

Humanities teach students to think. Where would we be without them?

By Francine Prose

Following announced funding cuts in US universities, is it entirely paranoid to wonder if humanities are under attack because they enable students to think?

Humanities departments in America are once again being axed. The reasons, one hears, are economic rather than ideological. It's not that schools don't care about the humanities – they just can't afford them. But if one looks at these institutions' priorities, one finds a hidden ideology at work.

Earlier this month, the State University of New York (Suny) Stony Brook announced a plan to eliminate several of the college's well-regarded departments for budgetary reasons. Undergraduates will no longer be able to major in comparative literature, cinema and cultural studies or theater arts.

Three doctoral programs would be cut, and three departments (European languages and literature, Hispanic languages and literature, and cultural studies) would be merged into one. Not only students but faculty will be affected; many untenured teachers would lose their jobs, and doctoral candidates would have to finish their studies elsewhere.

This is happening at a time in which high salaries are awarded to college administrators that dwarf those of a junior or even senior faculty member teaching in at-risk departments. That discrepancy can only be explained through ideology. The decision to reduce education to a corporate consumer-driven model, providing services to the student-client, is ideological too.

Suny Stony Brook is spending millions on a multiyear program entitled "Far Beyond" that is intended to "rebrand" the college's image: a redesigned logo and website, new signs, banners and flags throughout the campus. Do colleges now care more about how a school looks and markets itself than about what it teaches? Has the university become a theme park: Collegeland, churning out workers trained to fill particular niches? Far beyond what?

The threat of cuts that Suny Stony Brook is facing is not entirely new. In 2010, Suny Albany announced that it was getting rid of its Russian, classics, theater, French and Italian departments – a decision later rescinded. The University of Pittsburgh has cut its German, classics and religious studies program.

This problem has parallels internationally. In the UK, protests greeted Middlesex University's 2010 decision to phase out its philosophy department. In June 2015, the Japanese minister of education sent a letter to the presidents of the national universities of Japan, suggesting they close their graduate and undergraduate departments in the humanities and social sciences and focus on something more practical.

Most recently, the Hungarian government announced restrictions that would essentially make it impossible for the Central European University, funded by George Soros, to function in Budapest.

These are hard times. Students need jobs when they graduate. But a singular opportunity has been lost if they are denied the opportunity to study foreign languages, the classics, literature, philosophy, music, theater and art. When else in their busy lives will they get that chance?

Eloquent defenses of the humanities have appeared – essays explaining why we need these subjects, what their loss would mean. Those of us who teach and study are aware of what these areas of learning provide: the ability to think critically and independently; to tolerate ambiguity; to see both sides of an issue; to look beneath the surface of what we are being told; to appreciate the ways in which language can help us understand one another more clearly and profoundly – or, alternately, how language can conceal and misrepresent. They help us learn how to think, and they equip us to live in – to sustain – a democracy.

Studying the classics and philosophy teaches students where we come from, and how our modes of reasoning have evolved over time. Learning foreign languages, and about other cultures, enables students to understand how other societies resemble or differ from our own. Is it entirely paranoid to wonder if these subjects are under attack because they enable students to think in ways that are more complex than the reductive simplifications so congenial to our current political and corporate discourse?

I don't believe that the humanities can make you a decent person. We know that Hitler was an ardent Wagner fan and had a lively interest in architecture. But literature, art and music can focus and expand our sense of what humans can accomplish and create. The humanities teach us about those who have gone before us; a foreign language brings us closer to those with whom we share the planet.

The humanities can touch those aspects of consciousness that we call intellect and heart – organs seemingly lacking among lawmakers whose views on health care suggest not only zero compassion but a poor understanding of human experience, with its crises and setbacks.

Courses in the humanities are as formative and beneficial as the classes that will replace them. Instead of Shakespeare or French, there will be (perhaps there already are) college classes in how to trim corporate spending – courses that instruct us to eliminate “frivolous” programs of study that might actually teach students to think.