

West Virginia college axes liberal arts; Pennsylvania Historical Society slashes workforce

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West Virginia's Wheeling Jesuit University (WJU) late last month announced the elimination of all of its liberal arts majors, along with the layoff of 20 of its 52 tenured faculty members. The move was followed this week by the termination of the college's affiliation with the Jesuit order of the Roman Catholic Church.

The college, founded in 1954, recruits students from Wheeling and surrounding economically depressed areas of West Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Ohio, once the heart of the American steel and coal industry.

Nineteen majors will be eliminated, including in every field associated with classic liberal arts education—among them history, literature, philosophy, mathematics, and even theology, long a feature major at colleges linked to the Catholic Church.

The college cut every Jesuit position at the school, which this week resulted in the revocation of its Jesuit affiliation by the Maryland Province of the Society of Jesus, apparently the first time such a move has taken place. The Jesuit order sponsors 28 US colleges and universities, including Boston College, Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., and Marquette University in Milwaukee.

Only 11 majors will remain—each one of them a “pre-professional,” or vocational program. Also spared are the college's athletic programs. WJU, which announced a financial emergency in early March, will be reduced in all but name to a technical school—should it not close its doors entirely, the fate of 24 liberal arts colleges since 2016.

Behind WJU's axing of liberal arts is the gathering financial crisis in American higher education, driven most immediately by spiraling tuition costs and stagnant high school graduation rates. Decreases in

enrollment at institutions dependent upon student tuition—a category that includes most public colleges under conditions of declining state support—are seized upon by banks to impose higher borrowing costs. Colleges are responding by targeting for savings—or outright destruction—fields in the humanities and social sciences.

WJU's move is symptomatic of the development of an openly class-based system in higher education. On one side are low-endowment private colleges and financially starved public universities and community colleges. These colleges are increasingly dropping even the pretense that they are doing anything more than preparing young people for a lifetime of exploitation. As the WJU administration put it in a statement, its recent moves aim “to better equip students for the 21st century economy, while refocusing [on] academic programs in health sciences, business administration and education.”

On the other side of the higher education class divide are the massively endowed private institutions and a handful of the very elite “public” universities. Here the attack on liberal arts does not come through budget cuts. It is spearheaded by highly paid professors, practitioners of identity politics and postmodernism, ideological currents hostile to art, science and historical truth.

That this latest attack on education takes place in West Virginia, the scene of two major statewide strikes of public school teachers over the past year, underscores the fact that the defense of education must be widened to embrace educators at all levels—from grade school through college, and at both public and private institutions. In all cases the antagonist is the

same: an economic and political setup that subordinates human needs, including the need for access to the arts and sciences, to the profit imperatives of the financial elite.

Historical Society of Pennsylvania lays off 30 percent of its staff

The Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP), one of the oldest such organizations in the US, on Monday announced it would lay off 10 staff members, about 30 percent of its already barebones staff. It will immediately suspend publication of its historical magazine, *Pennsylvania Legacies*.

A mere 24 employees will be left in charge of a library and archive that houses 21 million separate items—that is, about 1 million volumes, manuscripts and artifacts per worker—including print materials that date back to the early colonial period. By way of comparison, Harvard University Library, the nation’s largest academic library, houses some 17 million volumes, but boasts a staff of several hundred full-time employees.

The HSP is facing an operating deficit of \$400,000 beyond its roughly \$3 million budget. To offset the absence of state and city support, the facility has been pleading with universities in Philadelphia to form some sort of partnership. After being spurned by Pennsylvania University, the city’s Ivy League institution—which sits on a \$14 billion endowment—the HSP is currently pursuing an alliance with Drexel University. The sticking point is reportedly the HSP’s debt.

Last year, the Philadelphia History Museum, a spin-off of the HSP, closed its doors after the Democratic Party-controlled city eliminated all funding.

Founded in 1824, the HSP is located in downtown Philadelphia less than one mile from Independence Hall, the cradle of the American Revolution. Its collections are world-renowned for their scope and depth. The society’s web site notes that among its millions of holdings are “the first draft of the United States Constitution, an original printer’s proof of the Declaration of Independence, and the earliest surviving

American photograph.”



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