

# This is why it matters that Western Illinois University fired all its librarians

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## FULL TEXT

I am a professor at Western Illinois University, where the new interim president and interim provost gained approval from the board of trustees to lay off nearly 90 people, including all eight librarians. This was a surprise move that took place over the summer when faculty members and students are largely gone from campus. We can start to get a glimpse of the harm the ill-conceived layoffs are doing to the university by considering the decision to eliminate librarians, thus depriving WIU students of basic services expected not only of any credible university but also of functional K-12 schools.

In the absence of any adequate explanations as to why some faculty or staff members have been targeted over others, many of us question the values driving these decisions. Why librarians? Why were so many faculty members laid off and so few administrators? Why is athletics permitted to run multimillion-dollar deficits every year, whereas other programs are held to parsimonious "bottom-line" restrictions?

In the last such purge at WIU, in 2016, the university eliminated majors and programs in philosophy, women's and gender studies, African American studies and religious studies -- all disciplines dedicated to researching and teaching logic, ethics, morality, diversity and equity. Why were they deemed less important than maintaining a golf course?

The priorities expressed by the cuts taking place at WIU over the last decade are consistent with such cuts being taken all over the country in which the liberal arts and humanities are being gutted. Administrators such as President Kristi Mindrup at WIU claim to be cutting their universities into "the right shape." How do we know what the right shape is? Who decides that it is the liberal arts, the humanities or the librarians who are responsible for "misshapen" institutions?

Here is the thing: Our selective, nationally ranked universities are not getting rid of their philosophy departments and all of their librarians. The cost-cutting measures we see at WIU and similar institutions imply that only children of privilege deserve librarians, or the humanities, or the arts. That training in information science, critical thinking and creativity properly belongs to those who can afford it. This attitude practically ensures that scientific research and cultural products will predominantly reflect the views and the values of the elite. The kinds of cost-cutting trends exemplified by what just happened at WIU suggests that students attending certain kinds of regional schools should stick to vocational degrees catering to the immediate needs of businesses.

WIU serves a large constituency of first-generation students from Illinois -- I was such a student -- and it has been recently ranked by The Wall Street Journal as being in the top 10% of schools in fostering social mobility. The administration's hasty, seemingly arbitrary, cuts will undo these important gains. It is well understood that student success is encouraged by the presence of role models, by evidence that people like them can be professionals, leaders, experts and professors. Women and people of color are underrepresented at the highest ranks in academia. Layoffs affect greater numbers of the untenured, younger and more diverse pool of instructors, cutting off their ability to establish their careers and earn promotion. Thus, layoffs typically perpetuate inequality.

Librarians are on the front line in getting books into the hands of the diverse constituencies, of defending our First Amendment rights against those who want to ban books. They put powerful research resources in the hands of everyone, even first-generation students, even students in parts of our state who have been part of the so-called

"Forgottonia."

Since the beginnings of our republic, public education and public libraries have been a key part of the American experiment. They absolutely can increase social mobility. They absolutely are something we as a country can be proud of. Given that the American Library Association has called legislation and other actions targeting librarians as "a threat to our democracy," WIU's decision to dispense with librarians is an ideological one, even if the administration did not intend it that way.

Most professors will tell you that good students share qualities no matter where they are from: intellectual curiosity, a thirst for learning, a desire to challenge themselves, a willingness to work hard. You can find those students at Ivy League schools and state flagship institutions, and you can find them at Western Illinois University. We are all diminished if only privileged students get the resources they need to thrive.

A big reason college is unaffordable for so many Illinois families is because of a long trend of public disinvestment in public higher education. I appeal to Gov. JB Pritzker and to legislators in Springfield to reinvest in all Illinois students -- not just the elite. Allocate adequate funds to the regional universities that are the engines of social mobility in our state. Make it possible for our diverse and talented students to plot a path to prosperity and realize their potential. Help us help them meet the challenges that our state, our nation and our world face now and will face in the future. Sherry C.M. Lindquist is a professor of art history at Western Illinois University.

CAPTION: Photo: People walk on the Western Illinois University campus in Macomb in 2021. Jose M.

Osorio/Chicago Tribune

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