**‘A Luxury That We Can’t Afford’**

Why one university axed its entire library faculty.

'An attack on our profession'

By [Adrienne Lu](https://www.chronicle.com/author/adrienne-lu) December 10, 2024

In early August, Hunter Dunlap, a professor and librarian at Western Illinois University, was with his wife to celebrate her final chemotherapy session when he opened an email from work.

He was being laid off. His last day would be May 14, 2025.

The university had been struggling financially for years, and the Board of Trustees had recently approved another round of layoffs, so he wasn’t surprised that the library would be affected. But as the most senior librarian, Dunlap immediately realized that if he was being laid off, all of the librarians must be losing their jobs, according to their union contract.

Dunlap and his colleagues were stunned. The layoffs would leave only a dean and paraprofessional staff members overseeing a library collection in which the university has invested an estimated $62 million since 1980. The library supports a college with thousands of students and about 450 faculty members offering 43 graduate degrees, including two doctoral programs. Soon, Dunlap said, there will be no professional oversight of the collection and no expertise to help people use those resources.

Academic librarians have long struggled to communicate their value at a time when so much information is available online and much of their work remains invisible to the public. Still, laying off every librarian but the dean raises new questions: Can a library function without librarians? Can a college? To Dunlap, the answer is obvious: “You just can’t run a comprehensive university without library services. I mean, it’s just mind-boggling.”

Academic libraries have dealt with dwindling resources for decades, implementing furloughs and hiring freezes; cutting staff; reducing hours; and trimming spending on books, subscriptions, and databases, even as their costs grow every year. [Columbia College Chicago](https://columbiachronicle.com/exclusive-forced-out-of-job-after-nearly-35-years-columbia-librarian-remains-hopeful-college-will-survive-financial-challenges) laid off half of its library staff earlier this year amid budget cuts, and the [University of California at San Diego](https://library.ucsd.edu/news-events/2024-2025-hours-and-services-updates/) recently shrunk library hours. Last year, the [University of California at Berkeley](https://www.lib.berkeley.edu/about/news/space-plan-announcement) announced it would merge the collections and staff of three libraries by summer 2025 to save money.

The move to lay off the librarians at Western Illinois appears to mark a new low. “Budget pressures are indeed an ongoing challenge across higher education, and many institutions are facing difficult decisions,” said Leo S. Lo, president of the Association of College and Research Libraries. “However, completely eliminating librarian positions is an extreme step that sets a worrying precedent.”

Student enrollment at Western Illinois, about 70 miles west of Peoria in Macomb, has fallen from about 11,000 students in 2015 to 6,332 this year. Like many of its peers facing steep enrollment declines, Western Illinois has been through years of difficult budget cuts, including several rounds of buyouts and layoffs.

Eight librarians were among the 89 faculty and staff members who received layoff notices in August. The previous month, the university had laid off 35 non-tenure-track faculty members, including one librarian.

The library will be the only department to lose all of its faculty members. Administrators say the university can make do with the library dean and remaining staff. “The faculty librarians are an important part of the university,” Christopher A. Pynes, interim associate provost for academic programs, research, and institutional effectiveness, said in an interview with *The Chronicle*. “The problem is that, where we are now, they are a luxury that we can’t afford if we’re going to provide instruction in certain disciplines.” The library dean, Héctor J. Maymí-Sugrañes, did not respond to requests for comment.

Dunlap, who is 58 years old and has worked at Western Illinois for 27 years, is now leading a campaign by the librarians to reverse the layoffs. So far, there is a [website](https://savewiulibrarians.org/) featuring letters of support from librarian groups around the state and the country and a Washington Post [book critic](https://readwise.io/reader/shared/01j6j0cg52npksbt8cztex7ewk/), plus an online [petition](https://actionnetwork.org/letters/urge-wiu-to-bring-back-the-librarians?source=direct_link) that has generated more than 6,000 signatures. A student trustee said he had received hundreds of emails in support of the librarians.

The librarians immediately recognized they needed to pull together and educate people about the “dire consequences of this catastrophic decision,” Dunlap said. “It is just quite unimaginable that a comprehensive master’s-level university would forsake all of its librarians.”

Not long after the dawn of the modern internet, people started questioning the role of a college library. A 2001 [article](https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-deserted-library/) in *The Chronicle* described how the internet had left “many librarians and scholars wondering and worrying about the future of what has traditionally been the social and intellectual heart of campus.” That debate continues [today](https://www.insidehighered.com/opinion/blogs/higher-ed-gamma/2024/10/28/whats-gained-whats-lost-evolving-university-library?utm_source=Inside+Higher+Ed&utm_campaign=94f8ed07f8-DNU_2021_COPY_02&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1fcbc04421-94f8ed07f8-197778321&mc_cid=94f8ed07f8&mc_eid=f0fd73e7ce). Librarians have worked to redefine not only the role of the library but also their own place on campus, taking the lead, for example, on institutional efforts around information literacy and making learning materials more affordable and accessible to students.

Erin E. Whitaker, a student-success librarian for information literacy and an assistant professor at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, co-wrote a 2019 research [paper](https://alair.ala.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/03c8fa25-3c1d-4e19-9072-a550e52b74f9/content) on student perceptions of academic libraries and librarians. The researchers found that while students could easily articulate the value of the library as a place to study or socialize, many had simple or outdated views of what a librarian does.

“We interviewed a lot of students and they still kind of didn’t know what librarians do,” Whitaker said. “They kind of had these stereotypical, ‘Oh, a librarian is like a cat lady in a cardigan that’s going to assist me.’ Or the people upstairs that are just shelving books.”

At Western lllinois, librarians’ responsibilities include indexing and organizing the collections, selecting authoritative sources tailored to the university’s curricular needs, and helping students identify sources on research topics. Krista Bowers Sharpe, a reference librarian and assistant professor at Western Illinois, started a [YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCrLS6BXkXHA3hd_pTVmGLUQ/videos) channel explaining what college librarians do as part of the campaign to save their jobs. “Librarians do not read books all day,” each episode begins. “Here are some of the things we do.”

Bowers Sharpe, for example, serves as a liaison to certain departments outside the library, consulting with students beginning their thesis research and helping them pull together literature reviews or identify data sets. She is sometimes invited to teach classes on topics such as evaluating information, distinguishing credible sources, and sociology-research methods.

Bowers Sharpe said professors often ask students to use peer-reviewed journal articles in their research. It often falls on the librarians to explain what that means and help students understand how scholarship is conducted, how to use the library’s databases, and why peer-reviewed content might be important to their professors.

Because information today is commodified in a way that isn’t always visible to students, Bowers Sharpe said, “we spend time explaining why we have access to some journal content and some book content, but not all of it, and why a Google search is not getting you … access to everything,” she said. Librarians invest time, money, effort, and expertise to choose, troubleshoot, and make accessible information from a host of companies in a way that many people don’t necessarily see or understand, she said.

As a first-year student at Western Illinois, Jeffrey Keith was required to go to the library a few times a week to study because of his weak high-school grades. Somewhere along the way, he started talking with the librarians about all kinds of things — their career paths, how artificial intelligence can be used in education and the arts, and how politics have changed, for example.

Now a sophomore, Keith still hasn’t checked out a book from the library. But he’s continued to visit the building to study and to talk to the librarians. He said he feels at ease with them, despite his social anxiety. “I don’t just get the feeling that they care, I know that they care,” he said.

“I definitely say with absolute confidence that the librarians have made me a better thinker,” Keith said. “They’ve made me question things more.” He hasn’t found those kinds of conversations and relationships anywhere else on campus, he said.

A graduate student in sociology, Jennifer Ofoe, said she started to panic when she couldn’t find the data that she needed for her dissertation on health disparities in the United States. But a librarian helped her identify relevant information from the National Health Interview Survey and asked the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to give Ofoe access to the data, which was not easily accessible to the public.

Ofoe said people underestimate librarians’ role. “They do more than just sit at the front desks or reference desks. They ensure that students are able to achieve their academic purpose.”

David Banash, a professor of English, brings some of his writing students to the library early in the semester so they can learn specific skills — like how to use the databases and how to find peer-reviewed sources — but also to get acquainted with the librarians. Over the course of a 16-week semester, they’ll spend about four weeks working on their research papers in the library in close proximity to the reference librarians, so students can call on them when questions inevitably arise.

“They’re in good shape for what research demands will come in their future classes,” Banash said. But more importantly, he said, by the time they finish that class, “when they have questions in their own lives, they know how to get those questions answered.”

Another library advocate, Lora Ebert Wallace, a professor of sociology, said she is baffled by the administration’s decision to cut the librarians. She said librarians have helped her students use a program to organize bibliographies and literature; created training programs, including one that teaches graduate students how to avoid predatory publications; and provided instruction for students conducting research. Wallace goes to library training sessions each semester with her students and learns something new every time because the software changes constantly. If there are no librarians around to stay on top of things, she said, it’s just a matter of time before those systems start failing.

Librarian Hunter Dunlap stands at the Malpass Library on the campus of Western Illinois University in November.Matthew Holst for The Chronicle

Wrapped up in the question of what role a librarian should play — and how much they are valued and respected by their institutions — is the question of whether librarians should be considered faculty members, as they are at Western Illinois. In 2017, librarians at about half of academic libraries nationwide were considered faculty, according to a [survey](https://www.aaup.org/article/once-and-future-faculty-status-academic-librarians-university-virginia) by the Association of College and Research Libraries, granting them the protections of academic freedom and the ability to participate in shared governance, among other things.

But as Pynes noted in explaining the decision to lay off the librarians, some colleges have taken faculty status [away](https://www.chronicle.com/article/as-their-roles-change-some-librarians-lose-faculty-status/) from librarians as their role has shifted over time.

When college librarians essentially function “as participant[s] in the processes of teaching, research, and service,” they should be granted faculty status, a joint [statement](https://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/jointstatementfaculty) by a committee representing the Association of College and Research Libraries, the group now known as the Association of American Colleges and Universities, and the American Association of University Professors argued in 1972.

Pynes said that eventually, the university would like to hire some staff librarians who are not members of the faculty, or perhaps subject professors who can also serve as part-time librarians. But William Thompson, who retired as a librarian and English professor at Western Illinois in 2023 and previously served as the faculty-union president, dismissed those options. The union would challenge hiring civil-service employees to replace faculty librarians, he said. Hiring subject professors who are also part-time librarians is also impractical, said Thompson, who did both jobs himself, given how hard the university’s remote location and declining enrollment makes it to attract new employees.

Enrollment at Western Illinois, as at many other [regional public](https://www.chronicle.com/article/this-is-why-some-regional-public-colleges-are-in-so-much-trouble#:~:text=The%20Chronicle%3B%20iStock-,This%20Is%20Why%20Some%20Regional%20Public%20Colleges%20Are%20In%20So,may%20be%20partially%20to%20blame.&text=Deep%20cuts%20at%20public%20comprehensive,and%20more%20brutal%20than%20ever.) colleges, has been on a downward slide for years as a result of unfavorable demographic trends and, this year, problems with the Free Application for Federal Student Aid. A historic [budget standoff](https://www.chronicle.com/article/as-illinois-budget-impasse-ends-so-does-a-nightmare-of-total-uncertainty-for-its-public-colleges/) in Illinois several years ago furthered the financial pain. More recently, federal stimulus money that helped colleges get through the pandemic dried up.

Western Illinois administrators laid off faculty members in 2015, 2018, and 2019, according to Richard M. Filipink Jr., a history professor and the grievance officer for the union representing faculty members and other academic professionals. Pynes, who is also a professor of philosophy, is no stranger to the sting of program reductions. In 2016, the university [eliminated](https://www.wiu.edu/news/newsrelease.php?release_id=13712) its philosophy major, along with African American studies, religious studies, and women’s studies, although students were still able to declare a minor in those subjects.

This time around, Pynes said, when administrators were directed to reduce spending by $22 million out of an annual operating budget of about $100 million, those previous cuts were top of mind. Administrators decided to make their priorities tenure, academic expertise, and keeping as many academic programs as possible, he said.

Library advocates argue that librarians provide essential support for that expertise and those programs. But the provost’s office viewed librarians through another lens. “We’re trying to *Moneyball* this thing and try to figure out how to get as much as we can, and as many offerings as we can, with the least amount of money,” Pynes said, referring to the Michael Lewis book about a baseball team that crunched numbers to discover undervalued players and assemble a competitive team despite little funding for salaries.

Pynes said he doesn’t like to think of faculty members as revenue producers. But librarians, he said, are “not offering courses that students need to take to progress in their degree completion.” That left administrators with a dilemma, he said: “Do we keep books and periodicals? Do we keep faculty in disciplines that teach students? Or do we keep faculty librarians?”

Cody Cornell, a senior who is now serving in his third year as the student representative on the university’s Board of Trustees, said academic librarians are among the highest-paid personnel at the university. (That’s partially because many were hired on 10- to 12-month contracts, while most other faculty members are on nine-month contracts.) “If we had decided not to lay off our academic librarians, we would have had to lay off another 15 faculty members that are professors in the classroom and teaching our students, which would further affect student retention and student course-scheduling and, ultimately, student graduation,” Cornell said.

Pynes said the narrative that the library is under attack is unfortunate. “I love libraries too! Every time I travel internationally or to a big city, I go to a library or a bookstore. I’m not a philistine here,” he said. “But we’re, in some sense, protecting the contents of the library by reducing the cost of running the library. We’re going to have librarians. They’re just not going to be faculty members.”

The university has reached a point where there are no easy choices left to make, Pynes said. “One of the things that higher education is very good at is telling you how they’re going to grow and build stuff,” he said. “We’re not very good at having policies, procedures, and processes in place for shrinking. And that makes it very difficult.”

And the pain is not yet over. Recently, the university’s committee on academic-program elimination met for the first time. That means there are likely to be more layoffs in the near future.

Dunlap remembers the days when the Western Illinois library had many more librarians and staff, and a robust budget for books and other materials. The library shrunk from 19 librarians in 2006 to nine earlier this year, for example. And its budget for books, periodicals, subscriptions, and other parts of its collections has also taken a hit, falling from about $1.4 million to $1.1 million over the past decade. Some years, the library managed to buy only $10,000 to $20,000 worth of books, which doesn’t go far when academic books typically cost more than $100 each. Some years, the budget was so tight the library had no money to buy books at all, focusing dollars instead on electronic resources.

This fall, 80 miles north of the main campus, the university also closed the doors to the library at its Quad Cities campus, in Moline. Students can obtain books by placing requests at a makeshift library-services desk in a building on the other side of campus.

Before the layoffs on the main campus were announced, Dunlap had already submitted his paperwork to retire in June 2026. Now, he’s fighting — partly for his position, but also for the principle.

“We perceive this as an attack on our profession,” he said, “not just losing our jobs.”

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