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Originally Published: February 25, 2018 4:00 AM **Updated: 10 days ago**

Hiram College redesigns itself to be 'new liberal arts'

By Rachel Abbey McCafferty



Photo by Samuel Adams

Hiram College president Lori Varlotta says the school will focus on integrated learning, high-impact experiences and technology.

Hiram College is in the midst of a dramatic academic redesign.

The small, liberal arts college in Portage County has worked toward balancing its budget in recent years, and it's seen the scrutiny placed on its peers by accrediting bodies. And given that Ohio is a particularly competitive market, the college's leaders believe it's time to change.

"The academic redesign is an attempt to position Hiram College as the new liberal arts," said President Lori Varlotta. "And by 'new liberal arts,' we mean that we want to be a model for integrated learning, high-impact experiences and mindful technology."

Those areas of focus are three that Hiram has prided itself on doing well, from its long history of interdisciplinary learning between programs, to its more recent Hiram Connect and Tech and Trek programs. Hiram Connect formalizes participation in experiences like study abroad, internships or research opportunities, and Tech and Trek provides students with tablets and teaches them how to use them out in the world.

The academic redesign is part of Hiram College's newest strategic plan, which was approved last summer. The larger plan is focused on the college's financial health and infrastructure improvements needed on campus, as well as the upcoming academic changes. And instead of focusing just on adding interesting new areas or highlighting existing areas of strength, Hiram is being transparent about the fact that these changes could mean the elimination of programs and jobs.

And though it was too early to name specifics, some of those could be the more traditional liberal arts disciplines, Varlotta said.

For example, Varlotta said Hiram could re-examine how it offers courses in the arts. Could Hiram offer a merged fine and performing arts major, or does it need to continue to offer standalone majors in music, art history and the like, she asked.

"That's a safe example to say we want to make sure that those courses are available. We want to make sure that our general education program and certain upper-level courses include offerings in those areas, but whether or not we need four standalone majors is a question that we need to answer," Varlotta said.

The college is also looking to restructure the "academic architecture" on campus, Varlotta said. Currently, Hiram has about 29 departments, many of which are made up of one to three faculty members. And that's not a "viable" or "efficient" model, she said. Hiram has about 81 full-time faculty and about 30 adjuncts.

The college is trying to get ahead of potential job cuts by offering an early retirement incentive, and Varlotta said it will use the regular appointment, promotion and tenure process to identify faculty who may not need promoted at this time. After those measures are taken, Hiram's leadership will look at whether it needs to eliminate some tenure or tenure-track positions, Varlotta said.

The faculty on the college's Strategic Academic Team, a group of faculty members from across the college tasked with overseeing the data collection and creating recommendations, know these changes, particularly the talk of job cuts, could cause tension on campus.

"The Hiram that we are used to is going to be fundamentally different in less than a year's time," said Nick Hirsch, an associate professor of biology, faculty chair and member of the team.

Hirsch has encouraged his peers to look at the big picture: the future of the college and its growth and survival. That may come at the expense of some individual jobs or programs — including those of the members of the team — but he said it's important to set aside self interest and put the college first.

"And I asked myself, what would happen, how would I react if I were the one who was cut, who lost his job," Hirsch said. "And I say, as much as that would be frightening, as much as that would be disruptive to my life — again, the idea of kind of a higher purpose, that if I can do that, if I can look back and see Hiram standing tall in a way that's sustainable, I can see it going forward for years and doing what it's doing, and continue to do that, I'll be OK. I'll be OK with that. And I think that a lot of the faculty feel the same way."

Faculty members have asked if the college could wait for natural attrition, Varlotta said, but that's just not a possibility.

"And frankly, time is not our friend. You know, we've had these small departments for a long time, and while we've made great headway with our financials, we're not completely out of the woods yet," Varlotta said.

In an email, Varlotta said that Hiram has cut its expenses in recent years in a variety of ways, from putting off equipment replacements to limiting travel to cutting staff positions. But revenue and expenses still aren't aligned, and it's now time to look at what changes can be made on the academic side.

And a "wait-and-see approach" won't cut it when the Higher Learning Commission — the college's accrediting body — next visits the college in 2020. Varlotta noted that the commission has become more strict in recent years — it wants to see proactive administrations making data-driven decisions. Varlotta said she would be taking on this process regardless, but knowing the commission will be visiting in a few years is an added incentive to make sure the college has a sustainable path forward.

The academic redesign started in October. Faculty across campus have been invited to answer questions about their programs related to measures like quality, demand in terms of student interest and workforce need and expense per student credit hour, and the responses have been made available to all.

The report will go in front of a number of committees and the faculty as a whole before it makes its way to Varlotta. After viewing the report and the insights from various groups on campus, Varlotta will make recommendations to the board of trustees about any program enhancements, mergers or discontinuations that she thinks need to take place. Discontinuations of academic programs or of tenured positions must be approved by the board.

The changes being announced in the coming months at Hiram will be significant, beyond a new tagline or vision, Varlotta said. They'll have an impact on the college's "reality," she said.

"And we're going to do it in record time," she said.

Varlotta said she expects to announce programmatic changes — additions, discontinuations and mergers — by May or June. The base of any structural changes should be in place by August.

Hiram went through a program prioritization process nearly 15 years ago, said Sandy Madar, a strategic team member, director of strategic academic initiatives and biology professor. The previous process led to Hiram's Centers of Excellence, she said, adding something new to the college but not really enacting change otherwise. This time around, the faculty are engaged in the process and are being asked to think about what students and employers really want.

As part of the academic redesign, Hiram put out a call for innovative ideas at large, which it was collecting through Feb. 25. Varlotta said that so far, ideas had been floating up about how to restructure academic departments, the first-year experience and the college's approach to advising.

It's the innovation question that's getting the campus "buzzing and hopping," Madar said.

Paul Gaffney, an associate professor of English and another member of the team, said the college is really considering all the possibilities right now.

"We're saying, 'What would we do if we were starting over?' " Gaffney said.

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