

West Virginia University students protest planned slashing of cultural and language programs

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Hundreds of students walked out of classes at West Virginia University (WVU) Morgantown campus on Monday, protesting the university's proposal to eliminate 169 full-time faculty positions (7 percent of the entire faculty) and 9 percent of academic majors. Among those programs in jeopardy, along with their respective instructors, are the Department of World Languages, Literature, and Linguistics, which will be eliminated in its entirety if the proposal is implemented.

The elimination of the department would mark the end of instruction in Russian, French, Spanish, Chinese and German, as well as a master's program in linguistics and teaching English to non-native speakers. To add insult to injury, for WVU students who still desire language instruction, the university is toying with the idea of shunting those students to outdated online platforms and a privately-owned language app.

Among the other proposed cuts at WVU are: creative writing, doctor of music arts in composition, master of music in composition, master's in jazz pedagogy, and bachelor's in environmental and community planning.

In all, 32 of 338 total academic majors offered at WVU have been recommended for elimination. Of those 32, 12 are undergraduate programs and 20 are graduate programs.

WVU is the most important research university in the state, which is located in Appalachia, a region plagued by high levels of poverty in the former coal mining center.

The proposed cuts, which the university administration sought to justify by pointing to a \$45 million budget deficit, have sent shock waves not only through the student body and workers at WVU but throughout the country. The cuts are widely understood as a frontal assault on the social and cultural rights of workers and youth more broadly. Significantly, the protesting students on Monday wore red T-shirts and bandanas, as did West Virginia coal miners during the 1921 Battle of Blair Mountain.

Explaining the situation that youth are confronting in West

Virginia, one protesting student told the Associated Press, "Kids are stuck in these rural communities as it is and a lot of us are looking at either the military or college to get us out of here and let us learn something new." Another student stressed that public education in the state was already hard to access. She added, "For me, it's really that this is going to happen on the national level, and we're just the frontline of it."

A former graduate of the university told the AP, "I think there's a rising tide of anti-intellectualism in this country, and it's really hard to see because there's nothing wrong with being educated and learning things. It's going to make people more isolated and live poorer lives and I think the cruelty is some of the point here."

A petition protesting the elimination of the Department of World Languages, Literature, and Linguistics under the title "Preserve Students' Rights to Study World Languages at WVU", has garnered almost 22,000 signatures within just 10 days. It states:

This decision threatens not only the economic opportunities that come with language proficiency, particularly for students in economically depressed areas like Appalachia, but also our cultural diversity. ... [L]earning world languages has proven benefits beyond language proficiency. It enhances cognitive abilities, promotes cultural understanding, improves communication skills in the first language, and fosters empathy towards diverse communities. ... Access to quality education, including world languages, is crucial for breaking the cycle of poverty and providing a brighter future for West Virginia. By eliminating world language, cultures, and linguistics courses at WVU, the university administration is limiting WVU students' potential for success both locally and globally.

The administration of WVU has responded with barely disguised contempt to the outpouring of protest. WVU Dean of Students Dr. Corey Farris ludicrously stated that there have “been minimal concerns from students as the academic transformation continues,” claiming that only “a handful of students [will be] impacted” by the elimination of academic programs.

This round of cuts, moreover, is only the beginning. Deficits are projected to swell to an annual \$75 million, and the WVU administration will likely target additional programs as well as other features of campus life, like more than 400 student organizations, for future cuts.

WVU, according to Farris, will “be using an external group who’s also going to come in and help us look and do some benchmarking for us. It will be a number of eyes, internal and external, as we review student life.”

The claim that the cuts are “necessary” because there is no money for education and culture is a lie.

West Virginia University, like all institutions of higher education, is marked by extreme levels of social inequality. It is run by its board of trustees like an institution not to serve the social and educational needs and rights of the working class, but as a business entity. Its President E. Gordon Gee, who previously headed universities like Brown, Vanderbilt and Ohio State University, is a multi-millionaire and boasts a salary that falls within the income bracket of the average CEO: \$800,000.

Meanwhile, WVU Board of Governors have regularly approved tuition increases. The most recent, a 2.62 percent increase and a 2.88 percent increase, for resident- and non-resident students, respectively, was approved for the 2023 budget. An in-state student living on the Morgantown campus will spend an estimated \$22,668 annually according to the WVU website. For an out-of-state student, the annual price tag swells to approximately \$40,380.

Already, West Virginia federal student loan borrowers accrue an average debt of \$31,121.28, while the annual average salary of a West Virginian with a bachelor’s degree sits at \$49,170.43, according to *Forbes*. If one considers cost-of-living increases that come on top of an already burdened monthly budget, it is clear that borrowers might take decades to pay off their loan. Nationwide, according to the Congressional Budget Office, student loan debt increased from \$187 billion to \$1.4 trillion between 1995 and 2017. In that same time span, US military spending has more than doubled, from \$321.6 billion in 1995, to \$646.75 billion in 2017. Currently, the figure is closer to a trillion dollars a year.

The planned cuts at WVU are rightly seen as a fundamental assault on the right of the working class to culture and education, and the beginning of a far broader

assault on public education. Already, institutions including Amherst College, Duquesne University and Johns Hopkins University have eliminated or are in the process of completely eliminating the language component of secondary education.

The claim that there is “no money” for culture and education must be rejected.

Since February 2022 alone, the US Congress has sent \$113 billion in aid to Ukraine to fund and escalate a war that was deliberately provoked by US imperialism. The high-precision ammunition and cluster bombs and many other means of human destruction, are used to further the killing of Ukrainian and Russian soldiers, with the estimated death toll among Ukrainian soldiers alone already above 300,000. Preparing for a new imperialist world war, the Biden administration requested a record \$1 trillion war budget for 2024.

There is an intrinsic connection between the drive of US imperialism toward a new world war and the attempt by the ruling class to make workers pay for this war, and destroy whatever social and cultural rights the working class has won in previous struggles. Imperialism, as the Russian revolutionary Vladimir Lenin concluded, means “reaction all down the line.” Workers and youth must combine their fight against the attacks on their social and cultural rights with a fight against imperialist war. The immense resources spent by the ruling class on war must go to fund free education and access to culture for all.

In 2018, wildcat strikes by West Virginia educators led to the largest strike wave of teachers across the United States in decades. The past year has seen a growing movement by educators and academic workers, autoworkers, nurses and other sections of the working class who are determined to fight for their interests.

These are the principal allies of students and workers at WVU. We urge students and faculty at the university to contact the WSWS and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) to discuss the next steps in their fight against the cuts at WVU.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact