments have sufficient returns. By 2021, the University, if it is able to stick to the budget plan, will reach a revenue increase of 2%.

Investment wise, strategic priorities are being identified including student success, strategic clusters and investment in teaching facilities. Specifically, according to the Cabinet Members, the strategic clusters are being established as a way to improve departments and communication, leading to student success. It will also allow departments to collaborate on projects and share ideas.

The strategic clusters will organize programs and people across departments rather than within departments. There will be seven different themed clusters: exploration and discovery, justice and security, tourism, environment and sustainable development, health and human enrichment, arts and technology, education, democracy and social change, and innovation and entrepreneurship. All clusters will be spearheaded by the Strategic Cluster Steering Committee, and each cluster will have three to four "guides" who will bring together others whose program and interests align best with the cluster. Anyone can participate with the clusters.

"Strategic Clusters will enable students to participate in interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, and hands-on learning to develop skills relevant to the 21st century," as stated by the Office of the Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs.

With an update on credit generating, Julie Bernier, provost and vice president for academic affairs, said, "We are taking a two phase approach, calling it 'level one' and 'level two'. We are engaging in the level one process right now. Academic departments, faculty, chairs and deans are reviewing programs that were identified in the level one process."

"There are over 80 programs that either fell into quintile four and five in the URSA process, or are considered low enrolled programs. We need to look at those, review them and decide what should happen with these," said Bernier. "Are they such that they be discontinued? Should they be revised? Should they be consolidated with other programs? Some decision needs to be made on each of those [80 programs]."

Many decisions have already gone through the curriculum process. So far, the curriculum committee has identified eighteen programs that are considered to no longer meet the needs of students. Those programs have now gone through the curriculum process and have been discontinued or consolidated. In the case of the social work program, several options have been deleted. Low enrolled minors have also been deleted.

Evaluations and review are occurring and decisions are being made "based on where we are headed with the clusters," as described by Bernier. The strategic clusters are an investment factored into the budget plan.

President Don Birx addressed that the administration is looking at the University from a view point of where they'd like to see the University five years from now.

"We need to look at the structure of our University and move away from looking at it being so flat and see it in a three-dimensional view," said Birx. "There are issues we have to take structurally."

At a student level, what will the strategic clusters and open labs mean for the students? Will departments and the curriculum change collectively? The Clock plans to find out.

The Clock writes this article based on the meeting held at 3:30pm. Topics and questions from that meeting are covered.

For more information on strategic clusters, please visit plymouth.edu/clusters.