

'Time Out' to Reconsider Core Changes

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Many a curricular overhaul is controversial. At the University System of Georgia, where two preliminary plans were met with intense skepticism from some quarters earlier this year, the uproar is causing second thoughts among administrators, who wrote in a letter to faculty members on Monday that they would “halt the current core revision process until later in the year” to allow for more input from faculty at each of the 35 campuses, and “to take stock of where we are.”

The decision, announced by Susan Herbst, the system’s chief academic officer and executive vice chancellor, was a partial about-face that was cheered by many of the plans’ critics. Since the changes were announced, they maintained that faculty were not properly included in the planning stages and that the proposals — still preliminary and short on specifics, to be sure — would water down instruction and training in vital subject areas.

“The attempt to revise our core is clearly controversial, with some consensus and some areas of great disagreement,” Herbst wrote in the letter. “That will always be the nature of curricular change in the academy. Given the nature of much of the dialogue, and in order to be responsive to the concerns many of you have expressed about process and involvement, I believe that it is appropriate to take some time out to ponder our options and consider all opinions in a systematic fashion.”

The process of revising the system’s core curriculum, which began before Herbst came on board last year, was intended to better prepare students for an increasingly globalized world with a greater focus on interdisciplinary studies — replacing, for example, categories like “social sciences” with “Addressing Global Issues with Sustainable Responses” or “Understanding Self, Others, and Societies.” Those leading the curricular changes also stressed that it would provide better flexibility for students who transfer between campuses.

Critics, however, said that the proposed changes would have made transferring credits harder — and, rather than preparing students for a 21st-century world, the proposed frameworks would shortchange basic knowledge needed to succeed in a more competitive, global economy. A petition organized by several professors — and signed by over 400 so far — argues that the plans would “diminish students’ knowledge of American subject matter (history, government, society, culture, etc.), vitally important scientific knowledge, and the actual nature of globalization.”

In her letter, Herbst emphasized that faculty input would be a major priority in the coming months, as she and others look for a consensus on what kinds of changes are needed. “Faculty are responsible for the nature of education in this system, and it is faculty talent and compassion that change lives,” she wrote.

In an interview, she said that academe was a “culture of argument,” and that the current debates were displaying a sophisticated level of discourse among faculty. She also hoped that the way in which faculty and administrators handled the issue would be a “model for students.”

“I think that there was a broad-based view among the faculty ... that this was a bad idea,” said George Rainbolt, a professor and chair of the philosophy department at Georgia State University who is the webmaster for the petition effort. He called it a “bad process,” so that “the result of the process was a bad result.”

“They may well start the process again in a more inclusive and constructive way, and I think that’s all to the good,” he said.

For now, Herbst said she will travel among the system’s campuses, meet with faculty groups and discuss plans with the presidents and provosts of the system’s colleges and universities. So far, she said she was “open-minded” about the possibilities for change — and what needs to be changed — and was looking forward to continuing the process.

In the fall, Herbst said, “I’ll have consulted with enough people that we can start to have more discussion on specific plans, whatever direction they take.” The curricular changes were originally projected to take effect in 2010.