



Faculty Advisory Council

Illinois Board of Higher Education

IBHE Faculty Advisory Council Recommends Supporting Liberal Arts & Sciences Programs

Endorsed Unanimously 2-15-19

Proposed Actions

Out of concern for the effects of the state-mandated Low-Producing Program Report on student access to liberal arts and sciences programs, and because a central reason for a governmental presence in higher education is to ensure opportunity for all its citizens, we urge the Illinois Board of Higher Education, university administrators, university government liaisons, and the state legislative and executive branches to pursue the following priorities when developing policy that affects especially the public universities of Illinois:

1. Maintain access to the liberal arts and sciences for all Illinois students, no matter where they live in the state. We caution against movements to offer specific liberal art and sciences programs in only one or two schools in the state, as opposed to serving at the heart of every public university.
2. Recognize the value of liberal arts programs as central to the mission of a university in producing broadly educated graduates prepared not only for jobs, but for fulfilling lives and careers. Jobs change with technological and societal changes, and a more broadly educated citizen is better able to navigate this change, to contribute to the economy, and to engage with the shared civic life of Illinois.
3. With regard to the state's Low-Producing Program Report, explicitly include contribution to the liberal arts and sciences as a reason to preserve programs with small numbers of majors in the humanities, social sciences, and sciences.
4. Maintain a strong and vibrant four-year university system in Illinois, one that delivers a quality liberal arts-centered education provided by scholars and researchers who hold doctorates or the top degrees in their respective fields. This is central to our ability to not only keep Illinois students in-state, but to attract students from surrounding states and indeed nationwide.
5. Recognize the value for the common good of continuing to provide institutional spaces for scholars in the humanities and social sciences, as well as the sciences and applied fields.

All of these highlight the contributions of the liberal arts to the health of the Illinois public university system, and suggest that program size as a measure of viability needs to be balanced against service to the people of Illinois.

Background and Rationale

In critical response to the IBHE's legislatively mandated Low-Enrolling Report, and the decision of the IBHE to set the threshold of a low-enrolling program at 40 majors for baccalaureate programs, the Faculty Advisory Council advocates that the IBHE and elected officials communicate clearly to all constituencies the value of the liberal arts for a four-year university education. We thus encourage the IBHE to develop proposals (and interpret state legislative mandates) in ways that assess whether public universities are meeting the expectation that students will have an opportunity to study core academic liberal arts and sciences disciplines at all four-year public universities, in classes taught by those with doctorates in a liberal arts or sciences field.

Although the IBHE must respond to legislative directives, the IBHE also has a responsibility to communicate with legislators, the governor, and the general public about **what is at stake in viewing public universities as places that provide a well-rounded university education**—rather than as a collection of competing profession-specific majors whose preservation or elimination is the primary focus of legislative interest.

To condition the survival of programs in the liberal arts (that serve *all* students) on their ability to attract at least 40 majors is inimical to the overall educational quality of the majority of four year public universities. In its framing of metrics for the Low-Producing Programs legislative report, the IBHE currently requires 40 majors as the threshold before which a major is considered low-enrolling.¹ This number applies regardless of the size of the university. Although the report also provides the opportunity to make a case for supporting low-enrolling programs, nevertheless, in practice, some institutions have cited the IBHE's metrics of "40 majors" as the primary factor when choosing to eliminate a major, even when good arguments have been made to preserve small programs that serve all students through General Education and that serve some students through majors that reflect long-standing commitments to understanding human history, culture, and meaning. Such programs range from African American studies to philosophy and many other areas of the humanities.² Similarly, smaller

¹ It is important to note that the expectation of 40 majors to avoid being on a Low-Producing Program Report) was *not* legislatively mandated, but an interpretation made by the IBHE in consultation with university presidents. See the mandates of Public Act 097-0610 (<http://www.ilga.gov/legislation/publicacts/fulltext.asp?Name=097-0610>), which amended 110 ILCS 205/7 and charged:

Each State university shall report annually to the Board on programs of instruction, research, or public service that have been terminated, dissolved, reduced, or consolidated by the university. Each State university shall also report to the Board all programs of instruction, research, and public service that exhibit a trend of low performance in enrollments, degree completions, and high expense per degree. The Board shall compile an annual report that shall contain information on new programs created, existing programs that have been closed or consolidated, and programs that exhibit low performance or productivity. The report must be submitted to the General Assembly.

² While additional programs are being considered for elimination in 2018-19, thus far the following baccalaureate programs have been eliminated using the Low-Producing Program Report: African American Studies (WIU), African Studies (EIU), BS in Economics (CSU), Russian (NIU), Geography (CSU), Philosophy (WIU), Religious Studies (WIU), Women's Studies (WIU).

science programs like physics and geology are under threat, as are smaller social scientific fields like anthropology and economics. And at least some administrators have communicated to their universities that they fear the IBHE or state legislature will condition funding on meeting the threshold of 40. In short, some administrators have used the 40-major threshold to eliminate majors in the liberal arts, even though the liberal arts are a foundation for a university education more broadly—in the way specialized vocational programs are not.

While some have argued that any student who wants to major in a particular humanities or social sciences field should just attend what may become just the one or two or handful of universities that offer this program, the costs of this approach are high.

First, it means that the IBHE is sending the message that the university is no longer a place committed to providing a broad educational foundation for what will likely be many career changes for graduates. Instead **the university becomes defined and assessed as a collection of high-enrolling major degree programs—where success is measured not in quality or contribution to the common good, but in student credit hour production.** Public universities risk losing sight of the value of a broader liberal arts and sciences foundation for *any* four-year baccalaureate degree. **While an undergraduate student’s four-year major degree program reflects a short-term investment, a student’s broader General Education courses in the liberal arts and sciences reflect a longer-term investment for both students and the common good of the state—and supporting those courses requires a commitment to the fields of liberal arts and sciences.** A public comprehensive university is not a collection of high-enrolling major degree programs. Graduation requirements in General Education (or the liberal arts and sciences) are central to what it means to earn a four year college degree not only because they foster broadly educated citizens who can continue life-long learning, but also because they cultivate skill sets, practices of independent and critical thinking, and habits of understanding the world from multiple points of view that can enable later career changes. Eliminating majors in the liberal arts and sciences reduces numbers of faculty who invest in both courses and careers in these fields.

Second, **most students do not know what kinds of majors are available to them, so expecting them to choose their college on the basis of a high school interest in an area like philosophy, geology, or gender studies can be unrealistic,** since students may not even know about these areas of study unless they encounter them in college. **It also assumes a mobility that not all students have when they opt to attend a nearby public university.** So student access to liberal arts majors becomes limited, unless they happen to attend a college that has a field that may interest them.

Third, especially insofar as students view universities as places to explore pathways to future careers, **students may simply opt to go to the universities with the wider range of offerings, rather than to those narrowly focused on specific fields.** Anecdotally, students often voice a preference for attending a school with a broad rather than narrow range of program offerings. And at a recent IBHE Faculty Advisory Council meeting, outgoing IBHE Executive Director Al Bowman said (as expressed in the minutes from the meeting) that the “underperforming programs report and the budget concerns led to a perception of guidance counselors and families that institutions were weakened.”³

³ IBHE Faculty Advisory Council minutes for the November 16, 2018 meeting at Illinois Wesleyan University.

Fourth, by failing to champion the liberal arts as the heart of a university education more broadly, and so not actively *discouraging* liberal arts programs from closing, the IBHE’s expectation of 40 majors **also keeps students from having access to a broader range of offerings in the liberal arts, even though studies show that majors in these areas often outperform their peers in salary by mid-career,** and are sought out by high tech companies that want students who can think independently, write well, analyze and problem solve in unfamiliar circumstances, and communicate well with others verbally.⁴ There is no reason not to offer majors in small liberal arts fields if there are sufficient faculty to cover both a small number of majors *and* General Education course offerings—especially when even many tech companies (like those in Silicon Valley) are actively seeking liberal arts graduates with creative and people-oriented “soft skills.”⁵

Fifth, **when public universities use the Low-Producing Program Report to eliminate liberal arts areas** of study that are small in numbers of majors, but that contribute to the general education opportunities of all students, **they are also affecting the future of research and scholarship.** Without institutional spaces for the teaching of art history, philosophy, gender studies, African American studies, and other smaller liberal arts disciplines (and increasingly other liberal arts areas like geology, sociology, history, anthropology, and literature), there are also fewer people able to pursue a career in the research and study in these disciplines. That translates into fewer academic jobs for those with doctorates in liberal arts fields, who then must find careers that do not usually provide the resources or support for a scholarly life. **We lose a public commitment to the liberal arts as part of the common good—the effort to understand human beings and our world in the various ways that liberal arts academic disciplines do.**

Sixth, **many private colleges and universities in Illinois are feeling their own futures tied to the pressures of the Low-Producing Program reporting,** as their own administrators begin to adopt the practices of public university administrators. Pressure on the public universities to eliminate small liberal arts and sciences programs influences the perceived priorities of liberal arts colleges as well—away from what they traditionally do best. This is despite the fact that liberal arts college graduates typically do well economically in the long run.⁶

For these reasons, **we encourage the Illinois Board of Higher Education to explicitly include contribution to the liberal arts and sciences as a reason to preserve small majors in the humanities, social sciences, and sciences;** and to **ask public universities regularly to assess how well they are fostering a liberal arts education that is provided by scholars and researchers who hold doctorates in their respective fields.**

⁴ See Debra Humphreys and Patrick Kelly, “How Liberal Arts and Sciences Majors Fare in Employment: A Report on Earnings and Long-Term Career Paths,” *Association of American Colleges and Universities*, <https://www.aacu.org/publications-research/publications/how-liberal-arts-and-sciences-majors-fare-employment-report>; Willard Dix, “A Liberal Arts Degree Is More Important Than Ever,” <https://www.forbes.com/sites/willarddix/2016/11/16/a-liberal-arts-degree-is-more-important-than-ever/#dec7cae339f2>; Mark McNutt, “There Is Value in Liberal Arts Education, Employers Say,” *US News & World Report*, <https://www.usnews.com/news/college-of-tomorrow/articles/2014/09/22/there-is-value-in-liberal-arts-education-employers-say>; Debra Humphreys, “Employment Outcomes in the Four-Year Sector: The Value of Liberal Arts Degrees,” *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, Vol 46, 2014 (Issue 3), pp. 64-66.

⁵ Alex Chriss, “Don’t Ditch That Liberal Arts Degree: A liberal arts degree is an asset in Silicon Valley, not a liability,” *US News & World Report*, 1-19-18, <https://www.usnews.com/opinion/knowledge-bank/articles/2018-01-19/in-this-digital-age-students-with-liberal-arts-training-stand-out>

⁶ “The Economic Gains (Yes, Gains) of a Liberal Arts Education,” *Inside Higher Ed*, <https://bit.ly/2JQLMRk>

Respectfully submitted to the Board of Higher Education on 4 June 2019,

Members of the Faculty Advisory Council, 2018-19

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