

We post the following letter, because it raises many of the same concerns with which the ISU Faculty Association agrees are critical to the ISU Mission.

This Open Letter was not developed or submitted as an activity connected in any way with the ISU Faculty Association.

The signatories were not polled on the union question, nor should their support of the letter necessarily transfer to support of ISU FA efforts (although all are welcome).

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Viewpoint

GUEST COLUMN

An open letter to Illinois State University

The economic challenges currently facing higher education in our state and this country present our university with difficult decisions. It has come to our attention that Illinois State University has contracts with the consulting firm EAB (Education Advisory Board) which has provided the administration with a PowerPoint “handout” containing analyses and recommendations ostensibly applicable to our university.

According to the company website, EAB offers “best practices to address education’s top challenges with research forums dedicated to presidents, provosts, chief business officers, and many other key academic and administrative leaders.”

As a matter of common sense, we ask why ISU should commission, pay for, and heed such advice which is patently generic. At a time when budget concerns threaten to impinge upon the core mission of the university, namely, educating our students, the expenditure of nearly \$100,000 on consulting contracts with

EAB raises a few eyebrows. Is it not the purview of ISU’s well-paid central administration to perform the tasks outsourced to EAB?

The PowerPoint provided by EAB contains information made available a year ago in another

PowerPoint presented by ISU’s associate vice president for enrollment management. A third PowerPoint presentation from the provost’s office is now also in circulation with content based on the EAB template.

Each of these PowerPoint documents communicates institutional policies we the undersigned can neither condone nor accept. We contest the contents and implications of those policies and call for a reconsideration and realignment of university values and commitments.

The implicit message of those PowerPoint presentations should give pause and elicit opposition from administrators, faculty, and

students alike, for it risks undermining our core values and mission.

Among other recommendations, two stand out as especially disturbing and problematic. One essentially advises faculty to teach and grade in ways to please our students and so keep them enrolled (and paying!). According to the EAB's "Roadmap for Realizing Academic Ambitions," institutions must "limit high-DFW [D/fail/withdrawal] courses." Faculty would accordingly need to give students at least Cs if not better - Cs already generally undesirable, consequently disincentives which could conceivably cause students to leave (and stop paying) ISU.

This recommendation appears at the same time ISU has increased enrollments, while enrollments at several other state universities have declined. Should difficulty also be avoided in ISU courses? If, for example, students do not like to read, should faculty dispense with having them read? We may attract students' attention with fun and games, but we will never secure their education (or respect) by replacing robust pedagogy with worthless proxies.

Another troubling recommendation advises that ISU courses/programs be utilitarian. They should have practical application and lead to employment in the American workforce. (This view bears a striking resemblance to the policies Wisconsin governor Scott Walker tried to implement at Wisconsin's state universities.)

The PowerPoint from the provost's office suggests that we "prioritize electives by

focusing on student needs." Such a guiding principle essentially declares that the humanities particularly and liberal arts more generally have little or no support and role to play at our university, since the humanities are typically considered impractical and of scant utility, in other words, not what students need.

In the October 2016 issue of the *Scientific American*, the editors explain that emphasis on STEM courses (which supposedly lead to jobs) at the expense of courses in the humanities (like literature, philosophy, languages, or history) will actually do harm to our economy. They argue that poetry is as important as physics. We could make the same case for philosophy and finance.

They go on to spell out the value of an education in the humanities and liberal arts, which develop analytic and synthetic skills necessary for "clear communication" and "solving complex problems."

Similarly, Harvard Medical School has recognized the importance of the arts and humanities as "powerful tools in medical education that have the potential to improve professionalism, reflection and empathy among physicians and trainees, foster humanism, reduce burnout, enhance perspective, sharpen physicians' analytic and diagnostic skills, and improve teamwork and communication" (<http://artsandhumanities.hms.harvard.edu/what-we-do>).

Learning how to read and write well in humanities courses involves learning how to think well,

certainly excellent training for any career. To champion and promote the humanities is not to depreciate or detract from any other courses of study at ISU with a more vocational emphasis. However, the EAB recommends a paradigm shift, from “every discipline deserves equal investment” to “investing equally in all disciplines will lead to mediocrity.” We disagree, and we believe that the university must invest in a broad range of disciplines in order to prepare the next generation with the kinds of creative and dynamic thinking required to devise solutions for the economic, political, environmental, and social crises of our times.

In addition to their undeniable utility, an even greater benefit might well be gained from what could be called the inutility of the humanities (and liberal arts). That is, the study of literature, history, philosophy, art, or music affords us a way of knowing and knowledge fundamentally different – and therefore of inestimable value – from that offered by our culture of technological consumer capitalism with its monetization of everything, its winner-take-all competition, its impersonalization, its quantification, and its devaluation of anything which is not demonstrably efficient and mundanely useful.

Yet, the inefficiency of poetry or pure physics (that is, physics not tied to corporate and government grants and agendas) is an incommensurate gift and of great value. It allows for creativity, for unexpected discovery, and for seeing the world from otherwise unavailable perspectives. As Christopher Ingraham reported in *The Washington Post* (7 September, 2016), recent studies have

demonstrated that literary fiction boosts “the quality of empathy in the people who read it” and “in a way that few other works of art,” not to mention other disciplines, can. The meditative thinking needed to read literature offers an alternative and counterbalance to the calculative thinking and statistical analysis employed in management, commerce, corporations, and technology. In other words, the humanities teach us to be humane.

As a matter of professional practice, as well as in response to the budget crisis, ISU faculty are well aware of the importance of revising our curriculum and pedagogical practices to make sure we meet the needs of our students. And in response to economic constraints, we have allowed class sizes to grow and have watched as professors are replaced with temporary and part-time instructors – sometimes appropriately perhaps, but all too often in ways that destabilize programs and deny students classes with actual professors. Much of what we are doing already is right, and there is no reason to abandon those educational practices with a proven record of success.

At ISU, we are losing sight of our stated mission to offer students “a small college experience with the resources of a large university.”

To be sure, ISU and the other state universities face real, financial problems, but jeopardizing or eviscerating our standards to cut costs or to retain paying students is surely not the answer. ISU must continue to assert and defend the incalculable value of the humanities and liberal

arts. That task must be led by the leaders of our institution.

Key to a remedy is also a return to state funding of our state universities. That remedy not only requires a budget for the state of Illinois, but also a restructuring of how much the state funds its public institutions of higher learning, certainly one of the great treasures of the democratic, American educational system.

Not so many decades ago, the state of Illinois funded ISU at above 70 percent which did not

lay any unbearable burden on Illinois students and their families. Now, however, our state funds ISU at below 20 percent (soon to be much less) and places huge financial burdens on our fellow citizens.

True support for our students from the state of Illinois benefits them individually and all the rest of Illinois in countless ways, as those students become knowledgeable, responsible, and humane citizens who give back to their Illinois communities, strengthening both society and the state economy.

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