



August 23, 2023

Members of the Board of Governors
West Virginia University
Office of the President
Stewart Hall
P.O. Box 6201
Morgantown, WV 26506

VIA EMAIL

Dear Members of the WVU Board of Governors:

I write on behalf of the 1.72 million AFT members to voice our concerns regarding the proposed catastrophic cuts to program and staff at West Virginia University.

WVU is a land-grant institution and the sole R1 research university in West Virginia. It is a key economic and educational driver in the state. As you know from our work in McDowell County, we have a long-term commitment to this state. As the largest and fastest-growing higher education union in the country, we are dedicated to every student's freedom to learn and to faculty's freedom to teach. These cuts are draconian and catastrophic and do not simply jeopardize the institution's continued standing as an R1 university. The scope and nature of these cuts raise fundamental questions about WVU's commitment to its students, its surrounding community and the state.

As you well know, as a land-grant institution, WVU is responsible for providing accessible education and research with the goal of improving the lives of the people and communities within the state. Indeed, the institution's own mission requires you to create "a diverse and inclusive culture that advances education, healthcare, and prosperity for all by providing access and opportunity; by advancing high-impact research; and by leading transformation in the world through local, state, and global engagement." Yet at a time when robust, affordable higher education is essential to providing opportunity to West Virginians, fostering the state's economic growth and enhancing global competitiveness, WVU is pursuing a course that does the opposite. It threatens the university's status as an R1 institution and limits students' pathways to success.

American Federation
of Teachers, AFL-CIO

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The \$45 million shortfall these cuts attempt to address is the result of a decade of painful cuts by the state and financial mismanagement by the current administration. Over the past 10 years, the state Legislature has cut funding to the university by 24 percent, creating a significant budget shortfall for the university. The cost of college has shifted to West Virginian students and families who can least afford it. The Promise Scholarship program has been eroded, going from a scholarship program that covers the full cost of in-state tuition at a public college or university to a fixed block grant that covers around 63 percent of the cost of tuition on average. And while many states have seen an increased reliance on tuition dollars over the past few decades, West Virginia has outpaced most states: Between 1980 and 2022, West Virginia public institutions have gone from receiving 19 percent of their total revenue from tuition to 56 percent.

While state support for higher education was shrinking, the current university administration engaged in foolhardy, debt-funded construction projects based on faulty enrollment projections. When faculty members, students and members of the local business community questioned these decisions, the university president doubled down, driving the institution further into peril. The state funding cuts, bad business decisions and unwillingness to engage with faculty and other partners have led to a situation where the university is facing profound challenges that will have a significant impact on students' and employees' futures.

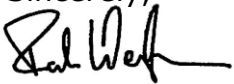
Simply put, West Virginia's students are being priced out of attending their flagship institution. Those who will be able to attend will receive an education that is now being impaired by drastic cuts—yet they will be expected to compete with graduates of other R1 institutions in surrounding states. This amounts to a broken promise to the people of West Virginia and will contribute to the state's brain drain. The impact of these cuts on the surrounding community is no less dire. West Virginia University is the largest employer in Monongalia County. Layoffs on campus will significantly affect families and the local economy. These effects will be felt not by just the families of the WVU faculty and staff facing layoffs, but also by the local businesses and retailers who serve the community and who depend on WVU employees spending money in their shops.

The people of West Virginia deserve a strong, well-supported public flagship institution, one that is accessible, is affordable and provides the full range of majors and minors necessary for students to thrive well into

the future. As the West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy has argued, just returning the state funding levels to what they were a decade ago would mitigate the current budget gap. There are demographic trends that deserve the careful attention of the university administration and the board of governors. And universities should evolve to best serve the needs of the state and to ensure that students are being prepared for future success. These are not, however, decisions that can easily be made outside of the norms of sound campus shared governance or under the pressure of a manufactured crisis.

Rather than proceeding with cuts that disrupt students mid-degree, weaken the economy of the local community and the state, and undermine the university's mission and standing as a premier research institution, the board of governors, together with the university administration, should advocate for increased state support to make up the projected budget shortfall in the short term and to adequately fund WVU going forward. This funding could provide the university community with the window it needs to engage in the level of consultation and planning called for under the AFT-affiliated American Association of University Professors' policies on shared governance in the academy and the university's existing shared governance procedures. This process should be fully transparent and should include a thorough review of administrative costs as well as a review of current academic programs. Decisions about curriculum and educational programs should be driven by the faculty, who should be full partners in helping the institution successfully navigate financial challenges. It is through this kind of process that WVU could move forward in a way that positions the institution to best achieve its mission and that best ensures student success.

Sincerely,



Randi Weingarten
President

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cc: Gov. James Conley Justice II
Sen. Joe Manchin
Sen. Shelley Moore Capito