



Indiana's Higher Education "Reform" and the Elimination of Labor Studies

BY LYNN DUGGAN AND
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The current political environment is changing the role and importance of the university system from a center of culture and academic excellence into one more victim of neoliberalism. Increasingly viewed as income-producers rather than knowledge-creators, many public universities have caved to Trump administration demands to cut programs. Some have also contracted out core university missions to private firms and eliminated degree programs based on disfavored constituencies. At Indiana University (IU), diversity, equity, and inclusion policies and many liberal arts, foreign language, STEM, and education programs are on the chopping block. Not surprisingly, so is the Labor Studies Department.

In May 2025, Indiana's Republican government passed a state budget (House Bill 1001) with last-minute additions to restructure public higher education, including the requirement that bachelor's degree programs graduate a minimum of 15 students per year. The legislation also raised other degree thresholds and changed faculty councils' right to shape policy to a purely advisory role. Within a month of the bill's passage, Indiana public colleges and universities restructured over 400 degree programs—approximately 20% of their programs. About half of the restructurings are at IU, including the elimination of the state's only labor studies program over the next four years.

Indiana's Higher Education Commissioner at the time, Chris Lowery, praised the state's public higher education institutions for their "thoughtful voluntary review and reduction" of degree programs. Indiana University President Pamela Whitten,

fully on board with the governor's agenda, did not consult IU faculty councils. Alexis McLeod, an IU professor of religious studies, said in a July interview with Aubrey Wright on WFYI Indianapolis, "The state is clearly trying to micromanage the university and trying to transform the university. ... One thing I wish we saw from the university is more questioning of that, maybe more resistance to that."

Like much else at Indiana University, the Labor Studies program and its history are being erased, along with all references to diversity, equity and inclusion.

Instead of the wished-for discussion, the Indiana Commission for Higher Education obscured the impact of the program cuts. On July 25, 2025, in the online publication *Indiana Capital Chronicle*, Casey Smith noted that "Board leadership repeatedly emphasized that the overall degree changes are expected to have little to no impact on students." She quotes Matt Bulter, the Indiana Commission for Higher Education's chief academic officer, as saying, "Programs on the chopping block all had zero enrollment or were already on track to be phased out."

In reality, only 69 of the eliminated programs had no enrollments in 2022–2024. Another 101 eliminated programs, termed "suspended... toward elimination," have many student enrollments and majors, and their closures will affect 2,400 graduates annually, according to the Indiana Commission for Higher Education's PowerPoint slides. Another 229 programs will be merged or consolidated, affecting 900 graduates annually.

When schools weaken their commitments to students' chosen fields midstream, the students experience academic, professional, and emotional disruptions. Program closures undermine students' sense of academic identity and community and lead to uncertainty about the credibility of their degrees. In addition, program eliminations destroy opportunities for future (or would-be) students and communities, particularly in the case of a program like IU's Labor Studies program, which is the only one of its kind in the state and provides accessible classes to students who are interested in union perspectives.

The interim chair of IU Labor Studies, Marquita Walker, was not included in any discussions of restructuring prior to hearing about House Bill 1001's passage and was not told that the bill would result in the closing of degree programs. Since her appointment in 2019, Walker has succeeded in tripling labor studies enrollments and credit-hour production, increasing credit hours from 3,841 in 2020 to 12,191 in 2025. Two past deans had instructed her to focus on increasing enrollments, which had fallen from 2013 to 2020 under a prior chair from the School of Social Work, due to poor outreach, loss of retiring faculty, and the pandemic. Walker succeeded on all counts. By 2025 the program's growth was stable, a prospect that should logically have led to a "merge or consolidate" or "monitor" decision—and not the elimination of the program—especially in light of the School of Social Work's administrative failures that slowed progress toward the Labor Studies program's stable growth.

The IU Labor Studies Department was likely expressly targeted by the governor and state officials. The effort to eliminate labor studies is unfortunately not new, nor is it isolated.

History of IU Labor Studies

Indiana University's Labor Studies program originated in 1946 after the IU Post-War Planning Committee on Industrial Relations recommended that the university develop an extension program to meet growing demand for workers' and trade unionists' education and foremanship training. The 1935 National Labor Relations Act established legal structures for collective bargaining. Off-campus classes were needed to train organized workers and union officials in the use of these institutions as well as to balance the growth of the Business School and recognize labor's importance to the state's well-being.

Beginning with one coordinator of IU's Industrial Relations Program at the Bureau of Adult Education and Public Service, the Labor Studies program grew to encompass 24 staff on six IU campuses teaching credit as well as noncredit classes by the late 1970s. It was an independent division within the university from 1999 to 2007, with an effective outreach arm to communities. It remained one of the premier labor studies programs in the country until around 2014. It would have easily met the 15-student baccalaureate degree threshold if this had been imposed when it had 16 full-time faculty on six

campuses. Today, the Labor Studies program has been carved down to four full-time faculty on two campuses.

Over the years, state politicians have consistently attacked IU for being too liberal, too knowledge-based, and too diverse. In 2005, the state legislature cut the Labor Studies program's funding by 20%, forcing untenured faculty and staff to look for jobs and decimating the noncredit program. Facing closure threats, the program responded by offering its entire credit curriculum in the form of online classes beginning in 2005, generating sizable budget surpluses for years.

IU placed the Labor Studies program inside the School of Social Work in late 2006. Not long after this, the School refused to replace the program's lost faculty and staff, repair the the program's website (crucial for an online program), or allow affordable non-credit classes (basic to the program's mission), all the while benefiting from funding streams brought into the school by the merger. Indiana University and the School of Social Work have followed neoliberal principles in managing the Labor Studies program: intensification of labor, reduction in staff, and replacement of full-time with part-time instructors. The Labor Studies program was denigrated

as an advocacy program, which it is not—at least, no more than the 450 active faculty in IU Bloomington's and Indianapolis's business schools.

The Debate That Should Have Happened

Politicians' last-minute addition of restructuring language into House Bill 1001 and President Whitten's failure to consult faculty councils have resulted in a missed opportunity for Indiana. A public debate could have compared the Commission for Higher Education's criteria (degrees awarded) to other measures of program success, such as student enrollments and contributions to IU's mission. From an economic perspective, enrollments (credit hours) are more important than degrees as they produce income. Anyone literate in economics also understands the "positive externalities" of education (meaning each educated person raises the well-being of many others due to better health, rule of law, political stability, higher productivity, and other benefits).

Classes taught in one program benefit students in others such as business, public administration, economics, public policy, sociology, ethnic studies, gender studies, history, and political science. Among IU students who took at

HOW ARE OTHER LABOR EDUCATION PROGRAMS DOING?

Indiana's draconian transformation may be a harbinger of things to come for other labor education programs; however, this is not possible to predict. Like labor, labor studies is often the target of conservative and right-wing forces. Most labor education/studies programs in this country are in heavily Democratic states where labor unions tend to be stronger.

For an overview of the broader context, Helena Worthen conducted a survey of labor extension programs in U.S. colleges and universities in 2014, finding 61 programs that existed at one point in time or another. See her article, "The Labor Education That Workers Need Most" (*D&S*, July/August 2025), for information on the impact of growing political polarization on labor education programs.

Despite the headwinds that labor studies programs face, what is clear, according to historian Paul Ortiz, is

...the need to defend the hard-won spaces of dissent, mutual aid, and bridge building that our academic ancestors sacrificed so much to institutionalize. These spaces include programs ... of black studies, Chicano studies, gender studies, and LGBTQ+ studies, ... fields of study [that] give us tools to explain how we got into this mess of misogyny, mass incarceration, and materialism, as well as how we might find ways to build a more just and peaceful planet.

SOURCES: Helena Worthen, "The Labor Education That Workers Need Most," *Dollars & Sense*, July/August, 2025; Paul Ortiz, "Response to 'What Universities Can Be: Strategizing amid the Crisis in Higher Education,'" *Labor Studies in Working-Class History*, April 6, 2026 (lawcha.org).

least one labor studies class from 2014 to 2018, approximately 55% were liberal arts and sciences majors; 12% were business majors; 8%, general studies; 5%, nursing; and 4%, public and environmental affairs. Only about 7% of students taking labor studies classes were majors. Many non-majors minored or earned certificates in labor studies. Importantly, most college and university students are or will be employees for most of their working lives, increasing the relevance of classes such as labor/employment law, labor history, and labor and the economy to all students.

President Whitten's decision not to consult faculty councils prevented this discussion from occurring and skewed public understanding of the economics of higher education. Her actions help explain the IU Bloomington faculty's 2024 no-confidence vote against Whitten, which cited her dismal record on free speech. For more information on Whitten's autocratic leadership, working jointly with the supermajority Republican state legislature, see the 2026 documentary film, "Freedoms Under Assault," co-directed by IU School of Education professor emeritus Robert Arnové and Jacky Comforty (see freedomunderassault.org; available for \$3.99 by pay-per-view at comfory.vhx.tv).

The Mission of a State University

The view that the main role of universities is to issue diplomas and degrees goes against their historic mission to contribute to society as well as to individuals via community learning, advanced study, culture, innovation, and progress. The elimination of the only labor studies program in the state will limit the ability of all students and communities to engage with the political and economic changes they face or hear about as employees and as parents. Unless Indiana seeks to replace humans with robots or return to the Stone Age, it cannot advance without an educated labor force knowledgeable about our history and rights.



Marquita Walker, interim chair of IU Labor Studies (center), with students in 2023. Credit: Photo provide by Marquita Walker.

Indiana's House Bill 1001 is neoliberal education on steroids. It is making draconian cuts to public higher education while directing universities to narrow their sights on the number of graduates produced. Universities should also focus on student enrollments, the number of people affected positively, and the number of achievements of programs. A productivity model blind to programmatic content and character is not in keeping with IU's global stature and may undermine it.

While the gradual elimination of labor studies majors and courses continues over the next four years, the program is represented in confusing and contradictory ways on IU's websites. It is impossible to find the department's courses, history, or names of full- and part-time faculty members—and of course not its emeritus faculty. Like much else at IU, the Labor Studies program and its history are being erased, along with all references to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

In eliminating labor studies and other programs throughout Indiana public higher ed, the state's leaders have robbed students of vital resources and straightjacketed free speech, critical thinking, and creative thought. It remains to be seen whether students and community members who are affected

by the invisibility and isolation driven by the political elite will see this for what it is and raise their visibility and voices; or whether they will simply take the path of least resistance. **D&S**

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To add your voice to others' critical of the closure of the IU Labor Studies program, please begin by signing and circulating the "Labor Studies Is Vital to Working Hoosiers" petition at Action Network (actionnetwork.org).

SOURCES: Robert Arnové and Jacob Comforty, "Freedoms Under Assault," 2026 (comfory.vhx.tv); Matt Butler and Chris Lowery, "Degree Program Review: Voluntary Early Actions Overview, July 24, 2025," Indiana Commission for Higher Education, July 24, 2025 (in.gov); Ethan Sandweiss, "Hundreds of Indiana University degree programs at risk of disappearing," IPB News, June 25, 2025 (indianapublicradio.org); Casey Smith, "Indiana higher ed board updates degree review process after hundreds of programs cut, merged," Indiana Capital Chronicle, July 25, 2025 (indianacapitalchronicle.com); Marquita Walker (interim chair of Labor Studies) in discussion with the authors, January 2026; Walker analysis, "Labor Studies Active Student Enrollment; Nonmajors," 2026 [data files]; Aubrey Wright, "'You're cheating the students': IU to cut, merge almost 250 degrees to comply with state law," WFYI News, July 5, 2025 (wfyi.org).