

Editorial: Cutting duplication among universities will cut costs



Noah Cary/Iowa State Daily

ISU president Steven Leath and Bruce Rastetter, president of the Board of Regents, applaud at the efficiency forum April 1, 2014.

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By: ISD Editorial Board

The Iowa Board of Regents is looking to help in-state students and Iowa taxpayers save money. Part of the efficiency review being conducted by the Regents and Deloitte is the idea of duplication on campus. Duplication, in this sense, would mean new programs or services at regent universities that are identical or very similar to programs already successfully offered at another university in the state.

Although Iowa's Board of Regents and Deloitte Consulting, the company contracted to conduct an efficiency review of the three regent universities, made clear in the [public forum](#) hosted by Iowa State on Wednesday that they were not approaching this process with any preconceived notions, a few areas of interest as to where savings can be found have emerged.

In the efficiency forum at Iowa State and in an exclusive interview with the Iowa State Daily Editorial Board, Board of Regents President Bruce Rastetter categorized these efforts as focused primarily on future concerns.

If, for example, Iowa State wanted to introduce a new Masters program that essentially mirrored an already successful track at the University of Northern Iowa, the regents would like to have specific parameters to gauge the level of redundancy. Nothing would be dead on arrival, but perhaps precious resources could be saved by encouraging an Iowa State undergraduate to attend graduate school elsewhere in the state.

Those who remember the discontinuation of dozens of programs from UNI in 2012 may fear that a similar chopping-block style of cuts may be in our future. At the efficiency forum, though, all parties were clear that this is not something that can be determined until data is collected and the real value of such cuts could be assessed.

"We would make a distinction between efficiency and effectiveness. And we do look at both," Deloitte Director Richard Ferraro said. This could mean even suggesting increased staff in certain areas, as long as it would lead to greater effectiveness or overall efficiency.

It is important to note that, of the courses eliminated at UNI, most were severely underutilized. As Rastetter put it, “Those courses had from zero to five kids in them graduating in five years. You had courses that hadn’t taught a student in two years.” It really does seem a stretch to say that programs with so few beneficiaries should be paid for by Iowa tax dollars and student tuition.

Of course, if such programs had some major reason for being offered, such as extremely low costs, chances for unique research or special learning opportunities, the regents would be free to keep them around. Making sure that such concerns are raised will be the duty of stakeholders in the next few months, as the regents have vowed to ensure an open and transparent recommendation process.

With the stated goal of looking not only at each of the regent universities individually, but also in how they work together, the coming efficiency review has an opportunity to increase cohesiveness and cooperation between Iowa’s public higher learning institutions. While this could feasibly reduce competition or encourage complacency, Iowa’s universities are not in a vacuum. They will still be competing with the institutions of other states, and they will still be seeking national recognition for their work.

Additionally, there are some forms of duplication that are actually seen by the regents as important. Rastetter pointed, for example, to the fact that all three of the regent universities have schools of business, suggesting that there are good reasons to support all of them.

Working for greater efficiency in our regent universities may require some changes, but as long as those of us with vested interests come forward and take advantage of the public nature of these reforms, we can hope to see real improvements.