

## Stop Corporatizing My Students

NY TIMES OPINION - Nov. 15, 2023, 5:00 a.m. ET

By Beth Ann Fennelly

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I have taught creative writing in Mississippi's flagship university for over 20 years, and I've witnessed a powerful outcome: students who master written and spoken communication can change the world.

Which is why the educational trend focusing on student outcomes is so alarming. In September, Mississippi's state auditor, Shad White, published a report, "[Plugging the Brain Drain: Investing in College Majors That Actually Work](#)." It notes that many students are likely to leave our state after completing their educations, presumably for more exciting opportunities elsewhere. Mr. White proposes tying educational investments to majors that dovetail with workplace needs in Mississippi.

He cited a Texas bill [signed into law in June](#) that overhauls how the state funds its community colleges. Money for those colleges in Texas is now allotted based off [student outcomes](#) that prepare them for the work force. Mr. White said the Mississippi Legislature should create a study committee of work force experts to outline the most- and least-needed programs and design a university funding structure with the state's work force and economy in mind.

It's worth noting that nowhere in the eight-page report is educational value discussed in relation to anything other than money. I wonder what value he'd ascribe to John Keats' "[Ode on a Grecian Urn](#)."

In social media posts, Mr. White also [dismissed fields](#) like African American studies, gender studies and anthropology as "useless degrees" in "garbage fields." Instead, in the report, he recommends that students enter fields like construction management.

See how efficiently students in the poorest state are shunted toward the vocational: It's not personal. It's business. This, despite a [study](#) by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences that found that humanities majors are comparably likely to be satisfied with their jobs and employed in supervisory roles as graduates from other majors.

The report is unsettling because we've seen universities around the country enact budget cuts that have reduced humanities offerings.

In August, West Virginia University [proposed cutting](#) academic majors and programs, in a bid to reduce the budget shortfall caused in large part by declining enrollment. The process, as outlined on the [provost's website](#), seeks to create "a more focused academic program portfolio aligned with student demand, career opportunities and market trends."

Consider the terms the provost used: trends, market, demand, portfolio, metrics.

Despite an outcry from students, professors and alumni, the university's board of governors voted to slash [28 academic majors and 143 faculty positions](#) in September. While humanities [wasn't the only area of study to take a hit](#), programs or majors in fields like creative writing, world languages and music were among those [initially flagged](#) for discontinuation.

Last year, the University of North Carolina Greensboro [contracted with rpk Group](#), the consulting firm that has worked on West Virginia University's restructuring, to devise an academic program review in the face of declining enrollment and changes in state funding. Their [website asserts](#) that "innovation disconnected from the business model is not sustainable."

Reducing education to a business model changes what, and who, gets taught. Framing students as entry-level employees emboldens this "nudge" toward the vocational. But students need a wide horizon to explore, dream, try, fail, try harder, fail better. They need, if you will, to be useless — for a while, anyway.

It's true that the great majority of my students won't go on to be writers, but they will go on to be readers who, through literature, educate themselves cognitively, emotionally and spiritually. They'll leave my classroom prepared to think critically, to consider another's perspective and muster empathy, and to recognize fake news, fear-mongering and demagoguery.

Maybe that's why the Shad Whites out there seem so keen to thwart my students working toward "useless" degrees. After all, they can detect faulty reasoning faster than a sneeze through a screen door. So let me suggest that higher education administrators jettison the corporate-ness. My students' degrees are only "high value" if they've reason to value them highly. My campus is not your corporation. My classroom is not your boardroom.

And should you need help choosing apt metaphors, check out a creative writing class, maybe even one at West Virginia University, where, happily, such classes still exist. Or perhaps one at the University of North Carolina Greensboro, where [an outside consultant](#) hired by the university's chapter of the American Association of University Professors has reported that the university "is in solid financial condition," and that instead of cutting academic programs, it might do better to trim bloated administrative costs. (The university [disputed](#) the accuracy of this report.)

As for Auditor White — he's welcome to audit my creative writing class, though he might have some catching up to do. My students happen to be pretty great, not least because they have "traveled in the realms of gold," [to quote Keats](#) — a quote that doesn't mean what Mr. White might hope it means — that they've entered the construction management field. It means they've read a lot of good books.