

Massive enrolment decline at Illinois public colleges and universities due to state budget impasse

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Public colleges and universities in Illinois have endured an unprecedented level of effective budget cuts, amounting to more than 60 percent of previous state funding for higher education over the 22 months since the state government last passed a full state budget. Operating on less than half of a normal budget, many schools have raised tuition, laid off and furloughed staff, and eliminated majors and other programs.

In fiscal year (FY) 2016, billionaire Republican Governor Bruce Rauner and Democratic leaders in the state legislature appropriated only \$755 million for higher education, down from \$1.95 billion in the previous year. In FY 2017, state funding totaled only \$843 million, part of a so-called “stop-gap” budget which ended in January.

These cuts have created uncertainty over whether certain schools will remain open, and have resulted in massive declines in enrollment in public higher education as a whole. According to the State Higher Education Finance Report for 2016, more than half of the national decline in public higher education enrollment from FY 2015 to 2016 was accounted for by Illinois alone, which lost about 46,000 students, or around 11 percent of total enrollment.

The drop in enrollment is not surprising, as some of the biggest declines have occurred at those institutions that are in the worst financial shape and which have carried out the biggest cuts. Leading the way was Chicago State University, which saw a 24 percent decline in enrollment in 2016, and the “regional” universities, Eastern Illinois University, Southern Illinois University-Carbondale and Western Illinois, which saw smaller but significant declines.

More cuts at these schools are forthcoming. The administration of Eastern Illinois University plans to have its board of trustees vote soon to eliminate its degree programs in Africana Studies, career and technical education, and adult and community education. The philosophy program, originally targeted for elimination, will drop three of its seven full-time professors via “attrition” by 2019. It will also have to attract 20 students to major in philosophy by 2020 or the program will risk elimination again.

Northeastern Illinois University in Chicago furloughed workers over spring break in March, and is requiring further furlough days in April and May in order to reduce expenses.

Southern Illinois University President Randy Dunn announced that SIU will release its own plans for further restructuring soon and remarked, “Everything within the magnitude of operations, we’re going to be looking at.” Speaking at a state Senate committee hearing last week Dunn said this might include, “Potentially making reductions or closing certain operations. Everything other than tenured faculty would be available for reorganization, restructuring, removing.”

It would be incorrect, however, to see the budget cuts to higher education and the resulting effects as merely an unfortunate byproduct of the state’s budget impasse. Although that dispute has been fueled by deep tactical differences between Rauner and the Democrats over the continued role of the unions in suppressing worker anger and militancy, the assault on higher education institutions is, as in the case of public primary and secondary education, a thoroughly bipartisan affair.

In an interview given to WTTW’s Chicago Tonight,

Rauner said, “We need to shrink the bureaucracy in our university system. We have an expensive overhead, pension, work rules, restrictions. Just like inside state government, we need to shrink that bureaucracy. We need to put our money in our schools, in our teachers, in our students, and we need the state to step up and do a better job supporting our schools.”

Signaling a more aggressive stance against higher education, Rauner also said, “We also need to eliminate the redundancy in our schools. Many of them offer the same majors and options, and we have too much overlap. We need to help streamline our university system.”

Republican state Senator Chapin Rose, a Rauner ally, spelled out some of the implications after a recent Illinois Senate committee hearing. Attacking a plan by the University of Illinois system to build a new facility for STEM programs in Springfield, Rose asked, “Why are we funding a building for an unranked program when you’ve got the number-six engineering school in the world [at the Urbana-Champaign campus] that could at least stay in the top 10 with that money?”

Such a plan to consolidate programs of education at single locations is not a new idea. In fact, the same idea was pioneered at the City Colleges of Chicago (CCC), Chicago’s community college system, and was heavily pushed by Democratic mayor Rahm Emanuel, who is close to Rauner and worked with him in his attacks on public schools and teachers in Chicago.

One of the first likely targets of this more aggressive agenda is Chicago State University (CSU). CSU saw its state funding cut by a higher percentage than any other public university, and has laid off 40 percent of its staff as a result, roughly 400 workers. It has also seen its accreditation threatened because of the recent financial problems.

Underscoring the bipartisan collaboration in this assault, Paul Vallas was recently named by CSU’s Rauner-controlled board to a newly created post of chief administrative officer in order to carry out a “turnaround” at the school. Vallas was installed by former Chicago mayor Richard M. Daley as Chicago Public Schools (CPS) CEO in 1995, where he initiated the program of school closures and privatizations that has continued to the present. Since then, he has overseen similar assaults at school systems in Philadelphia, New Orleans, Haiti, and Bridgeport,

Connecticut.

It must also be noted that even prior to the large decline resulting from the budget impasse, student enrollment in Illinois declined 17.5 percent from 2011 to 2016, more than triple the percent decline in enrollment of the US as a whole, all at a time when state government was controlled entirely by the Democratic Party, including current House Speaker Michael Madigan.

According to a report from the Center for Tax and Budget Accountability (CTBA), higher education funding had already dropped from \$2.2 billion in 2008 to \$1.9 billion in 2015. CTBA also noted that since 2000, adjusted for inflation, higher education has been singled out for deeper cuts than any other major area of state spending, with an effective reduction of 41 percent.



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