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The Crisis of the Humanities Officially Arrives

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[Stanley Fish](#) on education, law and society.

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[classical education](#), [humanities](#), [SUNY](#)

In a response to [last week's column on "Howl,"](#) the movie about Allen Ginsberg's famous poem, [Charlie from Binghamton](#) asked, "What happened to public investment in the humanities and the belief that the humanities enhanced our culture, our society, our humanity?" And he speculated that it "will be a sad, sad day if and when we allow the humanities to collapse."

What he didn't know at the time is that it had already happened, on Oct. 1, when George M. Philip, president of SUNY Albany, announced that the French, Italian, classics, Russian and theater programs were getting the axe.

For someone of my vintage the elimination of French was the shocker. In the 1960s and '70s, French departments were the location of much of the intellectual energy. Faculty and students in other disciplines looked to French philosophers and critics for inspiration; the latest thing from Paris was instantly devoured and made the subject of conferences. Spanish was then the outlier, a discipline considered stodgy and uninteresting.

Now Spanish is the only safe department to be in. Russian's stock has gone down, one presumes, because in recent years the focus of our political (and to some extent cultural) attention has shifted from Russia to China, India, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq. Classics has been on the endangered species list for decades. As for theater, the first thing to go in a regime of bottom-line efficiency are the plays.

And indeed, if your criteria are productivity, efficiency and consumer satisfaction, it makes perfect sense to withdraw funds and material support from the humanities — which do not earn their keep and often draw the ire of a public suspicious of what humanities teachers do in the classroom — and leave standing programs that have a more obvious relationship to a state's economic prosperity and produce results the man or woman in the street can recognize and appreciate. (What can you say to the tax-payer who asks, "What good does a program in Byzantine art do me?" Nothing.)

President Philip cites as one justification for his action the fact “that there are comparatively fewer students enrolled in these degree programs.” Of course, in a bygone time seats in those programs’ classes would have been filled by students who were meeting quite specific distribution requirements; you remember, two advanced language courses, one course in American lit and another in British lit, and so on.

Those requirements have largely gone away. SUNY Albany does have general education requirements, but so many courses fulfill them — any one of dozens will meet your humanities requirement — that they are hardly a constraint at all, something the Web site acknowledges and even underlines with pride. This has happened in part because progressive academics have argued that traditional disciplinary departments were relics from the past kept artificially alive by outmoded requirements.

But keeping something you value alive by artificial, and even coercive, means (and distribution requirements are a form of coercion) is better than allowing them to die, if only because you may now die (get fired) with them, a fate that some visionary faculty members may now be suffering. I have always had trouble believing in the high-minded case for a core curriculum — that it preserves and transmits the best that has been thought and said — but I believe fully in the core curriculum as a device of employment for me and my fellow humanists. But the point seems to be moot. It’s too late to turn back the clock.

What, then, can be done? Well, it won’t do to invoke the pieties informing Charlie from Binghamton’s question — the humanities enhance our culture; the humanities make our society better — because those pieties have a 19th century air about them and are not even believed in by some who rehearse them.

And it won’t do to argue that the humanities contribute to economic health of the state — by producing more well-rounded workers or attracting corporations or delivering some other attenuated benefit — because nobody really buys that argument, not even the university administrators who make it.

And it won’t do, in the age of entrepreneurial academics, zero-based budgeting and “every tub on its own bottom,” to ask computer science or biology or the medical school to fork over some of their funds so that the revenue-poor classics department can be sustained. That was the idea a while back, but today it won’t fly.

The only thing that might fly — and I’m hardly optimistic — is politics, by which I mean the political efforts of senior academic administrators to explain and defend the core enterprise to those constituencies — legislatures, boards of trustees, alumni, parents and others — that have either let bad educational things happen or have actively connived in them.

And when I say “explain,” I should add aggressively explain — taking the bull by the horns, rejecting the demand (always a loser) to economically justify the liberal arts, refusing to allow myths (about lazy, pampered faculty who work two hours a week and undermine religion and the American way) to go unchallenged, and if necessary flagging the

pretensions and hypocrisy of men and women who want to exercise control over higher education in the absence of any real knowledge of the matters on which they so confidently pronounce.

On the basis of his performance in this instance, President Philip (who is without a doctoral degree and who has little if any experience teaching or researching) is not that kind of administrator, although he does exhibit some skills. With little notice, he called a town hall meeting for Friday afternoon, Oct. 1, when he could be sure that almost no academic personnel would be hanging around. In an e-mail sent the same day, he noted the “unfortunate timing,” but pleaded the “limited availability of appropriate large venue options.” In effect, *I can’t call a meeting on a convenient day because we don’t have a room large enough to get you all in, so I’ll commandeer a large room on a day when I know that very few of you will show up.* Brilliant!

The lengthy e-mail is also a legal justification in advance of any legal action. Philip knows that he can’t dismiss individual professors, but can only eliminate programs and departments. And he knows that, given tenure, contracts and all that pesky stuff he can only do that if he can make a case for financial exigency.

Accordingly, he explains in some detail a 30 percent decline of state support in the past three years and lists the steps his administration has already taken to deal with the problem. He is careful to say that the action he takes does not reflect any negative view of the scholars who will lose their positions or the value of the subjects they teach. He acknowledges that the burden seems to fall disproportionately on the humanities, but assures the departing soldiers that comparable cuts are on the way in the other colleges. (It’s almost a Bill Maher line: *Don’t get me wrong. I love the humanities.*)

Every sentence is written with passages like this one from AAUP v. Bloomfield College (1974) in mind. We consider, the court said, an administration’s “duty to honor solemnly undertaken tenure commitments, the objective data relating to the college’s financial circumstances, its financial history; the authenticity of the financial threat . . . the existence of real alternatives to the action taken.” Philip (or the university lawyer) is covering all the bases.

He also seems to be trying a political ploy. He makes much of the failure of the state legislature to pass a bill that would have allowed the university to set its own tuition rates. “Regrettably,” he reports, that didn’t happen. He is sending the legislators a message: *you dropped the ball and see what you made me do.* I guess they are supposed to recoil in horror and say, “No, no, we’ll do the right thing.” Fat chance! The truth is no one in public life cares for the humanities as an academic enterprise, although public officials most likely do care for books, movies, operas and TV, and like to think of themselves as crackerbarrel philosophers and historians.

That’s O.K. It’s not their job to value the humanities or even to understand them. But it is the job of presidents and chancellors to proclaim the value of liberal arts education loudly

and often and at least try to make the powers that be understand what is being lost when traditions of culture and art that have been vital for hundreds and even thousands of years disappear from the academic scene. President Philip cries crocodile tears. Real tears are in order.

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