Hi, my name is Andy Horowitz, I’m an associate professor of History at the University of Connecticut, and I serve also as the Connecticut State Historian. I recently wrote an op-ed for the Hearst newspapers in Connecticut about challenges faces universities and the importance of the humanities and I’d like to share it with you in this voice note.

When I started my new job this fall, as a history professor at the University of Connecticut, I did not think I was naïve about the challenges facing public higher education. I was aware of the recent ruinous cuts in West Virginia and Wisconsin, the ideological attacks in Florida, and the assault on tenure in Georgia and Texas. But I consoled myself with the idea that those states were controlled by Republicans who have long been hostile to the public sector. Connecticut has a Democratic governor, a Democratic-majority state legislature, and several years of record budget surpluses.

And so I was shocked when UConn recently unveiled a budget that would impose 15 percent cuts across the university over the next five years, in response to a precipitous reduction in state funding. The cuts would force the elimination of many graduate programs, including history. They would limit students’ access to foreign language courses and writing intensive courses. Class sizes would increase, as would tuition, which is already up by 23 percent over the past five years. The cuts would imperil research grants and professional accreditations. Students would graduate deeper in debt for a diminished education.

Before coming to UConn, I taught at elite private schools. With jobs for historians hard to come by, I felt lucky to work anywhere, let alone such privileged settings, but I had a jealous respect for the ethical clarity of public universities. While many private schools seek to distinguish themselves by their selectivity — that is, by how many applicants they can exclude — public schools usually boast of how many people they can include. At UConn’s Hartford campus, where I came to teach, we are proud to be able to welcome the large majority of applicants into our classrooms.   
  
As I settled in this fall, teaching “US history since 1877,” one way I got to know my new students was by the topics they chose for their research papers. One student wrote about debates over nuclear power in Connecticut in the 1970s, because he thought it could inform his efforts as a climate activist. Another student wrote about the history of English as a second language instruction, because she aspired to be a high school teacher, even as she told me during office hours that school shootings made her afraid to commit to that career.

I got to know my students, too, by the reasons they gave for missing class. I excused absences for a volunteer firefighter who was called to a fire (his paper was about 9/11), for a student who had to translate for her immigrant mother at a doctor’s appointment (her paper was about the New Deal), and for a student whose boyfriend overdosed on opiates (her paper was about OxyContin). To use a cliché I might have edited out of their papers, my students looked like Connecticut.

Particularly in the humanities, higher education serves goals so lofty that they risk escaping into the ether, which may be why it sometimes proves easier to attack than to defend. In ways impossible to quantify, a good education helps to make life more interesting and worthwhile. It helps you to cultivate a richer sense of yourself as a person and the world as a whole. It helps you to connect with others, by recognizing a universal humanity, and it helps you to understand difference, by recognizing the particularities of the human experience. It helps to make the way things are seem less inevitable, and helps to widen your sense of what is possible. A good education helps you to realize your life’s purpose.

Higher education serves more tangible goals too, of course. Simply put, there is no problem we face as a society whose solutions do not run through our public universities. The media literacy necessary for a world awash in misinformation, the language skills necessary for a world shaped by transnational connections, the clarity of speech and writing necessary for a world of words, the technological acumen necessary for a digitized world, the ability to negotiate distinctions in a pluralistic world — few institutions in American life attempt to address any one of these needs. Public universities attempt to address them all, and often do so successfully. They express our highest ambitions for our society and represent our best hopes for the future.

Connecticut’s governor has argued that budget cuts are necessary, even in the face of budget surpluses, because the state must stockpile billions of dollars in a rainy day fund, in adherence with strict legislative “fiscal guardrails.” But the state’s genuflection to austerity rings false: degrading educational opportunity for the next generation of teachers, nurses, daughters, sons, neighbors, and voters could not possibly help to safeguard our collective future. The truth is just the opposite. Divesting from public education is the budgetary act of abandoning hope for the future.

At the end of last semester, I included a bonus question on the final exam: “what do you want to be sure to remember from this class?” One student used the prompt to apologize for occasionally arriving late. “I would get up at 1 a.m., with sometimes as little as four hours of sleep, to work a second job to pay for school,” he explained. “It’s possible to stay up for 20 hours at a time, to eat one meal a day, and to do so while studying. The biggest takeaway for me is that I can do it.”

We owe him a great public university. Not the chintziest university we can pawn off on someone who doesn’t have other options, nor the denuded university that consultants conjure in their PowerPoint slides as maximally efficient. We owe him, and all students, institutions that are scaled up to the challenges upon us. We need universities that are equipped to transform the lives of precious individuals and to shore up the future of our precarious nation.

For my own part, I won’t be so naïve anymore, and I hope you will join me in advocating for public higher education in Connecticut and everywhere. New York, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, and Connecticut’s community college system are all slated for major cuts right now too. As one of my students observed in her exam, “being on the wrong side of history is like failing an open-note test.”