

When Faculty Downsizing and Student Success Collide

Marcee Everly¹, Kathryn Berlin², Peggy Weber¹, Yassenka Peterson¹, Jessica Nelson¹

1. Indiana State University, Terre Haute, IN. 47809
2. Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis, Indianapolis, IN. 46202

Indiana State University faces similar struggles as other institutions of higher education: the need for increased enrollment with fewer faculty. Indiana State University is a four-year public university in the Midwest with more than eighty undergraduate majors, seventy-five graduate programs, and upwards of one hundred minors, certificates, and licensures. The university has seen an increase in enrollment over the past few years, with fall 2016 enrollment exceeding 13,500 students. The faculty workload at our university is twelve credits hours per semester, with most of our faculty on ten-month contracts. Several new clinical programs have been added, requiring a much smaller student-to-faculty ratio. Although we have been fortunate to experience growth in student enrollment and programs, we have not been as fortunate in growing the number of faculty. In this article, we share strategies implemented to address the current trend of faculty downsizing while increasing student enrollment within a health sciences college.

Maintaining a Cohesive Leadership Team

In order to work collaboratively and creatively, a cohesive leadership team is needed. In higher education, like most institutions, our college has seen a large turnover in both the dean and the chair roles in a very short time span. With healthcare leadership roles becoming increasingly difficult to recruit for, a sense of urgency and fear of the unknown became very palpable among the existing college leadership cabinet. Therefore, developing a sense of community and collegiality, while maintaining a strong and balanced leadership team, was essential to the college's continued success.

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Working together as a college unit, in lieu of fighting for individual department needs, was key to the overall success of our college during this very trying time. The biggest hurdle was, at times, to place department needs aside to see the bigger picture of the college function. Constant communication in the form of bimonthly face-to-face leadership meetings was crucial to continue the flow of information and transparency. Veteran members of the leadership team formed close mentoring roles to junior chairs to ensure that they felt supported and to provide an outlet for questions. Sharing resources related to curriculum development and investigating interdepartmental teaching was identified as a best practice. With limited full-time faculty resources, ways to decrease resources spent and to increase return of investment of faculty dollars was essential. Department chairs and associate deans worked hard to revise college-level policy regarding faculty released time for program directors to ensure that responsibilities across the college were aligned, succinct, and equitable.

Maximizing Efficiency

Although smaller class sizes were previously a hallmark of our university, increasing enrollment meant a shift to larger class sizes. We had to examine practices closely to identify the maximum use of resources while also adhering to existing accreditation standards within the college. Increasing course enrollments resulted in increased work for faculty members. Thus, it was vital to ensure that faculty had adequate support and resources. New resources for faculty included the availability of instructional designers who provided extra assistance to design, improve, and maintain courses. Support was via small-group training or one-on-one consultation. Faculty could also access the Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence. Here faculty participated in presentations and structured programs aimed at providing support for teaching.

In addition to increasing enrollments in on-campus courses, we also increased the number of online course offerings. Offering online courses helps to address issues with facility limitations, such as number of available classrooms and maximum room occupancy. We also transitioned some on-campus courses into hybrid courses, where part of the content is delivered online while part is on campus, thus freeing up classrooms on certain days. An extremely helpful resource at our university was the Online Instructor

Certificate course. This program was implemented to provide faculty with the skills to develop and maintain online or hybrid courses.

In order to maximize efficiency of faculty workloads, we had to carefully evaluate the courses offered to students. It was necessary to reduce the redundancy of similar courses offered by different majors and even to eliminate some common core courses. A decision to reduce, or in some cases eliminate, the offering of elective courses was also made.

Another solution to improving efficiency was to develop and enhance the role of graduate assistants (GA) to teach foundational studies (general education) courses. Within one department, graduate students typically taught two sections of a health and wellness course, with fourteen to twenty-two sections available each semester. Each GA had full teaching responsibilities and autonomy for their courses. As with other budgets, the number of GAs was decreased, demanding a review of the course offerings and possible solutions.

To provide successful teaching experiences for the GAs, one GA (enrolled in a doctoral program) was assigned the role of graduate assistant coordinator under the supervision of the department chair and developed a comprehensive program focused on improving student outcomes and providing GA support to ensure accountability. The coordinator was responsible for recruiting GAs and for conducting the initial orientations, supervision, management, and training throughout the academic year. Specifically, the coordinator provided program-level orientation; ensured GAs were aware of the appropriate chain of command and communication channels within the department; provided GAs with duty and performance expectations; developed, supervised, and worked with underperforming GAs to improve performance; evaluated, with the chair, GA teaching performance; prepared reports pertinent to the GA program; and maintained progress reports.

The addition of a GA coordinator proved invaluable in terms of course scheduling and outcomes. Having a coordinator oversee the GA program alleviated the department chair's responsibilities of managing GAs.

Subsequently, ensuring that all GAs were teaching the same materials and focusing on the same learning objectives and outcomes allowed the foundational studies course to meet university requirements. At the same time, this helped to streamline the summer offerings for the course, which are taught by tenured and tenure-track faculty. Having the courses established, with specific outcomes and assignments set, reduced the prep time for faculty when planning for summer courses.

Student Success

Working toward student success when student enrollment increases and faculty numbers decrease can feel like walking a tight rope with no safety net. Collaborating among a plethora of groups on our campus has led to positive results (e.g., our four-year graduation rates have increased). The different groups involved to promote student success include students, staff, faculty, and administration.

Students could access services to support their academic, emotional, and financial success. Tutoring, math and writing centers, mentoring, support services for individuals with disabilities and for student-athletes, and the student counseling center were all available to assist students. Students could also receive services from, or be selected to serve as, supplemental instructors for courses. Students were also required to participate in enrichment activities embedded in courses. These activities included participation in simulation, interprofessional education, community engagement, and experiential learning opportunities as well as opportunities to collaborate with faculty on research projects. Students also have access to the career center for internship and professional skill development as well as support for employment after graduation.

The university requires student success plans to be completed annually by each department. The focus of the plans is on freshmen retention and persistence to completion. After the end of the year, departments assess their plans to identify successes and areas for continued development for the forthcoming year. Departments are encouraged to collaborate with other departments and units within the university. One example involves departments collaborating with the career center, where students can receive assistance

with résumé writing, obtaining professional clothing for job interviews, and attending career fairs.

Another example is a department partnering with the English department so that students can enroll in an English course that uses APA style formatting versus the traditional MLA format used in the humanities.

In addition to student success plans, a four-year plan was developed for each major that leads to graduation. The plans are a map for each student to know what is required and when courses should be taken for students to stay on track to graduate in four years. The plans are updated in an electronic audit report for students prior to registering for courses each semester. The plans show students what they should register for in the coming semester and if they are on track to graduate in four years.

The key to all the student success resources and activities is communication. Students may get off track to graduate in four years, but through communication with advisers and faculty members, adjustments can often be made to the plan of study to get students back on track. Other students may not be able to graduate in four years, but by working through issues they are able to remain at the university and still graduate. We have built a safety net to help as many students as possible successfully complete their college degree.

Conclusion

The challenges of increasing enrollment without increasing, and perhaps actually decreasing, faculty numbers is sadly one that will likely continue to plague campuses across the country. Although no one has all the right solutions for every situation, we hope that sharing our interventions will help provide ideas for others. Although we have presented what we have done thus far, we are not able to rest on our laurels. We will be doing continuous assessment and evaluation to determine what is working and what we need to adjust. We have found that by working as a cohesive team to maximize efficiency and ensure support for both students and faculty, there can be success.