



Save university arts from the bean counters

Scientists must reach across the divide and speak up for campus colleagues in arts and humanities departments, says Gregory Petsko.

As we enter the season of goodwill, let us spare a thought for our colleagues on the other side of the two-culture divide. A number of US universities have recently drastically cut or closed their programmes in arts and the humanities. Departments of classics, French, Russian, German, American studies, theatre arts, philosophy, Italian and European literature have all suffered. To borrow a phrase from Marx (Karl, not Groucho), a spectre is haunting higher education: the spectre of the market.

Similar stories of cutbacks in non-science subjects have emerged from France, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and other countries long known for the strength of their higher-education systems. In the United Kingdom, there is deep concern that the humanities are at serious risk in the new education budget announced in October by chancellor George Osborne. Excluding research support, which, Osborne said, will remain flat “to ensure the UK remains a world leader in science and research”, the amount of money going to higher education in England will probably decline by 40% over the next four years. The government has said only that it will continue to pay for teaching in science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

If arts and humanities are to survive, we who work in the sciences need to stand up for them and alongside them. Why? We should proclaim not only our love for the humanities as educated people, but their crucial role in our lives as professional scientists. I learned to think critically, analyse deeply and write clearly in my university humanities courses, not in my science courses. I found humanities the most valuable subjects in school. They still broaden my thinking, help me to make connections and aid my ability to communicate.

The humanities are the victim of two pernicious trends that have crept into the management of universities in the past decade or two, based on the idea that market forces should control what happens in education, as they are supposed to influence the economy.

The first is that higher education is increasingly run as a business; anything that doesn't contribute positively to the bottom line of the balance sheet is reduced or eliminated. Helping to drive this trend are the disturbingly large number of institutions of higher learning that are headed by administrators recruited from the worlds of business or politics. Nothing could so undermine the mission of a university as the misguided principle that all parts of it must make a profit. Contrary to the prejudices of a number of administrators, there is evidence from recent studies, including one from the University of California, Los Angeles, that arts and humanities departments can actually make a profit. But I don't think we should use that line — it's fighting on our opponent's ground. And it is also not

clear that all science and engineering programmes make money. A better argument is that profit and loss should not be the chief basis for important academic decisions.

The second damaging trend is the growing mantra of student choice, which increasingly dictates what programmes are offered, expanded and supported. The thinking here is that students are consumers, and market forces will lead to efficiencies in education, just as they do in, say, finance. If the past two years have taught us anything, it's that markets aren't always efficient. In fact they can be manipulated, driven by emotional frenzy and subject to fads. Besides, there are things that simply shouldn't be left to the brutality of the invisible hand. Education is one.

Moreover, the idea that student choice is a good thing is wrong, whether one believes in markets or not. Students have neither the wisdom nor the experience to know what they need to know. Left to themselves, they frequently choose subjects based on the fashion of the moment (which in the United States is currently economics, although at one time it was sociology) or on what they think will equip them best for a job. That the best and most valuable education combines breadth with depth is something that most students do not yet understand. We need less student choice, not more. We need more prescribed curricula, not less.

To reverse these trends, here are some specific suggestions for things we might do. First, we should affirm the principle that universities aren't just about discovering new knowledge or generating intellectual property; they are also supposed to preserve ideas and information that may seem out of date now, but that are bound to

become important in the future, as 'old' ideas always do.

Second, we have to fight the hegemony of the bean counters. Universities should be run by people who understand what universities are really about. Marx (still Karl) also remarked that, for the bureaucrat, the world is a mere object for him to manipulate. Bureaucrats see universities the same way. And third, we must leave the comfortable ivory towers of our laboratories and take a stand with those in higher education — be they faculty members or administrators — who oppose the tyranny of the market. There is only one market that has any place in higher education: the marketplace of ideas.

To borrow from Marx again (Groucho this time, not Karl), those who run universities have had some perfectly wonderful ideas, but to savage arts and humanities education is not one of them. If you feel the same way, please speak out. ■

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HAVE NEITHER THE
WISDOM NOR THE
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