

Northern Virginia Community College faculty and staff speak out about loss of work due to budget crisis

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As budget crises intensify throughout the United States, budget cuts and other forms of the pandemic's lasting social impact are increasingly being felt by working people and working-class youth.

In the past week, members of the Northern Virginia Community College chapter of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) have been contacted by faculty and staff members at NVCC (also referred to as NOVA) describing the loss of work in the state's community college system. "Before the semester started [an administrator] told me that they had to take one of my classes and give it to a full-timer who had low enrollment," stated an adjunct faculty member who chose to remain anonymous.

The professor explained that the loss of one class would result in a de facto wage cut of \$2,700 for the semester. The stipulation which allows this brazen poaching of students essentially pits full-time faculty members against the more numerous adjunct staff in a race to the bottom.

"I've been so angry about this policy for years, but this is the first time it affected me," the professor said. "Since they only let us know one to two weeks before school starts we don't even have a chance to try to find another job or a way to make up for the loss in our paychecks." The teacher noted that students who sign up to take a class from a preferred professor will find out that they've been transferred to another professor without being given a choice in the matter.

The loss of work and pay is taking place as funding for public college dries up and the state begins to implement austerity measures in the midst of the pandemic economic collapse. According to the Public Broadcasting System, about 70 percent of college

professors are nontenured or on track to be tenured. "Described as the 'gig workers' of academia, adjuncts receive contracts on a course-by-course basis and make, on average, about \$3,000 per class," the report notes.

For such professors, "[F]ate is tied firmly to student enrollment. Even in boom times, colleges can scrap an adjunct-taught course if enrollment in that course doesn't meet expectations. The hook can come as the semester begins, or even a week or two in."

NOVA, which is publicly funded, is the largest community college in the Commonwealth of Virginia and the second largest in the US overall. According to *Pro Publica*, the college has over \$24.8 million in assets.

As a state school, NOVA's funding is being cut by the administration of Democratic governor Ralph Northam as well as the Democratic Party-controlled General Assembly, Virginia's legislature.

As the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, Virginia lawmakers agreed to end certain minor funding increases given in March to aid education. Plans for a second-year tuition freeze were scrapped as well as pay increases to teachers. On average, the state of Virginia spends over 8 percent less on its students than it did prior to the 2008 financial recession. In addition, tuition at four-year colleges has increased by more than 50 percent since that year.

In August, the General Assembly began meetings for a special session intending to pass an amended austerity budget. As the session began, Northam made clear that the return of funding for education and other social programs was predicated upon getting people back to work.

The Northam administration has refused to tap

Virginia's \$1.1 billion "rainy day" fund to help meet the budget crisis in the state education system. Rather than doing this, which might affect Virginia's AAA-rated municipal bond rating, Northam has proposed schools refinance loans, backed with the state's credit, to help meet financial obligations and defer payments.

This initiative, which was revealed last week, "delayed our payments, but we still have to make the payments. And during the time of the delay, we're still accruing interest," stated George Mason University President Gregory Washington to the *Washington Post* of Northam's plan.

The social austerity takes place in the midst of an economic crisis that has had an outsized impact on education workers. According to the Department of Labor, last month saw mass layoffs of at least 350,000 education jobs nationwide, the result of budget cuts in the face of the loss of state revenue. This follows after more than 1.4 million education jobs were axed in spring.

The financial fallout is resulting in catastrophic work and job loss for students and campus staff throughout Virginia. "The last time I worked on campus was a single shift in September, after that there was just nothing," said a student worker at NOVA to the WSWS.

The student explained that at that time he received a notice from his employer that encouraged him to reapply as a seasonal worker. The e-mail read: "You are all currently in the system as Part Time employees. Home office has asked us to get you moved over to Seasonal to better reflect the current workload," adding, "Try and get this done this week because home office will have us do separations sooner than later."

The student worker explained how the removal of hours had affected him as well as others. "I live at home with family. I had plans to move out, but since the pandemic those have been shot pretty much." He said that "some people aren't so lucky." He said that some international students had been forced to begin working illegally in order to support themselves after the loss of their campus jobs. Under the terms of their F1 student visas, international students may only be employed on campus.

The crisis of public education systems has also impacted college students. Another *Post* article, "The latest crisis: Low-income students are dropping out of

college this fall in alarming numbers," notes that 49,500 students were enrolled in NOVA this fall, a drop of 4.5 percent compared with last year, which saw 51,821 enrolled. Public community colleges in Virginia saw an overall drop in enrollment of 9.7 percent this fall.

"The ultimate fear is this could be a lost generation of low-income students," stated Bill DeBaun, director of the National College Attainment Network (NCAN) to the *Post*. An NCAN report analyzing data provided by the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) on financial aid applications shows the number of high school seniors who applied for financial aid to attend college declined by nearly 100,000 in the fall.

Speaking on the plight of students, the NOVA professor told the WSWS: "I know that the students are really struggling. A lot of them work in grocery stores or other jobs that remain open, so I hear from them all the time that it's really hard to balance school and increased hours at work due to new cleaning policies and other changes. It's a tough time."



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