

New Orleans universities plan huge cuts as state funding shrinks

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Two New Orleans-based public universities, the University of New Orleans (UNO), and Southern University at New Orleans (SUNO), are planning deep budget cuts in response to declining state funding. SUNO has announced \$2.6 million in cuts, while UNO has announced cuts of \$12 million, the largest in school history.

Louisiana, and New Orleans in particular, has been at the forefront of the assault on education in the United States, particularly after Hurricane Katrina. After the levees failed and flooded over eighty percent of the city of New Orleans, the American ruling elite converted New Orleans into a test bed for the most right-wing social policies, with a particular emphasis on education "reform," which consisted mostly in ripping up teachers' contracts and tenure rights and privatizing the vast majority of New Orleans' school system. Since then, other parishes throughout the state have begun to follow suit (see "Assault on Louisiana schools escalates").

However, this has not been confined simply to K-12 education. Over the past four years, according to the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, state funding for public universities has been slashed nearly in half, from \$1.6 billion to \$993.6 million in the current fiscal year, which began on July 1. The current fiscal year alone will see \$66 million fewer dollars flowing into public universities from the state's general fund. UNO and SUNO's allocation from the general fund will be down by 18 and 24 percent respectively this year; SUNO's state funding has declined by more than half since the start of the 2007-2008 school year.

UNO has projected that it will eliminate 130 jobs out of a total workforce of 1,737 in what UNO president Peter Fos described as "the most significant budget cuts in the history of our institution." Plans include the

firing of 16 staff members, the elimination of 26 graduate student assistantships, and leaving unfilled 30 faculty vacancies. Additionally, all non-essential personnel will be forced to take a seven day leave during the the spring break holiday that will be deducted from their vacation days.

Deep, crippling cuts are already underway. On August 3, the university announced the elimination of the UNO press director position and that it was putting the publisher "on a brief hiatus, during which time it will be accepting no new manuscripts while the administration reviews the UNO Press' business plan." Former director, Bill Lavender, the publisher's only employee, took UNO Press from a position of mediocrity to what the *Times-Picayune* described as a "nationally regarded book publishing venture." In 2007, the publisher had a catalogue of two out-of-print books; today, it has around 80 books in print. Outraged students and writers have since launched a petition drive to have Lavender reinstated.

Fos pointed to declining enrollment as a precipitating factor in the cuts. About 1,300 fewer students are expected to enroll in the fall semester when compared to the fall 2009 semester, when over 11,000 attended UNO.

SUNO in particular has been hit especially hard by recent state budget cuts. Established in 1959 as the New Orleans campus of the Baton Rouge-based historically black college Southern University, SUNO last year was embroiled in a bitter debate over whether to eliminate the school entirely and merge it with nearby UNO. While that proposal has, for the moment, been defeated, the university remains impoverished and starved of funds, which finds its reflection in abysmal four-year graduation rates that are under 10 percent.



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