How the Budget Reset is Affecting UNH’s College of Liberal Arts: Enrichment vs. Academics

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Outside of the former Museum of Art (MOA) at the University of New Hampshire, there are signs with pleas for the university to ‘fund the arts.’ The MOA closing was one of the major cuts made to the College of Liberal Arts (COLA), by its dean, Michelle Dillon. Dillon, along with deans across all colleges at UNH, was instructed at the end of the Fall 2023 semester to make a permanent 3.6% cut to their department concerning the university’s “budget reset.” Though each academic department was cut an equal percentage, members of the UNH community have concerns that the losses in COLA are drastic and may hurt the quality of their academics.

Dillon was informed of the budget reset in late October and was instructed to submit what cuts she decided upon by Nov. 4, 2023, to be reviewed by Vice President Provost Wayne Jones, and Chief Financial Officer in human resources Kathy Neils.

Dillon stated that COLA, a department accounting for about a third of incoming UNH students, has been frugal for a long time. A large cost to COLA noted by Dillon is its Ph.D. programs which maintain UNH’s status as a top-level research school.

“Our Ph.D. programs, English, history, psychology, sociology and education are hugely important to the college, [and] also hugely important to UNH’s reputation...but they’re costly,” said Dillon.

Before Dillon was elected dean of COLA she was a professor within the UNH sociology department. She stated that when advised to make the 3.6% cut to COLA, her commitment was to prioritize and preserve academic programs such as doctorates, study abroad and Model UN mock trial.

“When people come to university they have lots of wonderful experiences independent of academics. But I think it’s always important to keep in mind that a university is first and foremost an educational institution and the academic piece is the priority,” said Dillon.
12 administrative staff positions were cut within several areas of COLA including the art, sociology, history and English departments.

“I wish I wouldn’t have had to make those sorts of decisions. But I have to say people have been very cooperative as we’re trying to move forward,” said Dillon.

She stated that she is currently working with departments that have lost staff to streamline tasks to make sure they are well served by the new administrative structure.

Kai Parlett, a fourth-year student majoring in women and gender studies with minors in justice studies and anthropology, expressed that people in administrative and coordinator roles at UNH are an integral part of the COLA department. Parlett named her academic coordinator, Deborah Briand of Justice Studies as an example.

“She never taught me academically, but that woman has printed out every version of my honors thesis that I’ve written this year. When the budget cuts happened, I walked into her office and said ‘promise me you’re still here,’” said Parlett.

Parlett stated that the UNH Sociology Department’s student-produced academic journal “Perspectives,” will not be published this year due to lack of funding within the department.

“I’ve been working on my honors thesis since May. Figuring out how else we’re going to get our stuff published as undergads is really frustrating,” said Parlett.

Parlett has created and passed out stickers that read ‘fire the admin,’ with a graphic of the Museum of Art crossed out.

“I got in a little bit of trouble with the administration for making the stickers and passing them out, but I think it’s worth noting that they’re [the administration] not gonna really get anywhere by cutting a ton of programs that we care about, and then trying to regulate speech when we say that we’re really angry about it,” said Parlett. “The staff and side programs make it possible for us not to lose our minds, to do what we’re trying to achieve academically.”

Faculty as well as students have expressed their concerns with the budget cuts made to COLA. Siobhan Senier, professor and chair of the women's and gender studies department wrote a commentary on the cuts published in The New Hampshire Bulletin. Senier has taught at UNH since 2000, starting in the English department, and served for several years as grievance officer and VP of the American Association of University Professors UNH (AAUP-UNH), the tenure-track faculty union.

“I’ve written many LTEs over the years, and have been wanting to write something for the Bulletin, a news source I’ve greatly admired for a while. I am a tenured full professor with far less to lose than most people who still work at UNH, so even though I knew the piece might anger some people in power and cause headaches for me personally, I felt obligated to say some things that many people are feeling,” said Senier.

Senier stated that she was surprised to hear of the staff cuts made to each department and shocked to hear of the art museum’s closure.

“For decades, COLA was the biggest college at UNH, a sign that liberal arts should be at the heart of any good public education. We are now being ‘right-sized,’ in admin parlance, apparently to grow Business and Engineering. If UNH is to shift its mission from being a broad-based liberal arts public university to being primarily a Business and Engineering school, that’s a decision that should be made by the faculty, not a revolving cast of politically appointed trustees and short-lived administrators,” said Senier.

The expressed cause of the budget cuts is a $14 million gap in the projected budget. 30% of student's tuition dollars fund UNH's operating budget. The rest of the budget is funded by these categories: 3% from endowment, 10% from state support, 30% from grants and contracts, 22% from auxiliary, and 3% other. Information on the broader cuts can be found here.

“There was a gap between what the projected enrollment was going to be and what the actual number of students who came was...the university relies on current enrollment to fund its budget and we didn't have as much money as we thought we were going to,” UNH spokesperson Tania DeLuzuriaga said in a statement.
Found on the public tableau for UNH, pertaining to the class of 2027 19,748 of the 22,693 students who applied to UNH were accepted. Only 3,253 students for the class of 2027 are currently enrolled. Kimberly DePego, the vice president of enrollment management at UNH, stated that the yield for the enrollment rate fluctuated under 22% for the 2023-2024 fiscal year.

DeLuzurgiaga stated that half the students who did not enroll at UNH did not attend college at all.

“There is a demographic cliff where there are fewer people who are 18 years old, and there’s more competition. President Dean recognized that there’s a need to reset the budget and rework our thinking for both this fiscal year and the fiscal years to come,” DeLuzurgiaga stated.

The budget for 2024 is currently flat until the new plans for the 2025 fiscal year start in July. Senier remains optimistic that COLA can come together and recover in the aftermath of the budget cuts.

“One principle of my own cultural sustainability research is that all the things we love and need—making and enjoying art, music and performance; learning our histories and teaching each other to think critically; working out collective systems of governance—these are all things that humans just do, across cultures and across millennia. The particular institutions: museums, archives, colleges, political offices that we use right now might go away or change, and that’s upsetting and scary when it happens,” said Senier. “But humans have incredible power to sustain their cultures and each other when they work toward common goals.”

Dillon expressed that student concerns are considered when making any decision within COLA. She stated that the budget reset marks more of a change, rather than an end.

“I believe UNH is well positioned for the future, and I believe COLA is at the heart of UNH. There is a narrative that there is a decline in humanities majors and a lot of negativity. I’m trying to encourage people to recognize that you’ll always need liberal arts. I believe very strongly in our own college of liberal arts because I think we’ve got tremendous faculty...who are eager to work with our students in a positive and generative manner,” said Dillon. “What makes my day positive is knowing the quality of work that goes on at this college.”