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Students react to WSU faculty strike

Faculty strike could affect Wright State's enrollment, finances

AAUP-WSU president says administrators should come back to the negotiating table

Jan 09, 2019

By

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FAIRBORN —

Wright State University leaders fear that a faculty union strike this month could cause the school's already dwindling enrollment to drop even further this spring and next fall.

Wright State students return to classes on Monday and members of the Wright State chapter of the American Association of University Professors plan to strike at 8 a.m., Jan. 22. Three days later, Jan. 25, is the deadline for students to withdraw from the university and still receive a full refund, according to the WSU academic calendar.

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"There will be an impact on enrollment and how big it is will depend on how long (the strike) goes, which is frankly counterproductive," said Doug Fecher, chairman of the WSU board of trustees. "It's something we have to think about on all sides."

If the administrators are worried about how a strike will impact enrollment then they should come back to the negotiating table and forge a deal, said AAUP-WSU president Martin Kich.

"If it's likely that there's going to be a major hit to enrollment, why isn't the university administration and board bending over backward to avoid that?" Kich said. "They certainly know given the university's budget issues that another significant drop in enrollment is not something that's sustainable."

Shrinking enrollment has become a big issue for Wright State as the university continues to grapple with a budget crisis that forced it to reduce spending by around \$53 million in fiscal year 2018. Tuition is Wright State's single biggest source of revenue so lower enrollment translates into less money rolling in.



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Wright State's enrollment was projected to dip below 17,000 for the first time this fall since 2007 to around 16,224, nearly 3,550 below the school's peak in 2010 when a transition from quarters to semesters started taking place, according to a fiscal year 2019 budget. Though similar sized schools are



also facing enrollment issues, Wright State's full-time enrollment from fiscal year 2012 to fiscal year 2017 dropped 13 percent.

Wright State "is of course concerned about the retention of its students and the enrollment of new students for spring and fall terms and how strike threats affect them," Bauguess said.

The union's decision to put WSU on notice for a strike came after the board on Friday voted unanimously to implement its "last, best offer" on terms and conditions of employment to the school's faculty union.

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The new terms moves faculty union members into a single university-wide health care plan, maintains current rules of retrenchment, includes no pay raises and would allow faculty to be furloughed as part of "cost savings days." In its strike notice filed Monday, the union took issue with the furlough policy, changes to health care, new provisions for promotions and tenure appointment, workload policies and a merit pay system.

At Cincinnati State Technical and Community College, approximately 200 full-time faculty went on strike in September 2011. The following fall, the college's initial enrollment remained steady at around 10,600 or so, according to enrollment records from the Ohio Department of Higher Education.

Youngstown State University's faculty went on strike for a few hours in August 2011, according to The Vindicator. The next fall, enrollment there declined by about five percent from 14,541 to 13,813, according to the state.

A 1990 faculty union strike at Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania had a far deeper impact.

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More than 3,500 students withdrew from Temple during and immediately following the 29-day strike, according to the school's campus newspaper The Temple News. It took until the fall of 1999 for Temple's

enrollment to bounce back and the strike itself cost the school around \$12.5 million.

Though Wright State will not pay faculty members who go on strike later this month, Bauguess said the university estimates it will end up costing WSU money. The amount of money Wright State loses will depend on the length of the strike, Bauguess said.

The idea that the faculty union has “created an enrollment crisis” is untrue, Kich said. Both the union and administration have said they’d hoped to avoid a strike and Kich has always said it would be a last resort.

“If we don’t indicate that we’re willing to strike over this fiasco, we might as well not have a union,” Kich said.

Wright State plans to maintain normal operations if a strike proceeds. Classes will continue but some may be consolidated, taught online or taught by a substitute which could include WSU president Cheryl Schrader.

Although graduation is less than four months away on May 4, Fecher said he does not anticipate it will be impacted by a strike since classes will go on.

“I’m disappointed with what’s happened over the last few days ... I continue to hope there isn’t a strike,” Fecher said. “My hope is that it’s not a prolonged thing. We’ll take the best care of our students that we can.”

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