A department terminated

I logged onto a video call last month, not knowing what to expect. Faculty members in my department had just 1 day’s notice of the meeting with our dean, which made me wonder, “Is it another budget cut—or worse?” After a quick apology, the dean pivoted to the news: Given the crunch on university finances amid the COVID-19 pandemic, he’d made a difficult decision to terminate the geology department. If we wanted to keep our jobs, we’d have to find another department willing to take us in. His words hit me like a ton of bricks. For 20 years—even since I received tenure—I assumed I’d always have a job if I kept up my teaching and research. But the pandemic had brought long-standing problems to a head.

Three years ago, the same dean had asked us for help. His budget was in the red because enrollments were falling and a new budget system had moved money out of his college. The geology department had a few large, popular courses, but many of our upper-level classes were highly specialized, attracting only a handful of students. Fewer than 10 students a year majored in geology. We needed larger class sizes and more students to enroll as majors, the dean told us.

We convened faculty meetings to discuss how to move forward. Our curriculum hadn’t changed much in decades. Our students learned how to identify rocks and stare down microscopes, but they weren’t much exposed to many of the more pressing problems in geosciences, such as climate change and groundwater pollution. Some of us, including me, wanted to overhaul the curriculum. But others argued against abandoning our focus on traditional skills and concepts.

We ended up making changes only around the edges. We added new elective courses on climate, medical geology, and extraterrestrial life, which attracted hundreds of students—many from other departments. But we didn’t change the course requirements for geology majors, and many professors continued to teach the same material in the same way. The number of majors didn’t budge.

Then came COVID-19. We stayed open and taught students on campus, but enrollments continued to fall. We expected administrators to make cuts, but we did not think entire departments would be axed—especially not ours. Our seven professors collectively bring in hundreds of thousands of federal research dollars every year and publish dozens of papers. But the overhead from our grants did not make up for the lack of tuition dollars. The quality of our research wasn’t enough to save us.

After the meeting with our dean, my mind raced. What would become of our labs, our grad students, and all the projects in full swing? I had a secondary faculty appointment in a different college on campus, so I might be able to work there and avoid leaving the town where I’d lived for 27 years. But I didn’t want to leave my geology colleagues. I wanted a solution that kept us together as a team.

Two days after the dean’s call, I spoke with a university administrator who prodded me to not give up and asked, “What’s your vision?” I spent the weekend speaking with my colleagues and brainstorming a plan. Together, we imagined a wholly new earth science curriculum, one that would prepare students for the challenges of today. We’d rethink all of our courses from scratch, focusing on problems that students—and their potential employers—care about. For instance, instead of simply teaching how rocks crack and weather away, we’d explore how those cracks affect the movement of polluted groundwater.

Our new vision looks to the future and leaves the past behind, something we could never bring ourselves to do before the prospect of termination forced us to spring into action. We’re not sure how the university will react to our plan. Hopefully, our efforts aren’t coming too late.

I hope academics elsewhere can learn from our mistakes and take a hard look at their own offerings to make sure they’re serving the current generation of students. It’s hard to overhaul a department and develop entirely new courses. But it’s much harder if you wait until a crisis to act.

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