

Staff, Administration and Trustees at TU,

Thank you in advance for reading this letter in its entirety. My hope is that you will absorb my words with the openness and thoughtfulness that President Clancy has encouraged all TU alumni to have regarding TU's restructuring.

In 2008, I graduated from the University of Tulsa with a BA in Musical Theatre. For the past 11 years, I have worked as a professional actress, educator and stage director in theatre, opera and musical theatre. Currently, I am the Artistic Director of Glow Lyric Theatre in Greenville, South Carolina.

I waited to write this letter so that I could learn more about the changes that TU is undergoing. Unfortunately, I have been extremely unimpressed by how non-transparent the University has been in revealing the data and circumstances that lead to this decision, and even more confused by the communication I have directly received from President Clancy as an alumnus.

If I cannot convince you to maintain and respect degrees in the arts and humanities at TU by reminding you of the wealth of beauty, empathy and peace they bring to our world, I can at least meet you at your level by speaking to you with facts, figures and an emphasis on the "professional". Over three times in the mass email I received from the President, it was mentioned that TU is a University with a more "practical and professional focus."

In the state where I live, the arts not only provide a cultural outlet, but they are a key driver of economic development. The creative sector is a 9.7 billion dollar industry, and accounts for 115,000 jobs in South Carolina. I have seen and experienced the vital hand that the arts play in the sustainability in my community. I co-founded Glow Lyric Theatre ten years ago with a mission to produce musical works that were in direct response to the political and social climate of South Carolina. I wanted to ignite positive change in my community and utilize the performing arts to spark important discussions. Little did I know that my work in the arts sector would be moving the needle of South Carolina's economy. My company just recently calculated our economic impact in the city in which we are based. For each dollar our patrons spent on tickets to our productions, nine dollars were invested in the local restaurants, shops and other tourism businesses. Utilizing this data, it was revealed that *my performing arts company has contributed \$11,340,000 to our local economy.*

When young professionals ask me how I was able to grow my company from our first year budget of \$400 to an annual budget just shy of \$300,000 with two full time employees, I tell them it is because of the education I got at TU. Without the scholarship requirements to work on electrics/set/props/marketing crew and the opportunity to perform in almost 20 productions, I never would have had the skills and experience I needed to be a well rounded arts entrepreneur and leader.

I am only one person with a musical theatre degree from TU, and this has been my extraordinary impact on my community and its economy. I am just one amongst thousands that have been granted degrees from the theatre department- many of whom have made similar if not greater impacts where they live.

Do you still want to insinuate that my degree is not "practical" or "professional"?

I encourage you to do your research on what business leaders are needing and wanting in future employees. A survey released in August by the Association of American Colleges and Universities shows that while business executives value college, they prefer to hire students with more varied skills within the liberal arts. They were less likely to hire students who are singularly degree or profession focused. They saw that institutions are teaching graduates the skills they need for entry level jobs, but reported that students were not ready to be promoted because they did not possess the critical thinking, creative thinking, intellectual capacity and questioning nature that are associated with a liberal arts degree. Providing general classes on theatre, music and art (as outlined in your proposal) will not even remotely suffice for students to gain these skills. The arts are by nature a "learning by doing" venture. With your plan, you are stripping away the definition of what a liberal arts college is in favor of creating a "professional super school." This is exactly the opposite of what modern businesses need and want.

Do you still want to insinuate that arts degrees do not offer "the most in-demand skill sets of the 21st century"?

An Adobe/Forrester reasearch study came out this year with statistics showing that business and for profit companies hiring employees with degrees in the arts were more likely to achieve higher revenue growth goals as well as significant competitive advantages. Businesses need employees with creative arts degrees to help keep them at the forefront of what the business world is becoming, so that they can adjust more nimbly to rapidly changing environments and problem solve. Businesses want innovators, not hoop jumpers. It is proven by the data in these studies and surveys that only those employees with creative backgrounds and arts degrees are satisfying these needs. While you state that you are only cutting a small percentage of majors, you are short sighted. By eliminating or generalizing arts education at TU, you are shaping future employees that do not have the skills necessary to function in the contemporary workplace, nor be attractive to employers.

Do you still want to insinuate that arts degrees do not offer “exceptional career focus” for your students?

When you kill arts education at TU, you are killing businesses, jobs and economies all across this country. Plain and simple.

I am asking that you think of your long term responsibility as an educational institution, and re-evaluate these changes. Implementing these changes violates the principals of liberal learning and the Academe in favor of becoming a technical or trade college. Listen to the feedback and protests of your students and alumni- not because they give you financial support, but because they are successful and enhancing the world as a result of the education they received at TU. Reflect on the ripple effect of TU’s influence and what else you might lose by losing the arts and humanities. There is a lot more at stake than you can see right now. If you continue with these decisions, your problems will be much more far-reaching than bad press and angry students and faculty, and you will have many more uncomfortable questions to answer. My hope is that you will intervene at this moment, instead of when this plan fails your students and their career goals in the long term.

Sincerely,
Jenna Elser (Jenna Harris)
BA Musical Theatre, TU
MFA Stage Directing, FSU

P.S. If you want to know what kind of commitment is “True Commitment”, look at my legacy at TU below. This kind of involvement is what you’ll miss out on when you don’t have performing arts students:

2008 BA Musical Theatre, minor in Women’s Studies, Magna Cum Laude, Honor’s College Certificate, Outstanding Theatre Student Award (2005, 2006, 2007, 2008), Collegiate Lifetime Achievement Award (2008), Sang the National Anthem at my TU graduation, Scholarship in Theatre and Music and Academic Merit (because I was Valedictorian of my high school and made a 30 on my ACT), Raised \$2,500 for DVIS on my senior culmination project, member of Capella Chamber Singers, Concert Chorale, Fellowship of Catholic University Students, Habitat for Humanity, Pride at TU, Sigma Alpha Iota, Society for Gender Equality (it was called something different 12 years ago), TU College Democrats.