

Massive budget cuts underway at colleges and universities throughout the US

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A new round of sweeping austerity is underway at colleges and universities across the United States. Public and private schools in every part of the country have announced mass layoffs, program eliminations and campus closures in response to significant budget shortfalls as a result of declining enrollment, the ending of federal COVID-19 pandemic funding, and a long-term decline in state investment into higher education.

At the federal level, both the Democrats and Republicans have funneled trillions of dollars to war, corporate bailouts and tax cuts for the rich over the last two decades, but have offered no lifeline to struggling colleges. The most recent data from the Department of Education shows that in 2021, the federal government allocated a mere \$13.9 billion in general funds support to public universities, less than 1 percent of discretionary spending that year.

The following snapshot of cuts in several areas gives a sense of the scale of the looming attacks.

At Bradley University, a private non-profit in Illinois, massive cuts have been proposed to address a \$13 million budget shortfall, representing 10 percent of the school's total operating budget.

The austerity plan announced by president Stephen Standifird will slash 68 faculty posts from a combination of 47 layoffs and the elimination of another 21 positions through retirements and vacant posts.

At least 17 programs in the arts, math, sciences and humanities are set to be cut entirely, including Actuarial Science, Statistics, Religious Studies, Printmaking, Ceramics, International Studies, and Public Health Education.

Significantly, five other programs that are fundamental to a liberal arts education are being considered for either discontinuation or will be converted into "service units" that no longer offer major or minor degrees: Mathematics, Philosophy, Physics, Economics and French.

Speaking to local news, Jacob Weinberg, a junior at Bradley, noted that the cuts to the liberal arts programs will have a broad impact. "They might not have the best financial

statistics, but they teach you much bigger and, in my opinion, more important ideas."

At the Castleton campus of the Vermont State University (VTSU) system, Interim President Michael Smith recommended in October the discontinuation of 10 degree programs, the consolidation of 13 additional programs, and the cutting of between 20-33 faculty positions, or 10-15 percent of all faculty. Smith cited a \$22 million budget deficit across the VTSU system.

The programs proposed for discontinuation include Agriculture, Forestry, Photography, Music, School Psychology, Climate Change Science, and Computer Engineering Technology.

Over a hundred students rallied against the proposal in late October as several state legislators met with staff and faculty union officials. Denouncing the proposed ending of the music program, one student told local news, "Arts are important ... It's involved in everyone's lives."

Linda Olson, sociology professor and the local representative for the American Federation of Teachers at VTSU, reported that the campus is already struggling due to staff shortages: "There are staff positions that are paid so little we can't find people to do them. ... In our building, for example, which is the largest academic building, we are now required to remove our own garbage because we can't get a person to clean the building."

The University of Wisconsin-Platteville is set to eliminate 111 positions among faculty, administrators and other staff, representing 12 percent of its workforce. This includes 60 layoffs, plus the elimination of 31 vacant positions.

The university cited declining enrollment—28 percent over the last decade—high inflation, reduced state funding and an existing tuition freeze as it predicted a \$9.7 million budget shortfall for fiscal year 2024.

Cuts are coming across the University of Wisconsin system. UW-Oshkosh plans to lay off 200 non-faculty employees, over 20 percent of all employees. UW-Parkside will implement employee furloughs, requiring most employees to take between four and 19 unpaid leave days

through June 2024. The unpaid days will equal reductions to bi-weekly salaries by between 2.11 and 10 percent.

In Mississippi, Delta State University in Cleveland faces “across the board cuts” to overcome an \$11 million dollar deficit after a decade of “emergency-style budgeting” according to President Daniel Ennis. The university’s enrollment has plummeted 48 percent over the last 16 years. The cuts, which have not been specified, but which will include faculty layoffs, salary cuts and possible program closures, come on top of years of other cuts.

In 2015, faced with a \$1 million deficit, the university eliminated multiple programs in the Division of Languages and Literature—Journalism, Communications/Theater, and Modern Foreign Languages. Athletic Training and Real Estate/Insurance were also eliminated that year, as was the student newspaper’s printing budget.

Shepherd University, a public liberal arts institution in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, faces a \$6 million deficit in the next two years. \$3.8 million in cuts have already been announced, with more to follow, says President Dr. Mary Hendrix. These include 44 staff positions, 16 faculty slots, and four administrative positions. Additionally, one campus is set to be shuttered, and the university is “reviewing” all existing academic programs.

The latest round of cuts follows years of austerity in higher education. A report published this year by the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association on higher education financing notes that, “Although national-level education appropriations have recovered to 2008 levels, the majority of states continue funding higher education at a lower level than prior to the Great Recession. Twenty-eight states have not yet recovered from the 2008 Great Recession. ... Arizona (40.9% below) and Louisiana (32.2% below) are furthest from recovery. Another eight states remain at least 20% below 2008 levels.”

In addition to layoffs and program cuts, the growing financial pressure on colleges has led to mass closures across the US. Since 2016, an estimated 101 public and private non-profit colleges have either closed, merged or have announced plans to do so, according to one monitor. States with the most closures include New York (nine), Massachusetts (nine), California (eight) and Illinois (eight).

Among the most common casualties of these closures and mergers are art colleges, some of which had operated for over a century: Memphis College of Art and Watkins College of Art in Tennessee; Oregon College of Art and Craft and Pacific Northwest College of Art in Oregon; School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Massachusetts; New Hampshire Institute of Art; and the historic San Francisco Art Institute in California.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* warned in its analysis of

the provocative cuts at West Virginia University in September, the attacks against higher education are “... part of a systematic effort to divert all social resources to the war effort and the enrichment of the financial oligarchy. From the standpoint of the ruling class, the cuts at WVU are but an opening shot for a frontal assault on whatever remains of the cultural and social rights of the working class, all of which were won through bitter struggles in the past. Unless opposed, the destruction of the languages, arts, mathematics and cultural programs at WVU will become the new benchmark for what is to come at universities across the United States and internationally.”

This perspective has been confirmed in the last two months. The latest round of austerity comes amid the barbarous expansion of war by US imperialism, including in the ongoing proxy war against Russia in Ukraine and the US-backed genocide against Gaza by Israel. The \$105 billion in additional military spending requested by Biden in October, on top of the record \$1 trillion defense budget, is more than the entire Department of Education budget for 2023.

The US-Israel assault on Gaza has provoked mass opposition internationally and across the US. On college campuses, this is being met with an increasingly violent crackdown by the state and university administrations, which are employing authoritarian measures to suppress student opposition, including by banning campus groups and unleashing the police on student protests.

All of these issues—the struggle to defend public education, to defend democratic rights, and to end imperialist war—are necessarily connected and require that young people take up a fight against their root cause, the capitalist system. This means orienting their struggles to the growing movement of the international working class against war and austerity, including by expanding the call for a political general strike to stop the genocide against Gaza. We encourage students to join the IYSSE in order to take up this fight.



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