


Chapter 11

Building a House, Then Tearing It Down: Navigating Uncertainty in Creating and Closing an Academic Program

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ABSTRACT

The authors spent 7 years at the institution and were able to successfully navigate achievements, obstacles and ultimately the closing of the institution. There was an overarching theme of uncertainty throughout our experiences. Though the closing of an institution and the forced change in one's career path can be overwhelming. The authors will present their story related to the skills and knowledge they utilized through the building of an academic program that were transferable to successfully traversing the closure of a successful program at a failed institution.

INTRODUCTION

There have been many closures of colleges and universities across the country. According to Castillo & Welding (2025) approximately 80 institutions announced or completed closures or mergers since 2020. More closures are expected. With a decrease in the college-age population, a drop in enrollment in traditional four-year institutions, and higher operating costs, many institutions have faced the difficult

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decisions to re-organize their academic programs, alter their educational delivery options, eliminate academic or support programs or even close altogether.

This chapter explores the authors' perspectives regarding the parallels between developing a new academic program and dismantling it just seven years later due to the institution's closure. The authors, who were two of the first three faculty hired for a new graduate social work program at a tuition-driven, teaching-focused institution, found navigating uncertainty to be the key commonality between creating and closing a program. The purpose of this chapter is to describe our experiences addressing the uncertainties both tasks entailed. We will also describe the tools and skills that we found to be helpful in navigating these unpredictable environments.¹

Living in a House While You're Building It

The institution in question had been in existence for over 90 years and offered a successful, accredited undergraduate social work program for decades. Based on student and alumni demand and regional workforce needs, two undergraduate faculty members proposed and developed the framework for a graduate-level social work program. After securing institutional backing and state approvals, the program launched its first cohort of students in Fall 2017, a mere two months after candidacy for accreditation was secured.

Prior to the hiring of the two authors, the institution had faced financial struggles and administrative difficulties. Two years before the MSW Program began, the college eliminated more than two dozen low-enrollment academic programs and cut 23 faculty positions with the goal of growing enrollment in more popular areas of study to reverse a 16% drop in total enrollment over the previous seven years (Johnson, 2024). The unilateral way in which the cuts were made (largely with little faculty input) ushered in a period of mistrust and lack of cooperation between academic staff and administration which eventually led to a faculty vote of no-confidence in the college's president prior to our arrival on campus.

Though we were aware of these challenges and discussed them with department members during the interview process, we both saw the creation of the MSW program as part of a proactive effort to improve the financial status of the institution through the expansion of graduate-level opportunities. We were also excited by the professional experiences that developing a new program would offer, particularly the chance to have meaningful input into the creation and growth of an academic program.

While the program director and department chair were responsible for navigating the state and accreditation body requirements, promoting the program, recruiting the first cohort of students and more, there were still many projects that needed to be completed to create the infrastructure needed to support and grow the program.

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