

Redesigning the School of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences for the 21st Century

Issue:

With constant shifting of public and private funding streams, higher education must prepare for the hard reality that a future college education and planned career choices will be a lot different from years past. Nowhere is this more evident than in the agricultural and life sciences. Maintaining the current structure is not viable. To continue in the current academic alignment would be a foolhardy endeavor. North Carolina A&T State University, like the other universities in the University of North Carolina System, is required to make substantial cuts that dig deep and exceed what can be met by trimming the fat from operational budgets. Current budget cuts have led to cutting low-enrolled/producing programs and releasing faculty associated with them. Savings from the proposed cuts will not be realized until subsequent years. In light of these cuts, it is imperative that the School of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences (SAES) be restructured in a manner that ensures a more effective, responsive and resilient academic environment where both efficiency and synergy can be realized. Restructuring efforts should focus on organizational efficiency, be interdisciplinary and integrated, and comprised of unique funding streams to sustain the redesigned school.

What has been done:

During spring 2011 six low-enrolled programs in the SAES were designated for discontinuance. Faculty associated with the programs were presented with options that ranged from retirement, phased out retirement, to being transferred to another department if a position was available and the transfer amendable to both parties. Programs discontinued include three undergraduate and three master's level programs. Administrators in units affected by the chancellor's decision leaped into action to develop new degree programs that would attract more students to the departments thereby making the units and programs more appealing to today's high school and community college graduates.

Taking into consideration my experiences in the Food System Leadership Institute, I drafted a revised plan (program areas) for SAES along with a list of seven strategies to consider in re-examining SAES' programs and presented them to the interim dean. He then asked the other associate deans and department chairs to share their suggestions for reorganizing the school. This led to the Dean's Council identifying three knowledge areas to guide the school's restructuring efforts: health, wellness and families; food, plants and animals; and sustainability and the environment. These areas were aligned with my recommendations. This information was shared with SAES faculty in an open forum and again in the school's quarterly newsletter. Faculty input was sought verbally or in writing. The interim dean was not successful in his bid to become the dean for SAES and subsequently, no further actions were taken with this effort. A new dean joined the university in September 2011 and focused his efforts on increasing enrollment by working with departments to create new undergraduate and graduate programs to replace those lost earlier in the year.

Impacts: No impact can be stated that relates to my proposed actions given that restructuring efforts ceased with the appointment of a new dean. Impact relating to the new programs (degrees, tracks, and options, i.e., new dean's focus) cannot be determined either as they have not yet been approved. However, one could surmise that had restructuring efforts continued and successfully implemented, it could have lead to:

- a more fiscally managed and operated unit
- a more effective, responsive and resilient academic environment where both efficiency and synergy *between faculty and disciplines* are realized
- preparation of society ready graduates who can aggressively tackle challenges faced by today's industry and business
- new educational strategies such as a greater application of distance learning and community development initiatives, greater involvement of the private sector and institutional partnerships, and a broad-based approach to "agricultural education."

How has your project been aided by your FSLI experience?

My project was aided by the FSLI experience in that it exposed me to several highly seasoned administrators and leaders who faced many challenges during their leadership tenure, which included reorganization. These individuals shared their trials and triumphs as well as their strategies for turning challenges into successes. This experience helped me to understand myself better and those with whom I work and interact. More importantly, it has taught me that process is important to any positive outcome.

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