

Ready for Anything

A liberal arts university education provides excellent career preparation.

By Karen Zagor

How do you quantify the value of staying up all night writing a paper on John Donne's *The Flea*, or spending a week contemplating what today's world would look like if Trotsky had succeeded Lenin instead of Stalin? Attempts to measure the worth of a liberal arts education usually have the same success rate as trying to calculate how many angels can dance on the head of a pin.

Yet increasingly, students, their parents and governments want to know what they are getting for their money. And these concerns may be having an impact on the number of students choosing to get a degree in arts.

"In the last ten years, students have been very much preoccupied with the notion of a career, much more than they were previously," says Michael Milde, Associate Dean, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Western Ontario. "People are worried that arts and humanities students will end up being unemployed."

For these worriers, what little empirical evidence that exists is comforting. Two Canadian studies in the late 1990s indicated that humanities and social sciences graduates were just as successful as engineering graduates in getting jobs, and actually did a bit better than applied sciences graduates at finding employment. Moreover, liberal arts graduates tended to earn more over the course of a lifetime.

In a 2001 report for Statistics Canada, which draws on information from the 1990s studies, Philip Giles and Torben Drewes conclude that humanities and social sciences graduates have a more difficult transition from school to work. In the long term, however, liberal arts graduates benefit from the generic nature of their skills "because these skills have a greater longevity and are complementary to continued, lifelong learning in the face of labour market changes".

These findings fit in with what Milde has observed. "Western's arts and humanities graduates do very well in the job market. The only people who do better are doctors, who are in huge demand."

Indeed, there are encouraging signs that society, or at least government and the world of commerce, is starting to recognize that the very essence of a liberal arts education is immensely valuable as we move towards a knowledge-based economy.

In May, the Ontario government promised to invest \$6.2 billion in post-secondary education over the next five years. The investment was announced following a review on education by former Ontario premier Bob Rae in which he said: "Society's survival has always relied on the transfer of skills and abilities across generations. What is new is the level and breadth of knowledge and skill required to succeed. Our current standard of living, and our quality of life, depend on access to the best education in the world."

Dr. Paul Davenport, Western's president and vice-chancellor, notes that the great questions of the liberal arts — Who am I and why am I here? What are beauty, virtue and justice? How can we build societies that reflect our values of justice and compassion? — are "taking on a special urgency in the knowledge-based society as we confront the social and ethical dimensions of rapid technological change, from protecting our environment to managing the results of genetic discoveries in human reproduction and health care".

Even in the world of business education, which has moved away from abstract thought and become very focused on scientific and mathematical methodology in recent years, the value of a foundation in the liberal arts is starting to be rediscovered.

Carol Stephenson, Dean of the Richard Ivey School of Business at Western, says: "I think some liberal arts is an excellent background, and I'm probably a living example, having spent the majority of my career in the business world after an undergraduate background in sociology, psychology, and English."

Douglas Reid, who teaches at the Queen's University business school, agrees that a liberal arts background can have practical applications for business students. "You predict the future by knowing patterns. Literature can help you hone your skills in recognizing patterns and underlying themes. Philosophy can help you understand how Socrates thought and how to become a good questioner. These are all useful skills in the business world."

The consensus seems to be that the students who achieve the most in life are those who are eager to learn and who follow that passion, regardless of how practical that appears to be.

"The advice that I give students is to pursue what they like, not what they think they should do or what their relatives have done," says Milde. "They are here for an education, and they will get the best education they can if they study what they like. This may sound trite, but it's true."

"I also tell them that they will learn two invaluable skills in our faculty — the first is to write well and clearly; the second is to think critically about subject matter. Both these skills are eminently practical."

"The fallacy is that because we don't prepare you for one career, we don't prepare you for any. In fact, we prepare you for anything."

(Adapted with permission from "What is the Value of Liberal Arts Education?" in the Western Alumni Gazette, Summer 05)