

# Gainesville.com

This is a printer friendly version of an article from [www.gainesville.com](http://www.gainesville.com)  
To print this article open the file menu and choose Print.

[Back](#)

---

Article published Sep 17, 2006

Sep 17, 2006

## Something rotten in the Gator Nation

PETER L. RUDNYTSKY

Psychoanalysis teaches us that, when a person's actions have certain consequences, it is reasonable to assume that those consequences were actually intended, even in the face of protestations and denials. What, then, are we to make of the assault on the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences recently launched by the administration of the University of Florida?

Is it too cynical to conclude that President J. Bernard Machen, a dentist by profession, aided by newly appointed Provost Janie M. Fouke, an engineer specializing in medical instrument design, are deliberately trying to wreck the humanities in order to turn the University of Florida into a glorified handmaiden of technology where nothing counts except the number of dollars a program is able to bring in?

We all share the aspiration to make UF a world-class institution. But our administrators are only deluding themselves if they think they can achieve this goal while eviscerating the very disciplines that are the heart and soul of any great university. Even mathematics, which seems to be an anomaly among the endangered departments, shares with the humanities a concern with knowledge for its own sake, and is thus not likely to be favored by those who think they can measure the worth of everything in strictly utilitarian terms.

Why do undergraduate students take English classes? Or classes in religion and philosophy? Some, of course, will go on to become teachers in primary or secondary schools, and we love them for it. Far fewer will apply to graduate school in literature or one of these other fields, with the hope of becoming scholars and college professors in their day.

The vast majority, however, do so not because they look on the study of literature and the rest as a pre-professional activity, but for a very different reason. Because they want to be educated! And they have grasped that, even today, in order to be an educated person, it is necessary to know something about culture, which was defined by Matthew Arnold as "the best that has been thought and said in the world."

I do not think our administrators fully appreciate the quality of this English department they are in the process of decimating. Among my colleagues are recipients of the Guggenheim fellowship, the National Book Critics Circle Award, Fulbrights, filmmaking prizes, college- and university-wide teaching awards, and honors for journal editing. Comma for comma, we can, or could, hold our own with any peer institution in the country.

But we are losing people at an alarming rate. In addition to those who have already retired and

the expected attrition on which the university is counting on to force retrenchments over the next five years, one of our most distinguished theorists has just announced his resignation to take up a post in England. And our senior African American member, an internationally renowned scholar of film studies, recently received an enticing offer from another university that our provost, in her wisdom, declined to match.

Under these circumstances, what graduate student in his or her right mind would want to come to study English at the University of Florida? What self-respecting faculty member would want to stay?

What is at stake here is not the proper balance between traditional literature courses and the potpourri of exotic offerings that are vying for space in our curriculum. Nor does it have to do with any reluctance to teach even introductory courses to undergraduates, which I am confident the vast majority of my colleagues would happily join me in doing if asked.

Rather, the gauntlet that has been thrown down by Tigert Hall has to do with the very purpose of a university and the values of a liberal education in 21st century America.

And as I write this on the fifth anniversary of the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, I mean no disrespect to the memory of the fallen heroes of that day if I dare to say on behalf of my colleagues, both in the English department and in the entire College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, "United we stand."

Peter L. Rudnytsky is a professor of English at the University of Florida.

---