

THE CHRONICLE of Higher Education

FACULTY

Meet the College Consultant the AAUP Seeks to Shame



Irene Owsley

Robert C. Dickeson has run afoul of faculty advocates by advising colleges not to let professors' tenure protections hinder the scrapping of weak academic programs.

By *Peter Schmidt* | JUNE 02, 2015

✓ PREMIUM

When the American Association of University Professors holds its annual conference this month, its members will consider rebuking several colleges and, by extension, one very prominent higher-education consultant.

Robert C. Dickeson, who has guided colleges throughout the nation in choosing to either buttress or scrap academic programs, stands accused in two new AAUP investigative reports

of inspiring institutions to trample professors' rights.

Those accusations are hardly the first criticisms that the AAUP has lodged against Mr. Dickeson in his long career in higher education. He first came under fire from the association in the early 1980s, when it censured the University of Northern Colorado for faculty layoffs he carried out as that institution's president. Nine years ago, the AAUP denounced his guidance to a federal panel on the future of higher education, known as the Spellings Commission, as "seriously flawed" and full of unfounded attacks on the nation's college faculties. His guidance blamed faculty salaries for rising college costs and argued that tenure had evolved from a safeguard of academic freedom into "a system to protect job security."

More recently, the AAUP took him to task two years ago in an investigative report that led to its censure of National Louis University. Mr. Dickeson did not directly advise the academic downsizing that led to the censure — instead, the association lit into him because National Louis had used his book and a separate consultant who embraced his ideas.

Last month the AAUP published reports on faculty layoffs at the University of Southern Maine and Felician College that characterized him as a threat to well-established academic principles.

In a recent interview, Mr. Dickeson expressed befuddlement over the AAUP's criticisms. He argued that the group had greatly overstated his influence on Felician, National Louis, and Southern Maine, and appeared to be ignoring how much his approach to winnowing academic programs emphasizes faculty involvement in such decisions.

It is not hard to see, however, how his ideas would irk the AAUP, which continuously finds itself battling both direct attacks on traditional faculty rights, such as proposed legislation in Wisconsin that would make it easier for universities to lay off tenured professors, and employment trends that have made tenure-track jobs increasingly elusive.

Rather than encouraging colleges to abide by the AAUP's standards, Mr. Dickeson argues that the standards are outdated and cause colleges to waste money on superfluous course offerings, research of questionable value, and faculty members whose services are not in demand.

He accuses the AAUP of having "converted itself from a professional organization into a union" focused on preserving jobs at the expense of colleges' financial health and ability to meet students' needs. "You have got," he says, "to be able to have institutions adapt."

Weighty Decisions

Mr. Dickeson heads two higher-education consulting firms, Academic Strategy Partners and Education Metrics, both of which specialize in helping colleges gauge the performance of academic programs to decide which should get increases or reductions

in financial support. Among his past positions, he was president of the University of Northern Colorado from 1981 to 1991, co-founded the Lumina Foundation for Education in 2000, and held top cabinet posts under two governors, Bruce Babbitt of Arizona and Roy Romer of Colorado.

He made a name for himself as an advocate of the winnowing of academic programs with his 1999 book *Prioritizing Academic Programs and Services*. In it he advises colleges to have faculty panels conduct unsparing, data-driven reviews of academic programs, deciding which to expand, keep as is, or eliminate. The criteria he proposed to guide the process include demand, various measures of faculty quality, graduate success, costs, and how much revenue a program generates.

"He came up with the idea of assessing everything that draws resources in a data-based way," says Larry Goldstein, who advises on academic-program prioritization, and sometimes works with Mr. Dickeson, as president of his own higher-education consulting firm, Campus Strategies.

Mr. Dickeson characterizes his program-prioritization process as "very bottom-up," based partly on his belief that administrators "don't necessarily understand what's going on in the trenches." He argues that faculty members' involvement is crucial because of the expertise they bring and the need to have their buy-in. Typically, however, the faculty panels that advise prioritizations are selected by administrators, not faculties or faculty senates.

Missing from Mr. Dickeson's advice to colleges is any encouragement to obey the AAUP's admonition not to lay off tenured faculty members except in case of financial exigency. He argues that "financial exigency," as a legal term, covers only colleges at death's door, and that colleges can almost never prove such a state when layoffs are challenged in court. "I run into institutions all the time that say, 'Well, we've got a financial exigency,' and I look at their books and say, 'No you don't,'" he says.

"Something new and different has to come along," says Mr. Dickeson, who calls for the development of a "more reasonable and responsible" standard for determining when a college can no longer sustain a given tenured faculty position.

Many of the colleges he advises, he says, have changed their policies on the layoffs of tenured professors in response to less-dire pressures. Although the AAUP has softened its own financial-exigency definition to include financial crises that merely threaten a college's mission, it is nowhere close to tolerating layoffs of tenured faculty members based solely on their association with failing academic programs.

Bearing Blame

Mr. Dickeson boasts of having worked with more than 700 colleges in the United States, Canada, and beyond. Among his current clients, Frederick V. Moore, president of Buena Vista University, a private college in Iowa, says the consultant helped his institution devise "an open, transparent, evidence-based process" to reduce its academic work force.

"Anytime you undergo a process like this there is some natural tension," Mr. Moore says. He adds, however, "I think we came out of it about as well as you could expect."

Joan Propst, provost of Alderson Broaddus University, in West Virginia, says Mr. Dickeson helped her private institution embark on a three-year prioritization process. Two years in, that process has led Alderson Broaddus to cut some academic programs with low enrollments, such as history and studio arts, and establish new programs in high-demand areas, such as legal studies and graphic design. "We based many of our decisions on where we are going to get the best bang for the buck," she says. Although her university has spared tenured professors from layoffs, its faculty members, she says, have been "less than thrilled with the process."

Mr. Dickeson's name is so inextricably linked with program prioritization that he has ended up pulled into controversies at colleges he never advised.

The AAUP's recent report on Southern Maine, for example, blames him for inspiring the university to eliminate about 60 full-time faculty members based on his writings, not any direct role in program cuts there. Christopher G. Quint, a Southern Maine spokesman, last month said "we know about him, like most anybody in higher education does," but not even Mr. Dickeson's writings played a role in the university's cutback decisions.

In the case of Felician College, Mr. Dickeson says his involvement with the New Jersey institution consisted of conducting a workshop to introduce faculty members to program prioritization, and then dispatching some of his employees to train faculty members on how to write program reviews.

Two years ago, Bill Hazelton, then an engineering professor on an academic-prioritization panel at the University of Alaska at Anchorage, lamented in a blog post that people there were invoking Mr. Dickeson's controversial reputation "to damn any mention of program prioritization in a university environment."

In response to the more recent AAUP reports linking his work to faculty cutbacks, Mr. Dickeson says, "I will certainly accept responsibility for anything that I have done, but I don't think it is fair to accept responsibility for things that I didn't do."

Peter Schmidt writes about affirmative action, academic labor, and issues related to academic freedom. Contact him at peter.schmidt@chronicle.com.

© 2019 The Chronicle of Higher Education

1255 23rd Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20037