

September 10, 2024

The Honorable J. B. Pritzker, Governor of Illinois
Office of the Governor
401 S. Spring St.
Springfield, IL 62704

Pranav G. Kothari, Chair
Illinois Board of Higher Education
1 North Old State Capitol Plaza,
Suite 333
Springfield, Illinois 62701-1377

Carin L. Stutz, Chair
Board of Trustees, Western Illinois University
c/o Athena M Brooks, Senior Executive Assistant to the President
President's Office
Western Illinois University
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Dr. Barbara Gellman-Danley
President, Higher Learning Commission
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Dear Governor Pritzker,
Chair Pranav G. Kothari,
Chair Carin L. Stutz,
Interim President Kristi Mindrup,
Interim Provost Mark Mossman,
President Barbara Gellman-Danley,

We are professional librarians working at academic libraries in the state of Illinois who vehemently protest the decision recommended by the President and Provost and confirmed by the Board of Trustees on August 6, 2024, to terminate all nine Librarian Faculty at Western Illinois University and the additional decision to relocate library services, such as can be offered, to a campus location distant from library buildings, collections, equipment, and other resources.

We acknowledge the difficulty that financial exigency presents to an institution. But we must protest the assertion by a university spokesperson that the university “will continue to have adequate coverage in the library” after the layoffs,¹ a statement which demonstrates near total ignorance of the work librarians do and what it takes to run an effective academic library. While the staff that work in a library do important work and are extremely valuable, the work of professional librarians extends the work of a library to support the teaching and research mission of the university.

A library is not merely a study hall decorated with rows of books on shelves. Books on shelves, and digital subscriptions to databases, ebooks, journals, streaming music, and other materials do not appear freely over the Internet. All these things must be selected, the contracts/licenses negotiated to ensure ongoing access to electronic content, streaming services, and productivity software, the materials cataloged to ensure discovery; and collections and services promoted through instruction to library users and outreach to the community. This is the work done by professional librarians.

The annual report of the WIU Libraries (2022-23, the latest posted to the University’s website) indicates the many activities, programs, collections, and outreach efforts conducted by Librarian Faculty at WIU.² This report describes the student learning goals addressed by professional librarians to develop students’ critical thinking skills required to identify misinformation and malinformation; the collaboration with academic faculty to deliver online and in-person instruction; the design of learning activities and the construction of course-specific web guides

¹ Palmer, Kathryn. 2024, August 20. Library Faculty Eliminated Amid ‘Fiscal Insanity’ at Western Illinois. *Inside Higher Ed*, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/business/cost-cutting/2024/08/20/library-faculty-eliminated-western-illinois-university>

² Annual Report of the University Libraries 2022-23, https://www.wiu.edu/provost/pdfs_and_docs/AnnualReport2023Libraries.pdf

directing students to resources that support their assignments; and the many consultations with individual students in pursuit of their research assignments and goals. The WIU Librarian Faculty provide support to innumerable community organizations through the outreach and staffing provided related to the Illinois Regional Archives Depository (IRAD), allowing residents of Illinois access to the historical records of state and local government agencies. Librarian Faculty conduct outreach to high schools to prepare students not only for their current assignments but to support their aspirations to pursue higher education. Professional librarians collaborate with other WIU centers to expand access to critical resources, including the Gwendolyn Brooks Cultural Center, for which they digitized VHS and cassette tapes, making these invaluable materials broadly available for research and study.

Furthermore the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) can and certainly should weigh in on this decision and what impact it could have on the good standing of WIU and therefore its eligibility for state and federal funding, among other issues. In 2021 the WIU Librarian Faculty and staff were a crucial component of the WIU Administration's Assurance Argument pertinent to criterion 2.E.2, "Western provides the support needed to ensure the integrity of research and scholarly Practice", stated as follows:

In addition to access to the programs, services, and requirements discussed above, students and faculty have access to the University Writing Center, and the University Libraries offer individual or group presentations on how to effectively use the library. Librarians are available in person, by phone, and through instant messenger and web-based inquiry interfaces. WIU Libraries Information Systems and Digitization Unit developed a Research Panel to increase research productivity. The new extension enables convenient access to library information resources and services including scholarly databases, library catalogs, interlibrary loan, and internet resources such as Google Scholar. A faculty member also developed a guide to provide information on choosing and evaluating journals for possible publication.³

None of the programs, services, collections, and requirements provided by the WIU Library and cited by the University in the statement above would be feasible without professional librarians.

The Library is often characterized as 'the heart' of a university, a space not only for storing stuff, but also a space for teaching, for learning, for interaction, and for scholarship. It is also a space where contracts and licenses are negotiated to ensure access to critical scholarly information, where outreach to campus and community organizations is conducted in support of mutual goals, where international standards of digitization and metadata are applied to expand scholarly access to research materials, where rare and valuable materials are accessed and used under supervision

³ University Accreditation, Assurance Argument – Western Illinois University. March 29, 2021. p.31
https://www.wiu.edu/aasp/accreditation/pdfs/2020/assurance_argument.pdf

and guidance. Without this beating heart, led by the professional librarians who care for it, the University will ultimately fail.

Sincerely,

Anne E. Zald, Government Information Librarian, Northwestern University Libraries
Christopher Straughn, Collections and Government Documents Librarian, Northeastern Illinois
University Libraries

Gabrielle Toth, Interim Dean, Gwendolyn Brooks Library, Chicago State University

Benjamin Aldred, Associate Professor and Reference Librarian, Richard J. Daley Library,
University of Illinois Chicago

Sanga Sung, Government Information Librarian and Assistant Professor, University of Illinois
Urbana-Champaign Library

Aric Ahrens, Engineering and Government Information Librarian, Paul V. Galvin Library,
Illinois Institute of Technology

Connie Fleischer, Research Services Librarian, D'Angelo Law Library, The University of
Chicago

Members of the Northeast Illinois Documents Librarians (NIDL) organization