

Report of the Academic Reorganization Working Group Presented to the Faculty Senate December 20, 2021

BACKGROUND

The Academic Reorganization Working Group was established by the Financial and Physical Planning Committee of the Faculty Senate and the Provost's Office in May 2020 to evaluate and reimagine UVM's academic organization to ensure that our pedagogy, research, scholarly, and creative activity continue to position the University at the forefront of higher education and support student success. This group developed several speculative models for UVM's academic organization which coalesced in a conceptual framework, UVM 2050, that grouped our academic offerings under four broad areas of programmatic strength. Initial response to UVM 2050 indicated a strong desire on the part of faculty, staff, and students to participate in an inclusive and collaborative process to evaluate our academic structure and administrative systems, consider the feedback of campus constituents, and recommend the appropriate course ahead for academic reorganization and realignment.

With the strong recommendation of the Faculty Senate, the Academic Reorganization Working Group extended the timeline for their work and expanded their membership.¹ This newly constituted committee consisted of faculty, staff, and students from across campus and incorporated subgroups tasked with assessing Internal Alignments, External Benchmarks, and University Supports. Additionally, an ad hoc Administrative Systems Working Group was charged with examining the systems implications of any potential programmatic realignments. During the spring semester of 2021, the Working Group engaged in an extensive data-gathering process that sought the input and advice of the campus community regarding UVM's academic structures and administrative systems.

FINDINGS

1) History of UVM's program development

The Academic Reorganization Working Group considered over 100 years' worth of UVM's program development, the formation and closing of colleges, and the work of previous reorganization task forces. Taking this material as a whole, it is clear that the university has historically been challenged to engage in a meaningful and sustained process of long-term academic planning and educational stewardship that would serve the interest of "one UVM." While there are examples of successful cross-campus collaborations in research and pedagogy, it is more often the case that program development takes place primarily at the unit level, with little coordination with potential cross-unit partners. As a result, UVM has numerous course offerings, degree programs, and departments that exist in substantial overlap with others. Further, the historical evolution of programs has meant that some faculty and programs that would otherwise have strong affinities reside in different units, presenting challenges for collaboration. It is worth noting that UVM is not alone in this regard, and the academic

organization of many institutions we examined likewise display areas of overlap, duplication, and inconsistency. However, for a small institution like UVM, this complexity creates barriers for both students and faculty wishing to take advantage of all UVM has to offer.

2) Campus responses to reorganization:

Throughout the spring 2021 semester, the Academic Reorganization working group held over two dozen community forums, town halls, and brainstorming sessions, and provided opportunities for written feedback on the Provost's Academic Reorganization website. As a result of these efforts to gather campus input, we received over 1000 comments, suggestions, and recommendations. During the summer, this feedback was coded using qualitative research methodologies and analyzed by a team of faculty and graduate student researchers. The results of this analysis are described in the "Academic Reorganization Data" document published on the Provost's Website.

It should be noted that the great majority of participants in these feedback sessions were faculty members, with substantially less participation from staff and students, and that many of the same faculty members attended multiple sessions to voice their opinions. Hence, the findings of the report should be understood as a snapshot of a particular set of concerns rather than as a reflection of the entirety of the campus. However, there were consistent themes that emerged from these sessions. As articulated in the summary of the "Academic Reorganization Data," participants expressed "marked resistance to reorganization," "significant fear and distrust" of the administration, and confusion and uncertainty about the need for reorganization. Concerns were also expressed about the timeline for reorganization and the speed with which people perceived change to be taking place.

Although there was an acknowledgement of structural challenges and inconsistencies in our academic organization, participants also frequently pointed to administrative systems that impeded collaboration and innovation, including HR administration, F&A allocations, faculty buyout, inconsistent course equivalency policies, varying approaches to academic advising, and other areas where procedures and policies were either cumbersome or contradictory. By far, the biggest factor cited for the systems challenges people faced was the administration of IBB. The "Academic Reorganization Data" report relates that: "[P]articipants felt that resource allocation decisions, particularly in the context of the IBB model, have created competition between units that erodes the ability to work collaboratively as an institution. IBB was repeatedly cited as a model that creates inequities and competition among units and undermines collaborative endeavors that should define and strengthen the institution as a whole."

3) Ongoing reorganization initiatives

As the Academic Reorganization Working Group was conducting its work and taking campus input, several units on campus were engaging in their own efforts to address program alignments, course offerings, and organizational structure. Among these are the proposal for a School of the Arts in CAS, the collaboration between CALS, CAS, and RSEN on the realignment

of Environmental Studies and Environmental Science, and the development of a Department of Geography and Geosciences reflecting the move of Geology faculty into Geography. We note that these efforts have an eye toward improving student outcomes, strengthening and clarifying program offerings, and ensuring the overall health of the institution. Indeed, the independent efforts of our colleagues to address some of the longstanding issues that the Academic Working group identified in its initial survey of the University's academic programs are substantial and suggest that initiatives to reimagine academic alignments that enlist faculty, deans, and senior administrators in the change-making process can produce positive and necessary results.

4) Social Justice, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Respondents had very few substantive comments regarding the ways that Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) are hampered by our current systems or structures or the way that they could be enhanced through changes to them. We believe that JEDI work is integral to the mission of the University, and therefore the silence by respondents over these issues reveals a need for deeper reflection and coordination. Although centering the question of DEI issues was a priority of the working group, it is clear that the question of how to impact inclusion and equity through our academic alignments has not been adequately framed by this Working Group. That said, the establishment of the University Diversity Council (UDC) shows great promise to make the relationship between DEI and academic organization salient and material. We also note efforts in several colleges and departments to assess and adjust their programmatic offerings, to transform their cultural practices, and to address historic and ongoing issues of climate, access, and equity. The changes to the CBA to include work on DEI in Faculty effort are likewise important steps for the university, as are ongoing efforts to ensure equity across our systems and policies. We also acknowledge the work of the Office of the Vice Provost for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion to establish a comprehensive and holistic university strategy aimed at a continuously renewing our commitment to justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion. For these efforts to be successful, they must be consistent, resourced, and hold each member of the university community accountable. The Academic Organization Working group offers its strong, wholehearted support for these efforts and to UDC, and believe that any proposal for reorganization, including any realignment of existing programs or creation of new programs, must account for historic and existing inequities and establish a framework for enhancing DEI issues to go forward.

REFLECTIONS

1) "One UVM" or Many?

Throughout the course of the Working Group's efforts, we have heard—often and repeatedly—of the pride, loyalty, and identification that campus constituents feel for their home departments, programs, and colleges. Despite calls by individual faculty, students, and staff for more opportunities for cross-campus collaboration, the working group has not observed a corresponding strong identification with the institution as a whole. This unit-level identification and a general desire to preserve status quo long predates the efforts of this Working Group, but

it has been accentuated in the context of the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 crisis and the uncertainties brought about by the reorganization process itself. It should be noted, however, that the lack of a central identity for UVM is mirrored in the initial findings of the external analysis of potential applicants conducted by the Art and Science Group, which suggest that even if potential applicants know about UVM, they do not have a clear picture of what UVM is known for and stands for. This represents a fundamental challenge the university must address if it is to continue to prosper in the current, uncertain higher education environment. We must be able to provide a concise message about the University's mission and identity that resonates with the citizens of Vermont, our potential applicants, and funders and donors across the country and the world.

2) Ensuring the Vitality of our Research Portfolio While Preserving our Commitment to Pedagogy

Throughout the course of the Working Group's efforts, we heard repeatedly of the need to balance our research ambitions with our historic strengths in student-centered pedagogy and curriculum. While this was sometimes posed as a conflict, we feel that these two goals are complementary. Research innovation is integral to our responsibility as a land-grant institution and is critical to the future economic success of Vermont. There are numerous examples of UVM bringing an interdisciplinary approach to societal challenges (such as sustainable agriculture or community development) that benefit the state and its communities. From the standpoint of our commitment to students, we believe that the further we push the boundaries of understanding, innovation, and entrepreneurship through cutting-edge research across all disciplines, the better we will be at ensuring our students are empowered with the skills necessary to become knowledgeable global citizens, creative community leaders, and innovative change agents. One of the consistent points of agreement in speaking to campus constituents was examples of successful campus-wide institutes like the Gund Institute that marry research with meaningful opportunities for students. Respondents consistently supported the establishment of similar institutes in the future. However, it is crucial that these university-wide initiatives should strive to balance enhancing our research productivity and our commitment to education, particularly graduate education, which was frequently cited as needing additional investment.

3) Balancing Big and Small, Decentralized and Centralized

As we begin to address the identity conflict UVM faces, we also must address our structural and systemic challenges. UVM is a decentralized university. We have two very large academic colleges, CAS and LCOM, four relatively small colleges, CALS, CEMS, CESS, and CNHS, and two comparably sized schools led by deans, GSB and RSEN. By contrast, other land grant institutions and flagship state universities have proportionally smaller Colleges of Arts and Sciences (Cornell ~ 30%, UNH ~ 30%, U. Mich. ~ 44%, compared to UVM's 55%). The consequences of having colleges of disparate size lead to unique challenges regarding flexibility and pace of change. Smaller colleges struggle to efficiently deliver all services. Larger colleges can find it challenging to be nimble and to quickly adjust to a changing educational landscape. The imbalance also makes discussion over resource allocation difficult.

4) IBB

While the historical challenges UVM has faced in its long-term academic stewardship efforts predate the implementation of IBB, IBB was frequently cited as an impediment to cross-college collaboration and effective partnerships between similar programs. Even as IBB has provided colleges with data allowing them to react to student interest, respondents expressed the sentiment that it has also led to continued inefficiencies and in some cases duplication of effort or offerings, as units move to meet student demand in areas of interest, while simultaneously creating competition with other units striving to answer the same demands. The balance of the seven colleges, including relative size, relation to accrediting bodies, and workload, complicates efforts for them to work together, especially with regard to their curricula. Feedback likewise indicated a lack of familiarity with the administration of IBB and the tracking of its impact, information which the provost has made publicly available to the campus community. In short, although IBB is a budget tool, ongoing confusion about its implementation and its effects loom large over any consideration of our academic alignments.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We believe that there are opportunities to better amplify our educational impact and enhance our institutional reputation in our areas of strength and our impact on the state by considering realignments between departments and colleges to coalesce areas of strength. It has become clear to the Working Group that while there remain significant areas of the University that merit restructuring, presenting a single, static model for UVM's academic alignments would not address the fundamental need to change our approach to long-term academic planning and for establishing processes to address programmatic overlap and reform systems that impede collaboration and innovation. Given the already-ongoing reorganization efforts in a number of colleges, concerns about programmatic disruption, uncertain short-term financial benefit, and the pressing need to confront the question of our institutional identity, we do not at this time recommend a single, wholesale reorganization of the university's academic structure. Instead, we strongly recommend a process for continuous improvement and evaluation of our academic alignments to enhance UVM's reputation, establish a culture of inclusion and equity, promote new opportunities for collaboration, innovation, and creative pedagogy, address remaining areas of structural and systemic ineffectiveness, and grow our research productivity. To achieve these ends, we offer the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1: Establish Processes for Long Term, University-wide Academic Planning and Oversight

Currently, senior leaders, including Deans leading academic units, are guided by the strategic goals and principles outlined in the President's Amplifying Our Impact statement, and the Provost's Academic Success goals and metrics. However, there are limited opportunities for academic and governance leaders to reflect holistically on the university's programmatic offerings from a strategic perspective.

An Academic Stewardship Group should be charged with reducing competition and overlap of programs and course offerings between units and empowered to establish mechanisms for

oversight and accountability. This body would also advise on the negotiation, establishment, and maintenance of MOUs between partners offering joint programs across units. This body could be an enhanced iteration of the Educational Stewardship Committee, which was established as part of the initial implementation of IBB as a joint collaboration between central administration and the Faculty Senate to promote academic excellence, evaluate curricular offerings, and ensure against overlap and competition between programs. While the principles undergirding Educational Stewardship were strong, no provisions were made for implementing their findings or for creating accountability for programs that, in whole or in part, duplicate others. We recommend a revitalized and reimagined Academic Stewardship Group consisting of members of the Faculty Senate, the Academic Leadership Council, the Office of Institutional Assessment, the Office of the Vice President for Research, and Financial Analysis and Budgeting, that shall serve as a collaborative partnership and as a joint oversight body, holding the campus units accountable for programmatic conflicts and ensuring realignment of, and innovation in, courses and programs where deemed necessary. This is essential for optimizing the curriculum within budgetary constraints.

At the same time, we recommend establishing an annual retreat to discuss trends in higher education and consider emerging programmatic plans from a university-wide perspective. The Academic Stewardship Group shall annually address improvements in the overall alignment of departments within colleges or—where necessary—the potential for merging of colleges, and it will present a summary of their findings to senior leaders and the Faculty Senate. By embedding strategic discussions of academic structure into an ongoing conversation, we can make stewardship of academic resources and programs a regular and engaged practice at UVM, allowing the campus to consider change and anticipating adjustments to our academic alignments as merited. This culture of continuous improvement is consistent with the philosophy of accrediting bodies working with programs and our institution as a whole, and indeed of higher education.

Recommendation 2: Empower the Academic Stewardship Group to review cross-unit degree programs

Once established, the Academic Stewardship Group should, as its first task, consider the areas of academic and curricular overlap currently existing at UVM. This includes both similar/identical majors and minors offered in more than one unit and programs that are managed across several units, with multiple partners, often under an MOU. With the participation of the identified programs, the Academic Stewardship Group shall convene faculty, staff, and administrators of these programs, or otherwise request feedback on what is working well and what challenges are arising, and develop recommendations to continue existing agreements that support these programs, revise existing agreements, or to realign programs, including consolidating them in one unit and recommending the elimination of duplicative or overlapping degrees in other units. While we hope that, as in the case of the already in-progress realignments, a spirit of consensus and compromise will characterize these

efforts, should programs be unable to reach agreement about realignment, we recommend that the Provost implement the Academic Stewardship Advisory Board's recommendations.

Recommendation 3: Promote Interdisciplinary Research Initiatives

One of the consistent themes of the Academic Reorganization Working Group's listening tour was a desire for more Interdisciplinary Research Institutes and Centers to enhance the University's Research profile. The Gund Institute and the Center on Rural Addiction (CORA) are powerful examples of interdisciplinary organizations tackling important societal problems, engaging with communities. We recommend establishing four to five new Research Institutes and Centers to promote multi-disciplinary research collaboration, graduate education, and student opportunities. These new Institutes and Centers should focus on complex challenges and take an interdisciplinary approach that includes the humanities, social sciences, sciences, medicine, and business. Topics that we either already have strength in or could be solidified include Social Justice, Food Systems and Food Security, Agroecology, Green Energy Solutions, Educating the Next Generation, Sustainable Business and Engineering Practices (including water systems), Healthy Communities, and more. To succeed, these institutes need to have the endowment strength of the Gund Institute or the federal resources of CORA and a precondition for their existence must be the assurance of adequate funding. Ideally establishment of any University Institute must address both local and national interests. The Faculty Senate (in consultation with the University Scholars and Distinguished Scholars) shall advise on the establishment of these Institutes and engage in a regular review to ensure their ongoing viability.

Recommendation 4: Establish Systems Consistencies Across Units

One barrier to interdisciplinary collaboration is inconsistencies in policy across the colleges. Consistency should be established for the following procedures:

- F&A sharing models with faculty and departments and a mechanism to track them
- Faculty buy-out with research funds
- Course equivalencies, both within colleges and for cross-college teaching
- Workload policies, where possible under the CBA
- Human Resources policies and procedures to ensure efficiency, transparency, and equity
- Uneven advising loads and disproportionate weight given to advising in workloads between colleges and departments/programs
- Cross-College teaching, including teaching in the Honors College

Recommendation 5: Bring the Campus Community Back into the IBB Conversation

It is important to acknowledge that IBB was regularly cited as the biggest obstacle to achieving change at UVM. While this may be true in some areas, there are also numerous examples of IBB

leading to significant innovation and transformation both in research and education that individuals might not be aware of.

There is much disagreement around IBB as a budgeting tool. Some see IBB as a tool for implementing change within the University, whereas others see it as causing significant damage to the fulfillment of the University's mission. It has also undergone several different changes, knowledge of which is spread unevenly throughout the campus community, despite the analysis of IBB's impacts conducted by the Provost's office and available publicly to the UVM community. We recommend a two-fold strategy: first, a fresh information campaign to provide various stakeholders with an understanding of current conditions; second, a strategy to expand the decision-making process to give faculty and staff a clearer level of input into strategic choices within the system. We therefore urge the Administration to re-establish the IBB Steering Committee.

¹ Dating to its initial establishment in May, 2020, the members of the Academic Reorganization Working Group have been: David Jenemann, Dean, HCOL (chair); Lana Al-Namee, SGA; Simone Blaise-Glaunsinger, HCOL; Shari Bergquist, University Budget Director; Thomas Borchert, Professor, Religion, CAS; Christopher Burns, Special Collections, Libraries; Susan Comerford, Associate Professor, Dept. of Social Work, CESS; Meghan Cope, Professor, Geography, CAS; Mary Cushman, Professor, LCOM; Jennifer Dickinson, Vice Provost Academic Affairs; Kirk Dombrowski, VP for Research; William Falls, Dean, CAS; Jason Garvey, Associate Professor, CES; Randall Headrick, Professor, Physics, CAS; Kathy Howrigan, UVM Foundation; Jinny Huh, Associate Professor, English, CAS; Adrian Ivakhiv, Professor, RSENr; Mary Louise Kete, Professor, English, CAS; David Jones, Professor, GSB; Jay LaShombe, Admissions; Alan Maynard, Clinical Associate Prof., Biomedical and Health Sciences, CNHS; Ernesto Mendez, Professor, Plant & Soil Science, CALS; Katherine Merrill, Senior Lecturer, Math & Stats, CNHS; Cathy Paris, Senior Lecturer, Plant Biology, CALS; Sarah Plaut, SGA; Avery Rasmussen, Perinatal Data Manager, LCOM, GSS; Pramodita Sharma, Professor, GSB; Linda Schadler, Dean, CEMS; Constance Van Eeghen, Assistant Professor, Gen Internal Medicine, LCOM; Jim Vigoreaux, Vice Provost Faculty Affairs; KC Williams, Assistant Dean, CEMS; Alexander Yin, OIR