

AAUP says MU administration, not programs, should be cut

The organization of professors points to chronic underfunding from the state as the core of the problem.

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MU's recent elimination of five degree programs and the ongoing process of reconfiguring 34 others has become a topic of concern among members of the American Association of University Professors.

AAUP is a national organization with a chapter at MU. The local organization has a non-voting representative to the Faculty Council. MU operates under a system of joint governance, in which administration and faculty collaborate to make decisions concerning the future of the university.

Although AAUP often publicly criticizes universities for cutting programs, the organization has yet to make a statement regarding the changes at MU.

According to Stephen Montgomery-Smith, MU AAUP co-vice president and representative to Faculty Council, the cuts were a main topic of discussion at the last meeting of MU's AAUP chapter.

"The general discussion seems to be that this is a bad idea," Montgomery-Smith said. "My sense is that they're really cutting into the bone of what the university does, its core mission, yet there's a huge amount of bloat in upper administration. It's a terrible way of trimming the budget."

Faculty Council Vice Chairman Clyde Bentley said although the programs slated for elimination are small, MU's biggest challenges lie in the upcoming program reconfiguration.

"The actual eliminations of programs are pretty small, and they don't have a whole lot of impact," Bentley said. "The major issue is not in this round, it's in the next round, because if this document's accepted, then there are a number of courses that the administration has said need to be examined, redesigned or consolidated."

Although the national organization has not publicly reacted to MU's situation, AAUP has concerns that resonate throughout the nation.

"Our general principle has been that temporary fluctuations in enrollment and financing are not sufficient criteria for eliminating an entire program," said John Curtis, AAUP director of research and public policy. "There should be academic considerations and a decision-making process that looks at what the impact on the curriculum will be."

The program changes at MU come as a result of pressure from the state legislature, a factor that has made the process more difficult.

"This is not something coming out of Jesse Hall," Bentley said. "It's coming from the state government, so it's a little more difficult for faculty to deal with because we're not dealing with our partners. We're helping our partners deal with someone from state government, and that's a little harder to do."

Victoria Johnson, MU AAUP co-vice president, said she sees the program changes as a result of chronic underfunding of higher education in Missouri, which consistently ranks among the lowest in terms of its allocation of funds for higher education.

"Given the overall underfunding of higher education, MU is doing the best it can with the little that it has," Johnson said. "The MU system has been cutting costs and trying to be more efficient for the last decade. With the economic crisis, we are being so underfunded that we have to cut valuable programs."

Bentley said the program cuts stand in opposition to Gov. Jay Nixon's stated goal of 60 percent of adults holding a college degree by 2025.

"We're talking about a very rapid and large increase in people who need to go to college," Bentley said. "We're also being told that, under the current political climate, there's almost no chance in seeing an increase in funding for higher education. That's a very difficult formula."

Despite such funding issues, AAUP feels universities could be making more of an effort to preserve the quality of its programs.

"One problem with the current rounds of discussions is that, very often, the focus is on how much it costs to pay faculty or what kind of jobs students are going to get when they finish a degree in a particular area," Curtis said.

Although MU has promised it will not cut faculty, Bentley said that with 25 percent of faculty members either eligible for or close to retirement, MU could save money simply by not replacing departing staff members.

Montgomery-Smith is skeptical of MU's claim that it will preserve its faculty.

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"If they don't fire faculty, I don't see how they're going to make any savings," Montgomery-Smith said. "If they do fire faculty, they'll be making very small savings because they'll be cutting people with low salaries."

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