

December 6, 2018

Dr. Virginia S. Horvath, President
State University of New York at Fredonia
138 Fenton Hall
Fredonia, New York 14063

Dear President Horvath:

We have recently learned that SUNY Fredonia is seriously considering the elimination of its philosophy major and of its philosophy department. We are appalled by this news, and we most strongly oppose the proposed elimination, for several reasons.

The most basic reason is one that you have no doubt already heard many times, but that you would be terribly unwise to ignore. Philosophy is the most basic of all the liberal arts disciplines; no college that purports to offer its students a liberal arts education can afford to exclude it. The Chair and professors of your philosophy department are absolutely right to say, in their April 7, 2017 memorandum to you, your Provost, and your Dean and Associate Dean of Liberal Arts and Sciences, “a public university without a philosophy department is a lower-tier institution that does not take the liberal arts seriously.” We will not belabor this point: it is universally recognized throughout academia and by the educated public. As the Dean of Arts and Sciences at one of our SUNY comprehensive colleges has said—and this dean comes from one of the physical sciences, not from philosophy or any other humanities field—“philosophy is the mother of all disciplines.”

The second reason, which is clearly and powerfully presented in the April 7 memorandum from professors Kershner, Belliotti, Feit and Tuggy, is that your Philosophy Department is doing a terrific job for your institution—one that you ought to be proud of. They are offering a high-quality program despite their astonishingly small faculty size. They are doing so in a highly cost-effective way: they teach far more SCH per faculty FTE than your institutional average and than the national average, they do it for a lower cost than average for your institution, and their enrollment ratio is higher than average for your institution. At least as important (if not more so), both of your remaining full-time faculty members are Distinguished Teaching Professors, and both are outstanding scholars, having published eleven books and over 100 journal articles. Relegating philosophy on your campus to a mere “service” role, on which they would be teaching only basic introductory courses, would be a huge disservice, not only to potential philosophy

majors, but also to students who take more advanced philosophy courses as electives, so as to expand their outlook, hone their thinking, writing, and speaking skills, and examine the deepest human issues.

Of course, you may say that the number of philosophy majors at Fredonia is too small to justify a major in this time of tight budgets; indeed, that appears to be your only argument for the proposed elimination. But the average number of philosophy majors from 2008 to 2016 was 33, which is perfectly respectable in a comprehensive college of Fredonia's size, and any perceived smallness in that number is well compensated for by the Department's exceptionally large contribution to your general education program. You might say that the current number of majors is significantly lower, and that your Dean of Arts and Sciences has stated that although "the work of the faculty to streamline an already structurally simple program and revise its schedule to meet student demand is commendable[,] unfortunately, it is likely not enough stem the decline. (Declining enrollment is common across the country.)" But, in the first place, no dean has a crystal ball; the decline may be only cyclical. Furthermore, the April 7 memorandum points out that Fredonia's total enrollment has recently declined by 24%. So, it is no reflection on the philosophy department that its number of majors has declined. Moreover, your administration itself undercut the Philosophy Department's best recruiting tool, a large-section introductory class. (For a Department trying to offer a decent number of upper-division courses with only two full-time faculty and two contingent faculty members, offering such a course is an entirely appropriate, rational thing to do, and such large courses, if well taught by a talented and dynamic professor, can provide an excellent and highly inspirational educational experience.) Finally, given that the basic reason for the proposed elimination is financial, we find it shocking that at a time when Fredonia, a school with 4400 undergraduates and 200 graduate students, has a provost, two associate provosts, four deans, and four associate deans, several of whom were brought in from outside the university, Fredonia is seriously considering eliminating a core liberal arts program from its curriculum and thus depriving its students of an unparalleled opportunity to develop their minds. This is a stunning reversal of priorities in an institution whose mission is teaching and learning.

This point brings us to a third major reason for our protest. The founding principle behind the creation of the SUNY system was to have an affordable university campus easily geographically accessible to any resident of New York State intellectually able to acquire a university education, regardless of his or her wealth or social class. This principle precludes allowing some of the campuses to deteriorate into second-rate colleges, whose students would be deprived of educational opportunities and options that remain open to students who can afford to attend more expensive private schools. By eliminating the philosophy major and department from your campus, you would be doing exactly that. You would be helping to perpetuate a society divided between the wealthier few and the less fortunate many, and violating the public trust. Last but not least, you would be aiding and abetting the deplorable level of discourse and thinking that now

threatens to destroy our society. For philosophy is *par excellence* the discipline that fosters critical thinking, rational examination of values, and toleration of alternative points of view, and these skills and disposition are the only antidotes to the blindness, foolishness, and bigotry that surround us on every side.

For these reasons, we ask that you withdraw the proposal to eliminate the philosophy major and department from your institution. We urge you to consider and to adopt ways of dealing with the financial issues you face that do not deeply damage the academic quality of your institution as well as undermine SUNY's mission and the purpose of public higher education, as your proposal would unquestionably do.

Respectfully,

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