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Reshmi Dutt-Ballerstadt
Linfield College, rdutt-b@linfield.edu

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Academic Prioritization or Killing the Liberal Arts?

Submitted by Reshmi Dutt-Ballerstadt on March 1, 2019 - 3:00am

Many faculty members consider “academic prioritization” a dangerous buzzword used by college administrators to signal the imminent demise of one academic department or program and the forthcoming expansion of another.

This term is increasingly being employed, in theory and in practice, by administrators at liberal arts colleges and universities across the country to explain or justify decisions to cut certain programs or even entire departments. Such decisions are essentially a death sentence for the liberal arts. It is a simultaneous devaluation of the many underrepresented, first-generation and social justice-oriented faculty (who were hired as a result of various diversity initiatives) who teach in disciplines such as foreign languages, women's and gender studies, area studies, critical race and global studies, etc.

Silent alarms go off in our heads and red flags begin waving whenever the term is used, because we know such euphemisms usually mean departments that serve the public good, such as the humanities, social sciences and even some sciences like math and physics, are going to be sacrificed for a robust expansion of other job-oriented programs such as health sciences, business administration, sports management and various pre-professional and polytechnic programs that serve the market-driven, neoliberal interests and profit-driven model of education.

As Henry Giroux has pointed out in “[Beyond Dystopian Education in a Neoliberal Society](#)”^[1], “the dystopian mission of public and higher education [has become about producing] robots, technocrats and compliant workers.”

Ultimately, “academic prioritization” is a logic that paves the way for converting

non-revenue-generating disciplines into service-oriented disciplines. Recently, McDaniel College ^[2] suspended five majors and two minors, all in the humanities. This was an indication that the institution's administration believes that such cuts were essential in redirecting revenue toward majors that have potential for growth. In an open letter ^[3] supporting faculty impacted by these cuts, it was made clear that such cuts are seen as attacks on international and national humanist education.

Indeed, higher education has become a business, and like in any business, there are winners and losers. The biggest losers are a generation of students who are being robbed of critically engaging with disciplines and materials within the arts, humanities, theater, music, history, religious studies and philosophy, political science, sociology, anthropology, and foreign languages. These disciplines have proven to contribute deeply to enhancing one's malleable intelligence, a sense of civic duty and social responsibility, and engagement in critical citizenship.

Wendy B. Libby ^[4], president of Stetson University, while articulating the value of an inquiry-based liberal arts education, also reminds us that “fake news is actually a time-honored American tradition” and it is “fundamentally, a liberal arts education [that] helps students understand that facts can mislead, particularly when taken in isolation or without proper context.”

Moreover, training in the liberal arts is highly viewed as beneficial by employers who value interdisciplinary skills. A liberal arts education provides a much-needed interdisciplinary framework for understanding the various modalities of human interactions, social justice issues, racial, class and gendered politics, and the impact of geopolitical-economic forces locally, nationally and globally. In George Anders's book ^[5] *You Can Do Anything: The Surprising Power of a “Useless” Liberal Arts Education* and his widely read article in The Atlantic ^[6], he observed what many of us committed to the liberal arts already know.

For instance, “History majors often become well-paid lawyers or judges after completing law degrees, a recent analysis ^[7] by the Brookings Institution's

Hamilton Project has found. Many philosophy majors put their analytical and argumentative skills to work on Wall Street.”

The biggest losers in the diminution of the liberal arts on college campuses are underrepresented and first-generation faculty and students. These particular students and faculty have made long-term commitments to engage in fields of inquiry to advance understanding of intersections of race, gender, ethnicity, citizenship, language, sexuality and class -- subjects that fall under the catchall of liberal arts programs. When those programs are cut, as they have been nationally in the last five years or so, these faculty members find themselves further devalued and even erased by program closures and loss of academic and tenure-track jobs.

The loss of an academic job, tenure track or otherwise, for any underrepresented or first-generation faculty member is not just the end to their invisible labor of cultural taxation [8]. It is also a signal that their labor is not valued by the institution anymore. Audrey Williams June in “The Invisible Labor of Minority Professors [9]” asserts that “to serve as role models, mentors, even surrogate parents to minority students, and to meet every institutional need for ethnic representation” is “an unheralded linchpin in helping them succeed.” Yet these values and commitments are seemingly discarded when these faculty members lose their jobs, further devaluing hours of institutional commitment and unpaid labor to an institution’s commitment to diversity and inclusion.

Furthermore, for an underrepresented faculty member, academic prioritization may even mean a loss of a tenure-track job altogether, as explored in a study [10] by the TIAA Institute conducted in 2016. “More Faculty Diversity, Not on Tenure Track [11]” cited the above study and concluded “that faculty jobs have become more stratified with the growth of non-tenure-track positions over the same period, most gains for underrepresented minority groups have been in the most precarious positions. That is, not on the tenure track.”

Ultimately, beneath all the frills of living up to the changing times, market forces and student demands, the dominant logic dictating a more cost-effective model of education and academic prioritization hinges on a trade school/skill-

based model and not on a liberal arts model of education.

Yet as Falguni A. Sheth argued in “[The Best Education Isn’t Cost-Effective](#) ^[12],” a defense of Hampshire College’s lack of a cost-effective model of education, “Hampshire’s model is effective precisely because it is not efficient. Inefficiency -- not cost-effectiveness, in the form of careful attention, reflectiveness and conversations unhampered by time restrictions -- leads to some of the best education in the country.”

She posited that “Inefficiency requires more money, not less, but for good cause: nurturing young minds and sustaining the education of worldly and thoughtful citizens, which requires the nurturing of faculty minds and lives, as well.”

Needless to say, such elimination of programs in the name of academic prioritization by terminating tenure-track and tenured positions profoundly undermines tenure, academic freedom and shared governance based on [AAUP’s guidelines](#) ^[13]. In 2016, the [AAUP censured](#) ^[14] the College of Saint Rose for “under[ining] academic freedom and render[ing] tenure virtually meaningless.”

What is often glossed over in these administrative conversations and decisions about “prioritization and restructuring” are systemic and covert destruction of social justice-oriented [diversity](#) ^[15] initiatives as a result of program and center closures. In 2017 [Dartmouth](#) ^[16] closed its Gender Research Institute. For scholars of women’s and gender studies, 2018 was a “dangerous year,” as noted in [The Chronicle](#) ^[17]. Africana and black studies programs are also under severe attack nationally. In 2014 [Wesleyan](#) ^[18] students protested understaffing of their African American studies program.

These decades-old diversity initiatives have contributed to the hiring of many minoritized, underrepresented and first-generation faculty and increased the number of students representing diversity in predominantly white liberal arts and elite colleges. The initiatives also led to the establishment of various diversity, social justice and equity-related programs in humanities and social sciences departments. This too is a great loss.

Lastly, academic prioritization promotes a lack of equity in labor by creating a system of labor where some disciplines, programs and majors are touted as being more valuable, or distinguished, than others. Colleges and universities these days are routinely hiring consultants to administer “curriculum cost analysis.” Not only do such consultancy services undermine faculty expertise and missions of institutions, they also privilege “market-driven demands” based on a customer service/business model of “student interests.” Even worse, departments, programs and faculty are pitted against each other by data provided by these consultants reflecting which programs are in more demand than others and ostensibly better serve the market needs of students. Such cost analyses are then institutionalized by college administrators to create first-, second- and third-class rankings of majors and programs, and labor stratification within departments. This is usually followed by memos on the need for academic prioritization, restructuring and elimination of faculty and programs. Then faculty are invited to join retrenchment committees where they can participate in each other’s demise. Sadly, when programs are cut, the opportunity to expose students to entire disciplines is forever erased.

Several liberal arts institutions across the nation, like [Saint Rose](#) ^[19], [Mills College](#) ^[20], [Hampshire College](#) ^[21] and [Goucher College](#) ^[22] have undertaken academic prioritization efforts that have led to faculty terminations and have landed them on AAUP’s radar due to violations of principles of tenure and shared governance and academic freedom. These program cuts and closures primarily are made in disciplines such as foreign languages, history, religious studies, English, music, theater, sociology and anthropology -- subjects often referred to as the heart of the liberal arts.

I am a tenured faculty member of color in an institution where the term academic prioritization has just been introduced following a curriculum cost analysis. I see fear and panic in the eyes of many of my colleagues, whether tenured or untenured. I see deep frustration in our first-generation students and students of color, who are uncertain if they can complete their major or not, or if they will lose a mentor or a great teacher. I see great uncertainty thrust upon us -- an uncertainty that has shifted from the fiscal crisis into an intellectual and a moral crisis. I see a crisis in democracy as we move away

more and more from providing education that is only focused on finding jobs rather than the growth of the whole individual.

Author Bio:

Reshmi Dutt-Ballerstadt is the Edith Green Distinguished Professor in the English department at Linfield College in Oregon. She is the author of The Postcolonial Citizen: The Intellectual Migrant and is the lead editor of the forthcoming book Civility, Free Speech and Academic Freedom in Higher Education. Dutt-Ballerstadt frequently writes about conditions that impact underrepresented faculty in higher education, free speech issues and academic freedom. She also has a blog called On Being Brown and Out/Raged [23]. Her previous pieces in "Conditionally Accepted" can be found here [24] and here [25].



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Links

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- [2] <https://www.carrollcountytimes.com/news/education/cc-mcdaniel-follow-20190225-story.html>
- [3] https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSc3Cipmgd7ty1wTby0cXvIck9BGCrTpuev-wRoyFgnIAo1VKA/viewform?fbclid=IwAR0ImxUYHfWyD48_9_rZuKaSbyLoK_MOTiKELJ-YEqXtC6DfW7JrqBI9Kn8
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