

University of Wisconsin Stevens Point students, faculty stage sit-in to protest cuts to humanities

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On Wednesday, March 21 more than 300 students and professors at University of Wisconsin Stevens Point (UWSP) marched together and occupied an administration building in response to the proposed elimination of 13 majors and demanding their right to a liberal arts education. As part of the protest, students sent the university's chancellor and administration a letter requesting to work with the university's administration to create alternative proposals that will not cut any humanities programs.

Students held signs, reading, "Where's your Humanity? It's been Cut!" Mackenzie Madison, an art student, lamented the possible loss of the nationally accredited art department, telling Wisconsin Public Radio, "I'm really infuriated. The art department is what brought me here. The art department is what defines this campus. It's a big part of this community."

Earlier in March, administration officials announced a proposal to eliminate 13 academic majors from UWSP's humanities programs, a move which has drawn widespread anger from students and professors, as well as national notoriety. The proposal has been framed as a necessary cost-cutting solution to resolve the school's projected deficit of \$4.5 million over the next two years and stabilize declining enrollment.

The money to fund high quality public education, including the humanities, is readily available. The effort to slash the humanities at UWSP in order to cover a comparatively modest budget shortfall comes amid immense levels of social inequality in the United States and record profits for the wealthy. Wisconsin's nine richest people control nearly \$50 billion in wealth, a mere 0.0001 percent of their combined net worth would more than cover UWSP's projected shortfall.

As part of Republican Governor Scott Walker's plan to transform impoverished areas of the state into cheap labor platforms, seemingly unlimited amounts of money are being made readily available to subsidize the costs of private businesses such as electronics manufacturer Foxconn, which will receive \$4.5 billion in public funds. A recent \$100 million "Safety Plan" bill, which easily passed the Wisconsin State Senate, will place more armed police officers at Wisconsin schools.

The 13 majors slated for elimination include Art, English, French, Foreign Languages, History, Music, Literature, Philosophy, Political Science, and Sociology; fields which promote the development of culture and critical thought, but are derided as unable to meet "state workforce needs." The plan will eliminate multiple tenured professors and block countless future students from having the opportunity to pursue these disciplines.

The university's administration declared they want to move away from liberal arts and humanities programs in favor of those more "technical in nature" in part by emphasizing "high-demand career paths", which they hope will be more popular and therefore more likely to attract additional students and revenue. This includes the proposal to expand eight "technical" programs supposedly more likely to lead to employment, which include finance, graphic design, management, marketing, business administration and physical therapy.

However, forcing students into a technical major does not mean that they will be guaranteed a job under present economic conditions, where those who do find employment in their field end up in low wage jobs or

are forced into unrelated fields, all saddled by immense student loan debt.

Formal proposals for changes made by the campus governance system and the University of Wisconsin, which will detail projected numbers of job cuts and program eliminations, will come after August 1, with approval from the UW System Board of Regents. Faculty and staff of the academic departments being axed will face mass layoffs, with tenured teaching jobs set to begin being eliminated starting in June 2020.

Since 2013, the university, located in central Wisconsin, has seen a decline in enrollment of 15 percent, down to 8,200 students in 2017 from 9,600 in 2013. According to the university, student population has been declining due to a reduction in the number of high school students looking to enter college upon graduating, a 12 percent drop in first year student retention, and the reduction in the general education courses required to graduate resulting in students leaving their studies earlier.

The proposed sweeping cuts to the humanities studies at UWSP are part of a broader restructuring of the University of Wisconsin system statewide, undertaken specifically for the purpose of cost-cutting.

UW System President Ray Cross announced a plan last October to restructure the state's public university system, which was approved in November by the UW Board of Regents for implementation beginning July 1, 2018. This restructuring would tie the thirteen two-year UW Colleges to their larger sister universities nearest to them, effectively making them regional satellite campuses of the latter.

The proposal also removes separate administration of the UW-Extension campuses and places them under UW-Madison and UW System administration. UW Colleges Online, which has been operated as an additional campus just as the UW-Extension, will also be reorganized under UW System administration.

The system's restructuring was announced without consulting any of the campuses, UW administrators affected or shared governance groups, and drew heavy criticism for being a nakedly rushed-through cost-cutting measure resulting from demands by Walker to reduce the cost of operations and resolve the UW System's budget deficit.

The latest system-wide changes follow earlier attempts by Walker to amend the so-called "Wisconsin

Idea" by removing words that commanded the university to "search for truth" and "improve the human condition" and replace them with "meet the state's workforce needs."

Wisconsin state Democrats reacted to the proposed cuts at UWSP with general ambivalence and no proposed plans to keep the humanities programs running. Their sole offering to date came at a March 13 campus town hall meeting hosted by Democratic State Representative Katrina Shankland and the UWSP Student Government Association, providing a forum for student and community members to voice their dismay at the proposed cuts.

Students and faculty are planning further demonstrations against cuts, fearing that the UWSP plan will be a test run for further cuts throughout the UW system in step with Walker's 'Wisconsin Idea' vision for the university to be repurposed as providing cheap labor for corporate interests in Wisconsin.

Rather than demanding a seat at the table to devise alternative ways of implementing funding cuts, students, instructors, and staff must appeal to workers and youth throughout the US and internationally to reject all attempts to gut the UW System, insisting on the right of all to higher education.



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