

After latest attacks on liberal arts education, New England college presidents double down

By [Hilary Burns](#) Globe Staff, Updated August 10, 2023, 1:05 p.m.



Colby College president David Greene said colleges cutting liberal arts majors “concerns me for the future of the country.” YOON S. BYUN

History, philosophy, religion, languages, literature, and the arts are the core of a liberal arts education that academics say prepares students to confront complex challenges in life.

But college enrollment in the humanities has [been falling](#) for years, as families and prospective students opt for majors — such as business and computer science — that lead to higher starting salaries.

In the latest example of that shift, [Simmons University](#) and [Lasell University](#), amid financial constraints, said they are cutting liberal arts majors, including history, modern languages, philosophy, and literature, because of low enrollment.

The cutbacks come as some conservative politicians rail against the liberal arts for being, well, too liberal. During a recent campaign swing through New Hampshire, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, a Republican presidential hopeful, called for government intervention to dissuade colleges from teaching “ideological” courses. [Polls also show](#) that the public’s confidence in higher education has plummeted.

In the face of such challenges, advocates of the liberal arts are undeterred. The humanities are not dying, half a dozen New England college presidents and provosts said in interviews with the Globe; they are, however, in need of a public relations boost.



Smith College's new president, Sarah Willie-LeBreton. SHANA SURECK

“When people say that a liberal arts education doesn’t prepare students for a life that is serious, I think to myself, what could be more serious than the act of translation in a world so desperately in need of diplomacy?” said Sarah Willie-LeBreton, the [new president of Smith College](#) in Northampton.

“What could be more crucial than the study of ethics in a moment when technology seems to have run out ahead of us and some of our nation’s most respected politicians flout the rule of law?”





Leaders of these selective private schools said the study of philosophy, literature, history, and languages teaches students how to read carefully, think critically and creatively, and form opinions of their own. Those qualities are important at a time when the country is grappling with political upheaval and as robots and artificial intelligence are [threatening jobs](#) in every industry.

Despite fewer students majoring in English and philosophy, the scholars pointed to recent investments in the arts, museums, and new faculty appointments on their campuses as evidence that teaching of the humanities is stronger than ever.

“We fuse the humanities into everything we do,” said Williams College president Maud Mandel.



The Paresky Center at Williams College in Williamstown. MATTHEW CAVANAUGH

Applications to Williams and other selective colleges have been skyrocketing in recent years. But lesser-known schools with fewer resources [struggle](#) to maintain enrollment as more people question the value of a college degree and the population of college-aged students in New England declines.

Seeing other colleges cut liberal arts majors “concerns me for the future of the country,” said David Greene, president of Colby College in Waterville, Maine. “Because I think that a strong democracy depends on people who can read [and] will actually fight for understanding truth. Those things are going to be more important, not less important, going forward.”

Colby, for its part, has increased the number of faculty members in the humanities by 27 percent since 2014, Greene said.

Over the past decades, STEM — science, technology, engineering, and math — has become a [favorite buzzword](#) of educators, employers, and politicians eager to inspire new generations of students to enter the growing science fields. Some higher education watchers point to [federal funding disparities](#) between the humanities and STEM fields as a big reason why many institutions increasingly favor the latter.

Universities have also faced mounting pressure in recent years to better meet industry needs for skilled workers. For many colleges across New England, this has led to increased investments in nursing, biotech, and other health care programs to address workforce shortages.

“Every student should have access to an education that aligns with industry demands and evolves to meet the demands of tomorrow’s global workforce,” US Education Secretary Miguel Cardona tweeted last December.

Parents and prospective students are “understandably concerned” about graduates being able to support themselves after college, said Michael Elliott, president of Amherst College. But it is up to college leaders to explain how their liberal arts graduates flourish over the long term, even if starting salaries [are not as high](#) as they are for STEM graduates.



Amherst College SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

Elliott said an Amherst liberal arts education prepares students to take on different types of jobs throughout their careers, which will come in handy when, [as experts predict](#), generative artificial intelligence displaces jobs in computer engineering, journalism, investment banking, and paralegal work.

“At a moment where the world of work is being upended, the liberal arts and the humanities are a way of future-proofing yourself and giving yourself the tools and the flexibility to be able to learn again and again as the world of work gets reinvented,” he said.

The nation’s higher education sector has “historically been the envy of other countries,” because of its liberal arts approach, said Mandel, the Williams

president. She added that many Williams graduates end up pursuing careers in business and the sciences, and she argues that they are better prepared because of their knowledge of the humanities.

“We train broad thinkers who are able to solve complex problems by pulling from a wide variety of disciplinary ways of knowing,” Mandel said. “To me, that’s the heart of innovation.”

In addition to career preparation, colleges such as Amherst and Williams exist, Elliott said, to prepare students to participate in democratic societies, including approaching careers in business, science, policy, law, or the arts “in ways that promote democratic cultures and a society that benefits everyone.”

“That means educating students to be able to take on the difficult ethical challenges that a democratic society requires,” Elliott said. “How are we going to mitigate the social harms of climate change without disadvantaging some groups over others? How do we think about racial disparities [and] injustice in our society? How do we create economic growth in a way that benefits everybody?”

For Colby’s Greene, politicians attacking higher education conjures images of dictators throughout history expelling “the artists, the poets, the writers, the intellectuals, because the humanists see truth.”

“Those truths can be very hard for people to accept, so it’s not surprising that when people want to be in greater control, one of the first things they go after are the artists and the humanists,” Greene said.



Colby College in Waterville, Maine. CARL D. WALSH FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

When politicians don't have answers to looming problems, from income inequality to the climate crisis, they turn to topics such as higher education as a form of distraction, said Michael Jeffries, dean of academic affairs and American studies professor at Wellesley College.

"I don't think it does anyone any good to obsess over those sorts of attacks [on the liberal arts]," Jeffries said. "What I would encourage us all to do is think about how we can contribute to some of the solutions [to society's greatest challenges.] That really should be more pressing for the folks that we elect to represent us."

Colleges with ample resources should be expanding enrollment so more students have access to a high quality, liberal arts education, Greene said. Applications to Colby since he took office in 2014 have grown from 5,000 to 18,000 and its student population increased by about 24 percent; financial aid rose from \$28 million to \$68 million, he said.

“Make it more accessible because it is so powerful, and it’s [the type] of education that allows you to lead and prosper,” Greene said.

Hilary Burns can be reached at hilary.burns@globe.com. Follow her [@Hilarysburns](https://twitter.com/Hilarysburns).

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