

Illinois public higher education hit with more cuts

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The butchering of Illinois' public higher education system continues as the state has been operating without a budget since July 1. Both Democrats and Republicans are attempting to use the budget impasse to introduce permanent reductions in state funding to public education.

The budget stalemate has meant Illinois' public universities and colleges have not received any state funding for the current school year. For some colleges, state funding amounts to 30 percent of their operating budget. Moreover, students have not received any of their need-based Monetary Award Program (MAP) grants. As such, state colleges and universities have begun the process of gutting programs and eliminating faculty positions to maintain costs.

Earlier this month Southern Illinois University, located in Carbondale, announced the potential layoffs of 180 faculty and staff positions, 300 student-worker positions and the slashing of 20 percent of its total operating budget, amongst other cuts.

On March 14 Northeastern Illinois University in Chicago began furloughing roughly 1,000 workers, requiring them to take one unpaid day each week. Through this maneuver NEIU is expecting to save between \$225,000 and \$250,000 per week as workers see their paychecks dwindle.

In Charleston, Eastern Illinois University workers may be expected to take a "deferral in salaries." In other words, workers may receive cuts to their salaries ranging anywhere from 2.5 to 7.5 percent dependent upon income. Faculty and academic personnel recently voted down a proposed 5.6 percent flat rate cut for all employees.

Western Illinois University (WIU) in Macomb has announced fiscal cuts for the next two years beginning July 1, 2016. WIU already slashed \$5 million from its

current fiscal budget with \$4 million expected to be sliced off by the end of June. The cuts will be accommodated by mandatory furloughs for non-negotiated personnel beginning April 1 in addition to the layoff of approximately 100 workers. WIU is currently covering \$11 million worth of MAP grants for students.

Last Wednesday, the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago sent out letters to 738 students announcing they would no longer cover the costs of their MAP grants which have been unfunded due to the budget impasse. As a result, these students will not be able to register for classes on April 4 for next year's semester until they pay the cost of tuition the MAP grants were originally going to cover. The university has set up loans for students to cover the new costs, which will remain interest-free through September. Beyond that, their loans will be hit with a 6.8 percent interest rate.

The community college Parkland College, located in Champaign, has cut 46 positions from its staff alongside cuts to programming. Meanwhile, Oakton Community College has raised tuition by 10.8 percent this year and may raise it by the same amount next year. Joliet Junior College has also raised its tuition this year and Highland Community College in Freeport and Rock Valley College in Rockford will most likely see tuition increases come next school year.

In Carterville, students at John A. Logan Community College staged protests against staff layoffs and the cutting of services and programs. The college recently announced that 55 employees are to be laid off in the coming months. Commenting on the cuts, a mother of a student at John A. Logan told the *WPSD Local 6* news, "I have another daughter who is hearing impaired, and they're cutting all of our interpreters at the school. So, they're setting her up to fail."

The lack of state funding has inevitably affected the credit rating of Illinois' community colleges. Moody's announced the possibility of downgrading the credit ratings of 19 Illinois community colleges, affecting approximately \$855 million of rated debt.

While Republican Governor Bruce Rauner is arguably the most openly aggressive figure seeking to drastically cut funding to Illinois public higher education, both Democrats and Republicans are in complete agreement that significant cuts must be made. Rauner has proposed a 20 percent reduction in state funding for higher education, down from his original proposition of 30 percent. In turn, the Democrats have suggested cuts amounting to 8.5 percent which would result in a loss of millions of dollars in funding. Whatever the final percentage may be, it will be significant.

In 2010, then Illinois Governor Pat Quinn, a Democrat, introduced a state budget that saw \$1.5 billion slashed in the forms of cuts to social programs and education, with \$100 million cut from Illinois' public higher education system. Without mincing words, Quinn stated, "I've got to adopt a budget for our state that still invests in Illinois, the important things, and cuts back everything that's not a priority."

Both parties are seeking to exploit the budget crisis to extract concessions from the working class. For students and workers, the defense of public education is bound up with a political fight against both parties of big business, the Democrats and Republicans, and the capitalist profit system they defend.



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