

EPC Feedback on Part-time Bachelor's Proposal
1 February 2022

The Educational Policy Committee held two well attended meetings, one in November and one in December, to discuss the proposal. What follows is a summary of EPC's preliminary feedback on the proposal as it stands. EPC expects that the proposal will undergo substantial revision and refinement going forward.

EPC members found the proposal's motivating sentiment praiseworthy. It would be wonderful if the university could make available some semblance of a Cornell undergraduate experience to members of populations who currently lack a path to a residential Cornell bachelor's program. That said, the ambitious scope of the proposal demands attention up-front to implementation questions whose resolution might necessitate a scaling back of the proposal's agenda. EPC members found it impossible to consider "whether" we should move forward without addressing the "how," not to mention "what" Cornell aims to do.

Committee members were of the unanimous opinion that a fully online undergraduate degree program is fundamentally different from, and arguably inevitably inferior to, a full-time residential program. Members felt that for this reason alone the part-time bachelor's degree should carry a designation different from the residential degree, along the lines of Harvard's program. Other considerations support drawing such a distinction. To cite just one example, several EPC members have experience teaching early- and mid-career professional master's students, both in person and at a distance. Teaching these students can require painful compromises in standards. Might fully remote part-time undergraduate students trigger compromises even more painful? Will course instructors feel pressure to give passing grades to some minimum fraction of enrollees?

By making that point, EPC members don't mean to denigrate the potential of the proposal's target populations. Consider the fact that, as one committee member pointed out, the CPEP population performs demonstrably better than on-campus undergraduates in plant-science courses and in other areas of study. Incarcerated individuals, one might argue, have the time and energy to achieve at a high level. Do full-time working adults have that bandwidth, no matter how capable they are? Lack of such bandwidth might trump aptitude for such individuals.

Regarding the financial-aid structure, the part-time program would supposedly constitute a closed system financial-aid-wise, with students who pay sticker price subsidizing those who can afford little or nothing. The questions arise as to where the sticker-price students come from, and how the part-time student population will be distributed between the full-paying and the heavily subsidized. The Provost has alluded to a substantial population of wealthy international students in the market for the program. One EPC member asked whether we should be thinking of wealthy international industrialists paying full price and thereby subsidizing economically disadvantaged domestic students and then asked rhetorically, "Aren't there plenty of international poor people who could

benefit from this program?” The committee spent significant time discussing these composition issues and concluded that before moving forward it was important to decide how the mix would look and whether we were comfortable with that.

Aside from the questions of what we’re doing, and for whom, is the question of how we might be able to pull it off. Existing online content falls far short of what a rollout on the scale of the proposal’s would require. Generating enough courses to support an entire online degree would be a massive undertaking. How would non-RTE faculty members get release from their current full-time commitments to do this, and how would that release diminish the quality of our residential students’ experience? Generating new online content, much less teaching and administrating an online course for nontraditional students, is a massive time-sink. Would departments be expected to value this activity when promotion time comes? As it stands, departments don’t even generally value time spent on curricular reform.

Now for some positive feedback. EPC members felt that piloting a part-time bachelor’s program in one field of study to a well defined audience of online learners would test the hypothesis, so to speak. Maybe pick a population, say veterans, and see how it works. Committee members felt that making it work in STEM will be difficult if not impossible, at least in part because producing sufficient high-quality online content would require an investment of faculty time far beyond what is feasible at present. EPC members also felt that the program will look different for incarcerated individuals than it does for others — in fact, why not take CPEP up another level in parallel with the single-population pilot just described? Down the road, we might see one program for the incarcerated, building off Cornell’s substantial experience and success, and another for the rest.

The big questions (with a few suggested answers) from EPC:

- What are we providing? EPC sees it as a special bachelor’s degree, probably administered and awarded by Extension.
- Whom is it for? What is the target mix of the student population? EPC feels the need to address these questions up-front.
- How might we pull it off? Again, EPC would like to answer this question before proceeding.