

Florida GOP vs. Social Science

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Florida Republican leaders seem to have a problem with the social sciences. Last year, a powerful state senator (due to become Senate president next year) urged the state's universities to scale back programs that produce psychology and political science majors. This week, the governor is taking on anthropology.

Governor Rick Scott gave an interview Monday to [The Herald-Tribune](#) in which he said that he wants to shift money away from some degree programs at state universities to increase support for science and technology fields. To illustrate what's wrong with current funding patterns, he said: "If I'm going to take money from a citizen to put into education then I'm going to take that money to create jobs. So I want that money to go to degrees where people can get jobs in this state. Is it a vital interest of the state to have more anthropologists? I don't think so."

Then in [a radio interview](#), he reiterated his view, saying of anthropology majors: "It's a great degree if people want to get it. But we don't need them here."

Perhaps not surprisingly, anthropologists are not pleased with the sudden attention.

The American Anthropological Association has requested a meeting with the governor. [In a letter to Scott](#), the association's leaders said, "It is very unfortunate that you would characterize our discipline in such a short-sighted way.... Perhaps you are unaware that anthropologists are leaders in our nation's top science fields, making groundbreaking discoveries in areas as varied as public health, human genetics, legal history, bilingualism, the African American heritage, and infant learning."

A spokeswoman for the governor, asked by *Inside Higher Ed* about the request from anthropologists to talk about these issues and the scholars' frustration with his comments, re-read Scott's quotes about the value of STEM degrees, but declined to comment about anthropology.

Many anthropologists have been [issuing defenses](#) of their discipline and its relevance.

The emergence of anthropology as a target was something of a surprise to Florida academics. Last year, State Senator Don Gaetz, who has since been elected as president of the Senate for 2012, [complained about other degrees in the social sciences](#). "When the No. 1 degree granted is psychology and the No. 2 degree is political science, maybe before we ask \$100 million more of taxpayers we should re-deploy what we have," Gaetz said. "That way we make sure we're not sending graduates out with degrees that don't mean much."

Those comments led a group of psychology professors to prepare [a report](#) noting that just because the psychology major is popular doesn't mean it is a bad degree. The paper noted success for graduates in a range of fields (not just psychology).

Florida academics have already been worried about the state's governor, who has repeatedly expressed admiration for the push by Texas Governor Rick Perry to demand more information about how faculty members spend their time, and to focus evaluations of programs on their ability to land grants (with the latter criteria viewed by many as favoring the physical and biological sciences over the humanities and social sciences, where grants are fewer and smaller).

And some faculty leaders in Florida said that the governor's comments reflect a general problem of politicians understanding the liberal arts and the role of academic leadership.

Tom Auxter, president of the United Faculty of Florida (the statewide faculty union, affiliated with both the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association), noted that typically such attacks come at the humanities. (Auxter is professor of philosophy at the University of Florida.)

Auxter said that, regardless of discipline, faculty members should be concerned about what Scott is saying. He said that if budget cuts are needed (to support STEM or for any purpose), faculty members and administrators should be making those choices, and that politicians shouldn't be deciding which fields merit study.

"It's not for the governor to say," Auxter said. "There are entire worlds he needs to learn about before making these comments."

Further, he said that the comments ignore the reality that Florida's universities have in fact been pushing hard to attract more students to STEM fields, and to boost capacity in those areas. Auxter said that much of this is positive, but that he is concerned because "there is a problem with valuing STEM disciplines in a way that becomes dysfunctional."

"You cannot develop STEM disciplines all by themselves. They are within universities and they need to be in functioning universities," Auxter said. "People are not going to be attracted to universities that have been gutted."