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Faculty

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Federal Shutdown Hits the Classroom, Limiting Research and Fieldwork

By *Lindsay Ellis*

After Wednesday's meeting of his research-methods class, Richard A. Williams, an associate professor of sociology at the University of Notre Dame, told students to light a candle in the university's grotto, an outdoor stone hollow where community members pray, for the government shutdown to end soon. His request was in jest, but Mr. Williams said that the inconveniences brought by the government shutdown are affecting faculty members and students alike.

He and his students need U.S. census data for a project that he has assigned to classes for about a decade, but the Census Bureau's Web site is unavailable because of the lapse in federal funds. Mr. Williams asks students in the class, which covers theory construction and data collection, to compare racial composition and economic status among neighborhoods or communities using census data in a final paper.

"I'm not expecting people to be too traumatized," Mr. Williams said. "But it's one of the many examples of the impact on people, and I think it's an adverse impact on my students."

The effects of federal closures [since the shutdown began](#), on Tuesday, have reached into a number of college classrooms like Mr. Williams's. Faculty members have cited the [absence of online information](#) and the lack of access to national parks as among ways the shutdown is limiting research, data collection, and other forms of scholarship.

In response to a question *The Chronicle* posted [on Facebook](#), many academics listed the effects of the shutdown on their day-to-day

lives.

Master's of Public Administration students at DePaul University cannot get access to government data for their capstone projects, which apply research methods to individual presentations and papers. They must now scramble to conduct quantitative and qualitative surveys.

A professor teaching a historical-methods course at the University of Southern Indiana commented that her students must go without primary sources from the Library of Congress.

Data collection on water quality has halted at waterway-gauging stations, another professor added.

Data and primary sources are crucial for Anne M. Whisnant's "Introduction to Public History" course at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her students are conducting research on previously unexamined parts of the Blue Ridge Parkway's history, and they do not have access to the documents, like maps and letters, that they need to do their work.

Ms. Whisnant, the deputy secretary of the faculty and an adjunct associate professor of history and American studies, does not expect to have to abandon the project entirely because she has studied the region and has accumulated materials like digitized images and maps that she can share with her students. But she said the lack of access to basic records will limit the assignment's effectiveness.

"It's going to be more tentative and less rich than it would have been," she said.

Back to the Library

In some cases professors are urging their students to turn to old-fashioned methods—digging up books, photocopying pages, and asking librarians for help—to find information for class assignments rather than wait for the government to reopen.

Thomas F. Wolff, associate dean of undergraduate studies at

Michigan State University's College of Engineering, is one teacher in a course on civil and environmental engineering. His class of about 60 undergraduates must create a site plan for an 8,000-student university in a designated area of Michigan, using information from the Department of Agriculture and the National Resources Conservation Service to find the best place to build.

On Wednesday a student approached Mr. Wolff, saying he could not get access to the data. Mr. Wolff extended a project deadline and then asked if students knew how to find the library. (They did.)

"In practice, all sorts of unexpected things happen, and you have to go to Plan B," he said. "It was interesting and ironic that this reached all the way down to a routine homework assignment."

Kathleen A. Nicoll, an associate professor of geography at the University of Utah, said the shutdown showed that members of Congress did not understand how vital government agencies are to students' education.

Ms. Nicoll, who is on sabbatical, said her colleagues had reported stark differences in their classroom experiences since the shutdown. Professors cannot, for example, provide the latest data in daily lectures.

"This is creating an environment where, in my mind, academics are not able to do our jobs," she said, "even though we're not federal employees."

13 comments



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gerard_harbison • 11 days ago

Let's be clear; the systems are up. They need to be up to tell you they're unavailable.

I could rationalize taking them down during a shutdown, because, unattended, they're more likely to be hacked. The only reason to have them up and displaying an 'unavailable' message is to create inconvenience for people who want to use them.

Jonah Goldberg has a nice column this morning on Obama's vindictiveness.

9 ^ | 2 v Reply Share ›



physiology → gerard_harbison • 10 days ago

I think it's a bit hard to blame the status of a particular website on the President. I highly doubt that the President ordered that each website be turned off. It was probably ordered by someone a bit lower on the chain of command.

13 ^ | 1 v Reply Share ›



calgrad → physiology • 10 days ago

Having it happen lower down is even worse. That's proof of something long-argued: The culture of government has changed from "public service" to "we're more important than you are". Much like the IRS decision to link audits to political point of view, this is evidence that government consider itself our master, not our servant.

3 ^ | 1 v Reply Share ›



Reythia → gerard_harbison • 6 days ago

First off, as physiology noted, it's highly unlike that it's Obama personally who decided to shut off the government websites.

But more to the point, WHY SHOULDN'T HE?

Because it inconveniences you? (Us, actually, since I can't get my data offline right now either.) Have you ever considered that maybe, just maybe, the total and complete failure of the legislature to legislate OUGHT to affect the general public? That, maybe, just maybe, that's sort of the point of all this, no matter how silly and trivial it seems to shut down websites and such?

If you want your websites back, maybe you ought to contact your congressman, specifically your house of representatives guy. Personally, I'd tell him (since mine's a republican, alas) to insist that Boehner offer the senate's budget bill up for a straight, no-strings-attached vote. But you can tell yours whatever you think the solution should be.

Maybe it's important for us to realize that what the federal government does really DOES affect us. And maybe it's equally important for us to realize that, in return, we can aggregately affect them.

So stop whining, and start writing. Lots of people I know have things much worse than merely not being able to visit websites. Be glad you're at work today.

1 ^ | v Reply Share ›



missoularedhead • 11 days ago

I'm teaching historiography and research methods, and I changed my final assignment to be secondary source only based...too many of them were writing on topics that required LOC or NARA access.

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mjw13 • 10 days ago

Good news is that at least loc.gov sites (including American Memory) are back up, and in some cases, there are enough alternative sources online for census data to provide what many students need. The professor's advice to find the library is a great one; even better is find a librarian (said the librarian!).

6 ^ | v Reply Share ›



jsimon6 → mjlw13 • 6 days ago

Absolutely, as a librarian I can attest that there are many resources available for access to government information and other primary sources. Also, though the main pages of the government sites are down, we have ways of searching the content. Sometimes even Google (gasp, a librarian mentioning Google!) can help, if you use some of the more advanced techniques for searching within a domain.

Ask us!

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mbelvadi • 8 days ago

"turn to old-fashioned methods—digging up books, photocopying pages, and asking librarians for help" - while as a librarian I appreciate the encouragement that students explore what the library has to offer, I am a bit dismayed that this author appears to cling to an obsolete stereotype of the library as a source of dead-tree materials only. If you talk to a librarian yourself, you may well find that your library subscribes to full text databases full of articles, books, and primary historical materials, which are hosted on private commercial servers and thus not affected by the shutdown. The specific offerings will vary by your library's budget and selection criteria of course, so if you are at a small institution in a city that also has a much larger one, you could also explore the library website of the larger one and find out if they have additional online primary resources that your students could use if they physically visited that other library - this is commonly the case.

8 ^ | v Reply Share ›



nunya • 6 days ago

I'm trying to write a dissertation, and ERIC is shut down.
<http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWeb...>

Not exactly sure how denying academics articles that have already been written, already been funded, much of it by tax dollars, is logical. I could understand not allowing NEW articles to be added, but to deny existing articles on an existing database, that was already paid for? It shows how some politicians (both left and right) want to make this shutdown as painful as possible. To serve their ideological cause. Sickening.

And reminds us that we should not be depending on the government for much, if anything. When the government control the information....

1 ^ | v Reply Share ›



Reythia → nunya • 6 days ago

shrug Why SHOULDND'T we be affected by this? Our legislature has failed to legislate. Our government is not working. That's not just a minor inconvenience, it's a BIG DEAL. And while I sympathize with your understandable annoyance, remember that for a lot of people, it's having way bigger ramifications than merely not being able to reach a website. I know a good dozen out of work this week, for example. And of course, things will get much, much worse for all of us if they refuse to raise debt ceiling.

Maybe someone in the government is trying to motivate us regular citizens to WAKE UP. To remind us that when we vote (or don't), we're really electing the people who will govern (or not, as it were).

I don't enjoy having websites I need for work down either. It's a royal nuisance. But I think it's probably a good (though painful) idea to remind us regular folks that this government shutdown isn't something we can just brush off and ignore.

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jsimon6 → Reythia • 6 days ago

While I agree with many of your sentiments, it's probably best if we try and find ways to work around this. Many people don't have the luxury of outrage; there are ways we can get around this for individuals. Absolutely write your representatives, get on the phone, etc. In the meantime, talk to a librarian; we can help you get through this troubled time.

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Reythia → jsimon6 • 4 days ago

Of course. Which is why there's been a lot of behind-the-scenes sharing of ordinarily-on-websites data between scientists.

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jsimon6 → nunya • 6 days ago

If your institution has access to Ebsco databases, they have made the content of the government version of ERIC available for free. Ask the librarian at your institution for more information.

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