

We ignore the liberal arts at our peril

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Who would have thought it would come to this? Academics around the world are having to explain why there is value in studying history, English, philosophy, psychology, creative arts and the other subjects that collectively make up what is referred to as the liberal arts, or the humanities and social sciences. It is the equivalent of masons having to justify mortar and plumbers having to justify pipes.

The exhilaration of the Age of Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries has been replaced by the nervousness of what appears to be an Age of Justification in the 21st century. Modern society's love of innovative gadgets and apps, pronouncements that youth can now be taught on the Internet (and possibly become high-profile entrepreneurs to boot), and social media outpourings that give falsehoods as much airplay as truths, have created a cocktail of rhetoric for critics who are sure that a liberal arts degree is a worthless investment.

The Age of Enlightenment was about the growth of literacy, and the expanding awareness of diversity and knowledge in cultural, literary and scientific thought. The Age of Justification appears to have as its worrisome centrepiece the belief that the value of something exists only when viewed through a prescribed lens at the current moment.

We all agree that there should be good rationales for public expenditures. But there are problems if, in trying to justify something, we fail to take into account all the relevant information.

First, a liberal arts degree is a great economic investment. This year the Education Policy Research Initiative at the University of Ottawa published an analysis of the annual earnings, over 13 years, of 1998 graduates. The data showed that earnings of social sciences graduates doubled over 13 years to \$80,000, the same average earning of math and science grads.

The data also show a worrisome gender-based difference, with men out-earning women by 15 per cent to 20 per cent across all disciplines. Over the 13-year period the average annual earnings of a man with a humanities degree reached just over \$80,000, compared with \$75,000 on average for a woman with an engineering or computer science degree. Such findings deserve more research, of the kind our country's social scientists and humanists are increasingly engaged in.

Provincial university systems also track graduate performance. In Ontario today, two years after graduation, employment rates for all university grads average 94 per cent, and 92 per cent for those in the humanities. Ontario university grads earn on average \$1.1-million more over their lifetimes than other postsecondary graduates, and \$1.5-million more than high-school grads. University does make financial sense.

Second, as a multicultural country playing in the global arena, Canada needs a citizenry that learns and studies human differences, social behaviours, and cultural traditions. It needs a citizenry that encourages respect for human rights, and encourages artistic creation and appreciation of the arts. The humanities and social sciences engage in these intersections, and contribute to what makes us human.

At the University of Windsor, our Cross-Border Institute is looking at technological, legal and public-policy issues involved in moving people and goods from one country to another. Our research and education programs to prevent sexual violence against women are getting at one of the biggest realities any society must confront. Both undertakings address matters critical to Canada's future, and rely heavily upon insights from the social sciences and humanities.

Third, the perceived crisis in the value of liberal arts must be viewed through the lens of globalization. Enterprises, from manufacturing to service-sector jobs, continually migrate to lower-cost countries. This reduces the prices of goods and services and expands markets, but it also puts people out of work.

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The suggestion that the best anodyne for this is STEM programs (science, technology, engineering, math) and more skilled-trades graduates misses the reality that liberal arts have as their foundation the encouragement of communication, writing and out-of-the-box thinking. If you visit universities across Asia, you'll find that liberal arts programs are taking off.

For example, the National University of Singapore and Yale University have partnered to open a liberal arts campus in Singapore. Across China, Japan, South Korea and other countries, new partnerships focused on liberal arts are emerging. Increasingly around the world, the liberal arts are not being seen as passé, but rather as essential. Our world depends upon and needs STEM expertise, but what it really needs is STEAM, with the arts included.

We undervalue the liberal arts at our peril. In his 1902 book *Human Nature and the Social Order*, sociologist Charles Cooley proposed the concept of the looking-glass self, which states that humans acquire their sense of self through social interactions and by what others think of them. Mr. Cooley would likely be intrigued, and feel that his concept has been verified, by the addiction of peering into cellphone screens. Humans are indeed social creatures.

A degree in the liberal arts, with its focus on the broad spectrum of human endeavour, has never been needed more. It is one of society's best investments in helping to ensure that our self-reflections are broad, and that in this Age of Justification, we do not forget the importance of enlightenment and reason.