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Western Illinois University prepares to cut degree programs

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Four degree programs at [Western Illinois University](#) may be eliminated this month following years of poor enrollment and low graduation rates.

Administrators recommended that majors in African-American studies, philosophy, religious studies and women's studies all be cut from the curriculum at the dual-campus institution in Macomb and Quad Cities.

Western's board of trustees is scheduled to vote on the matter at its Friday meeting. Should trustees approve the cuts, it would mean no new students could declare majors in those programs. It also could mean cuts in faculty positions, but not until the 2017-18 school year, according to Kathleen Neumann, interim provost and academic vice president.

Students already majoring in any eliminated programs will be provided individualized study plans so they can complete their degrees, Neumann said.

The move comes after a monthslong review into eight degree programs. Also evaluated were bilingual/bicultural education, public health, geography and musical theatre. Members of the Academic Program Elimination Review committee, comprised of faculty from the four undergraduate colleges and the library, submitted recommendations to Neumann in May.

Some department leaders said the cuts would undermine the integrity of Western's educational goals.

"I'm concerned that cutting the department of African-American studies is cutting out a part of history at Western," said chairman F. Erik Brooks, adding that Western's program was one of the earliest in the country to be established. "With this vote on Friday, that's just going to wipe away all of that history in one fell swoop. It's going to be gone. I think it's a move in the wrong direction."



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Neumann's recommendation to cut the four programs does not align with the committee's recommendations. Committee members proposed cutting the public health major, saying that its curriculum overlapped with a different concentration in the health sciences department. They also supported a proposal to incorporate religious studies degree courses into the philosophy major program.

The group advocated keeping the other degree programs with some reorganization.

Neumann said there simply is not enough interest in the four degree programs targeted for elimination. Bilingual/bicultural education, public health, geography and musical theatre would be revamped.

"There's plenty of evidence to suggest that there are plenty of students that would be interested in these areas if these modifications were put into place," Neumann said of the programs being retained.

Neumann said that while the state's budget woes did not directly affect this decision, it still was critical for the school to gauge the economic viability of its curriculum.

"This would be happening regardless of the current situation in Springfield," Neumann said. "For several years now, we've seen a decline in fiscal support from the state. We've seen a decline in the number of graduating Illinois high school students who choose Illinois public higher education. We are all responsible to be good stewards of our resources and make the wisest use of our faculty, staffing that we have available to us."

Falling course enrollment, ballooning costs of instruction and fewer completed degrees were common among the programs assessed, according to the committee report. About 8,300 full- and part-time undergraduates were enrolled at Western during the spring term.

Twenty-two students chose African-American studies as their major as of spring term, the highest number in three years. But enrollment in the introductory class has dropped nearly 41 percent since 2011, and three courses account for nearly two-thirds of enrollment in all African-

American studies classes, according to the report. The minor program is more popular, with 47 students.

Committee members did not endorse dropping the concentration, in part because they felt potential layoffs would disproportionately affect black faculty members.

The group had similar concerns about the impact on minorities with cutting women's studies, even though just two students received a degree in that subject this year.

"Questions of equity, social justice and diversity are at the center of the women's studies program major, and Western makes clear its commitment to these values by supporting this curriculum and the faculty who create and teach it," the report states.

Twenty-eight students committed to a philosophy or religious studies degree in the 2015-16 school year, compared to 34 in 2011. Three students received degrees this year, down from 10 in 2011. Overall enrollment in philosophy and religious studies has dropped 33 percent since 2011.

Gordon Pettit, chairman of philosophy and religious studies, said he felt that the figures overlook that there are only seven professors in his department. Pettit is petitioning the board to retain the philosophy major and had collected more than 1,500 signatures as of Tuesday.

"Philosophy is often misunderstood but is the foundational discipline for academic inquiry," Pettit wrote in an email. "There is a reason that the highest degree in most academic fields is the Doctor of Philosophy. In addition to the important questions asked in a philosophy classroom, ... studying philosophy hones the highly practical and transferable intellectual skills of critical reasoning, argumentative analysis and clear communication."

Neumann said general education courses in all the subjects — which show far stronger enrollment trends than the major-specific classes — still will be taught and students still will be able to pursue minors.

"We're all very committed to WIU continuing to be a quality, comprehensive institution," Neumann said. "We've got a very diverse set of student populations, and we're going to be moving and advancing Western's mission forward."

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