



Spring 4-8-2020

President Nugent on Cuts, Additions and Changes to Programs, April 8, 2020

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Recommended Citation

Schlenker, Charlie, "President Nugent on Cuts, Additions and Changes to Programs, April 8, 2020" (2020). *Interviews for WGLT*. 78.

https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/wgl_t_interviews/78

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WGLT Interview with President Georgia Nugent, April 8, 2020

Ryan Denham: Illinois Wesleyan University has sent the results of a faculty driven evaluation of its academic programs to students and families. The exercise includes significant changes that could result in layoffs. It comes as the university also deals with Covid-19. Charlie Schlenker spoke to Illinois Wesleyan president Georgia Nugent about what it's meant so far for the bottom line.

Charlie Schlenker: What does this do to the Universities bottom line? All of these changes and we'll take those in some detail after the big picture question.

President Nugent: Ok, well I think it will not surprise you that we like every other college and university in the country, um we'll feel this in our bottom line as you said. Um we will uh realize some extra expenses undoubtedly perhaps chief among those is the refunds from ribbon board that were prorated for our students who are no longer living on campus. Uh and there will be a number of other costs with the technology that we are needing to provide and things like that. At the same time there will also naturally be some savings that we recognize for example no one is traveling these days. Uh our food service providers were very generous in adjusting our contract with them. Uh so its going to be a dent in the budget and uh all of this is shaping up as we all try to understand more clearly exactly what the Cares Act will provide and or what other federal state legislative uh measures might provide--

Schlenker: So for instance—go ahead

Nugent: In the beginning in the very beginning, we thought this might be as much as a three million dollar difference in our bottom line. We now believe that this is a little back of the envelope. We now believe it would probably be about 1.7 million and we have some degree of confidence that seven hundred thousand of that might be uh assisted by different kinds of aid so we'll probably see about a million dollars.

Schlenker: That is far less than my sons institution Saint Olaf in Minnesota is planning, theyre counting on about a seven million dollar hit. Now they are larger than uh Illinois Wesleyan, they have about four thousand students, you're at what, twelve hundred?

Nugent: Sixteen hundred

Schlenker: You're at about sixteen hundred, so scalable that's not all that different.

Nugent: Yeah, I'm sorry to hear that though. Their president is a good friend of mine actually

Schlenker: Yeah and that's just the covid-19 response. Um, you had also been doing a larger more comprehensive visioning exercise as many institutions are doing because of the coming enrollment cliff in about 3 years where the number of graduating high school seniors are to drop significantly. What do you anticipate the cuts and realignments will do on that front?

Nugent: Well I should say that you are absolutely right to note that many colleges and universities have undertaken this kind of program evaluation or some are calling it prioritization or whatever. I would first step back for a moment and say this actually isn't only about cuts. Uh I think that these kinds of initiatives are motivated in part just by a changing context that is not only the demographics that you site the number of high school graduates is declining, particularly in the Midwest. But, there are so many other factors that play as well. Global financial situations which had somewhat destabilized earlier and now has done so much more with Covid. Um as well there is a changing demographic that isn't only about declining numbers of students but a declining makeup of the student body. Uh first generation students going to be in much greater you know much more visible than they were before perhaps. Then also theres the changing uh the ways in which information technology of different sorts have changed the way everyone gains access to information and since colleges and universities are partly about information and knowledge that inevitably needs to change us. So I think we're kind of looking at this overall evaluation in part simply to be cognizant of what we will need to be in the future and that that will entail some changes in the students that we teach in the ways that we teach in the subjects that we teach.

Schlenker: Last summer Illinois public radio stations did a series on enrollment fall across universities and Bradley university at that time was going through the same exercise that you've just now come out with the results of. Um they just came out with theirs and I asked the Bradley enrollment management official whether Bradley was late to the dance since other Universities had done this earlier uh I'll ask you the same question.

Nugent: (laughs) that's fair enough, um I don't believe that we were but you know that's probably natural on my part uh what I do think is that we um however whatever time we arrive at the dance I think were actually dancing very well and in part what I mean by that is I am really really proud of the way that we have chosen to carry out this exercise. Uh particularly because it has been entirely faculty driven and carried out by faculty. Now a number of our peer institutions and I believe Bradley might be one have carried out this kind of prioritization but much more with a top down approach. That's understandable uh what we have chosen to do is a little bit slower it's a little bit more uncertain perhaps initially, but I think that in the end we will come to a much stronger set of conclusions and with a lot more campus wide understanding. So this has been carried out for us by a group of nine faculty members uh who are members of the most substantial governments committees and they have just done wonderful work um, objective, scrupulous, forward-looking, and very courageous, I think, in trying to uh, envision who we should be in the future.

Schlenker: So Bradley's take on this will result in something north of a thirty to forty million dollar reduction I believe to the universities budge. What are you talking about once the reinvisioning and reprioritization has happened?

Nugent: It will not be anything of that magnitude of course Bradley is larger than we are. Uh I can't give you any definite numbers yet and part of the reason for that there are several reasons but one of them is not a completed process yet. Our task force has now submitted its report but as I said, we do have a fairly thorough and multi steps to the process. So this report will now go to the major governing

committees, they will send the entire faculty the recommendations they believe require faculty vote, and then that vote of the faculty will come to me and to the board of trustees. So were not yet at the point where we can look at that report and say this is what we're going to do. I guess if I really tried to ballpark the numbers um I would say if everything suggested in the report was accepted as a recommendation and I do not believe that will be the case we would probably be talking about maybe at the outside of four million dollars something like that were on a much smaller scale.

Schlenker: and what does that mean in the terms of number of people?

Nugent: (laughs) Again I can't give you the number because none of these have been affected. What I should clarify is I have said to the faculty from the time that I arrived, which as you may know was only in August, that if this process should result in recommendations that would uh effect tenured faculty every effort would be made to redeploy their talents in an appropriate way. So uh now that may not be possible in every case or there might be faculty members who aren't interested in doing that. But that means that I can't really say uh numbers of persons who would be affected by this yet.

Schlenker: Let's talk about some of the proposals to discontinue, say American culture studies or international business of design technology, entrepreneurship, educational studies, anthropology goes to a minor instead of a major, French to a minor, Greek and Roman studies to a minor, and degree programs offered in the school of art, reduced uh transforming the graphic design major and reducing the school of music to a department of music and discontinuing some under enrolled instrumental majors and other things like that. Um the big picture for all those is that you have to have as a liberal arts institution some of these programs for people who are a hard science major who want to do music or a hard-core business major who wants to do a little bit of art or theater or something like that. In order to make the institution as a whole well rounded and attractive do you believe that these things are at risk by the list of changes?

Nugent: Thank you, that's an excellent question. Um I do not believe that now we have a particular footprint if you will which is to offer a rigorous liberal arts education combined with excellent pre professional programs for example our nursing, business, uh and so forth. So that's very much the shape that we want to continue to have in the future and the programs that you mentioned all of the things you mentioned are recommendations that you find in this report. A number of them I suspect will evolve as additional deliberation takes place. So I would note for example, as you rightly note alongside that is a recommendation that graphic art be enhanced um similarly if we look at the design technology entrepreneurship program. On the one hand the recommendation that that be in it's current form but at the same time there's recommendation that entrepreneurship be enhanced in the business program and that we also enhance opportunities for makers space and innovation. So what I think what were really looking at is while the language of some of these recommendations or suggestions may sound as if it's terminating something, it's actually that most of them are much closer to a transformation or reimagining of the program and I would say that's true of the music recommendation as well in fact in the language of that recommendation the task force explicitly acknowledges what you just mentioned that music needs to remain as an important part of the education we offer here. So I think some of the recommendations um particularly for those programs currently under enrolled are really about how do

we act to actually make those programs more sustainable than they actually are in their current form today.

Schlenker: Well Illinois Wesleyan was once highly known for its school of music and the hierarchy in music tends to be conservatory, school, department, and program. So the language is going to signal something to majors, something less than it had been.

Nugent: Yeah I think that's a good point, you are quite right, there was a time when the Illinois Wesleyan School of music would have one hundred and fifty to two hundred majors. Today the largest program in the school is music education uh has approximately 24 majors and all of the other majors combined so it would be instruments as you note, the vocal program, and so forth all of them combined have an enrollment in the twenties. Several of those programs have major enrollments of one or two students. So what we're looking at here is a national phenomenon that music programs nationwide have declined and I would say that were looking at a need as I said to reinvision those offerings. Um there are a number of musical fields for example jazz or contemporary music that are not really represented in our current curriculum and there are some other fields for example opera that are fields that are not drawing a lot of interest these days as you may know one of our graduates we're most proud of is a well known soprano at the Met.

Schlenker: Dawn Upshaw?

Nugent: Yeah, but our opera program is just not drawing students and im sure as you know well uh orchestras and opera companies around the country are closing. So I think it's painful uh be we do need to face reality and ascertain and how we can move forward in a positive way.

Schlenker: Let's also talk about the additions which is that the addition of an institute for global studies or new programs in public health and criminology or creating a school of business and economics or creating an enhanced entrepreneurship program within the proposed school of Business and a maker space which are popular among a variety of institutions of higher education does that all boil down to where the fish are or how does it fit into the overall university mission both of those are actually valid questions I think.

Nugent: Yeah they are very good questions. Um to some extent youre right, fishing where the fish are and after all we want to serve students and their families and I think its no surprise to say that in some ways the educational interest and need in some families have evolved in recent days. We see much more interest in outcomes, much more interest in studies that are perceived to be much more directly related to a subsequent professional career. Um that does not in any way certainly to my mind diminish the enormous significance of grounding in the liberal arts. But let's take this as an example. We've had for many years very strong business programs uh in finance, in accounting, in business itself, uh and so I think it would be a reasonable move to uh enhance a bit what our currently programs and bring them together into an even stronger business school. Uh we gather that many of our perspective students would find that an even more attractive offering even though we already have a number of students who are very drawn to our accounting and finance programs and so forth. So I think it's both a

recognition of what is of interest to contemporary students and recognition of existing strengths that we could perhaps make even stronger.

Schlenker: So as you unpacked what the change to the school of music to the department of music meant, would you also unpack what moving from a business and economics set of departments to a school of business and economics what does that mean in terms of offering.

Nugent: Right, um to become a school like that and I'll compare it to our school of nursing which is very successful. In that case there are national accreditations agencies and they um specify the criteria the specifications that such a school must meet in order to be accredited and that's a positive in that it's um I think it clarifies the offerings and it sets a readily recognizable standard of excellence. So for example our nursing program just went through its reaccreditation and that kind of process is lengthy and detailed process of self-examination of a testing that you meet certain standards and the programing the sources devoted to the program, the quality of faculty members and so forth. So it's really a kind of nationally understood stamp of approval if you will.

Schlenker: One of the things that were hearing out in the community is that this will or might mean layoffs so tackle that one would you

Nugent: Sure. Um layoff you know can ensue if a program is actually terminated. Any kind of layoff of tenured faculty members is not legally governed but professionally governed I would say by standards that have been outlined for decades by the American association of university professors. They have very clear guidelines for the very few instances in which a tenured faculty member could be let go. When I came to the university I uh said to the faculty and I have reiterated multiple times that it's my intention if programs are to be eliminated it would be my intention to make every effort to redeploy faculty members if that's possible and that's in line with AUP standards. Um let me give you an example, lets say that a program were closed but among the things that we are considering to become an even stronger institution is that we want to develop a more robust center for pedagogy, for faculty, or we want to develop a more far reaching and again more robust advising program. It could well be the case that faculty members who now aren't teaching so many courses in lets say ancient history, my own field right (laughs), um the those offerings might be reduced and a faculty member teaching in that area might be very capable of offering their talents and adding value to another area of the university like enhanced advising. So that would be the first thing we would think about doing. Now it might be the case either that a faculty member isn't interested in doing that or that their talents simply don't lend themselves to a new and different area then we would be going down a different path of course. But according to AAUP guidelines uh it's important to offer that possibility and the faculty member has the right to accept or refuse such possibility.

Schlenker: I believe McMurry College is closed after 174 years. Um which and others around the nation have or will do so--

Nugent: Right

Schlenker: --is this an existential question for Illinois Wesleyan?

Nugent: Happily, it is not for Illinois Wesleyan. Um I will say a couple things about that. One, prior to my arrival on this campus, for the last 6 years since I stepped down from my last presidency I have been very involved with the national organization for independent colleges and universities and in that context I was looking a lot and researching a good deal about this entire sector. It is true that closures in this sector have increased in recent years however it's been the case for about a hundred years that there have been between 5 and 10 closures uh of small independent colleges annually. What has happened in recent years is not an exponential increase in that but a slight increase in that. So I would say that many fewer colleges are at existential risk than some of the informational years in the public would lead you to believe. Uh in particular Illinois Wesleyan is not in the same situation as McMurry because we have a much more robust endowment and we are a considerably larger institution. Um McMurry as I understand it had come to a much diminished student body. So for us this is not an extensive crisis and actually what were engaged in now is ensuring that it doesn't become that. That we look around us that we make changes that are valuable changes for the future and that we continue to be strong.

Schlenker: I know you weren't willing to take the faculty numbers question and employment numbers question at this time because not everything has been approved and signed off on but you might be able to address the idea of how much different will the faculty look if these changes happen.

Nugent: Oh it would be minor change. Yeah we are not talking about whole sales revolution here it would be fairly minor changes.

Schlenker: What is your timeline, for um, getting approved and then uh accomplishing the changes to whatever programs are approved for change?

Nugent: Right those are two quite different things. So the recommendations as I mentioned come to the trustees at their May 19th meeting. At that time they will ascertain how they want to proceed. Uh they may approve some, they may reject some, they might even say this needs further study um I don't really know at this point. Now let's say that there are some of the recommendations that are accepted. In that case there will still be a timeline to consider because uh again for best practice we would and I have already said that we would um enable any student that's in the program to be able to complete that program. So closing an academic program is not an open and shut matter. There the issue of enabling your students to continue, there is the issue of um how faculty might be redefined or redeployed. So in some instances that might mean that these recommendations would require a three or four year time line to actually um realize.

Schlenker: What happens if a student says you know what I see the handwriting on the wall and this major in this area going forward is not going to be as valuable to me because of the change in stature or status of the program, im going to transfer. Does that shift your timelines if you no longer have enrollment in a given area?

Nugent: Oh if every student in a program were to transfer, sure that would shift the time line. Um as far as that question obviously that will be an individual decision by the student we'll be making every effort to encourage them to complete their education here and that the education offered here is valuable. I

think one of the relevant factors there um probably is I would say our liberal arts orientation. Where no question a major is important but for many students and I know many of our alumni the most important was their overall experience at Illinois Wesleyan. So I think that students' individual decisions will be affected by that not only by their particular major.

Schlenker: What else should the public know at this point?

Nugent: Hmm uh I suppose should know that we have been apart of central Illinois for 170 years and we are proud of that and we will continue to be proud partner in our community.

Schlenker: President Nugent Thank you

Nugent: Thank you