

# Florida's war on knowledge

BY ELIZABETH BIRD  
*Special to the Times*

As Florida professors watch with dismay what seems to be the systematic dismantling of our university system, we find ourselves, for once, speechless. Anything we say will surely sound self-serving; as our esteemed Florida Senate President Ken Pruitt has put it, we should "suck it up and deal with it."

Dealing with it, in this Legislature's books, cannot possibly mean actually rethinking the madness of Bright Futures, or the legacy of underfunding that has left our universities so far behind. Rather, we need to pack more students into our classrooms, move them out as fast as possible, and try to deliver quality in return for a tuition rate that is up to six times less than our "peers" in more enlightened states.

The basic issue, of course, is that our legislative leaders aren't particularly interested in education. What excites them is "work force development," and Pruitt is leading the charge. He has no time for the liberal arts and social sciences, arguing that the job market should drive academic course offerings. "How many psychologists do we really need?" he quips.

At the risk of sounding self-serving, may I point out that his blinkered view misses the point? Business leaders understand — the nonpartisan Council of 100 strongly supports the need for a vibrant, truly academic university system, writing last month, "If higher education in Florida suffers, then our entire economy is at risk." I vividly recall talking with a leader of a state envi-

ronmental agency about what kind of graduates he needs in his work force. Would majors in subjects like anthropology, sociology (or perish the thought, psychology!) have the right training? His answer: "I don't want the universities to 'train' my employees — that's what we do when they come on board. I want you to educate them — teach them to think, write, know what's going on in the world. That's what makes proactive leaders who can

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take us where we want to go."

The education students receive in top research universities is distinctive, and hard to connect directly to the "work force." University faculty have a duty to conduct research, writing books and articles that change the state of our knowledge. Good students understand that; they appreciate the fact that their forensics teacher wrote the latest book on skeletal trauma, or that their medical anthropology professor is conducting cutting edge research on HIV/AIDS in Africa. I see them in front of the glass case outside my office, looking at the books written by my faculty.

"Wow, I have her for Theory."

Such educators, whether in anthropology, history, philosophy or literature, inspire and excite. In a great university, undergraduate students conduct original research — and it's not so much what they research, as how they learn to develop questions, devise ways to explore them, and reach conclusions. These students are ready to go into law and medicine, business, social services and education. They become informed, engaged citizens, who volunteer, vote, support the arts and guard our environment.

There is nothing wrong with trade schools, technical institutes and other honorable institutions that "train" students for specific job skills. But our state will be immeasurably impoverished if we buy the lie that this kind of training is a substitute for the intellectual rigor and enrichment that great universities offer.

Most of us at USF still don't know exactly how things will change this fall, although department chairs are already cutting back on class offerings and choices. Pruitt advises us to keep increasing class sizes; after all, if education is simply making sure our students memorize a job manual, why not do so in a class of 350 rather than 35? At USF, I believe we do an incredible job with what we have — but at this point, there is nowhere to cut without diminishing our students' academic experience.

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