

## GUEST ESSAY

# What Just Happened at West Virginia University Should Worry All of Us

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**By Leif Weatherby**

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In proposing last week to eliminate 169 faculty positions and cut more than 30 degree programs from its flagship university, West Virginia, the state with the fourth-highest poverty rate in the country, is engaging in a kind of educational gerrymandering. If you're a West Virginian with plans to attend West Virginia University, be prepared to find yourself cut out of much of the best education that the school has traditionally offered, and many of the most basic parts of the education offered by comparable universities.

The planned cuts include the school's program of world languages and literatures, along with graduate programs in mathematics and other degrees across the arts and pre-professional programs. The university is deciding, in effect, that certain citizens don't get access to a liberal arts education.

Sadly, this is not just a local story. Politicians and state officials, often with the help of management consultants, are making liberal arts education scarce in some of the poorest states in the Union. This trend, typically led by Republican-controlled legislatures and often masquerading as budgetary necessity, threatens to have dire long-term effects on our already polarized and divided nation.

Administrators at West Virginia University devised the plan to restructure the school **with the help of a consulting company called rpk Group**, which also works with the Universities of Missouri, Kansas and Virginia, among other schools. The stated purpose of the proposal is to address an expected decline in student enrollment at the school that will create a projected \$45 million budget deficit.

But the projected deficit is the result of overly aggressive planning more than it is a financial liability created by the humanities. E. Gordon Gee, the president of West Virginia University, once promised that the school would have 40,000 students by 2020, but the figure is still well under 30,000 across three campuses and is projected to drop. Mr. Gee is now covering up his own failures at the expense of his state's citizens, instead of putting his efforts toward recruiting and obtaining donor money to fund a broad education for West Virginians.

What's more, cutting humanities programs — which make up a sizable minority of the majors slated to be cut, alongside pre-professional and technical programs — is not necessarily the best way to save money. There is substantial evidence that humanities departments, unlike a majority of college athletics programs, often break even (and some may even subsidize the sciences). In defense of its proposed cuts, West Virginia University has cited declining interest in some of its humanities programs, but the absolute number of students enrolled is not the only measure of a department's value.

The finances aren't the point, anyway. The humanities are under threat more broadly across the nation because of the perceived left-wing ideology of the liberal arts. Book bans, attempts to undermine diversity efforts and remodeled school curriculums that teach that slavery was about "skill" development are part of a larger coordinated assault on the supposed "cultural Marxism" of the humanities. (That absurd idea rests in part on an antisemitic fantasy in which left-leaning philosophers like Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse somehow took control of American culture after World War II.) To resist this assault, we must provide broad access to a true liberal arts education.

The campaign to overturn the liberal arts is politically motivated, through and through. The Democratic Party has lost the working class, while the Republican Party has made electoral gains among the least educated. With the help of consultants, Republicans seek to gut the (nonprofit or public) university in the name of a "profit" it doesn't even intend to deliver. The point instead is to divide the electorate, and higher education is the tool.

I grew up in rural upstate New York. I was lucky: My parents put a liberal arts education above all other goals. But I know what it looks like when people are told they can't have nice things, and it's ugly. Taking liberal arts education away from the least privileged — implying that they are future laborers and nothing else — helps ensure that they develop a

resentment of “elites.” That’s an animus whose political consequences should be uncomfortably familiar by now.

The resentment fostered by cuts like those at West Virginia University won’t be aimed at the true culprits. The long-term effect will be bitterness toward those who have access to the liberal arts education that remains on offer in many blue states and at elite universities — what the scholar Lisa Corrigan calls a “two-tier educational system.” This outcome is likely to fortify many Republican voting strongholds.

Democratic politicians need to fight back in these culture wars, defending the humanities (rather than disparaging them) and loudly dissenting from the view that education is just job training. College presidents like Mr. Gee should promote and recruit rather than cut and run. An unholy alliance of far-right ideology and mercenary venture capitalists has politicized the classroom. We must reject their vision of America and insist that a liberal arts education accessible to more than just the elite is one of the great foundations of a democracy.

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