

# 'CUT THE BALONEY'

## Wichita State professors criticize academic report

BY MIA HENNING  
news@thesunflower.com

Several Wichita State faculty worry a recent study could be used to justify cutting programs, firing professors and watering down higher education in the state of Kansas.

A decision by the Kansas Board of Regents later this month is expected to shed light on whether those worries are justified.

Rpk, a higher education consulting firm hired by KBOR nine months ago, placed 83% of Wichita State's degree programs on the chopping block, identifying them as operating below an 'optimal' level.

The rpk study takes a business approach to higher education by measuring the success of programs based on credit hours generated and degrees awarded, which does not always capture the quality of instruction or other details. The report also docks points from programs that are offered at multiple universities, such as history, journalism and physics, considering them duplicative.

"These kinds of reports oftentimes are useful for negative things," John Dreifort, history professor, said. "If we want to cut something, we can find something in that report to justify it."

Faculty are on edge this year after KBOR allowed Emporia State University to cut programs, like history, English, journalism, and debate. Emporia also terminated 33 faculty members in these or similar programs.

When asked if faculty should be concerned about possible cuts in light of program review, Provost Shirley Lefever said that reviewing programs is a "good thing."

"I don't know that I would say faculty should be worried," Lefever said. "I think what we've always said is that we want to make sure that our degree programs are healthy and that they're meeting the needs (of students)."

Regents have not said what they plan to do with the rpk report. At the regents' next meeting on March 22, they plan to decide the next steps. KBOR did not respond to The Sunflower's request for an interview in February.

Some faculty said that if programs were eliminated, it would hurt the entire university.

"You just can't take out one piece of what's going on at the university," Dreifort said. "It affects a lot of other programs, cultural events and community organizations throughout this whole south central Kansas area, as well as the state."

### WICHITA STATE IS DIFFERENT, PROFESSORS SAY

As part of the rpk report, the consulting firm focused its study from 2017-2021 and compared the regent's six universities: Emporia State, Fort Hays State, Kansas State, Pittsburg State, the University of Kansas and Wichita State University

According to KBOR's website, they funded the study to make sure that academic programs "align with Kansas' goals for the State's higher education enterprise, meet student expectations for programs centered on student success and increasing their employability, and efficiently deliver faculty and staff resources across each institution, division, and department."

In the report, rpk ranked bachelor's, master's, and doctoral programs at three different levels: "review and monitor," "optimize" or "maintain."

"Review and monitor" sits at the bottom of the list,

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meaning the programs that fall in this category show low degree production, a decline in student headcount or a headcount below the institutional median. "Optimize" degree programs show one or a combination of these negative traits.

For program review, rpk evaluated data on the number of students that had declared a major, as well as how many degrees were produced within a program at each university. For teacher workload, rpk looked at student credit hours generated by instructors.

Credit hours translate to tuition dollars for the university system, but faculty members say that measuring the university's worth through credit hours fails to account for the other important work at a university, such as research, advising, counseling, public and community service, and other scholarly endeavors.

"That sort of simple comparison doesn't capture what universities do and how they interact with their students and the community," George Dehner, associate history professor, said. "And it doesn't capture what the faculty do."

Not every faculty member teaches the same amount. Some courses, like those taught in lecture halls, generate a high number of students and — as a result — credit hours. Tests in these types of classes are often multiple choice or completed online, making grading much quicker than in classes with essay assignments. Other subjects require smaller class sizes for robust discussion.

Some faculty members, like department chairs, receive "course relief," meaning they teach less to fulfill other duties.

"If your metric is the number of credit hours that faculty members produce," Dehner said. "Well, then, you're missing what that individual is contributing to the university, to the department, and to students, by serving as faculty chair for the department."

Dehner also questioned whether it's fair to compare faculty members at different universities.

"The conceit of rpk is that we can compare faculty at KU at Fort Hays State (and) at Wichita State by the same metric, without recognizing that we serve completely different constituencies," he said.

Wichita State is an urban-serving research university, meaning one of its main goals is to improve the city and community through research.

"We're a university in a city with lots of industry," physics professor Nickolas Solomey said. "It makes sense to have a university that has almost every degree you could want, in a city where people are working full time."

SEE REPORT, PAGE 2

