

Akron Beacon Journal

Laid-off theater, dance professors question future of UA programs

By Kerry Clawson

Beacon Journal

Posted Jul 24, 2020 at 12:39 PM

At the end of last school year, the University of Akron theater program had two full-time faculty members and three staff members.

Now it has none.

The dance program had two full-time faculty members and one visiting assistant professor. Now, just the visiting assistant professor remains, if she accepts UA's offer to return for a year.

James Slowiak and Robin Prichard, two professors cut this week by the board of trustees, are now left wondering and worried about the future of those programs.

"My question is, who is taking responsibility for the curriculum and for making sure the classes get taught, and taught in the way they should be taught, and students are receiving what they need in terms of a theater major or minor?" Slowiak asked. "Who's supervising the students?"

UA's board of trustees last week, on the recommendation of President Gary L. Miller, cut 178 positions, including 96 union faculty members, to help balance a budget with a \$65 million hole in it. An additional 84 employees retired or resigned in the last few months, many of them alerted by the union that if they did not retire, they or someone else could end up on the cut list.

The cuts hit several departments hard, especially so in the School of Dance, Theatre and Arts Administration. While Miller said no programs were cut, some faculty are wondering how that can be possible if no faculty are left in some areas of study.

Slowiak, 65, said he was given the choice to retire by noon July 13 in order for his name not to go on the list of unionized faculty to be cut. But Slowiak, a 31-year UA theater department veteran, said he wants the public to know it wasn't his choice.

"I want to let people know that the university is forcing me to retire; I am not voluntarily retiring," he said.

Another theater professor, Adel Migid, retired earlier in the summer after being there 40 years, Slowiak said.

Also cut from the program are staff members Irene Mack-Shafer, manager of costume design; Chris Hariasz, technical director; and Danny Durst, master carpenter and technical assistant.

That leaves UA with no theater faculty or staff and no part-time faculty hired yet for the fall, Slowiak said.

A university spokeswoman said in an email this week that the dance and arts administration programs will be "revitalized with new direction and leadership" and the theater program, which has had "uneven or low enrollment, and while continuing, will likely be reviewed by the faculty this fall."

Slowiak said he was expecting 25 theater majors this fall, including 10 incoming freshmen. Those numbers come three years after a revamped theater program began that created new degree tracks in applied theater and social entrepreneurship, applied theater and business entrepreneurship, physical theater, and theater and film studies.

"Seven years ago, theater was on the chopping block," Slowiak said. "We were able to save the program at that point, and we completely refurbished the program."

He said after the changes, John Green, former dean of the Buchtel College of Arts and Sciences, promised to give it at least five years. This fall would be year four, meaning they haven't had a chance to matriculate a theater class from beginning to end.

“We’re right on track with what we said we would be when we did the new program” with enrollment, said Slowiak, who said he has always taught a full load of four theater classes and had planned the same for the fall.

The dance program is also losing assistant professor Valerie Ifill, who resigned earlier this month and is returning to Drexel University after working at UA for the last school year, Prichard said. She was brought into the dance program as an Africanist specialist.

“What was the criteria for Robin and me to be laid off,” Slowiak questioned, “when we had already lost the other two full-time faculty, which should have in some way made our jobs safe?”

Laid-off theater staff member Mack-Shafer, 49, who worked at UA for 23 years costuming theater, dance, opera and more, said she will receive no severance pay.

“Right now my entire department and my personal life has been upended, and it stings,” she said.

She spoke of the two years that the theater program was unable to recruit new classes when the major was in limbo and said the dance program needed extra support from the administration to rally from a declining number of majors.

“You have to have resources to be able to recruit. You have to have support. You have to have the faculty in place to create a draw to your program,” she said.

Prichard, a tenured associate professor of dance who worked at Akron for 10 years, said the university told her department in May that visiting professors would not be coming back. Now that visiting professor would be the only one left.

“They got rid of a tenured, union professor and replaced [me] with a non-unionized visiting person,” Prichard said.

“This is really I think about clearing out the program. The university says it [faculty cuts] doesn’t affect any programs. I don’t know what that means,” she said.

The School of Dance, Theatre and Arts Administration has had seven changes of interim directors in eight years, Prichard said. Marc Reed is now director of the School of Music and the School of DTAA since May, 2019.

Reed, reached by phone Thursday, declined comment.

With the layoffs, the Arts Administration master’s program has lost both Slowiak as interim coordinator and Hariasz as a senior lecturer. Slowiak said the masters program has about 15 students.

DTAA administrative assistant Lisa Hennessy also resigned in June.

Prichard said with no full-time dance professors, there is no one left to represent the program, including serving on honors or master’s theses, making or voting on dance curriculum changes, or serving on any school or university committees.

Total dance majors were down to about 25 last year, Prichard said, with none graduating last year and 12 new majors expected this year. When she started at the university a decade ago, the incoming class was at about 25.

The dance program was in the process of updating from being Eurocentric, based in ballet, to a modern dance curriculum that was to include an Africanist dance program headed by Ifill, Prichard said. Now, it’s unclear if the curriculum changes will occur or who will teach the classes.

“I’ve never heard of it happening anywhere else, to gut the faculty but keep the degree,” she said. “That makes no sense.”

Arts writer Kerry Clawson may be reached at 330-996-3527 or kclawson@thebeaconjournal.com.

Akron Beacon Journal

Several University of Akron departments gutted by cuts, retirements

By Jennifer Pignolet
Beacon Journal

By Katie Byard
Beacon Journal

Posted Jul 26, 2020 at 6:01 AM

Editor's note: An error in publishing caused an earlier version of this story that contained incorrect figures for the number of faculty leaving and remaining in several departments to show up online and in print. The numbers have been updated with figures from the university's department of human resources.

Even after 40 years in education, Evonn Welton wasn't quite ready to move to Florida — or for any other retirement plan, for that matter.

So even when opportunities arose at the University of Akron to retire or take a buyout, she pressed onward teaching special education in the LeBron James Family Foundation College of Education.

Last week, she was laid off.

Because the separation won't occur until Aug. 21, she's still teaching.

Even with classes going fully online, she has still seen her students engage in deep discussions and ask questions.

"I've sat there and got tears in my eyes and thought, they're not going to get this anymore," Welton said.

The special education department had five faculty members in 2018, she said. It was down to two this summer when one person moved out of state.

When she goes, it will be one.

“One person can’t assume all of that teaching load, and advising,” she said. “I don’t understand how they’re going to do this.”

The board of trustees voted July 15 on a recommendation from President Gary L. Miller to lay off 178 employees. The board also accepted the retirements and resignations of another 84 people at the same meeting.

The 178 included 96 members of the faculty union, the Akron chapter of the American Association of University Professors.

The cuts were spread over nearly every department or school, in addition to staff positions across athletics, facilities and the university’s police department.

Several academic departments lost multiple faculty, and a few appear to have no full-time faculty left.

While Miller has said the board vote did not eliminate any programs, faculty on and off the list are afraid the gutting of some departments is a de facto program elimination.

Even some departments with cuts of one or two people are worried about that impact.

“While changes in faculty for some courses will occur, all academic programs will continue this fall and courses will be taught by faculty experts in each field,” university spokeswoman Cristine Boyd said. “It is our goal to support the academic integrity and excellence of the institution to ensure that students continue to receive the high-quality education they have come to expect from The University of Akron.”

As for special education offerings, Boyd said the university does not anticipate problems delivering on its programs.

“We may need to be more flexible with course scheduling, but we anticipate that students will be able to start their program on time, finish on time, and have great student teaching experiences,” she said.

The education college, which will merge into liberal arts and become a school of education, is slated to go from 23 professors to 17.

Welton said her classes were always full, and she made regular exceptions to add one or two students after the class filled.

As a special education teacher, Welton said she focuses her lessons on the dignity and worth of every person, no matter their abilities.

Now, she's questioning whether she mattered.

"I bring a lot to this," she said. "I don't know why I was selected as somebody they didn't think they needed."

Widespread losses of faculty

About 70% of the faculty on the union cut list are tenured, according to the union, which posted the list with names and departments on its website Monday.

The union still has to vote by Aug. 3 whether to ratify the contract with the university. The administration has said ratification is vital to the university's survival, while union leaders have argued the cut list didn't have to be so long and the criteria that deans used to create the list was unclear.

If they do not ratify the contract, it is unclear what the effect would be on the list.

But faculty and students in many departments are bracing for imminent departures.

The 178 people laid off are in addition to the 84 who recently elected to voluntarily separate. The union has said many of them are leaving to preserve other people's jobs.

The administration eliminated all nine faculty working in Developmental Programs, which supports students who come to college not ready to take college-level courses.

That's part of an effort to move to a model of delivering remedial support where students take the college course alongside a developmental course, Miller told the faculty senate last week.

The university may need a temporary plan to cover those classes this year, however, until that dual model is in place.

“This change in delivery model will allow students to take courses directly from the math and English departments, which helps them progress to a degree faster and at less cost,” Boyd said.

The College of Business Administration will go from 62 faculty down to 52 faculty, according to numbers provided by the university’s human resources department, due to a combination of voluntary and involuntary separations.

In the College of Engineering, chemical, biomolecular and corrosion engineering will go from 16 faculty to 13. Civil engineering will lose four, dropping from 16 to 12. Mechanical engineering goes from 28 to 23, for a total loss in engineering of 12 faculty.

Sport science and wellness education had 12 faculty, and is losing five.

Nursing will go from 31 faculty positions to 24.

Akron’s Wayne College in Orrville, with about 1,800 students, took a sizable hit. The college went from 12 faculty to just five, also losing five contract professionals and four staff members.

The college also lost six staff and contract professionals to resignations and retirements.

The college lists 57 full-time faculty, staff and contract professionals, prior to the layoffs.

Boyd, the university spokeswoman, said the five baccalaureate programs, business administration, nursing, communication, education and social work, will continue to be offered at Wayne.

The list of staff laid off separately from the faculty union, released to the Akron Beacon Journal through a records request, shows positions and departments but not names of the people cut.

The list includes five people in the university’s police department, including two police officers.

Athletics lost seven employees. Ten people were let go who worked in the facilities department. The director of the Medina County University Center also was cut.

Popular program trimmed

Enoch Damson, a professor of computer information systems, who did not get laid off, is baffled over some of the cuts.

Another professor in the computer information systems program who was laid off was to be a major contributor to the growing cybersecurity bachelor's degree program, Damson said.

The program, launched with fanfare in 2017, now has upward of 200 students, Damson said.

The university "laid off a faculty member who was an integral to the cybersecurity program," which attracts students from the region and beyond.

Damson said the layoff was particularly surprising because earlier this year UA year launched a search for two additional computer information systems faculty members. One was to focus on the cybersecurity program and the other one was to teach networking.

More than 500 students are enrolled in all computer information systems programs (CIS), including cybersecurity, Damson said.

"We've had an upward growth in the combined CIS bachelor degree programs of 12 to 33 percent each year from fall 2013 to fall 2019," Damson said.

With the layoff, the CIS program — which was placed under the computer science department chair as part of UA reorganization earlier this year — has four faculty members.

Damson also is disappointed over the layoffs of two faculty members who were the only full-time instructors in the bachelor of organizational supervision program.

"That's still a popular bachelor's degree," Damson said.

‘A big slap in the face’

Mark Rittenour, a communications professor in the school of communications, rejuvenated the university’s speech and debate team 18 years ago, driving students to their competitions in a big van.

Rittenour is on the cut list, as is the team — at least in its current form.

“I just feel like I’ve given 100% to the University of Akron,” Rittenour said.

Budgetary constraints forced the School of Communication to no longer house the team, Boyd said, but it could come back as a student organization. That would still give them access to finances, advising and use of university facilities.

But laying off Rittenour is “a big slap in the face,” student Taylor Mills said.

Since she learned of Rittenour’s layoff last week, Mills, a vocal performance student, has been busy gathering signatures for a letter urging university officials to reverse the action.

More than 250 people — including UA alumni who were on the team and members and leaders of teams elsewhere in the country — have signed the letter.

“I truly don’t know anyone qualified to coach speech at the university besides Mark,” Mills said. She’s also worried the money available to student organizations won’t be enough for them to continue to compete on a national level.

Rittenour is one of two communication professors on the layoff list. He said he has been overwhelmed by an outpouring of support from students and alumni.

“I have been struck by former students who have found me on social media and said to me, ‘Yours are the courses that have taught me how to articulate my message ... how to make an argument,’” Rittenour said. “Those skills have a lasting impact.”

Contact education reporter Jennifer Pignolet at jpignolet@thebeaconjournal.com, at 330-996-3216 or on Twitter [@JenPignolet](https://twitter.com/JenPignolet). Contact reporter Katie Byard at kbyard@thebeaconjournal.com.

Akron Beacon Journal

This University of Akron program was warned it had too few faculty. It just lost another to cuts.

By Jennifer Pignolet

Beacon Journal

Posted Aug 1, 2020 at 6:01 AM

The site visitor from the American Psychological Association had high praise for the University of Akron's doctoral program in counseling psychology last December, calling it "overall, an outstanding program."

There was one "major issue" — it needed more faculty.

At the time, the program had five professors, each taking on a full load of teaching, advising, research and service projects, many of them assuming more work due to other faculty who had left in the previous few years.

Now, they are down another body, just months after the program's accrediting organization told university leaders they needed to invest in more faculty.

"If we were already on a shoestring, now we're on a frayed shoestring," Suzette Speight, one of the four remaining faculty, said.

In its elimination of 96 unionized faculty jobs earlier this month, the board of trustees, on recommendation from the administration, cut Margo Gregor, one of the five professors in the counseling psychology Ph.D. program.

The cuts, which are pending ratification by the union next week, hit many departments hard — in some cases because multiple faculty were laid off.

The counseling psychology doctoral program lost just one person, but students and faculty fear that one could have devastating effects because the APA accreditation is still pending.

When the cuts were announced, President Gary Miller said deans, who created the cut lists with department chairs, took care to make sure no programs would lose their accreditation.

Paul Levy, the chair of the department of psychology, said he is positive the program will maintain its accreditation, although its authorization could be shortened, meaning it would be up for another review in two or five years instead of seven or 10. The program's most recent approval was for seven years.

But according to the report from the APA representative sent to examine Akron's psychology doctoral program, the number of faculty, down to five from a peak of 10 within the last decade, was a significant issue.

"In our view the main challenge this program clearly faces is that they have seen a significant reduction in faculty numbers over the past several years," the report, obtained through a public records request, said.

The report does not indicate what would happen if the number of faculty were to drop again. A final decision is still pending.

Even if they do earn re-accreditation, Speight said, the impact of losing 20% of the staff will be significant.

"Myself and the other faculty are worried that the loss of Dr. Gregor potentially risks our ability to deliver a high-quality program," she said.

Students' concerns

The concern over accreditation, in addition to the well-being of the four remaining faculty, was the focus of a letter signed by nearly every graduate student in the program and sent to administrators in the psychology department

"With the APA considering our five-person faculty size small, the loss of even one faculty member could put the program in the precarious position of losing our accreditation status," the letter read.

That status, the letter explains, ensures graduate students are trained at the highest level and are "prepared to deliver quality psychological services."

Ginelle Wolfe, a rising fourth-year student in the six-year program, said internships and employers in their field are looking for students who come out of the accredited programs. In Ohio, only two exist — at UA and Cleveland State University.

“For that reason, even when we’re searching for grad programs, we searched through APA,” Wolfe said. “If a program isn’t accredited, it isn’t even on the list a lot of us are growing through.”

The APA site visit report states university administration was effusive about supporting the program, identifying the staff shortage as an issue and a hopeful area of investment.

But that was before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, turning the university’s already precarious finances into an immediate threat to its future, administrators have said. Without cutting \$65 million from its budget, they have said, the university could not make payroll by the end of the year.

Levy said he still believes that support for the doctoral program is there from upper administration. He said he does not want the program to only have four faculty, but current finances required hard choices. He is pledging it will be temporary, but for how long, he does not know.

“I’m certainly going to push for [hiring] as soon as I can, but I don’t know when that’s going to happen,” Levy said. “I think we have to get some stability across campus. I’m convinced that the administration, that this is a program they value and we’ll be able to invest in.”

Nuha Alshabani, who is about to start her fifth year in the program, said she is worried that won’t be enough reassurance for the current accreditation decision.

“I don’t know if you can tell the accrediting body, hey, we’re not meeting standards now but in a couple of years we might be,” she said.

Even uncertainty around the accreditation could be detrimental for recruitment and retention of students, Alshabani said.

“The first-year students haven’t even gotten to the program yet,” she said, noting they are asking, “Did I make a bad decision coming to the University of Akron?”

Workload grows

Nathan Bitecofer, who along with Alshabani and Wolfe spearheaded the effort to write and circulate the letter sent to administrators, said students are “pretty depressed” by the move to cut a position from their program.

“I think there’s a lot of people who are disappointed and angry and feel like the university has kind of let us down a little bit, when were already functioning with a skeleton crew, as far as faculty goes,” Bitecofer said.

Faculty have assured the students they will still be able to finish their degrees, he said. But with only four faculty members, they will have to take on Gregor’s course load, her advisees (including several working on their dissertations) and her position as director of the program’s in-house counseling clinic.

That clinic serves both the community at-large and Akron students seeking free mental health supports.

Levy said he intends for the clinic to continue operating.

“That’s an important part of the program,” he said.

The workload for remaining faculty will certainly increase, Levy acknowledged. The psychology department as a whole lost three faculty members, including two who taught at the graduate level. Psychology is one of the most popular majors on campus, Levy said, with between 500 and 600 students annually.

The doctoral in counseling psychology program only enrolls five or six new students a year, and may have to cut that back to four or five due to only having four faculty members. About 100 people apply every year.

Doctoral programs are intentionally small, but the students also teach at the undergraduate level, lessening the load for other faculty.

'Dream job'

Levy said he considers Gregor a friend, and that in his 31 years at the university, including 15 as a department chair, "this was the hardest thing I've ever had to do," he said.

Because the programs are small and last six years, the faculty and students often form tight bonds.

That's what Gregor said she will miss most.

"I'm very protective and care a lot about my students and want to make sure they get the best training they can," Gregor said in an interview this week.

Her research expertise is in vocational psychology, particularly around women in the workplace. She always offers students, even those she does not advise, chances to take over a piece of that research, and they often take her up on it.

Gregor said she is worried for the four faculty members left behind.

"I don't think the program will be sustainable with only four faculty," she said.

She served on dissertation committees for several students, some of them already deep into their work, who will now have to find a replacement.

Gregor was about to begin her fifth year at Akron. She had moved around the country her whole life, but Akron was her first stop in the Midwest. She was expecting it to last longer. She started her family here and bought a house here.

"This was really my dream job," she said.

Contact education reporter Jennifer Pignolet at jpignolet@thebeaconjournal.com, at 330-996-3216 or on Twitter [@JenPignolet](https://twitter.com/JenPignolet).