

Budget, Education

UConn Faculty Question Contractor's Role in Budget Cuts

— Juliann Ventura, 3.11.2024



Several UConn faculty members are questioning the role of an outside consulting firm in the university's cost-cutting decisions, and the possible elimination of academic programs and jobs.

Huron Consulting, a global professional services firm, has had contracts with UConn since 2014 for various projects. Most recently, the university paid Huron more than \$123,000 to manage grants and implement and evaluate technological software, according to UConn spokesperson Stephanie Reitz.

And earlier this year, UConn worked with Huron to better understand funding, staffing and enrollment data compared to peer institutions. These

comparisons would highlight “strengths, areas for improvement, and potential growth strategies,” she said.

But during a faculty union meeting in January, several professors questioned whether the firm would suggest slashing faculty positions and programs to cut costs.

“It was presented like this group has a reputation, like this is not a good sign,” said assistant professor Mary Beth Allen, who teaches French studies at the university.

Other educators warned that hiring outside consultants and other private entities could pose a threat to higher education if universities rely less on faculty voices.

“There’s a fear that Huron approaches [budget cuts] the way it would approach a corporation and maximizing profit,” UConn faculty union President Jeffrey Ogbar said. “And to that extent, there are people who are concerned about what Huron would recommend. And people have argued that Huron had its hand in West Virginia University and other universities that phased out very important programs.”

Last year, West Virginia University slashed almost three dozen majors and more than 140 faculty positions. About a month after university officials announced the proposed cuts, some faculty members took aim at consulting groups, among other issues, in a **motion urging academic leaders to stop the restructure**. They claimed that the process “relied on ill-informed consulting and faulty data collected by for-profit corporations like rpK Group and Huron Consulting Group.”

Huron declined to comment.

Reitz said that the university has had contracts with Huron various times over the past decade, “but the relationship is not a partnership.” UConn has not laid off faculty or staff, or proposed doing that as a result of the possible cuts, she added. She also said UConn has been working with the governor’s office and the General Assembly “to advocate for the necessary resources.”

When Sam Sommers, an assistant professor in UConn's English department, learned about UConn's contract with Huron at the faculty union meeting, she said she was disheartened, but not surprised.

"I've worked at a number of universities, and one thing that I've learned is that like every industry there's trends, and this is a huge trend in higher education," Sommers said.

Last month, several **faculty members at American University expressed concerns** after it hired Huron to help with its seven-year strategic plan.

From 2019 to 2020, the University of New Hampshire paid the consulting group \$600,000 to create a **cost-saving plan** that Huron claimed would save the university \$12 million over two years, but the proposal also included research cuts and faculty layoffs.

Five months after hiring Huron in 2020, **The New School in New York also laid off** more than 100 employees.

Isaac Kamola, co-author of "Free Speech and Koch Money: Manufacturing a Campus Culture War," a book that discusses money in higher education, said it's becoming more common for universities to lean on outside groups.

"What happens when the state mandates budget cuts is that instead of leaving those hard discussions to the faculty, there's an effort to cut out faculty governance and shared governance and to bring in these corporate firms that can basically do the slash and burn from the outside," said Kamola, who is also a professor at Trinity College.

Removing faculty governance can jeopardize higher education, said Monmouth University professor Marina Vujnovic, co-author of "Higher Education and Disaster Capitalism in the Age of COVID-19," a book focused on the corporatization of higher education.

"Now with these consulting groups and other privatizers like them, once they're invited into our academic home — our university — they create a parallel structure, where they say ... what programs are ready to be invested in, what these programs should look like, what technologies should be used, how education should be delivered, or how curriculum should be

delivered,” Vujnovic said. “So all of a sudden, faculty voice is on the bottom.”

Budget shortfall

UConn **expects** a budget deficit of \$70 million, while its medical branch, UConn Health, expects a \$29 million shortfall in fiscal year 2025, partly because Gov. Ned Lamont’s proposed budget **doesn’t include new money for higher education** and COVID-19 funds are set to expire in September.

Reitz noted that UConn wasn’t expecting to have COVID-19 funds allocated to the school’s budgets for fiscal years 2024 and 2025. The state used the funds to help UConn pay for permanent personnel costs.

To address the deficit, university officials proposed a 15% reduction across all academic programs over the next five years, starting with a 3% cut next year. Reitz said the university is asking for an additional \$47.3 million for its main Storrs campus and \$16.9 million for UConn Health during the current legislative session.

Reitz explained that the responsibility for addressing the budget cuts rests with each individual school, college and unit. The university administration does not play a role in the decision-making in specific areas, including academic programs.

Since the cuts are under the discretion of each department, Sommers said, they will play out differently depending on where the money is allocated.

“I can say in my department, my department chair has explained that in English, 98% of the money that’s in our budget goes to personnel,” she said. “So for her, when she looks at cutting 15% out of the total budget, it’s going to be graduate students, it’s going to be part-time faculty because those are all of our temporary employees. ... Whereas other tenure line professors, you can’t lay off unless the university declares financial exigency.”

As budget cuts loom, Kamola and Vujnovic warned about the threat to higher education as a whole.

“The model of a good functioning university is things like what the curriculum should look like, what resources should be funded, what kind of experiences students should have access to ... should be the result of deliberation and the kind of policymaking is built by those people who are part of that institution,” Kamola said.

Meanwhile, Vujnovic cautioned that allowing outside consulting groups in universities’ decision-making processes could have long-term consequences.

“I think that the more the administration invites them, the more they have the power to remake higher education,” she said. “... That’s one of the biggest threats to academic integrity that we see right now coming from outside the university.”

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