

African American and Women Studies Majors Eliminated at Western Illinois University

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Global Research, June 21, 2016

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

Board of trustees' decision represents trend towards eurocentrism and economic austerity

At Western Illinois University (WIU) it was announced at the conclusion of the spring semester that degree programs in African American and Women's Studies would be eliminated.

Programs dealing with these important areas of academic research would continue on a downgraded level. The decision to cut these programs was made by the Board of Trustees saying it was carried out after careful consideration and discussion.

WIU will allow students to minor in the program areas. Additional degree programs including philosophy and religious studies were also removed.

The Chicago Tribune reported that "The trustees' vote follows a recommendation by Provost and Academic Vice President Kathy Neumann and a study by a program elimination committee. Trustee board Chairwoman Cathy Early said the decision to eliminate the majors was not one the board took lightly." (June 11)

Providing a rationale for the nixing of the degree programs, the WIU registrar's office said that not one degree in African-American studies and only two degrees in philosophy, women's studies and one degree in religious studies were earned by students in the current graduating class. Neumann emphasized that the academic fields will still have a presence on the Macomb and Quad Cities campuses, noting that the students who are currently majoring in these areas will be allowed to complete their degree programs.

Nonetheless, the resolution to eliminate the degrees which passed the board of trustees emphasized that the decision could result in employees being retrenched. The decision to remove the degree programs did prompt opposition from both faculty and students.

An online petition opposing the abolition of the philosophy program collected 1,656 supporters. Brian Powell, an associate professor of Philosophy said the petition sent a message to the trustees that a lot of people "recognize the value of philosophy to the university." (Chicago Tribune, June 11)

The Peoria Journal Star reporting on the WIU trustees' decision pointed out as well that "The board also voted to modify bilingual/bicultural education, public health, geography and musical theater degree programs. Trustees also approved the university's fiscal year 2017 preliminary spending plan of \$221.3 million. The spending plan is a decrease of \$24.6 million from fiscal year 2016 All Funds Budget. The university's FY 2017 All Funds Operating Budget will be presented to the board in October." (June 10)

Although the university trustees claimed that its decision was not based on financial considerations but on lack of enrollment, the two areas of governance cannot be separated. The overall slashing of assistance programs from both the state and federal governments are a major contributing factor in the operations of higher educational institutions across the country.

In the state of Illinois, the legislature has been in a battle over the fiscal budget. The state went for an entire year without an agreement over a budget impacting education, municipal and social services.

WGN TV emphasized the severity of the crisis saying absent of an agreement the results could be catastrophic for various sectors of the economy and public sector. The deadlock between the legislature and the governor is hampering investment into the state.

An article by Bill Kissinger says “The state has been without a budget for nearly a year, as an epic political standoff between republican Gov. Bruce Rauner and democratic leaders opposed to his agenda continues with no end in sight. Lawmakers have just more than two weeks to reach a compromise. Without a deal by the start of the new budget year on July 1, more than \$9 billion in emergency funding that’s kept universities, domestic violence shelters and food stamps going will run out. There is also no funding for primary and secondary schools which could put opening on time in jeopardy.” (June 14)

Nationwide Decline in Public Funding at Root of Crisis

This situation in Illinois involving education and other public expenditures follows a pattern over the last several years where attacks on programs which challenge the dominant Eurocentric and male-oriented approach to scholarship have increased. This is coupled with the worsening problems of declining municipal services and infrastructure related to water, public transportation, environmental quality and assistance to low-income families and their children.

These cuts in academic programs are not only occurring in higher education but also in the public schools. In Chicago over the last four years, the teachers union has engaged in strikes and mass demonstrations in protests against the elimination of programs, the closing of school buildings and the reduction in salaries and benefits for educators.

In the city of Detroit, the imposition of emergency management in the public schools system periodically since 1999 has not only brought the district into near insolvency. The elimination of music, art, sports and other programs have severely reduced the quality of the education given to mainly African American and Latino youth.

At Wayne State University in Detroit, a decades-long center of higher education for working class and nationally oppressed peoples has experienced huge budget cuts prompting the raising of tuition and housing costs. Enrollment is down substantially while the largest corporations operating in Michigan are given huge tax breaks which are now threatening to send the state into monumental budget deficits and consequently more austerity measures.

The Need for a Renewed Fightback

With specific reference to academic programs aimed at the recruitment and quality education of oppressed groups, under the guise of deficits and budget tightening, these

programs are being rapidly eviscerated. Academic programs and curriculums designed to re-correct the racist and sexist approach to instruction and research, which were brought into the education arena as a result of protests and debate, are once again becoming the subject of ridicule and liquidation.

Certain states such as Arizona and Texas have placed restrictions on what can be taught about nationally oppressed groups within the public education system. In Arizona House Bill 2281 was passed in 2010 threatening districts with the loss of funding if they did not eliminate courses on Mexican American studies.

These actions however sparked a movement which insisted that these programs be reintroduced into the school system. Teachers and students held classes outside the schools igniting demonstrations which have gained some results in Arizona, Texas and California.

According to an article published by The Atlantic, "As the Tucson Unified School District's governing board prepared to discuss removing Mexican American studies from a list of classes that would count toward core requirements (seen by many as another move to demean it), nine students rushed the boardroom. They pulled chains from around their waists. Behind a curved wood desk with microphones, they sat in the board's rolling chairs and locked themselves in place. They pounded the table and chanted, 'When education is under attack, what do we do? Fight back!'" (July 19, 2015)

The only way in which the maintenance and reintroduction of these academic programs servicing African Americans, Latinos, Women and other groups subjected to national and gender discrimination can continue is through a similar process that brought about their origination during the period between the 1960s and 1990s. Students backed up by their communities took over buildings and shutdown campuses creating a crisis that the administrations and the broader political establishment could not ignore.

With the growth of people of color communities throughout the U.S. and the rapid transforming of so-called "minorities" into majorities, militant action will be required in order to make public education relevant to these constituencies. These struggles must be combined with the fight against austerity which is a direct result of the crisis in modern-day capitalism and imperialism globally.

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