

**To:** Wright State Board of Trustees

**From:** President Susan L. Edwards

**Date:** February 15, 2021

**RE:** Recommendation concerning Faculty Retrenchment

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### Background

In November 2020, Wright State University initiated the retrenchment process as outlined in Articles N17 and T17 of the collective bargaining agreement with AAUP-WSU. Within that agreement, retrenchment is defined as the termination of Bargaining Unit Faculty positions with continuing appointments and can be initiated as the result of a significant reduction in enrollment of a college, department, or program continuing over four or more academic semesters and expected to persist.

When Provost Leaman initially recommended retrenchment the University had already suffered enrollment declines over the preceding ten academic semesters, and enrollment decline has persisted going from 11,758 in Fall 2020 to 10,637 Spring of 2021. For comparison, it should be noted that the Spring enrollment last year was 12,298.

After making his recommendation to initiate the process, Provost Leaman then prepared a specific retrenchment plan, and concurrently, a Joint Committee of AAUP faculty and administrative representatives have similarly prepared a report recommending alternatives to retrenchment. I received their respective reports last week.

I trust all parties involved in this discussion now acknowledge Wright State University's enrollment has declined significantly over the past several years, and that the decline is in fact persisting. Not only did enrollment decline in Spring 2021 by 1,121 from the Fall of 2020, but Provost Leaman's detailed analysis indicates a very high probability of declining enrollment persisting through at least 2023. At that time the University's enrollment will likely be in the vicinity of 9,000 (excluding medical students).

I am certain there are some who disagree with the Provost's report, and I am keenly aware of the limitations of modeling and forecasting. Yet, it is difficult to imagine that our enrollment will suddenly break a 5 year pattern of decline given the current circumstances. Wright State finds itself in a highly competitive market fighting to recapture a declining base of incoming direct from high school students. No model exists that can comprehensively predict every data point or identify the specific future results from investments in marketing, enrollment, and retention initiatives. But I believe Provost Leaman accounted for those factors by relying on not just one, but four reasonable methodologies. And that analysis is consistent with our real-world observations about enrollment trends.

Here, all four models agree: enrollment declines will persist for at least the next several years. I have seen no reasonable evidence, from any source, to support a contrary conclusion. Accordingly, the size of our academic workforce currently sits well in excess of that which is warranted by the needs of the institution. Unfortunately, other University initiatives over the past several years, such as the 2 previous voluntary retirement initiatives, have not sufficiently brought our overall FTE faculty positions numbers into proportion with declining enrollment.

### **Findings**

Provost Leaman documented enrollment has declined and will persist in decline until at least 2023. Using those conclusions to build an operational framework moving forward, the Provost concluded that the University has at least 113 excess faculty positions. I find his conclusions reasonable and persuasive, particularly in light of the multiple dimensions that affect the balance of faculty to enrollment. Workload, course releases, section sizes, and course offerings all influence the number of faculty in each program area. I suspect current practices within many of these areas if adopted, could increase the number of excess faculty positions currently identified by the Provost.

In preparing this recommendation, I reviewed both Provost Leaman's report and the report of the Joint Committee on Retrenchment. Several of the Joint Committee's high-level recommendations included:

- Maximizing University efforts around enrollment and retention
- Viewing retrenchment as a dynamic process interacting with and being offset by the results of enrollment and retention successes
- Developing incentive programs around voluntary retirement or early exit
- Reducing the need/use of adjunct faculty
- Prioritizing the filling of all open administrative positions through internal hires whenever possible
- Improving community public relations efforts, preventing negative headlines, and maximizing the perception of the institution within the community

The Joint Committee also submitted comments related to calculating faculty staffing and projecting enrollment. Their overall approach in the area of faculty headcount appears to be consistent with the modeling used by the Provost although the report provided no specific headcount recommendation. Regarding enrollment, data analyses suggest a weak linear relationship between fluctuations in employment levels and college enrollment. Said another way, unemployment alone is not a strong predictor of enrollment.



I very much appreciate the work of the Committee and endorse many of its recommendations. Some, which require action by the Board, are addressed below. Some do not, such as prioritizing internal hires and minimizing the use of adjunct faculty and will be further considered at the administrative level as we move forward. Others I cannot accept for reasons explained below.

## **Recommendations**

**1. I recommend the Wright State Board of Trustees affirm the elimination of 113 excess faculty positions and approve the formal retrenchment of up to 113 FTE faculty positions.** That number is on the lower side of the Provost's recommendations, but I believe it to be reasonable and appropriate with respect to correcting our disproportionate faculty size compared against current and expected enrollment. I am recommending an "up to" retrenchment number because there are multiple alternatives available that can achieve the elimination of the excess positions and then reducing the actual number of positions formally retrenched and the Board will see further recommendations addressing some of those other options. The Joint Committee has requested the University officially "pause" or "suspend" the retrenchment process in order to implement some of these types of measures. However, it must be acknowledged similar measures have been tried previously with very limited success and it should be noted that if enrollment circumstances significantly improve, the collective bargaining agreement provides a mechanism for Wright State to reduce the retrenchment list, and potentially even callback retrenched faculty. This is potentially a great tool given the retrenchment notice period is long, in some cases up to eighteen months. That affords the opportunity to scale the number of positions appropriately. With the Board's approval of this recommendation, I will immediately engage the new Interim Provost to work with our Deans to finalize a list of 113 specific faculty positions identified to be eliminated/retrenched. Provost Leaman's recommendations were detailed to respective colleges and the Interim Provost will use that as a guide as it is recognized the possibility that program-level nuances might influence, positively or negatively, the specific number of excess positions in a given area or a college. As such, some flexibility is necessary to further refine where, exactly, to make particular faculty retrenchment decisions. I will also ask the Provost to contemplate the specific process while staying within the framework of the CBA, which would guide the recall of retrenched positions in the event that situation occurs. I am confident the Interim Provost, working with the Deans and Chairs have the knowledge and experience they need to develop specific plans which will ensure Wright State's continued ability to deliver an affordable, high-quality public education to the Dayton region.

**2. I request the Board's support of an incentive program to be offered to those who are interested in voluntarily separating from the University.** I recognize that type of program has been approved and authorized in the past, and that prior offerings were not widely successful in the faculty ranks. But such a program may be far more attractive to some today. We will work to structure an incentive plan in a manner that is beneficial to both the University and the employee. Given time is of the essence, the administration will provide the framework of a proposed plan at the March Finance, Audit, Governance, and Compliance Committee meeting

and will then be prepared to immediately present the proposal to the AAUP-WSU, whose approval will need to be secured in time for formal action at the April 30 Board of Trustees meeting.

**3. I request the Board's authorization to expend up to \$1 million in the current academic year for enrollment and retention efforts.** The Board has previously supported our efforts to stabilize and bolster enrollment and retention. Building upon that support, I am requesting an additional investment be made in key areas that could potentially offset the number of faculty positions impacted by retrenchment. If the Board authorizes the additional expenditure, I will consult with Faculty Senate on ways faculty can engage to the greatest effect. Last year the University supported Faculty Senate initiated efforts around specific faculty-led recruitment and retention efforts and this additional investment can build off of that foundation.

Finally, and in many ways most importantly given the subject at hand, I cannot more heavily endorse or emphasize the Joint Committee's recommendation for mutually positive and collaborative efforts between the University administration, the bargaining unit faculty, and other members of the University community, to pre-empt further negative public sentiment for the University. Given what this University has endured in the past, I am not naïve to believe that everyone will share the same perspectives on our issues and solutions, but I do believe in the power of positivity.

Wright State is moving forward and will be an institution where student success is at its heart. We were created to ensure the students of our region have access to a high-quality, affordable education that propels them ahead in life and we should be a place where faculty and staff can find enjoyable, fulfilling employment and engagement. We must embrace a collegial, constructive way to address differences within the campus community all the while working together to elevate the University to new heights. The Dayton Region needs a Wright State that they are proud of, and one that ensures the surrounding communities thrive. I acknowledge that change is sometimes painful, but we will succeed by working together.