

5. The Purpose of Public Education

The proper role of higher education is once again in the news. North Carolina Governor Pat McCrory recently stated that education isn't "based on butts in seats but on how many of those butts can get jobs."¹ State-funded colleges, McCrory argues, should offer those courses that prepare students for employment rather than those that are "popular" amongst student and faculty. McCrory also criticized majors that seem to offer little in terms of job preparation, saying, "If you want to take gender studies that's fine, go to a private school and take it...But I don't want to subsidize that if it's not going to get someone a job." McCrory and his supporters do not argue that the liberal arts and humanities are worthless but rather that the government's interest lies in subsidizing education that will eventually result in employment.

McCrory's critics disagree with this position for various reasons. Some take issue with McCrory's assumption that the humanities and liberal arts do not help students secure employment. These subjects teach students critical thinking, communication and writing skills, and the ability to quickly and accurately process and analyze information – skills that are clearly attractive to potential employers. According to this argument, the liberal arts have a considerable return on investment.

Others, however, argue that studying the humanities is intrinsically valuable and does not need any further justification, especially an economic justification. Art, literature, history, and philosophy are part of what makes us human, and studying these subjects affords us a richer, more fulfilling life. Thus, it is very much in the society's interest to educate students in these subjects. Defenders of the humanities also argue that one goal of education is to create informed and critical citizens so that civic communities and democracy itself can flourish.

Study Questions:

(1) Should the government subsidize specific college majors and areas of study? If so, what criteria should they use to determine what to subsidize? Should they, for instance, subsidize only those majors that are most economically valuable, that best promote moral development, that are most personally fulfilling or that help build a democratic society?

(2) Note that Governor McCrory's comments were directed towards publicly funded institutions. Should we use a different standard to judge curriculum taught at private schools?

¹<http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/01/30/north-carolina-governor-joins-chorus-republicans-critical-liberal-arts>