

Board of Governors approves draconian attack on education at West Virginia University against mass opposition

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17 September 2023

On Friday, the West Virginia University Board of Governors voted to approve draconian cuts to foreign languages and other programs at the university. The cuts first introduced by WVU President Gordon Gee will eliminate 169 full-time faculty positions, or 7 percent of the entire faculty, and 32 programs, or 9 percent of academic majors.

At the Board of Governors meeting Friday, students who had come to protest the cuts were forcibly removed from the meeting by campus security.

West Virginia University is the only R1 level research facility in the state, one of the poorest in the country. The cuts are directed primarily at liberal arts and humanities programs.

Among those programs slashed, along with their respective instructors, are the Department of World Languages, Literature, and Linguistics. Instruction in Russian, French, German and many other languages will be eliminated. Only Spanish and Mandarin will be taught.

Other programs that are being cut include: Creative Writing, Doctor of Music Arts in Composition, Master's of Music in Composition, Master's in Jazz Pedagogy, Master's in Higher Education Administration and Bachelor's in Environmental and Community Planning.

In all, 32 of 338 total academic majors offered at WVU are being eliminated. Of those 32, 12 are undergraduate programs, and 20 are graduate programs.

The vote by the Board of Governors to approve the cuts came despite almost unanimous opposition from the student body and faculty, and marks a new stage in the assault on public education and the right to culture by the working class in the US and internationally.

The week prior, a meeting of the faculty assembly voted by an 8-to-1 margin to call for a freeze in the cuts and voted by the same margin a vote of no confidence in President Gee.

At a packed public hearing on Thursday, West Virginia students, faculty and alumni spoke out against the massive cuts. Billed as a public hearing called by the Board of Governors (BOG) to inform them of their vote, it was clear that its decision had already been made.

The hearing itself was held in such a way as to limit as much as possible the input from students, staff and faculty. The day and time was chosen when most students and faculty were in class and

the administration refused the request to suspend classes during the time to allow the community to take part.

Scheduled to start at 10:30 a.m., the BOG first went into executive session for an hour, not opening the floor to speakers until 11:30 a.m. As its first order of business, the BOG limited speakers to just two minutes instead of the previously announced three, forcing most speakers to hastily cut their remarks.

During the nearly three-hour meeting, not a single speaker spoke in favor of the cuts or in support of the Board of Governors and administration. One after another students and faculty protested the cuts and pleaded with university President Gee to change course and reconsider carrying out the sweeping attack on education.

Prior to the hearing a crowd of students and faculty gathered outside the meeting hall. Once inside, many were carrying homemade signs with slogans such as: "This is not the WVU I fell in love with," "Gordon Greed," and "Gee has got 2 go!"

The hearing was conducted in a 220-seat room with Gee and other Board of Governors members present. Several speakers mentioned that they felt disrespected because Gee and other administrators were fumbling with their phones and showing little interest in the pleas and protests of the speakers.

The first speakers were Johanna Winant, Rose Casey and Jessica Wilkerson. Winant and Casey are both Assistant Professors of English, and Wilkerson is an Associate Professor of History. They each in turn read a portion of an open letter that was published in the *Boston Review* in which they explained the impact of the cuts and the importance of English and History.

They explained:

We're speaking out—despite pressure from the WVU administration to remain silent—because we're impelled by our responsibility as employees and stewards of this public university to safeguard its integrity and its future. With this letter, we join our colleagues' decisive call for the Board to freeze the current proposal to shutter programs and lay off faculty and staff.

The three went on to detail the enormous lack of funding that many departments already face, including the English Department

not being able to give a course in Shakespeare; the Chemistry Department having to shield expensive lab equipment from leaking water and course funds not being made available to incoming instructors.

But the 2023 cuts go far beyond short-term frugality and will decimate WVU for decades to come. If the rest of these cuts go through, students will no longer be able to take even a single course in many world languages, including Russian, Arabic, French, German and Italian; music courses, including piano performance and jazz; public administration; graduate-level math; arts programs, including ceramics, printmaking, and sculpture; parks, recreation, and tourism; or graduate-level study of higher education administration. Across almost all departments and programs, the variety and quality of courses on offer will decrease because faculty positions will be cut and class sizes increased.

They warned:

Our university risks being so hollowed out that students will not have the ability to do what is most enriching about college and what defined so many of our own experiences: explore disciplines or take a class for the sake of curiosity, not solely as a means to a vocational end. WVU will be left a Potemkin university; a false front; a gutted shell.

Brian Powel, a teaching Assistant Professor in the Lane Department of Computer Science and Electrical Engineering, spoke on the impact of cutting seven full-time faculty from their department of 35.

“The Lane Department already faces challenges from limited staff in many of our programs,” Powell told the board. “ABET accreditors have told us we do not have enough faculty for computer engineering. For computer science, we struggle to provide sufficient seats to meet demand. There are a number of new courses we would like to add for in-demand topics like cloud computing that we have not been able to implement because we struggle to staff those courses we already have. Further reductions in faculty will harm our ability to serve our students and our state’s high-tech industries.”

Torli Bush spoke in support of the Master of Fine Arts Creative Writing program within the English Department.

“I was raised in Webster County, and I’m a 2017 graduate of the Mechanical Engineering program here at WVU.” Torli went on to receive his MFA in Creative Writing from West Virginia Wesleyan College.

Torli explained the importance of writing and communication, especially in our current political climate.

During my time in creative writing courses at WVU, I was exposed to a new way of thinking and processing that STEM cannot fully lend itself to: to see the power of other people’s stories, hear and read Appalachian voices and be taken in by the truths of what they wrote, and have open discussions on the interpretations of both course readings and our own writings. These are elements that need to be fostered, particularly in our political and social age, not retracted.

Miles Case explained that as a child he came to this school with his father, who was in the Law program and that he himself is now a student. “This school means a lot to me. You can only imagine the anger and frustration that I felt when this administration and the school that I worked to get to for years gutting, eviscerating and dismantling our academic institution.

“The administration loves to claim that only 2 percent of the students will be affected, and that number has somehow gone down to 1 percent.” He continued to point out that these numbers are incorrect.

“By blatantly misleading the public, disregarding student protests, a vote of no confidence and the voices of the community, you have done nothing except to draw the eyes of the entire country on us.”

Miles concluded his remarks by referring to a speech by President Gee in March of this year when he said that higher education was under attack. He added, “What you forgot to say was you were the one attacking it.”

Matthew Kolb, a senior undergraduate Math major, spoke on the explosion of student protest over these cuts. “Everyone knows there is something going on here and that [the students] don’t support these recommendations.”

“We care, we care a lot. We care so much that we are doing things that I haven’t seen at WVU at my time here, that faculty haven’t seen at their time here. We’re doing things that might make history. People are looking forward to what we can accomplish.”

In all, dozens of faculty, staff, students and alumni spoke during the hearing. Not a single person spoke in support of the drastic cuts to faculty and programs, which the Board of Governors voted to implement the next day.

The fact that the administration blatantly disregarded the mass opposition among students and faculty underscores the fact that in order to carry forward their struggle against this attack on their right to culture and education, a new perspective and program are needed. We urge students and workers who want to discuss the way forward to reach out to the World Socialist Web Site and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) today.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact