

## Opinion: The cynics are wrong about the value of an Arts degree

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The main hall leading to the Webster Library at Concordia University: Skills like problem solving, cultural literacy, the ability to communicate, digesting research to see the big picture, decision making and leadership are as in demand as ever, Alan Shepard writes.

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At the beginning of the school year, there's a lot of optimism in the air — and in some quarters, cynicism about the value of a university degree.

Feature articles with a bottom-line bent ask: Why pay tuition for a credential you're not sure will get you a dream job in a job market that, since 2008, is making little room for new talent? In such a climate, it's argued that the degree — especially a Bachelor of Arts — is becoming a luxury.

Like a Trump tweet, these sensational views curry attention — they get pixels and airtime. But such baby-with-bathwater arguments are often made by those who already have a degree. What's more, they are plain wrong.

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Over a 40-year career, Ontario university graduates earn \$1.1-million more than grads from other post-secondary programs, says the Council of Ontario Universities. And over Canadian high-school graduates, that number rises to \$1.5-million.

But which program to take? Recent research from the Education Policy Research Initiative uses tax records to show that, 13 years on, University of Ottawa liberal arts graduates average similar earnings to math and science grads.

Those are the pocketbook benefits. But graduates are also more likely to donate time and money, vote, and rate their physical and mental health higher — just a few concrete signs of the ways an education transforms people, and their families' futures.

Today's savvy students know all this: classes this term are full.

And yet universities are at a crossroads. Reduced state funding, a slight demographic dip and the technological tsunami continue to press us. It is a moment of upheaval in the 900-year-old invention that has arguably done more to advance society than any other institution.

So, what's next for universities in this millennium?

First, be open, not closed. Prestige is a funny thing. Many clubs derive their elite status through exclusion. But for institutions whose *raison d'être* is the public good, that's a paradox.

Universities foster breakthroughs in both new and emerging disciplines, but also in the mind of every student. Institutions like Concordia admit students who are often the first in their family to attend university. Some of their childhood homes probably contained no books. I was one of them.

The potential energy liberated in those who make a leap into their future is fundamental to the well-being of our society. Still, the journey can be daunting. Having upper-year students normalize the challenges helps first-years navigate and shows them they belong. Supporting them through university services is also crucial.

Second, offer courses and degrees that are flexible and adapted to learners' needs. A degree is no longer a one-time buckling of the career tool belt. The next-generation university recognizes that learners will be back for more. No mystery why: Technology is accelerating change; knowledge becomes outdated faster.

What sticks are the general and particular skills: problem solving, cultural literacy, the ability to communicate, digesting research to see the big picture, decision making, leadership. In survey after survey, employers report seeking these skills.

But the most important skill is learning how to learn — which also means recognizing your shortcomings, when to retool, and how.

How can we deliver all these services? We must meet today's digital natives on their playing field with an end-to-end digitally enabled experience. More flexible course options and shorter, more stackable credentialing are the future.

Third, anchor programs in the broader community. We serve students best by helping them grow. And they grow in part by a deep engagement in the community around them. Pragmatic projects and network building open up post-university employment. And taking responsibility for others gives students an immediate sense of purpose in their educations. Makes it more real.

And that, after all, is what all of us want.