

Arts graduates are best prepared for the unexpected

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Special to The Globe and Mail

Last updated Monday, Sep. 15 2014, 1:50 PM EDT



Studying philosophy, like the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, helps students to think. (-)

One of my favourite things about being on campus in September is seeing new students, with their families in tow, moving into residence and wandering through the university's buildings and open spaces with wonder, nervousness and hesitation. Today's students and those who support them are understandably anxious about which school to attend and what to study when they get there.

Each season, the media reappraise the dollar value of the university degree and pronounce annually the death of the liberal arts. The so-called return on investment of business degrees ebbs and flows on the tide of the market, while the BSc seems to be either in high demand by traditional industries or not worth the paper it's printed on in new technology sectors. In the

meantime, the arts, humanities and social sciences have quietly gone about the business of evolving to reflect the times in which we're living.

Overlooked in the rush to judge and the pressure to choose is the fact that the B.A. is changing. Sure, the traditional liberal arts degree is not exactly a thing of the past, but the B.A. has a new trajectory: It's fast becoming more practical and more cross-disciplinary.

Studying history hasn't been about memorizing dates and key events since, well, whenever the last cabinet shuffle happened, but rather finding ways in which the past applies to current events. Philosophy's not just about answering hard-to-answer questions, but about cultivating invaluable skills for anyone who aspires to think, talk, or write for a living.

But those are the degrees that get all the attention and that everyone knows. Undergraduates today can major or minor in Digital Humanities, Aboriginal Studies, World Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies, Sexual and Racial Diversities Studies, Educational Psychology and Communication Studies, World Languages and Religions, International Development and Globalization Studies, the Social and Cultural aspects of Health Pandemics, or Human Rights, Child and Disabilities Studies.

Dozens of universities across Canada now have institutes and programs devoted to interdisciplinary studies in which students can design their own degrees by combining a variety of courses with independent, innovative research and transformative experiential learning experiences. Students increasingly have the opportunity to bring into focus multiple disciplines and to juxtapose viewpoints and theoretical perspectives that once seemed disparate, unrelated, or were simply overlooked. Through these experiences, they explore interconnections and new ways of thinking about and tackling the complex identities, issues and problems facing the world today.

The modern B.A. gives students perspective at a time when it's so crucial to maintain it. A university education is not the means to an end it once was, when a general degree was all a graduate needed to get his or her foot in the door, and it's why the B.A. is adapting to serve a new role in preparing graduates for the future. The modern B.A. prepared graduates for a marketplace that changes by the day, and for jobs that don't exist today but will in 20 years.

Today's B.A. is producing graduates who are well-rounded, creative, critical thinkers, graduates who can write persuasively, who can formulate arguments and defend their ideas in conversation, graduates who are socially engaged, socially responsible, and well equipped to navigate a rapidly changing, interconnected world. These are the job-ready skills that every graduate needs and the modern B.A. provides.

The generational gap between university students and their parents, the one so often exploited by the media, government and industry, rests on outdated preconceptions about the starving artist, the wealthy lawyer, and every-science-student-as-pre-med, as well as misguided assumptions about the role of a university education. The slow post-2008 economic recovery has mistakenly overlooked a fundamental and important transformation of the B.A., happening at a time when

the humanities and social sciences are more essential than ever in preparing graduates for the future.

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