

# Phi Beta Cons

The *Right* take on higher education.

ABOUT | ARCHIVE | E-MAIL | LOG IN TO COMMENT

## The Humanities' Real Enemies

By [Thomas K. Lindsay](#)

Posted on December 16, 2011 3:18 PM

The Associated Press recently [detailed](#) the desperation of our public universities as they strive to protect the humanities from budget-cutting state governors and legislatures. The story focuses on comments made last month by Florida governor Rick Scott. Citing the miserable economy, Scott argued that precious state tax dollars should go to support science and tech studies, not “educate more people who can’t get jobs in anthropology.”

This has sent shock waves through faculty lounges across the country. The story quotes University of Connecticut president Susan Herbst, who worries that an overemphasis on job training will rob students of what is truly higher in higher education. Not only do the humanities teach “critical thinking,” says Herbst, they also “teach us how we’re supposed to live.”

As someone with a Ph.D. in the humanities myself, I’d share Herbst’s sadness if I thought there was much left of the genuine humanities still being taught that needed saving. Instead, Herbst is right for the wrong reason: The humanities are indeed in mortal peril, if not dead already. But neither our governors nor our state legislators are the assassins. Our humanities professors are.

Adolph Berle recognized this over a half-century ago. An FDR brain-truster, he went on to become a law professor at Columbia. In a 1960 speech, he took American universities to task for having “run away” from their duty to teach, as Herbst puts it, “how we’re supposed to live.” Berle’s bill of indictment aims particularly at university philosophy departments, but does not spare history or the social sciences.

#more#The abandonment of the humanities’ core function, lamented by Berle in 1960, has only accelerated since. Up until the ’60s, most colleges and universities required all students, regardless of major, to study the great works of philosophy, literature, politics, art, and music. If you examine the course catalogues of today’s schools, you’ll find that fewer than 2 percent of them still offer a common core curriculum.

The “Western Civ” requirement is another casualty of the past 50 years. In a landmark study titled “The Vanishing West: 1964–2010,” the National Association of Scholars found that required Western Civ courses had declined from 80 percent in the ’60s to 10 percent today.

As for Herbst's claim that the humanities "teach us how we're supposed to live," this is true; rather, it *was* true, up until about 50 years ago. The last two generations of college students have been taught by their humanities and social-science professors that principles regarding "how we're supposed to live" are merely "values," and that all values are as good as any others. Moral and cultural relativism are the thin gruel that the universities feed their students' hungry souls.

No wonder, then, that while Herbst claims that the humanities teach "critical thinking," the facts reveal a less-sunny reality. A recent study of college achievement, titled, *Academically Adrift*, found that 45 percent of the students it surveyed showed little improvement in their critical-thinking capacities after two years of college. After four years, 36 percent continued to show little improvement. Having been pummeled to near-death by our universities, today's humanities lack the wherewithal to sharpen effectively students' critical-reasoning capacities.

And so now, after their decades-long assault on the humanities, our universities are surprised to find that students and state governments have finally learned their lesson of contempt, and are responding in perfectly logical fashion by declaring, "No need to spend much time and money studying this stuff."

My only surprise is that it didn't happen sooner.

If they hope to reignite the public's interest in the serious study of the humanities, our universities might first show an interest in such serious study themselves.

— *Thomas K. Lindsay serves as director of the Center for Higher Education at the Texas Public Policy Foundation. Prior to that, he was deputy chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities during the second term of Pres. George W. Bush.*

[PERMALINK](#)