

Arts Advantage

Why enrolling in the liberal arts is smarter than you think.

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According to Statistics Canada, over the last 20 years the number of employed 25- to 34-year-olds who have completed a university degree has risen dramatically. Among men, the number has increased from 17 to 27 percent. The gains among women have been even greater, from 19 to 40 percent.

This past September, however, came a pivotal shift, at least in the province of Ontario. The number of 18-year-olds enrolling in the province's universities fell by more than 2000, or 2.1 percent. What's more, the decrease was hardly consistent across the disciplines. Many subjects saw increases, which were needed to compensate for the decline of 2,600 in the humanities and social sciences—the so-called liberal arts.

In Ontario, at least, for the first time in as long as anyone can remember, fewer high school graduates seem to be choosing universities—or at least universities that will accept them—and more and more are rejecting a liberal arts education.

Demographers point to a shrinking cohort of 18-year-olds as one element of this phenomenon, but others suggest that universities, and particularly liberal arts programs, appear to be poorly designed to meet the labour market needs of the 21st century.

Indeed, as one report has pointed out, the proportion of post-secondary graduates working in jobs where they earn half the median income or less, a common measure of poverty, is higher in Canada than for any other industrialized country. And according to Statistics Canada, one third of those aged 25 to 34 who studied the humanities in university and a quarter of those who studied the social sciences hold jobs for which a high school education would suffice.

At best, then, liberal arts degrees seem to be leaving graduates indebted and underemployed. In a more cynical light, these degrees waste four or more years at a most important time in any Canadian's development as a citizen, taxpayer and member of the global community.

Commentators have typically offered three solutions to these challenges. Peter Thiel, the co-founder of PayPal, has paid students \$100,000 not to attend college for two years. He points to Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg as examples of how creativity often flows most easily outside of the university classroom.

Here in Canada, Cabinet minister Jason Kenney promotes greater emphasis on the trades: "We have to do away with this idea ... that young people who go ... into trades or technical vocations as opposed to professions are somehow pursuing a second-class form of education," he says. "That is a terrible lie."

Still others, including, if some reports are to be believed, Canada's prime minister, have suggested that students should simply make better choices about the degrees that they pursue. Engineers have jobs, such thinking seems to imply, so why study sociology?

The data tell a much more nuanced story, one that reveals a profound difference between the achievements of Canadians with a genuine liberal arts education versus those who have merely met the minimum standards to obtain a degree.

Although the gap has been narrowing, post-secondary graduates continue to earn consistently more than those with a high school diploma or less. They find jobs more easily and are more likely to keep them during an

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economic downturn. They are also, it is worth noting, more likely to be active citizens in both the social and political sense.

Admittedly, average wages and salaries among liberal arts graduates are typically much lower than those in fields such as engineering, and are losing ground, but they continue to meet or exceed those of college attendees, especially among women, who make up well over half of Canada's university population.

There are also indications that the earning patterns of graduates in the liberal arts are more consistent than those in other disciplines. As opposed to business graduates, for example, the salaries of liberal arts graduates tend to increase at a predictable rate regardless of the state of the Canadian economy. Much of that stability has been attributed to the preponderance of graduates working in the public sector, and some fear that such jobs will gradually disappear, but it is important to remember that even the current Harper administration—hardly a friend of big government—has not decreased the size of the federal public service since coming to power.

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Data from outside Canada are similarly hopeful. According to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, liberal arts graduates who complete graduate degrees earn, on average, twice the median salary of Americans with a high school education or less. And a 2014 Gallup poll of more than 30,000 U.S. college graduates indicated that those who majored in the arts were more likely to be engaged in their work and satisfied with their lives than those who studied science or engineering.

If the future replicates the recent past, then overqualification may also be a temporary problem. Statistics Canada reports that older bachelor's graduates are far less likely to be overqualified than younger ones, reinforcing the argument that a liberal arts degree might not be the most efficient ticket to a first job, but it will eventually help workers get promoted well above their less formally educated peers.

Moreover, in spite of popular suggestions to the contrary, not only is there scant sign of a skills shortage among the trades in Canada, but the majority of the occupations showing signs of future shortages are in health care, mining and engineering, none of which are particularly apprenticeship-friendly.

So what is really happening? How can we explain the increasing negativity with which a liberal arts degree seems to be viewed by university applicants and public officials given the clear opportunities that such an education represents?

For one, technological change has permanently altered the economic landscape more quickly than some of us anticipated, but not nearly as quickly as others have supposed. As machines displace lower skilled workers in a number of fields, new higher skilled analytical jobs are emerging to fix those machines, invent new ones and create new applications for them. As a result, innovation and problem-solving abilities now come at a premium.

University graduates, and especially those in the liberal arts, should, in such a context, be at a tremendous advantage. Their critical thinking, reading and writing abilities should make them indispensable. That is why some of them are doing so well, and many are in such high demand. One third of all CEOs of Fortune 500 companies studied the liberal arts, for example. (Minister Kenney himself, who makes more than \$200,000 per year as a member of the Cabinet, studied philosophy as an undergraduate.)

At the same time, however, society's acknowledgement of the importance of post-secondary education to national economic prosperity seems to have encouraged the unhelpful idea that all qualified students should continue their formal schooling immediately upon graduating high school and that post-secondary degrees or diplomas should become prerequisites for employment of any sort.

According to the Conference Board of Canada, in the first decade of the 21st century, full-time enrollments in Canadian universities increased from a little more than 650,000 to over 1 million. And this influx of students appears to have fuelled credential inflation.

In other words, while many 21st-century jobs require academic skills, too many employers now use degrees to reduce their applicant pool (or, as others might put it, as reliable signals of applicants' potential), regardless of the demands of the position. One U.S. survey noted, for example, that only 37 percent of employers who made degrees a requirement bothered to look at the transcripts of their applicants.

Credentialism has also affected the student mentality. Rather than pursuing a university education, more and more enrol simply to get a degree. We do not have equivalent numbers for Canada, and some have disputed elements of their methodology, but Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa provide some compelling evidence in their controversial 2011 book, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*. Until the 1960s, the average American undergraduate student spent about 40 hours per week on academics, be that in the classroom or at home alone studying. Today, students spend just 27 hours overall, and study time, when the real learning often takes place, is down from an average of 25 hours per week to less than 13.

Meanwhile, education scholars have demonstrated that skills in critical thinking and analysis must be practised deliberately to be learned. These skills require serious, sustained reflection, and they cannot be maintained without continuous renewal. It is not surprising, therefore, that Arum and Roksa would find that well over one third of the college students they surveyed showed no statistically significant improvement in critical thinking over their first two college years.

Those who multi-task in class, who cram for exams, who write research essays in a single draft the night before and who generally privilege their paying jobs or their social lives over their schooling are not going to learn. Paradoxically, their lack of critical thinking skills will prevent many of them from realizing what they are missing. That they can obtain a post-secondary credential by doing just enough to pass only reinforces the disconnect.

In the past, that disconnect was relatively harmless. University graduates were relatively rare, and good jobs were plentiful. Indeed, some Canadians continue to believe that learning how to think is merely an associated benefit of a successful university experience, rather than the point of one.

Today, however, for all but the best connected and wealthiest students, a failure to develop the necessary critical thinking skills in university means graduating into a globalized world in which there will always be countless others better prepared to take advantage of desirable employment opportunities.

Too many students, it seems, are not being given this message, especially in the liberal arts, where the more subjective nature of assessment—not to mention a lack of transparency and clarity in grading policies and approaches (not all universities list class averages alongside student grades, for example)—makes it difficult for professors to fail them outright.

Put another way, too many students apply to university without first pledging to dedicate themselves to real, transformative academic learning. When they arrive, they are shocked by the amount of effort it takes to learn, but realize almost as quickly that they can invest significantly less of themselves—what is now called learning "strategically"—and still pass.

Once they receive their credential, however, they find themselves utterly unprepared for the jobs they had hoped to obtain. As for all of the material that they studied to survive a particular test or write a certain paper, it too is almost immediately forgotten.

All this leaves potential employers confused and frustrated. Too many of them believe, wrongly, that all liberal arts graduates have learned to think. Some, moreover, go even further and assume, wrongly again, that the critical thinking skills developed in the classroom can compensate for, rather than merely complement, real-world experience acquired through on-the-job training.

So employers complain about the universities, and the universities criticize employers for failing to understand what education, as opposed to job training, is supposed to achieve.

Where do we go from here?

Given the importance of an educated population to Canada's prosperity, it will not suffice to tell young people they need not bother with school since they can learn a trade, or that they should avoid majoring in liberal arts subjects in university. We need a concerted effort from across society, including governments, university administrators, faculty and employers, as well as from students and their families.

We need an understanding that it is in society's best interest that every liberal arts graduate has in fact learned how to learn.

This effort begins from the premise that what matters about a university education, particularly in the liberal arts, is less your choice of major, and more how you study and what you learn. Furthermore, we need a general understanding that it is in society's best interest that every liberal arts graduate has in fact learned how to learn, even if that means that there are fewer graduates altogether. Empty degrees are no longer harmless. They devalue real learning, create false confidence among graduates and mislead employers.

Let's start with the possible role of governments. Their role is already a large one.

While university tuition has increased dramatically across Canada, so too have tax credits and grants available to students. Admittedly, some who do not need the credits still benefit more than others who do, but today Canadian governments and universities distribute over \$7 billion in non-repayable form including tax benefits, grants and scholarships to post-secondary students each year. (Colleges and universities collect about the same \$7 billion in tuition fees from domestic students, making net tuition, for all intents and purposes, close to \$0.) Thanks to various public schemes student debt levels have also been stable for over a decade.

That financial commitment is important; however, provincial governments need to avoid portrayals of post-secondary education as an extension of high school and speak of it instead as a demanding, albeit worthwhile, long-term personal investment. Post-secondary institutions should be funded based on their support for specific, faculty-endorsed learning outcomes rather than for the number of students who come through their real or virtual doors.

Moreover, since recent research indicates that the human brain is not fully mature until the early twenties, and there is no evidence that 17-year-olds achieve greater learning outcomes than do older students, it makes little sense to rush individuals who are not ready into demanding academic programs. And yet we do. We make financial aid and RESP top-ups easily accessible to students right out of high school, even if they are only going to university because they do not know what else to do. Such incentives could be limited until age 19 or 20, encouraging students who have not received merit-based scholarships to engage in the world and develop an appreciation of the opportunities that higher education can provide before they register for classes.

Alternatively, governments could at least increase the incentives for recent high school graduates to wait. Programs like Katimavik, which used to provide young Canadians with practical, real-world leadership opportunities, could be revitalized and expanded. Governments could partner with employers—focusing, at least at first, on Canadian university alumni—to develop more accessible and relevant pre-university work experience programs.

As governments demand clearer learning outcomes, university administrators could work with their faculty to develop more concrete expectations of what learning means in particular programs and courses. In this context, the spirit of the Lumina Foundation's efforts to establish transparent degree qualifications profiles in American institutions is worth emulating.

How these outcomes are measured—whether through learning portfolios that document student progress or end-of-study tests, or other means—are developed by faculty to recognize the unique elements of their

courses, disciplines and programs, and then institutionalized by university administrations. Ultimately, institutions are funded in large part based on their ability to achieve the prescribed outcomes.

Admittedly, the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario's recent study of outcomes-based funding is, at best, inconclusive, but there are indications that positive results will take time, and that measurement indicators often require revisions.

Detractors of rationalized learning outcomes, who warn that tying government funding to them will incent universities, and even professors, to try to game the system are naive. Gaming is always there: consider how hard universities and faculties work today to recruit students because government funding is based so heavily on enrollment. The key is to create incentives for the strategically minded gamers that best serve Canada's long-term needs.

Internships and placements should also be reconceptualized. In the liberal arts context, they are less helpful as on-the-job training than as pedagogical tools to increase student engagement.

Even more importantly, universities must draw lessons from the findings of Gallup and others that successful learning is largely contingent upon three things: students need to feel that their professors care about them as people; they need to be inspired by their courses to learn; and they require access to a mentor. Those kinds of supports underscore the relevance of the liberal arts classroom experience that is too often ignored, if not misunderstood.

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Most students who study Renaissance history do not find jobs in museums. But many do begin careers that emphasize data analysis and persuasive writing, and those skills are nurtured in the history classroom. It is therefore up to the professoriate to revise their course titles and descriptions—not to mention their assessment processes and criteria—to be more transparent about how students might benefit from their classes outside of the academy.

Greater coherence across liberal arts majors and programs—working backward from the expected learning outcomes of a program to design courses that build the skills necessary to succeed, rather than letting professors design their own pet courses in isolation from one another—is also critical.

These measures of accountability are not mere bureaucratic exercises, nor, if implemented correctly, should they compromise academic freedom. Cognitive science tells us that students learn more when they understand exactly what they are trying to achieve. Appreciating how their courses fit together keeps students engaged and allows them to reflect on, and monitor, their own progress.

Meanwhile, private sector leaders should think seriously about the costs of using a university credential for anything but evidence of specific capacities. If a liberal arts education is critical to a particular position, interviewers should demand not just transcripts, but also evidence of how the courses on that transcript and the knowledge acquired from them have affected job candidates as people and as prospective employees.

Finally, families need to refresh their understanding of the purpose of a liberal arts education. Traditionally, it has been all too common for high school graduates with reasonable grades but no clear direction to head straight to university to find themselves. These students have gravitated to liberal arts programs that are perceived, rightly or wrongly, as less demanding. Parents and guardians have encouraged such choices, based on the common assumption that any degree is better than no degree at all, and that university is a great place to experiment and explore without serious consequences.

The world today has changed. Universities do provide many of these same opportunities, but a degree without learning is a degree without meaning. Applicants must be prepared to identify as adults and treat their studies like a full-time job. Spending 40 hours per week either in class or at home working should be the norm. Of

course, not everyone can afford to enroll full time, but part-timers should assume a commitment of eight hours per week per course and set the pace of their education accordingly. Those who are neither ready for nor interested in such a commitment should delay their university education until they are.

This is not to say that anyone should be forced to declare a major before they arrive on campus. Rather, it is to argue that liberal arts students need to realize that, regardless of whether they ultimately pass a course, learning does not take place while texting or tweeting, and just getting by is no longer enough to guarantee employment, let alone a fulfilling life as an active and engaged citizen.

The liberal arts themselves, and the skills that studying them offers, are more relevant than ever, and those who recognize their value and apply themselves accordingly seem to be doing quite well. Their success, however, comes in spite of a Canadian learning environment—cultivated by employers, administrators, and even faculty—that keeps in place systemic deterrents to deep learning.

We can, and must, do better.