

Laid-off WIU librarians honored with 'a very prestigious award'

Tri States Public Radio | By [Rich Egger](#)

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Julie Lorenzen / Courtesy Photo

The Western Illinois University librarians being honored by the Illinois Library Association include (left to right) Jeff Hancks, Michael Lorenzen, Krista Bowers Sharpe, Julia Thompson, Sean Cordes, Michelle Holschuh Simmons, Brian Clark, and Hunter Dunlap. A ninth librarian has chosen to remain anonymous.

The nine laid-off faculty librarians at Western Illinois University are collectively winners of the Illinois Library Association Illinois Academic Librarian of the Year award.

The award is presented by the Illinois Association of College and Research Libraries, a division of the ILA.

"This is a very prestigious award," said Hunter Dunlap, one of the honorees.

"I'm a past president of IACRL, so I really appreciate the quality of this award and what it means to a librarian to receive it in the state of Illinois."

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Dunlap hoped the recognition will remind people about “the importance of academic librarians and what they mean on a university campus.”

The award will be presented during the 2025 ILA Annual Conference Oct. 14-16 in Rosemont. All of the laid-off librarians have been invited to attend, and several have already made plans to do so, including Krista Bowers Sharpe.

“It’s going to be very affirming to be receiving an award in front of people that I’ve worked side-by-side with on various joint efforts towards librarianship,” Bowers Sharpe said.

The role of librarians in academia

The faculty librarians received layoff notices a year ago as the WIU administration worked to close a multi-million-dollar budget gap. More than 100 people from across campus received layoff notices last summer. The layoffs for the library faculty took effect in mid-May this year.

Bowers Sharpe said she believes administrators and even fellow faculty members don’t understand what library faculty do. So, during the past year, she created a series of short [YouTube videos called Library Magic](#) to explain their role in the institution.

“I think over the course of 13 or 14 videos during the year, we addressed various aspects of why somebody is paying for an academic librarian. And I think we made a pretty strong case,” Bowers Sharpe said.

The faculty librarians also created [a website](#), where Dunlap said more than 10,000 people filled out a petition urging the administration to reconsider its decision.

“I just want to go on record thanking everyone for their support, their help, all the emails and texts and things we’ve received over the year, which really gave us a lot of encouragement,” Dunlap said.

He also served on the Coalition for Higher Education Libraries, which successfully lobbied for creation of the [University Library and Professional Librarian Access and Transparency Task Force](#).

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media, including the Chronicle of Higher Education. They hoped to convince the WIU administration to reverse course, and they still hope the university's leaders will change their minds.

"There is not another university library in the state of Illinois that doesn't employ any professional faculty librarians. It's really just unbelievable," Dunlap said.

He said students are paying money to receive a quality education at WIU, but they don't have any library faculty to help them.

Coming together as a team

Bowers Sharpe is proud of how the librarians came together throughout the past year, gathering once a week to make sure they were all on the same page.

"It was a real lifeline for all the things that we had to experience during the year to have that group. It was a wonderful group to go through this experience with, very supportive," Bowers Sharpe said.

She said the library has staff members in addition to the faculty librarians, and they all worked as part of a team. She said the library couldn't function without the staff members either.

But the library faculty are now gone, and she can't believe how few people are left working in WIU's Malpass Library.

"Even the staff have really been overstretched, and were during this last year because people are still coming to the library even if there is lower enrollment. We still have people coming in the library and their questions, if anything, are harder than they used to be based on the amount of information that's available to people that they have to evaluate," Bowers Sharpe said.

Always learning something new

Dunlap said several of the librarians have retired, and some have moved on to other jobs. He retired a year earlier than he intended, but plans to continue membership in

Bowers Sharpe said she has gone through the retirement process, though “by no means” did she intend to retire so soon. She said some of the librarians are still involved in a legal case against the university over the loss of their jobs. That case is currently in arbitration.

Bowers Sharpe and Dunlap both said they became librarians because it’s a position where you need to know about a lot of different topics, and you’re always learning something new.

“On any given day, you have no idea what somebody will want to talk with you about, and it’s very exciting, it’s very fun,” said Bowers Sharpe.

Normally, August is the time of year when Bowers Sharpe, Dunlap, and the other faculty librarians gear up for a new school year. Bowers Sharpe said it feels strange to not be doing that this year.

“I’m definitely missing that feeling of, oh, I need to start thinking about what classes will I be asked to teach a session for? What students will have my name on their syllabus that they need to meet with me to begin their research process?” Bowers Sharpe said.

However, she will be on campus this fall because she’s taking a course at WIU in anthropology. Bowers Sharpe said just like when she worked at the library, she wants to continue learning.

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