

Much of what follows was outlined at the Academic Affairs fall workday, with deans, associate deans, and chairs in early August, and I have discussed nearly all of this in various meetings over the last year and a half. It adds up to a set of issues and priorities in higher education, and a vision of what seems to be needed in Academic Affairs. I don't think this is exclusive to any degree programs or pedagogies—UG, Grad, distance, on campus—but applies more generally to all of our work in Academic Affairs.

Higher Education & Enrollment

We all know that higher education is in the midst of significant transformation stemming from a combination of forces that include major demographic shifts, the Covid-19 pandemic, rapid expansion of distance degree and certificate programs, and new education and training opportunities outside of traditional universities. Added to these factors is a renewed and more vigorous debate over the “value” of higher education that has focused greater attention on the cost and immediate, rather than long-term, and undeniable, impact of four-year degrees. We all know that the evidence remains overwhelming that four-year degrees provide, on average, significantly higher wages and lower unemployment rates over a lifetime; the actual degree programs matter somewhat but not really all that much—getting a four-year degree is the critical step that opens a lifetime of opportunity. These advantages are in addition to the cultural, social, and personal benefits of higher education.

The most immediate result of the issues noted above has been a drastic reduction in the college-going rate and overall enrollment across the country. In Indiana the college-going rate has fallen from 65% to 53% in four years, and it will be below 50% when the most recent numbers for 2021 and 2022 are calculated. In the last two years IU-Bloomington and Purdue-West Lafayette have accelerated their race to enroll as many freshmen as possible, with both schools planning for more than 10,000 this fall; overall enrollment will top 50,000 at both schools this year. Nationwide this has been the response of so-called flagship universities to the loss of international students and their coveted tuition revenue (which began in 2017 and continued during the pandemic) and the pandemic's impact on domestic rates of attendance. In state after state the largest public universities have eliminated test scores and lowered admission requirements as they've enrolled thousands of additional students. Finally, in 2025 the demographic “cliff” that has been long discussed will be here, reducing the pool of traditional first-year students even more dramatically.

In sum, there are new and more intense challenges for regional public universities, particularly in the Midwest and Northeast. In the last sixty years, at least, these are unprecedented. One more important factor to consider is falling net tuition revenue caused by dual credit in high schools. This has caused ISU (and all schools) to lose net tuition revenue at a rate faster than enrollment because we've lost tuition in areas—primarily Foundational Studies—where we traditionally returned the greatest net revenue. It's affecting all of higher education and is an accelerating issue that disrupts the funding model that universities have relied on since World War II. Another way to think about it: we are enrolling a significantly higher percentage of SCHs (than ever before) in upper-level, advanced courses that are smaller on average and taught by tenure track and tenured faculty.

Student-centered approach

All of these trends are very challenging, but not unique to ISU nor things we can't overcome.

Enrollment management and recruiting certainly involves more than Academic Affairs—Student Affairs and Athletics, among others. But in Academic Affairs we control the curriculum and our programs, which are the most important factors that determine why the vast majority of students choose to attend a university, and whether or not to stay or leave. We need to do our part to make our offerings distinctive and relevant so that more students choose ISU rather than other options they have. We also control the pedagogy, which we all must work to keep engaging and cutting edge. That has to be a priority in all programs. We all need to ask ourselves: What makes our program in “X” stand out compared to other institutions? What are we offering students—in and out of the classroom—that makes ISU a better choice than somewhere else? Are we providing the most timely and accurate advising to keep students on track and clearly informed as to all the career and life options that their degree will provide? Are the curriculum and course schedules designed for faculty or students?

All of these questions are part of an approach we might call a “student-centered university.” It doesn’t devalue faculty or scholarship—frankly I’ll be the last person to do that—but it puts greater emphasis on prioritizing the student experience and how we envision curriculum and pedagogy, and how we frame career readiness (broadly considered), from the students’ perspective.

Indiana State Advantage

A big part of defining a vision for Academic Affairs and a unique identity for ISU has been articulated over the past year in the Indiana State Advantage. We’re all familiar with the specific programs included in this. Philosophically, as a vision, it seeks to extend much of the (very successful) Honors College approach to all of our students: student-centered, engaging courses and pedagogy, and frequent experiential learning opportunities. The ISU Advantage experience grants, for instance, offer the chance for all students, from all backgrounds, to get opportunities that often have been available to only a limited segment of our student body. This approach is also based on what alumni and many others have told us we do well and have done well for decades: treat students individually, not “as a number,” and offer them hands-on opportunities from the first moment they start at ISU. It draws on our history and greatest strengths, and is reflected in our very high rankings in various social mobility indexes. While the specific ISU Advantage programs currently apply to first-time freshmen, the approach certainly speaks to the same values in our work with graduate students—close working relationships with world-class faculty, the chance to conduct collaborative research, and personal attention that isn’t possible at larger, anonymous institutions. These opportunities also don’t exist at most smaller private schools that lack the facilities we have or the depth of research faculty. Finally, we can and should extend the current ISU Advantage programs (or new, different programs) to distance and transfer students.

Curriculum re-envisioned

The results of hundreds of surveys involving parents, students, CEOs, and hiring managers provide clear indications of what they see as imperative twenty-first century priorities for higher education. They are generally skeptical of what we currently offer, which they see as both arcane and archaic, lacking clear goals, objectives, or linkage to careers, and focused primarily on faculty preferences rather than student needs. We know that’s not all accurate, of course, but it speaks to our confidence problem with an increasingly skeptical public. Instead, they want shorter, interdisciplinary programs focused on preparation for a lifetime of frequently different careers and which allow students to finish quickly (on time). Specific emphases include better writing skills (always the number one

request from hiring managers and CEOs), the ability to work in groups with diverse constituencies, the ability to learn and develop on the job (to help them retain employees and develop new leadership), analytical skills (data or otherwise), digital literacy and competency, and integrative skills that allow for complex problem solving. Interdisciplinary majors are critical in many cases where the public fails to identify with our traditional disciplines or, in other cases, don't know what they are. In some areas—aviation pro pilot, engineering, or nursing, for example—students need to be prepared to pass professional licensing exams. That is unlikely to change, of course, but those majors are the minority of what we offer.

The starting point to re-envisioning our curricula is to revise majors by making them dramatically smaller (fewer credit hours) and less sequenced. Majors should not be more than 60 credit hours or sequenced over more than 6 semesters; the majority of majors should be 40-45 hours or less. This isn't easy. It involves reassessing each program as well as individual course objectives, prerequisites, sequencing, and scheduling. This might even be just organizing or packaging what we already do in different ways. And we should take a hard look at various accreditations: are we committed to accreditation for students and their success or for faculty and university prestige?

Smaller, less complicated majors would dramatically (as they have elsewhere) improve student success as measured in retention and graduation rates, reduce faculty workload and burnout by simplifying the scheduling and teaching demands on the fewer regular faculty that all universities now have, and improve the university's overall financial health by allowing us to schedule fewer of the most expensive courses we offer (upper-level electives and requirements). Another way to think about your major: design the curriculum for twenty-first century lives and careers, not for graduate school in the discipline. An UG degree should not, in the vast majority of disciplines, be a slightly slimmed down, preparatory version of a graduate degree. These changes would address some concerns raised by the public and help meet our financial and workload challenges at the same time. Many of these trends or issues were also identified by our Faculty Senate strategic planning group that met last year and reviewed program reports.

While making majors smaller it's also important to get students into major-specific, engaging and hands-on classes in their first semester. Let students experience it and see if it's for them. Added flexibility—not sequenced over more than 6 semesters—would also allow students to choose the major as sophomores without adding a full year to their time at ISU. Many students could then “discover” majors that they didn't know existed. Part of the success of our Honors curriculum has been getting students into challenging, exciting courses taught by passionate faculty in their first semester; it also gets them into more courses that don't look like another year of high school.

I know that many of you have done this work in your majors already. The MBA added an online option delivered in 8-week format and enrolled nearly 100 new students in less than two years. The Leadership and Professional Development completion degree is committed to offering many courses in 8 weeks and relies on maximum flexibility through a variety of certificates (and online); the BS in Sport Management revised upper-division requirements to an 8-week format so that late-declaring students can still complete the major in four years.

Some of the credits freed up from smaller majors could be invested by students into certificates, minors, or second majors, credentials long desired by employers and proven to help students succeed in a variety of careers and to improve personal growth and satisfaction.

Finally, fewer hours in majors, combined with so many credits “earned” in high school through dual credit, opens the possibility of a more unique core of classes or a defined certificate for students that might be considered “career” or “professional” readiness. This would be unique to ISU and could not be transferred in from outside; it would emphasize career readiness for the coming decades and acknowledge that everyone will be lifelong learners in their various careers and will need additional education and skills. These classes would be larger in size and generate some of the net revenue lost due to dual credit in Foundational Studies. Some fairly obvious categories could be:

- professional writing (already exists as “junior composition” in FS)
- information literacy
- data analytics
- research, analysis, & argumentation (use of evidence)
- group dynamics and diversity—or “how to understand and work with other humans”
- digital literacy
- management

Again, I would argue these must be outside of majors so that students experience different faculty and perspectives, and be taught in larger sections. This would be a true commitment to the twenty-first century curriculum that so many people, particularly employers, want to see higher education make. With smaller, less sequenced majors we would give many more ISU students the chance to finish in four, and possibly three years. That, in turn, opens up numerous possibilities for 4+1, 3+1, and 3+2 degree sequences. These would help set ISU apart from most other institutions, particularly larger public ones, as we’ve already done with the ISU Advantage commitment to experiential learning.

There is, of course, no single magic solution to the forces affecting higher education and declining enrollments nationwide. None of these issues are unique to Indiana State University. If we are creative in our approach to curriculum and pedagogy we can help distinguish ISU in the ultra-competitive landscape we face. We simply must separate ourselves from other institutions, we cannot run out largely the same majors that everyone else has, and we need genuinely to commit to a student-centered approach to curriculum and scheduling. In short: combine the ISU Advantage and its promise with significant curriculum reform to distinguish ISU; we can offer our students more opportunities, a better chance to graduate on time, and enhanced career readiness for the twenty-first century.