

## **Faculty statement regarding Academic Partnerships**

As the Northern Kentucky University Board of Regents considers whether to renew the University's contract with the online program management company, Academic Partnerships (AP), we, the faculty, issue this statement. As set forth in the NKU statement on collegial governance, faculty bodies have primary responsibility for recommendations in academic matters, and their recommendations should be implemented except for compelling reasons. Academic matters include, but are not limited to, "approval of agreements with external organizations which directly affect academic matters." Herein, we exercise our responsibility for making recommendations regarding the agreement between NKU and AP.

In preparation for this report, a subcommittee of the professional concerns committee solicited feedback from faculty across colleges who teach courses in AP programs. Such feedback was provided in written form (see Appendix) and through interviews. The feedback these faculty members provided is based on five years of observation and analysis. It is evident that the faculty are concerned about pressure to weaken academic standards to boost enrollment, lack of accountability regarding marketing of programs, and deception of students regarding program requirements.

Several faculty members perceive that information provided to prospective students by AP agents undermines student success at NKU. AP does not require that students be oriented to their degree program or advised by faculty. Consequently, some students are unaware of, or do not understand, program requirements. Poor understanding of requirements can delay graduation. The accelerated nature of AP programs means that all courses must be taught in a 7-week online format. This "one size fits all" model does not meet the needs of all online students, nor does it dovetail with the expectations of community partners. Faculty teaching in programs with a field placement requirement report that it is difficult to place students "mid-semester" (i.e., in March and October). More generally, the rigidity of the AP format can make it difficult for instructors to incorporate evidence-based teaching practices in their courses. Consequently, AP programs strip away the most productive and fulfilling aspects of the educational experience for instructors and students. AP prioritizes convenience and enrollment growth over education.

Another theme that emerges from faculty feedback is the perception that AP programs "cannibalize" traditional programs. NKU allows AP to charge less per credit hour for courses in the same program. When tuition for AP programs is lower than tuition for face-to-face or hybrid programs, cost-conscious students are pulled away from traditional programs. Consequently, enrollment in traditional or hybrid programs—wherein the university keeps 100% of tuition revenue--declines. For example, tuition for students enrolled in the AP master's in social work (MSW) program is \$599 per credit hour, inclusive of fees. Tuition for students enrolled in the traditional MSW program ranges from \$669 to \$999 per credit hour (depending on residency). One hundred forty-nine students are currently enrolled in the AP MSW program. Those 149 students generate less than \$500,000 in additional tuition revenue compared to the 54 students enrolled in the traditional MSW program. Sunsetting the AP program would also significantly reduce instructional costs because fewer faculty would be needed.

There is widespread concern among the faculty that AP is not being held accountable for meeting their obligations in marketing. Despite NKU being responsible for approving AP marketing plans, the faculty know little about how AP is marketing our programs or recruiting students to our programs. AP staff have conceded that they will not recruit from regions with universities who also utilize AP services. Because AP marketing strategies are proprietary, we can only guess whether they target students outside of our traditional market audience. That AP has been able to recruit some students who reside outside the traditional marketing area for NKU does not necessarily mean that such students would not have enrolled in a traditional program. Some traditional programs have recruited from outside of the three-state market since inception.

Finally, the faculty suspect that students are being misled by AP. Students may believe that they are being recruited by NKU when, in fact, they are being recruited by an AP agent. Additionally, students are led to believe that they may begin their courses immediately, even though their financial aid has not been processed. Consequently, enrollment must be delayed. Further, and importantly, because it is in AP's best interest to maximize enrollment, there is pressure from AP on NKU faculty, including program directors, to weaken admissions requirements and program curricula. This pressure is applied to NKU administrators who, in turn, pressure the faculty to make admissions and curricular changes.

In summary, the only service AP now provides to NKU is in marketing and recruitment, and the NKU faculty is unable to evaluate if that service is meeting any goal or objective.

### **Faculty Senate Recommendations Regarding the University's Agreement with Academic Partnerships**

We strongly recommend that an analysis be conducted *on every AP program* at NKU to determine how many students must be enrolled for the University to generate revenue. Such an analysis should be done with input from the program and/or school director. If the enrollment in any program does not meet the break-even point, that program ought not be included in a contract renewal. Programs that have sufficient enrollment to generate revenue for the University, *and that attract students who are unlikely to enroll in a traditional or hybrid program*, ought to be renewed, pending the agreement of the program and/or school director and the faculty who teach in those programs.

We strongly recommend that NKU administrators and faculty not acquiesce to high-pressure tactics that would weaken NKU's admissions standards or program curricula. "Quality matters" must be more than lip service. Actions that erode the quality of the educational experience harm students, faculty, the degree program's reputation, and the university's long-term viability.

We strongly recommend that NKU exercise greater oversight regarding the marketing of AP programs. AP must be held accountable for increasing enrollment in *every* program. Those NKU individuals responsible for the oversight of course mapping, marketing, and general oversight must be clearly identified. Such individuals must incorporate faculty input, including that of school or program directors, into their interactions with AP to ensure that programs are being marketed appropriately.

We recommend the creation of working groups within departments whose purpose is to solicit feedback from instructors of AP courses and to liaison with the university curriculum committee (UCC). The UCC should make recommendations to the university's AP point person, and the university's AP point person should be responsible for reporting back to the UCC.

We recommend that NKU exercise greater flexibility in making decisions regarding low-enrollment courses offered through the AP program. If low-enrollment courses must be offered, such courses ought to be made available to traditional students. If traditional students enroll in these courses, care must be exercised to ensure that these traditional students are not counted as AP students.

## **Appendix: Feedback from the faculty regarding Academic Partnerships**

*(Some identifying information has been removed and some comments edited for clarity.)*

***Theme: the quality of the educational experience for students and instructors is weakened in AP programs.***

- The 7-Week course requirement basically eliminates the opportunity for instructors to solicit student feedback on how to improve the course mid-way, in real-time. Due to the hyper-compressed mandated timelines, by the time the instructor receives feedback from students, or detects ways to improve a course, especially a new course, mid-way, there are only a couple weeks left, which denies the instructor the opportunity to make course improvements and denies the students opportunities for an improved learning experience. Both students and instructors “lose” because of these dynamics. Such dynamics then often create additional stress and problems for instructors to manage e.g., students then complain about the 7-week course structure, etc. within the anonymous course/instructor evaluations.
- As currently deployed, AP extracts and strips away most, if not all of the most productive and fulfilling aspects of the educational experience for instructors and students. Yes, many students may be initially seduced by the perceived convenience, discounted tuition rates and (recklessly) accelerated/fast timelines. However, once students start the class, many express dissatisfaction and regret about the AP “rules.” What many students report they seek, cherish and value above all else is a meaningful connection, relationship and communication with their instructor and their fellow students however AP approaches undermines, sabotages and largely eliminates opportunities for such interactions. However, the student is faced no choice but to enroll in the class and by the time they realize how horrible, restrictive, etc. the AP approaches, structure and “rules” are, it's often too late for them to get a refund on tuition from NKU so they just suffer through it. As do their instructors. Yet by then the students are often "angry, frustrated AP customers" and just blame everything on their NKU instructor vs. the faceless, nameless, bureaucratic corporate AP entities.
- Students in asynchronous online 7-week classes appear far less engaged and connected to NKU which, based upon initial observations and experiences, may be contributing to severe, precipitous declines of rates of student participation in completing course evals. This denies the instructor the opportunity to receive important feedback from students and significantly erodes the opportunity for instructors to improve their courses’ pedagogy and be responsive to student input. This results in lower quality education and learning experiences for students and makes the instructor's efforts to promote student success even more unnecessarily challenging.
- Faculty and administrators from numerous universities and colleges around the country continue to express disillusionment and disappointment at how and why NKU would ever enter into such an obviously extremely predatory corporate, anti-student, anti-public education contract with AP that undermines the integrity of public education and exploits their own instructors and staff at every turn. The fact that NKU has done this remains unconscionable within many amidst national and global educational communities.

- AP disregards, dismisses any and all respect for pedagogy or student's educational experience and learning process in their sole pursuit of corporate profits. This has quickly become obvious to students. One student, when frustrated and complaining about AP having learned she had to enroll in such course asked, “Does AP really stand for ‘Always Profits?’”
- AP rules for advising are not in the best interest of the student: AP does not want any students to be required to meet with an NKU advisor any time while they are in the program. It has been communicated they do not want anything to impede a student from registering for courses. While this may work with graduate studies, it does not work with undergrad as these students often need gen ed and/or additional upper division level credits in addition to the program requirements in order to graduate. AP does not communicate this to potential/new students (or at least not very well) because students will get to where they think they can graduate and find out they need several more courses to fulfill NKU graduation requirements. Students are furious and this creates a poor reflection on NKU, not AP.
- Students who graduate with AP courses have NOT encountered all of the content that we are able to offer students in our traditional programs.
- As stated before, all courses are 7-weeks, which does pose a problem for field as it is designed as a semester or 2-semester course. Having students starting field at these different 7-week term times becomes confusing for the agencies and they are not wanting to take students and are adamant about only taking students during the “typical” times (i.e., August, January, and May). This is hurting our relationship in the community with our agency partners. When this was addressed with AP, we were told to just get more agencies. This is NOT the issue. We have partnered with close to 75 new agencies and have over 200+ placement options. The issue is that the agencies do not want students that are not on their time lines. One of the biggest impacts is for the students that want to work in schools or hospitals. They find out later that they cannot do their internship at a school/hospital because of when they are slated to take field and this has upset some of the students as well.
- ... if the 7-week classes are as rigorous as our 16-week class, then two 7-week classes should amount to more than 12 credit hours of course work. If the student enrolls in 3, 7-week classes, it should amount to more than 18 hours of course work in those 7 weeks. A traditional student needs permission from the Dean to enroll in extra credit hours. The Dean pays attention to student capacity to engage in additional coursework; however, that process is eliminated with A[P]. Thus, relinquishing enrollment oversight may increase students’ chance to fail a course or to earn more than 2 “C” grades which would terminate the student from all NKU graduate programs.
- Online students, are not regularly checking emails, and have missed Field orientation or all important things related to field because of this. They seem more confused about the field process because they are not checking emails where they receive the necessary information.
- Requirement of course development in a packaged style so that any adjunct could teach any of our courses. This results in lower quality teaching, and ultimately negatively impacts our students.

***Theme: AP exerts pressure on NKU to weaken admission standards and program curricula.***

- Program faculty were promised that there would be a cut off for admissions, this has not been followed. In fact, NKU will admit transfer students 2 and 3 days after the first day of a 7-week term. This leaves the student NO time to get the textbook. By the time they are settled in, it's week 2, which is the equivalent of week 3 1/2 to 4 in a 16-week program.
- Program faculty were promised that if courses were in the carousel, they would be offered. It was acknowledged that they would be low enrolled at times, but they would be offered. Now, because of HUGE mistakes made in admin, we are being told those courses will be canceled if they are low enrolled and that we will need to find a substitute. It's insulting because if there were a suitable substitute, we wouldn't teach the class that was canceled.
- AP disregarded NKU admission standards for programs.
- We do a better job of admissions to enrollment if we (collectively) communicate and can reach out to applicants. Right now, only AP is supposed to reach out to applicants – we are allowed to once they are admitted.
- Their deadlines are also not realistic – not because we can't get them admitted and enrolled in time - but because financial aid can't be set up that quickly. We have a lot of students drop courses because they can't get financial aid worked out if it is three weeks or less before classes start.
- ... since we have kept our courses rigorous, faculty in our program have received lower course evaluations from AP students because some other programs have greatly reduced what is necessary for a student to complete an AP 7-week course. And, we have lost students to these programs, hurting our enrollment numbers. Leading to lowering admission standards and discussions about lowering course requirements to help boost enrollment
- Control of offerings should be determined by programs so that program requirements can be met.
- Curricular decisions—particularly about programs-should be under faculty control.
- Inability to offer synchronous online courses
- Inability to offer anything but 7-week courses, regardless of curricular needs
- Inability to offer our own orientation to incoming MSW students
- Pressured/forced to admit all applicants, even those with minimal qualifications.
- Inability to include necessary course content due to the condensed presentation of AP courses.
- AP value came early in the relationship, and they have been paid for this value. They force development of online programs, carousels, and course design. They provide, albeit poorly, behind the scenes: marketing, student support and instructional design.
- Since then, the behind-the-scenes support is inadequate.
- The administration overpromised and did not provide the faculty resources to deliver.

***Theme: Students are being misled by AP agents.***

- Communication – from AP (who represent themselves as NKU agents) to students.
- AP representatives are allowed to say they are from NKU when in fact they are not and continue to provide bad advice to students

- AP lies to incoming students about upcoming course and instructor expectations. AP also makes promises about course dynamics that they are totally ignorant of e.g. "Your instructor won't require students to complete assignments on the weekends." Then, once the class starts, AP's impossible promises, of which course instructors are totally unaware of, immediately prove false and then the students blame everything on their NKU faculty/instructor. In general, AP appears utterly useless, only existing as a parasitic, greed-fueled entity to NKU and represents an enormous squandering, excessive waste of State and University funds. What if any "staff" they have seem non-existent e.g., seemingly "no-show jobs." Whatever "marketing or recruitment" efforts they engage in remains invisible and/or non-existent. Instead, ALL the responsibility of creating new, online AP classes is dumped upon existing NKU faculty while AP remains devoid of relevant, or evident "checks and balances" or accountability and just collects the money in the manner of a corporate "cash grab" that is occurring on the backs of existing, overworked, underpaid public education teachers and staff.
- Communication errors from AP to students: AP has encouraged students who have a general associate degree to apply to the program and then request admission to the degree completion track, without clearly having met the admission requirements. This is surely a way for AP to get more students in the program but not acceptable. Also, when speaking with students they are often misadvised about the program, requirements, tuition, etc. This could be from false information relayed from AP at the time of recruitment/admission but also due to the lack of advising requirement.
- This is not an accelerated program.
- We call this an accelerated program, but unless students find an online 16 week to couple with their 2/2 7-week classes or attend over the summer, it will take a student more than 4 years to graduate.
- If the AP classes are as rigorous as the 16-week classes, students should not be enrolling in more than 2 during each 7-week period. When I asked about this during the AP meetings right after the contract was signed, both AP and the Provost said, well accelerated means the classes are accelerated, not the time it takes to graduate. However, all marketing by AP focuses on students graduating in less than 4 years. It appears AP wants us to enroll students in more than 2 classes every 7 weeks.

***Theme: AP programs cannibalize traditional programs.***

- We need to look at cannibalization data.
- AP advocates or requests the tuition be lower than our same program that isn't AP; we wouldn't be able to get our tuition lowered to match AP (for our hybrid programs) so that essentially cannibalizes our on-campus program since cost is a big factor for students. Ex: Advanced Standing MSW (AP tuition, regardless of residency, \$599 per credit hour and all fees included= \$18,500 30-hour program) (Hybrid program, KY resident: \$669 per credit hour; cost \$20, 120; breakdown: 613 resident rate + 16 rec fee + 40 for online course fee) (Hybrid program, Grad metro: \$630 per credit hour; cost \$20, 630; breakdown: 630 metro rate + 16 rec fee + 40 for online course fee).
- My department began offering our BA degree as part of NKU's partnership with Academic Partners. The data indicated that from 2000 to 2023 fall BA enrollment has increased dramatically. It has been proposed that online AP programs maybe cannibalized our native BA enrollment. If this is the case, one would expect that as the

AP BA numbers increased that there would be a corresponding decline in the on-campus BA's. This was not supported by the data I reviewed with native BA's increasing from 2018 to 2022.

***Theme: AP is not being held accountable for meeting their marketing obligations.***

- Lack of program specific marketing: I have yet to see any specific marketing tactics for [our program] from AP. In meetings with AP, when asked how they are advertising the program, it is always a generic answer. In AP reports showing the work of their outreach team, [our program] has never been mentioned. In quarterly reports with AP, I have provided various professions where marketing should be targeted but have yet to see anything done with it. My point is that six years into this relationship, AP does not know how to market my program and when given suggestions of what was successful when NKU marketed the program, they go nowhere. This is obvious given our enrollment is significantly down in comparison to where it was pre-AP.
- When we entered into the partnership with AP they had been primarily offering graduate level programs in business, healthcare and education. Offering undergraduate programs was a relatively new venture for them. I do not believe that there was any in-depth marketing analysis to see which undergraduate programs would be of interest to the target market. The target market being nontraditional adult learners who had some previous college course work and are seeking to obtain a degree while working and managing family demands. Further analysis of the enrollment data needs to be done to determine if this is the demographic that we have been able to reach with AP. Specifically, a comparison of the age, marital status, and location of AP students to our native population would be insightful. As we move forward there should be a market analysis to determine which programs are more appealing to this nontraditional demographic.
- ... after AP took the initial programs, existing online programs that were not included became invisible. For instance, if a student interested in Organizational Leadership online called the 'NKU Online Admissions' or completed an online admissions application, they were told that it wasn't available online and it wasn't an option on the online admissions application.
- ... if some programs ... are removed, when new students apply, they will no longer see the online options for programs not included in the [AP] contract and conclude the program is not offered online.
- ... each program needs their own link to the application process, and AP needs to agree to provide information to students calling about online programs that are not in their contract. Simply provide a contact to someone at the university, so those students aren't left in a vacuum.
- AP Revenue shares are too large.
- Data from AP—unsourced, unreliable.

***Theme: AP "point persons" at NKU are not responsive to faculty concerns.***

- Resistance from those at NKU managing AP programs: Those who are in charge of managing AP programs at NKU seem to be pro-AP and are resistant to hearing



otherwise). They also make any small change request an ordeal and are steadfast in their support of AP, instead of what is best for our NKU program and NKU students. They disregard any/all feedback from me as a program director who has managed this program for 10 years.

- Lack of any enrollment growth: When AP took over [our program], we had [twice as many] enrolled students. As of Spring 2023, we have [half as many] students currently enrolled. I have tried to professionally communicate my concerns to deans, Sam, etc. but it is met with extreme resistance. Those making decisions/reviewing the data do not know the history of the program/tracks and AP is presenting information about program growth that is not accurate.
- Control of scheduling—unable to make cuts to carousel, had to appeal. There is only one point person outside the college who was characterized as having AP interests rather than NKUs at the forefront-- Point person should advocate for university, not AP.

***Theme: Faculty workload has increased since entering the agreement with AP.***

- NKU instructors are excluded from whatever "orientation" AP purports to engage in; however, once the class starts, the NKU faculty are besieged with trying to dispel AP myths, provide accurate, current information to students yet by then it's too late. Students then complain about and blame everything on their NKU instructors via their teaching/course evaluations, which then just creates more work, stress and problems for NKU faculty to manage. These dynamics mean that AP forces NKU instructors into a constant state of "damage-control" as NKU instructors attempt to explain all the lies that AP tells incoming students. It's profoundly time-consuming and demoralizing. Students and instructors all lose in this scenario. Meanwhile, AP just sits on the sidelines, does nothing and collects massive corporate profits.
- The fact that existing NKU faculty are forced to create the curricula, materials, Canvas courses, etc. for new AP courses represents an enormous burden on top of already exploding/excessive instructor workloads, especially during a global pandemic. The fact that NKU faculty are not monetarily compensated for these additional, enormous expenditures of labor is tantamount to a university-wide scheme and a potentially legally actionable instance of class-action labor/worker wage theft.
- The intense additional burden that AP places on NKU faculty is not fairly distributed across NKU colleges or departments. Some colleges and departments are forced into using AP which means their faculty, staff and advisors endure enormous extra, additional uncompensated work while other colleges and departments are allowed to continue as if AP does not exist. These colleges and departments reap alleged potential benefits from the illusion that AP is somehow benefitting NKU (which it obviously is not) while carrying none of the extreme burden that AP and NKU forces upon existing NKU faculty in other departments and colleges regarding curriculum development.
- Too much pressure to meet deadlines during AP course development
- High pressure tactics—timetable, content, style

***Theme: The decision to enter an agreement with AP was inconsistent with collegial governance.***

- NKU hires world-class faculty from around the country who possess areas of expertise such as (but not limited to) business, finance, law, contracts, torts, private and government contract negotiations, executive management/budgeting, etc., however NKU Administration made the (reckless) decision to not meaningfully include such faculty into the decision-making process prior to signing the contract with AP. Sadly and tragically, had NKU Administration chosen a path which included such parties, which have a preponderance of relevant expertise, such would have likely resulted with FAR greater, more positive monetary and educational outcomes for NKU in general. Yet unfortunately and regretfully, NKU faculty were largely shut out from the decision to enter into this contract with AP. Had faculty been included in the process, there could have been some "checks and balances" and NKU perhaps wouldn't be \$28 million in the red, much of which can be blamed on what can only be described as abysmal contract negotiations (at least for the interests of NKU) with AP.
- I'm really concerned about the university ending 7-week programs after the AP contract is dead. We have students that have been admitted into these programs without any knowledge of the AP contract or it possibly ending. While there are a lot of problems with AP and what the university has set up, I don't want our program to be forced to end the 7-week program or alter it greatly just because the university made a bad decision. We need to find a way to allow it to continue allowing each program to make changes necessary for their success. i.e., faculty governance, which seems to be unheard of these days at NKU.

***Theme: Outcomes of the agreement with AP are inconsistent with NKU's values.***

- AP exists and depends upon a "one-size-fits-all" approach. However, not every college, department, class, discipline or topic is equally able to be effectively taught within their "one-size-fits-all" approach. For example, a class on policy or literature may be able to be transitioned to a 100% online 7-week, accelerated asynchronous environment with some ease; however attempting to teach nursing students how to bandage wounds, insert IV's, de-escalate psychotic individuals, train students how to best triage gunshot victims, how to intervene immediately after a patient or client is murdered, how to best supportively and effectively reveal to a patient/client that they have just tested positive for HIV/AIDS, etc. are all essential to provide effective training to current and future public health leaders yet these topics and educational imperatives do not transfer or fit AP's "one-size fits all" approach. This appears to represent NKU choosing alleged "profits" over "people" and makes NKU more of a potential threat to public health, safety and the State/Region's standards of healthcare vs. the trusted, health-advancing community institution NKU was historically regarded as.
- NKU spends millions of dollars on, enables and permits AP to operate in a "Ponzi-scheme" like manner where existing, already chronically underpaid, overworked, doctorate-level expert faculty are forced to engage in even further unpaid overwork in order to create courses that AP gets all the monetary remuneration and "credit" for. In this regard, AP acts like a silent, invisible, "no-show" "investor" in NKU's educational infrastructure that simply collects the huge corporate profits from the highly-expert, highly educated labor and expertise of others at NKU.
- AP does not align in any evident way with existing NKU DEI initiatives and commitments as announced and stated by NKU. In fact, the exploitation of often diverse,

expert, underpaid existing labor and the parasitic nature of AP aggressively undermines ALL alleged NKU DEI commitments.

- NKU purports to care about reducing gender-based oppression that women experience however considering the majority of NKU instructors are women, entering into and continuing the massive AP wage/labor-theft scheme further oppresses women and other minorities.
- NKU has at least voiced a desire to rectify the "crisis of non-belongingness," low-morale, etc. that NKU faculty/staff report experiencing en masse; however, AP remains one of the most potent mechanisms for creating and proliferating NKU's current toxic work environment and culture.