

Statement on the Importance of Librarians in Academic Libraries September 2024

On August 9, 2024, state university Western Illinois University (WIU) laid off all its librarians (except for the library dean), nine faculty librarians in total, effective May 2025.ⁱ This follows Columbia College Chicago's May 2024 decision to lay off five staff, including the director, four of whom were librarians.ⁱⁱ

What has happened at WIU and Columbia is part of a growing national climate of budget cuts, mergers, and closures in higher education, for colleges and their libraries.ⁱⁱⁱ [CARLI members](#) seek to participate in the conversations around the impact of shrinking access to information services in higher education on students, faculty, and other stakeholders. With this statement specifically, CARLI emphatically proclaims the importance of librarians in higher education libraries. Librarians (and libraries) are not an excisable luxury that is somehow detached from an institution's educational excellence but are instead critical components of campuses and the academic experience. Their work is inextricably interwoven with student success and well-being for the duration of the student's academic career, and they are important colleagues who contribute to the essential work of faculty.

Librarians serve the interdisciplinary teaching and research mission of higher education institutions.

Every interaction with a student, undergraduate or graduate, is aimed at student success; that is, producing a successful, skilled scholar or professional who is informed by perspectives both within and beyond their course of study. Librarians also enhance the work of faculty in the roles of co-educators and partners in research.

Librarians connect students and faculty with available resources and services. They ensure that patrons can *discover and access* carefully curated collections that are scoped to the institution's mission, curriculum, student needs, and faculty interests. Without librarians making these connections, students and faculty would be left without navigators. Professional faculty librarians are skilled in these areas in a way that staff are not. Campuses need human beings who can leverage technology to align with the mission and population of the school. Technical solutions will never be plug and play. Library staff are experts in using systems for immediate patron needs, but professional librarians use library systems for higher-level, specialized functions such as managing electronic resources, and configure systems, and create policies to support research, instruction, and collection management.

Academic librarians are on the frontlines of the information revolution. Access to global networks of scholarly communication is important for the economic health of our communities. Such access is also necessary for our students and faculty to contribute to vital political and cultural discussions that will shape the future of our world. Digital technologies have decentralized communication networks in ways that hold both promise and peril for the future. Academic librarians fill important leadership roles as campuses respond to new technology such as generative AI, Open Educational Resources, and the open access movement.^{iv v} They are building healthy communities to collectively negotiate for an information ecosystem that is both equitable and affordable. Librarians also serve as advocates for intellectual freedom and the role of academic freedom in research and scholarship. For decades, academic librarians have anchored the complex information needs of campuses, and that need for information professionals is more pressing now than ever.

The role that academic librarians fill is not immediately visible without a deepened understanding of the work that is happening every day in every library, a day that includes contact with a spectrum of patrons from a variety of backgrounds who have needs ranging from deficits in basic information skills, to social and life needs, to deep exploration of niche subject areas and the communication of innovative ideas.

Today's academic libraries make resource discovery and access seamless for students and faculty. Library services and spaces are critical supports for academic success, career preparations, and student well-being. Professional-level library personnel are essential for the development of resources, systems, services and space that reflect the radical and transformative changes which are occurring in higher education and in society. Libraries are a vibrant, central piece of every campus.^{vi} CARLI and its members see firsthand the library's value and contributions to learning, creativity, retention, graduation, and skill development. Our members' contribution to Illinois higher education is lasting and intertwined with their parent institutions' missions.

For all these reasons, CARLI asks all stakeholders within the higher education community to advocate for protecting academic librarians so they may continue contributing to the robust environment of learning and innovation within Illinois. We want Illinois students to be the most highly educated and engaged population possible. Such an aspiration points to high employment, innovative approaches to problem solving, and an understanding of diverse viewpoints.^{vii}

Endorsed by the CARLI Governance Board of Directors on September 18, 2024.

ⁱ An Update on WIU's Financially Sustainable Future. August 9, 2024. https://www.wiu.edu/news/newsrelease.php?release_id=20070
Maddie Franz, Mikaela Schlueter. Aftermath of WIU's decision to lay off employees being felt by campus community, August 16, 2024. <https://www.wqad.com/article/news/education/western-illinois-university-layoffs-impact/526-2aacd0ee-d635-4af8-b298-a0e84785e74c>

Sherry C.M. Lindquist. This is why it matters that Western Illinois University fired all its librarians. September 4, 2024.

<https://www.chicagotribune.com/2024/08/20/opinion-western-illinois-university-fire-librarians/>

Kathryn Palmer. Library Faculty Eliminated Amid 'Fiscal Insanity' at Western Illinois. August 20, 2024.

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/business/cost-cutting/2024/08/20/library-faculty-eliminated-western-illinois-university>

ⁱⁱ <https://columbiachronicle.com/exclusive-forced-out-of-job-after-nearly-35-years-columbia-librarian-remains-hopeful-college-will-survive-financial-challenges>

ⁱⁱⁱ A look at trends in college consolidation since 2016. August 14, 2024.

[How many colleges and universities have closed since 2016? | Higher Ed Dive](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/business/cost-cutting/2024/08/20/library-faculty-eliminated-western-illinois-university)

^{iv} Michael Rodriguez. College Closures and the Implications for Libraries and Vendors - The Scholarly Kitchen. September 5, 2024.

<https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2024/09/05/college-closures/>

^v 2024 Top Trends in Academic Libraries: A Review of the Trends and Issues. Research Planning and Review Committee. College & Research Libraries News. <https://crln.acrl.org/index.php/crlnews/article/view/26379/34322>

^{vi} Megan Oakleaf. Value of Academic Libraries. https://acrl.ala.org/value/?page_id=21

Karen Brown and Kara Malenfant. Connect, Collaborate, and Communicate: a report from the value of academic libraries summits.

https://www.ala.org/sites/default/files/acrl/content/issues/value/val_summit.pdf

Assessment in Action reports: Academic Library Contributions to Student Success: Documented practices from the field. Documented Library Contributions to Student Learning and Success: Building evidence with the team-based assessment in action campus projects. Putting Assessment in Action. <https://www.ala.org/acrl/issues/whitepapers>

^{vii} For support, the continuing education initiative [CARLI Counts: Analytics and Advocacy for Service Development](#), trains member libraries in learning how to use data to shape program and services, and how to talk to stakeholders about the library's contributions.