



ILLINOIS LIBRARY ASSOCIATION

Because Libraries Matter

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Illinois Library Association

560 W. Washington Blvd., Suite 330

Chicago, IL 60661-2692

Phone: 312.644.1896

Email: tjenkins@ila.org

**Western Illinois University (WIU) Librarian Faculty Named
2025 Illinois Academic Librarian of the Year**

The Western Illinois University (WIU) Librarian Faculty, Jeff Hancks, Michael Lorenzen, Krista Bowers Sharpe, Julia Thompson, Sean Cordes, Michelle Holschuh Simmons, Brian Clark, and Hunter Dunlap, are collectively the 2025 recipients of the Illinois Library Association (ILA) Illinois Academic Librarian of the Year Award. A ninth WIU librarian who also lost their job has successfully found a position outside Illinois and chooses to be an anonymous award recipient. The award, presented by the ILA Illinois Association of College and Research Libraries (IACRL) Forum, recognizes Illinois librarians who make an outstanding statewide contribution to academic or research librarianship and to library development. The award is sponsored by Library Juice Academy.

When the WIU library faculty were terminated in the summer of 2024 (effective May 2025), they began a large-scale collaboration to draw attention to the significant role of librarians in Higher Education. Librarian Krista Bowers Sharp created a YouTube series called “Library Magic” to emphasize the role and contributions of academic librarians. The library faculty also adopted a

Resolution of Concern, writing numerous letters to WIU accreditation agencies about the deleterious effects on student learning that were engendered by the terminations.

The efforts of the WIU Faculty Librarians to emphasize the important role of librarians in academia have received national attention. The librarians received media training from IFT/UPI union partners and were interviewed by television, radio, web, podcast, and print outlets, including *The Washington Post*, *Vox*, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Inside Higher Education*, and local NPR affiliates. The librarians' efforts garnered over 10,000 supporters, who submitted petitions to the WIU Administration to attempt to have the cataclysmic decision reversed.

Librarian Hunter Dunlap drafted legislation and served on the Coalition for Higher Education Libraries, which successfully lobbied the Illinois General Assembly to pass SJR13 in late May 2025. The law will create a blue-ribbon committee of legislators and university library stakeholders to strengthen the role of academic librarianship within Illinois.

The WIU Faculty Librarians created a website (savewiulibrarians.org) that tracks their news and their support. This site contains the CARLI Governance Board's *Statement on the Importance of Librarians in Academic Libraries* as well as ILA's endorsement of that statement.

The WIU Faculty Librarians developed two primary strengths as they contended with the unfortunate situation—they were unified and principled. The librarians met weekly, via Zoom, to keep up with each other and the changing details in their shared circumstance. These meetings created unity by providing an opportunity to plan, communicate, develop talking points, and provide support to each other during a very difficult time. Likewise, in their common struggle, they remained principled by focusing their campaign and press interactions on highlighting the harmful outcomes that the termination decision would have on WIU students and the campus community.

IACRL is proud to recognize the fine work of our colleagues in bringing state and national attention to not only their own plight, but to the importance of academic librarianship. Their termination has spurred many uncomfortable conversations in academic institutions, but has also inspired a recommitment to education and librarianship in many hearts. This award expresses our gratitude as well as our commiseration and sorrow.

The Illinois Academic Librarian of the Year Award will be presented at an awards ceremony during the 2025 Illinois Library Association Annual Conference. The conference will take place October 14-16, 2025, in Rosemont, Illinois.

For more information, contact the Illinois Library Association.

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About the Illinois Library Association

The Illinois Library Association (ILA) is a professional membership organization that represents Illinois libraries and the millions who depend on them. Founded in 1896, it is the third-largest state library association and serves as a chapter within the American Library Association. ILA is comprised of 2,000 personal and more than 500 institutional members, made up of public, academic, school, and special libraries, as well as librarians, library staff, trustees, students, and library vendors.