

Can Humanities Survive the Budget Cuts?

After years of hand-wringing about their future, liberal arts departments now face the chopping block. At risk: French, German, American studies and women's studies.



By Anemona Hartocollis

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The state auditor of Mississippi recently released an eight-page report suggesting that the state should invest more in college degree programs that could “improve the value they provide to both taxpayers and graduates.”

That means state appropriations should focus more on engineering and business programs, said Shad White, the auditor, and less on liberal arts majors like anthropology, women's studies and German language and literature.

Those graduates not only earn less, Mr. White said, but they are also less likely to stay in Mississippi. More than 60 percent of anthropology graduates leave to find work, he said.

“If I were advising my kids, I would say first and foremost, you have to find a degree program that combines your passion with some sort of practical skill that the world actually needs,” Mr. White said in an interview. (He has three small children, far from college age.)

For years, economists and more than a few worried parents have argued over whether a liberal arts degree is worth the price. The debate now seems to be over, and the answer is “no.”

Not only are public officials, like Mr. White, questioning state support for the humanities, a growing number of universities, often aided by outside consultants, are now putting many cherished departments — art history, American studies — on the chopping block. They say they are facing headwinds, including students who are fleeing to majors more closely aligned to employment.





Shad White, the state auditor of Mississippi, wanted to earn a living playing the guitar. He majored in political science instead. Imani Khayyam for The New York Times

West Virginia University recently sent layoff notices to 76 people, including 32 tenured faculty members, as part of its decision to cut 28 academic programs — many in areas like languages, landscape architecture and the arts.

Several other public institutions have announced or proposed cuts to programs, largely in the humanities, including the University of Alaska, Eastern Kentucky University, North Dakota State University, Iowa State University and the University of Kansas, according to The Hechinger Report, an education journal.

Miami University, a public institution in Oxford, Ohio, with 20,000 students, is reappraising 18 undergraduate majors, each of which has fewer than 35 students enrolled, including French and German, American studies, art history, classical studies and religion.

Those departments are dwarfed by computer science, which has 600 students enrolled; finance, with 1,400; marketing, with 1,200; and nursing, with almost 700.

For the humanities faculty, “it’s an existential crisis,” Elizabeth Reitz Mullenix, provost of Miami University, said in an interview. “There’s so much pressure about return on investment.”



Roosevelt Montas, a senior lecturer at Columbia University, suggested that it was up to universities to push back against a strictly careerist view of education.
Jackie Molloy for The New York Times

She said that she hoped that the subject matter, if not the majors, could be salvaged, perhaps by creating more interdisciplinary programs, like cybersecurity and philosophy.

The shift has been happening over decades. In 1970, education and combined social sciences and history degrees were the most popular majors, according to federal statistics.

Today, the most popular degree is business, at 19 percent of all bachelor's degrees, while social sciences trail far behind at just 8 percent of degrees.

Many courses on the endangered list are also dissonant with an expanding conservative political agenda. And many public universities are loath to invite further scrutiny of their already stagnant state subsidies.

At Miami University, degrees on the chopping block include critical race and ethnic studies, social justice studies and women's, gender and sexuality studies.

Mr. White, the Republican state auditor, said his first question was whether state spending on degree programs matched the needs of the economy. But he said that he also wanted to know, "Are we paying or using taxpayer money to fund programs that teach the professor's ideology, and not just a set of skills on how to approach problems in the world?"



Harvard, which has an endowment of more than \$50 billion, formed a strategic planning committee to look at humanities education. Sophie Park for The New York Times

Liberal arts professors are trying to defend themselves, using arguments tailored to an economy that is rapidly shifting — while also appealing to a more august vision of life's possibilities.

In a recent YouTube video — bluntly titled “Is a Humanities Degree Worth It?” — Jeffrey Cohen, the dean of the humanities at Arizona State University, defends his domain as a pathway toward not just a job but a lifetime of career reinvention.

“Our students are living in a time when the career that they’ve trained for is not likely to be the career that they’re going to be following 10 years later,” Mr. Cohen says. Studying the humanities, he argues, will teach them how to be nimble.

In a recent panel discussion in New York City, sponsored by Plough, a quarterly Christian-oriented magazine, Roosevelt Montás, a senior lecturer in American studies and English at Columbia University, suggested that universities should push back against a strictly careerist view of education.

“It’s not true that all students want from a college is the job,” he said. They are hungry for an education that “transforms them, an education that addresses their entire selves, not just a bank account.”

But that argument seems to be faltering almost everywhere.

Harvard, which has an endowment of more than \$50 billion, formed a strategic planning committee to look at humanities education. One idea, a university spokesman said, would consolidate three language majors into one super major: “languages, literatures and cultures.”

There is also collateral damage. In early October, Gettysburg College shut down *The Gettysburg Review*. In its heyday, the magazine, founded in 1988, published writers like E.L. Doctorow, Joyce Carol Oates and Rita Dove. More recently, it has prided itself on publishing up-and-coming writers.

The editors of the magazine, Lauren Hohle and Mark Drew, were caught off guard when the college provost told them they were being fired.

“She said we’re not serving the core mission of the college,” Mr. Drew recalled. “I was going to say, ‘What is the core mission?’ I thought this was a liberal arts institution. But I was trying not to be snarky.”

To Mr. Drew, *The Review*, with about 1,100 paying subscribers, was a symbol to the outside world of the college’s commitment to the humanities. But to the university’s president, Robert Iuliano, the review was a money pit that might have bolstered the college’s reputation among the literati, but at a cost to the student body.

The magazine earned about \$30,000 to 40,000 a year in subscription revenue, “and the operating cost is something like five times more than that,” he said.

“We have been really thinking hard about what it means to prepare students for today’s world,” he said, “because you know, it’s changing with such rapidity.” That means, he added, offering courses that could be twinned with “hands-on experiential opportunities.”

Mr. White, the Mississippi state auditor, majored in political science and economics at the University of Mississippi before becoming a Rhodes scholar and a graduate of Harvard Law School — a fine example, perhaps, of the value of the liberal arts.

But if he could do it over again, he might switch majors, he said, because “political science majors don’t command a high salary.” Working on a campaign or in government might be more valuable experience than the degree, he said.

Mr. White said he personally would have liked to play acoustic guitar for a living. But he doubted his chances for success, given the small number of jobs available.

Then he seemed to reconsider, conceding: “If you dig into the data, music majors do pretty well for whatever reason. They go to work at schools, they go to work at the university setting, or they work in churches.”

So on reflection, he softened his message. “What I would tell students is, don’t write off all of liberal arts,” he said. “Don’t write off all of the fine arts.”

Anemona Hartocollis is a national correspondent, covering higher education. She is also the author of the book “Seven Days of Possibilities: One Teacher, 24 Kids, and the Music That Changed Their Lives Forever.” More about Anemona Hartocollis

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