

Fighting for the humanities at church-related colleges

“What good is a Methodist college that doesn't have religion professors?” asks one student.

by [Jeannine Marie Pitas](#) in the [August 25, 2021](#) issue



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When Ashley Falcon learned that her alma mater, the United Methodist Church-affiliated Adrian College in Adrian, Michigan, was responding to pandemic-related fiscal concerns by cutting programs and faculty positions, she felt stirred to action. Though nearly a decade has passed since she graduated from the college, the Michigan-born high school history teacher working in Barranquilla, Colombia, firmly believes in the value of the liberal arts education she received at Adrian.

“It started in August 2020. I heard they were cutting programs like history, theater, Japanese studies—all these great programs that bring culture and inclusion to the campus,” Falcon explains. “They were cutting those and adding more business-oriented majors and minors. I wrote to my former professor to ask if this was really happening, and she told me it was. I said, ‘We can’t just do nothing.’”

Falcon founded the Asa Mahan Squad, an online group of Adrian students, alumni, faculty, and staff that took its name from the college's founder, a 19th-century minister, abolitionist, and early feminist. "He was a truly critical thinker, and at Adrian his image was everywhere as an example for us to follow," Falcon explains.

The story of cuts to humanities programs at colleges and universities is not a new one. Back in 2010 my own alma mater, the University of Toronto, set out to cut several language and literature programs, including the one I was enrolled in. (Thankfully, it was saved by a student-led resistance movement and international outcry.) Today, with skyrocketing costs and massive student debt, many students, parents, and members of the public are asking questions about the purpose of college. "Learning for its own sake" can seem an elitist luxury, not worth going into thousands of dollars of debt for without a clearly visible career path upon graduation. The question takes on a particular resonance at church-related colleges, where religion, philosophy, and other humanities disciplines are traditionally the lifeblood of higher education.

"I see the liberal arts as mission-critical, and I never intended to cut programs," says Adrian president Jeffrey Docking, whose own academic background is in ethics. "However, the market has changed, and I had a superfluous number of professors compared to students taking the liberal arts. When we look at where expenses go in a college, it's payroll. Some of the professors set to be cut did have tenure, but tenure was established hundreds of years ago. More and more people are saying that times have changed. Industrial workers are no longer guaranteed a job for life, so why should professors be?"

Docking's position is perhaps more nuanced than that of many administrators, and he was willing to change his approach when he witnessed the Mahan Squad's efforts. "I saw a groundswell of support for liberal arts. Some people in the community misunderstood me, thinking I was planning to cut history and other subjects, when I was instead planning to cut some faculty positions. But I decided to rethink this and meet people halfway, to pull back and try new approaches." He plans to reassess programs later this year.

Not all members of the community are convinced, however, that the programs are safe. Dallas Barringer, a junior at Adrian studying theater and film, says he struggles to understand. "Rumors of cuts began even before the pandemic. What seemed cruel was that the college was still promoting humanities majors. Theater was rising

in popularity, but they were going to cut all but one full-time faculty member, which doesn't make for a viable program," he says. "The administration has reversed course, but they haven't admitted to making a mistake."

To the question of liberal arts at a Christian-affiliated college, Barringer says that the college's original plan to cut religion courses and professors met with particularly strong scrutiny. "What good is a Methodist college that doesn't have religion professors?" he asks. "This level of disregard is blatantly disrespectful not only to the religious students and those studying religion but also to the school's own history and the faith at large. Adrian College is proving that you can abandon your roots for a quick budgetary fix—and they practically got away with it, thereby setting a horrible example for other Christian colleges."

Other church-related colleges have made similar decisions. Last summer, Canisius College, a Jesuit school in Buffalo, New York, cut 93 positions; 22 of them were faculty positions, mostly tenured. Tensions had been brewing between faculty and administration at Canisius for years, and in 2018 the faculty had done the groundwork to start a chapter of the American Association of University Professors, a national organization that advocates for faculty.

"Before cuts were announced in July 2020, the AAUP had written letters to the board asking them to respect the Jesuit mission," explains Canisius philosophy professor Tanya Loughead. "We received no answers or information; all discussions were secret. For five years the administration had been using 'return on investment' when rejecting certain programs. By that metric, those of us in the humanities were the most efficient workers on campus, because we teach a lot of students in core classes required at a Jesuit school. We thought we were safe."

Loughead was shocked, however, when most of the cuts went to the humanities anyway. "That is when the AAUP asked about the decisions. Why were no coaches cut, why no high-level administrators? We never received answers."

In June, the AAUP formally sanctioned Canisius. While this sanction carries no practical consequences, Loughead hopes that it might lead the Canisius administration to make different decisions in the future. "The AAUP, from the beginning, has said that anything regarding education or curriculum should be in the hands of the faculty. The administration and board have little interaction with students. If you don't let faculty manage the university, you won't have student-

focused education. It is disheartening to see we've put our lives toward that goal and that the administration and Board think they know better than we do."

Canisius's administration, however, states that the humanities were not singled out and that all parts of the college were affected. "The final plan included reductions in all areas of the college: the intercollegiate athletics program, non-teaching personnel, academic programs, faculty positions, and other operating expense lines," says Eileen Herbert, Canisius's director of communications. "The elimination of 71 non-teaching staff positions across the college, including senior-level administrators, amounted to a \$3 million reduction in expenses."

Nevertheless, the situation led to animosity and low morale among professors. "The messaging we've gotten indicated the decisions were made as if we're stocking a store for materials to buy and need to put out more of what customers are buying," says Nancy Rourke, who lost her job teaching Christian ethics in Canisius's religion department, only to be reinstated later. "Their choices were based on numbers of students who'd graduated with a certain major. Our religion major was shut down, and our students from the program have decided to transfer. It was puzzling, since our teaching load includes all students on campus."

Mike Pesarchick is a 2021 Canisius graduate who majored in urban studies and journalism with a minor in philosophy. During the 2020–2021 academic year he covered the cuts for Canisius's student paper, the *Griffin*. "With these cuts I lost two of my personally favorite professors. A lot of students feel this way. We are a Catholic college who gutted our religious studies program," he says.

"I totally get that from an economic standpoint it makes sense to focus on STEM. Canisius is pouring \$17 million into a science hall through a grant they got from New York State, which they matched. They've invested \$40 million in the sciences since 2012," Pesarchick explains. "It makes sense to do that, and I'm thrilled with their new physician assistant program. But for 150 years we have been built on a liberal arts Jesuit tradition. The change may make sense economically, but not in terms of what Canisius is."

"At Jesuit universities, we pursue a mission of caring for the whole person," says Nancy Rourke. "We are supposed to be ready to help our students and the world to think comfortably and confidently about what humanity is. Humanities courses give us more tools to think about what life means, using critical thinking and a knowledge

of what we (people) have already said and made and done. If we care about the whole person, then we must offer that. It is our species' legacy. If God cares about humanity, then God wants that legacy to be available for all humans to know and to continue onward."

Guilford College had a close call with cuts to the humanities and natural sciences; as with Adrian, a community mobilization saved them. "Guilford has always, like many small liberal arts colleges, been a tuition-dependent institution; it has never enjoyed a robust endowment," explains Ben Thorne, a 1999 graduate of the Quaker-affiliated school in Greensboro, North Carolina, who now teaches history at Wingate University. "Like many small liberal arts colleges, over the years it has tried to experiment with ways to increase enrollment. Some of these, like investing in many new dorms and facilities at once, were not thought through fully in terms of implications for the financial stability of the college."

Financial difficulties at Guilford led to the resignation of the college's president and the hiring of an interim president known for balancing budgets by cutting programs. In addition to slashing faculty, the interim president proposed eliminating numerous majors and programs.

"The proposed gutting of the liberal arts was particularly galling for Guilford, because doing so would be such a betrayal of the college's Quaker identity," Thorne says. "As our broader society struggles with competing viewpoints and agendas, Quakerism requires that even in the midst of the bitterest divisions we strive to recognize that divine spark [in each person] and seek from that place to arrive at a better understanding. Nothing better prepares us for this difficult work than a rigorous education in the liberal arts."

As at Adrian, a broad community of students, alumni, faculty, and staff pushed back with a campaign called Save Guilford College. "Their quick mobilization was essential to pressure the board to not run with the interim president's proposal," says Sierra Ashworth, a former student government association president who graduated from Guilford in 2021 with a degree in public health. "The ability of the community to come together with a united message was inspiring. They raised \$250,000 as a donation to the college to assist with the debt burden. Save Guilford was able to connect with parents as well, putting additional pressure on the college. If this mobilization had not happened, we would not be here now."

In the end, the board brought in a new interim president, English professor Jim Hood, who has been working to improve Guilford's financial situation without cutting programs. Getting some faculty to take early retirement has helped for the time being. "In the longer term, we're trying to attract more undergraduate residential students, with a revision of the curriculum and more experiential/residential learning," Hood says. "We're bringing back an adult education program that has fallen off in the past eight years and adding some master's programs. We're also shifting to a broader range of donors to help out with that population of first-generation, traditionally underrepresented students."

As many small liberal arts colleges struggle with debt, they are seeking to attract and retain students who themselves often take on huge debts and worry about the work that they will do once their education is finished. Many of them are reluctant to study the traditional liberal arts, which explains in part why preprofessional programs like sports marketing, criminal justice, and business have grown on many campuses while philosophy, religious studies, and English have contracted.

This is true of the school where I teach, the Presbyterian-affiliated University of Dubuque, which struggled financially during the 1990s and had to cut programs to survive. It ended up rebuilding strongly, and today it defines itself as a "professional university with a liberal arts core." While all students are required to take courses in the humanities as part of their education, few choose to major in them.

"For quite some time, a false narrative has been circulating that a degree in the humanities won't get you a job," says Ben Thorne. "Parents fear that their children, as they enter adulthood, will be unable to fend for themselves and be successful. If you hear that narrative long enough, and there's not a cogent counterargument being made loudly and forcefully, you may over time internalize or accept it."

"There is also a class element," says an Adrian humanities professor who asked to remain anonymous due to ongoing tensions at the college. "Well-to-do people send their kids to study English and history. It's almost like people are saying, 'My kids get to develop these ideas, but other people's kids can do trade school.' I see it as a weird kind of elitism."

"There is more you can do with a theater degree than people realize," says Barringer, the Adrian junior. "One friend of mine who focused on stage management now is going into event planning. Employers are interested in her background. Also,

the purpose of college is not just to prepare you for a job, but for the whole of life. It's about learning new things, seeking enlightenment as well as practicality, and finding your place."

"My education has had a huge impact on my career today," says Falcon, the Asa Mahan Squad founder. "When I became a history teacher, I went back and asked my former professors for recommendations of materials and approaches to use. They all responded. My teaching philosophy is to be interdisciplinary, as I was taught at Adrian. Any project we do involves applying history to something else in our lives," she says.

Beyond the development of transferable skills, the humanities are significant in teaching us not just how to think but what to think about, as novelist David Foster Wallace famously put in his 2005 graduation address at Kenyon College. For Wallace, a humanities education is crucial for breaking out of our basic self-centeredness and perceiving the world from the perspective of others: in short, for developing empathy, a faculty that has been in steep decline in our age of instant, reactive communication and growing tribalism.

As a professor who teaches general education English courses, I have often begun the semester with Wallace's words while also seeking to link course material to current events. During the 2020–2021 academic year, as we grappled with divisive national politics, I organized a course around the theme of US identity. Reading authors such as Flannery O'Connor, James Baldwin, Arthur Miller, Octavia Butler, and Junot Díaz, we discussed what it means to be a US American. Working for a college that is diverse ideologically as well as culturally, my classroom was a truly "purple" space where I sought to facilitate discussions about racism, immigration, economic inequality, mental health, and addiction—through the lens of stories rather than sound bites.

Nancy Rourke, whose classes explore systemic injustices in public health, takes a similar approach. "There's the belief that majors like nursing and criminal justice make the most sense for students, who so often have to go thousands of dollars into debt at age 18 just to use their talents. As a result, we are failing to draw students' attention to the reasons their work is needed in the first place.

"I think religiously committed institutions of higher education should show how the worlds of business, athletics, entertainment, finance, and medicine interact. The

common denominator among them is humanity,” she adds. “Christian and other religious universities should feed the world’s hope by holding open humanities’ best ideas, arts, practices, successes, and failures.”

“Democracy is predicated on people having thinking skills and being able to think critically about information,” says the Adrian professor who requested anonymity. “I feel like a humanities classroom is one of the last places where people talk and listen to each other.”

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Liberal arts under fire.”