

Challenges to Liberal Education in an Age of Uncertainty¹

Paul Axelrod

I want to discuss the challenges facing the liberal arts. The subject is hardly original. Debates on higher education, during the last decade at least, have been bedevilled by a preoccupation with academic “crises,” including the fate of the curriculum. Numerous authors in the United States and Canada, mostly imitating the late Allen Bloom’s *Closing of the American Mind*, have proclaimed, melodramatically, the fall of the contemporary university. Although I once criticized much of this literature for its analytical shallowness, political dogmatism, and historical romanticism,² I was only dimly aware of significant changes in university life that have since become more visible. Now even I think that the prospects for higher education are uncertain and disconcerting. Instead of using the language of “crisis,” and in the interests of (a rather strained) consistency with my earlier writing, I here employ the language of “deep concern” about the future of the university.

Liberal education, I fear, is at risk, and the sources of this peril are intellectual, economic and cultural. I argue first that liberal education is the potential victim of its own historical success. Open to a growing variety of disciplines, intellectual currents, and social applications, liberal education can justifiably ingest virtually any academic fare, including that, ironically, which could lead to its own demise. The sources of danger lie largely in the realm of political economy, although such intellectual matters as the “culture wars” play their part. All this notwithstanding, there is still reason for optimism.

I

The concept of liberal education is filled with paradox. It is at once the most enduring and changeable of academic traditions. It owes its origins to the intellectual culture of ancient Greece, and continues, at least ideally, to embrace its core values: fostering intellectual breadth, development of the whole person, cultivation of character and citizenship, and achievement, in learning and living, of balance and harmony. Indeed, J. Vanderleest contends that the goal of contemporary liberal education

elicits widespread agreement; it is a process designed to produce a fully educated person by providing knowledge that develops character and prepares individuals to be active citizens within their own societies.³

At this point, however, the consensus unravels. How one achieves these lofty goals has produced deep historical divisions. Even in ancient Greece, the philosophical approach of Socrates and Plato, who sought virtue through the pursuit of knowledge and truth, contrasted with the oratorical method favoured

by Isocrates, who declared rhetoric and expression to be the central attributes of enlightened citizenship. The more utilitarian sophists, in turn, stressed the art of political persuasion, which obliged students to write, present, and analyze speeches.⁴

In the Roman era, the "artes liberales" initially gave priority to oratorical skills, intended to equip propertied gentlemen to carry on the "time honored traditions of their own society."⁵ Seneca, on the other hand, contended that education should fit citizens for freedom irrespective of wealth or birth, and he rejected those subjects which insufficiently promoted "moral excellence."⁶

The liberal arts in the middle ages both drew from the Greek tradition and reconstituted the definition of essential knowledge. The "trivium" included the subjects of logic, grammar, and rhetoric. The "quadrivium" comprised music, arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy. The rediscovery of Aristotelian thought in the thirteenth century emphasized philosophy and logic at the expense of oratory. Whereas the Greeks had stressed the contribution of the liberally educated to public or military service, the medieval scholar could legitimately withdraw from society in order to engage in scholastic studies. This is the basis of an enduring intellectual dimension of liberal education. As Sheldon Rothblatt explains, the academic's "[i]solation does not imperil the personality but preserves it and allows the self perfect freedom to pursue thought at its highest, purest, and most disinterested."⁷ Of course, although the masters and students in England, France, Spain and Italy could conduct vigorous disputations, they could not question the theological canons of Christianity. Genuine academic freedom was still a distant prospect, equally so in the Protestant universities which were established in the wake of the Counter-Reformation.

Indeed, during both the Renaissance and the Enlightenment periods, intellectual life and the cultivation of a critical spirit thrived more fully outside the university than in. Proponents of the humanities, who favoured more cultural freedom, and learning for its own sake, were initially repudiated by many universities, then later embraced in a more secular academic world. It was acknowledged, eventually, that humanists who wrote music, poetry, essays, and even novellas also had something to contribute to the refinement of the student's character.

Cardinal John Henry Newman bridged two worlds in the evolution of the liberal arts. An Anglican convert to Catholicism, he believed that students required an orthodox Christian education in order to develop fully their moral sensibilities. Secure in their faith, students should also be exposed to knowledge arising from the secular world, including the study of literature, philosophy, history, and science. "Liberal education," he wrote,

makes not the Christian, nor the Catholic, but the gentleman. It is well to have a cultivated intellect, a delicate taste, a candid equitable, dispassionate mind, a noble and courteous bearing in the conduct of life;—these are the connatural qualities of large knowledge;— they are the objects of a University.⁸

Unlike those protecting the value of specialized research and the practical importance of professional training, Newman went so far as to defend the “transcendent uselessness” of scholarly life, which as historian Frank Turner argues, has been such an essential aspect of liberal education. It gives students the autonomy to explore the world of knowledge and refine their beliefs and values before entering the post-graduate world of work. And for professors, it has “provided the possibility of contained eccentric creativity.”⁹

Neither Newman nor his North American contemporaries who claimed to know the limits of essential knowledge and who deplored the fragmentation of scholarship could prevent the incursion of specialized research, the elective system, and the diminishing status of classics in the university curriculum. These developments contributed yet again to a remolding of liberal education. Inspired by the German example, elite universities in the United States by the beginning of the twentieth century had established research institutes and were offering the Ph.D, the new crowning achievement of academic life. Only the very best “honours” programme undergraduates were permitted to ascend the academic ladder. But all students now had an array of course options that signified the growing influence of individualism, secularization, and specialization even in the arts. The “social sciences” now included the new disciplines of psychology, sociology, and political science. English replaced Latin as the new core, and generally required, subject. Daniel Wilson, future president of the University of Toronto, was the first professor in North America “specifically” hired to teach the modern subjects of English language, literature, and history.¹⁰ Classical and religious study by no means disappeared from the curricula of lay controlled universities, but became themselves specialized course options. As Roger Sale argues,

The modern American university emerged in the embrace of two related principles: first, its teachers should be experts in specifically named fields of study, and, second, anything that could be made into an academic study had a proper place on campus, with a status roughly equal to that of any other.¹¹

The Canadian university landscape lacked the diversity of that in the U.S., and enrolled proportionately far fewer of the university-aged population in the early twentieth century. Still, it too offered students a greater choice of courses than in earlier generations, while promoting (primarily for men) the enduring ideals of character development and national service. Arthur Currie, the principal of McGill, favoured

[t]hat liberal education which elevates man as a whole and which fits him for taking his place in private and public life independent of his business and enables him to use for the best advantage his whole powers for good.¹²

Liberal education, then, was a relatively conservative instrument for fostering and extending the influence of middle class values on Canadian society.¹³

Was the emerging curriculum consistent with the historic principles of liberal education? Although traditionalists were (and remain) unconvinced, academic reformers insisted that the classical goals of liberal education could certainly be

effected in the modern university. Scholarly breadth could be achieved by providing a challenging range of courses. Responsible citizenship would be served by giving students greater freedom to make their own academic decisions. Even the university's sponsorship of extra curricular life, more diverse than ever by the early twentieth century, would (ideally) contribute to the development of the whole person.

Skeptics, like University of Chicago President Robert Hutchins, dismissed such explanations as mere rationalization for the directionless, soulless university, a problem that the "Great Books" approach to undergraduate teaching was intended to address, and which has been replayed by academic protagonists in the current era. The debates between "ancients" and "moderns" about the nature of liberal learning and the components of valuable knowledge thus have continued throughout the twentieth century.

The tumultuous changes of the 1960s added at least one new ingredient to the liberal education formula: the belief that the university should foster critical thinking, and that students (and faculty) should serve society by attempting to change it. Perhaps the best curricular examples of this are the now legitimate fields of multicultural and women's studies. Add to these the new interdisciplinary programmes such as Canadian studies, mass communications, cultural studies, industrial relations, labour studies, health studies, urban studies, among many other programmes, and the scope of the liberal arts appears staggeringly broad.

Thus liberal education over the centuries has been both reinforced and re-defined. Its scope has grown, and includes a variety of potentially conflicting elements. It cultivates character, but in the absence of *in loco parentis* standards of care since the 1960s, usually leaves students on their own. It struggles to balance and reconcile the demands of general and specialized, research intensive education. It permits professors and students to withdraw from the world of affairs, or to embrace an ideology of social change. For some, it is the means by which students are socialized and better prepared for citizenship. For others, it is a subversive instrument for challenging the social order. It provides access to virtually all subjects and privileges none. It is assuredly taught more liberally than in previous generations. As Rothblatt notes, the pedagogy commonly employed by liberal educators throughout history included "drill, rote, emulation, repetition, and ... the rod."¹⁴ Students today are generally treated more respectfully and encouraged to think for themselves.

A representative contemporary statement on the place of the liberal arts in the university can be found in the 1969-70 University of British Columbia Calendar. The Faculty of Arts, as the largest faculty in the university, "seeks to provide students with an opportunity to acquire the foundation of a liberal education." It stresses "breadth as well as depth," seeks to foster "a spirit of free and positive enquiry, a power of critical judgment, and a sensitive capacity for creative expression." It also strives to

prepare the student for both the avocations and the vocations of life. For many professional careers the basic experience of a liberal education is considered indispensable; in none is it considered superfluous.¹⁵

This last reference points to one element of liberal education I have not discussed, and to which I now turn—the pragmatic, professional and career-training dimension. One of the enduring historical debates in higher education has turned on the importance of professional training and the influence of the marketplace on liberal education. There are many examples of academic battles on this question. Whereas (in the 1860s) Harvard President Charles Eliot embraced the industrial era and favoured individualism, scientific progress, and competition, Princeton President James McCosh held to a “steadfast Presbyterianism” that would uphold the university’s moral authority.¹⁶ Similarly, although Ontario’s Egerton Ryerson believed the university should provide “mental discipline fundamentally rooted in social memory,” Daniel Wilson was receptive to the view that higher education was not sufficiently “fitting men for the actual business of life.”¹⁷ Of course, Thorstein Veblen believed that by 1900 the American university was dominated and damaged by business and professional interests, a sentiment shared by Canadian historian Frank Underhill who accused engineering schools of doing little more than producing “barbarians who can build bridges.”¹⁸

There are good reasons to worry about the impact of market values and market forces on higher education, including on the liberal arts. But those of us taking this position should also acknowledge the complementary, or at least symbiotic, nature of the historical relationship between the economic and cultural dimensions of university life. The universities of the middle ages not only trained ministers, but also lawyers, judges, accountants, administrators, and doctors who used the liberal education subjects of logic and oratory to conduct the business of the churches, the diplomatic service, and the civil state. The industrial era of the 19th and early 20th centuries, which unquestionably drew the university further into the marketplace by preparing middle class professionals, also coincided with, and to some degree inspired, the emergence of the social sciences which engaged academics in the study of human affairs in an increasingly urban, secular world.

Consider as well the impressive expansion of the liberal arts during the period of massive university growth in Canada between 1960 and 1970. Fueled by a belief in the value of human capital, politicians, businessmen, and educators could justify spending on virtually any aspect of higher education, which by definition, should contribute to the nation’s burgeoning wealth. Within certain limits, universities generally had the autonomy (and the funding) required to determine their own educational priorities, and as enrolment patterns indicated, the arts were high on most institutions’ curricular lists.¹⁹ Until now, the liberal arts (and the faculty employed to teach them) have benefited, at least indirectly, from a prevailing popular belief in the job training function of higher

education.²⁰ Academics would be naive to assume that universities would be funded or enrolled at current levels if the institutions were stripped of their economic role in favour a more purely cultural one.

Thus to the multitude of liberal education's goals, we should add the most utilitarian one: preparation of students for the labour force. Furthermore, proponents of this priority can defend it in terms familiar to both traditional and modern advocates of the liberal arts. Does responsible citizenship not require gainful employment? Does fulfilling one's creative potential and developing the whole person not demand a meaningful occupational outlet for the knowledge acquired in university? From this perspective, the needs of the market, perhaps more than ever in this age of economic uncertainty, should shape the university curriculum. Given their malleability, and their attempt to be all things to all people, the principles of liberal education, arguably, would not be compromised by this approach.

⁴Of course, this is precisely the thinking that exposes most of the liberal arts to danger. Will there now be room for "pure," or should I say "useless," scholarship and teaching in an environment bereft of adequate resources? If university courses cannot be justified on obvious utilitarian grounds, then will they be protected? Will intellectual initiatives that generate insufficient funding, limited employment prospects, or low enrolments be possible? Cuts in general government funding and the university's growing dependence on the private sector compound the problem. So too, do underemployed graduates whose minimal incomes raise questions in the public mind about the merit of the general arts. Given recent policy trends in Canada and abroad, there are indeed grounds for concern.

II

Despite its ivory tower mythology, the university has never been immune to the economic vagaries of the "real" world. Canadian higher education has certainly felt the weight of deficit-challenged governments over the past decade. Between 1995 and 1997 alone, Ottawa slashed \$7 billion from its expenditures on higher education, health care and social services, one-fifth of the total allocated to these sectors. Provinces imposed additional cuts leading to a significant erosion of public funding for universities. For example, ten years ago the Nova Scotian government funded 69 per cent of Dalhousie's operating budget. Today that figure is 52 per cent, and declines to 34 per cent if ancillary service and research earnings are included.²¹ University operating costs in Canada rose by 15 per cent between 1980 and 1995, but government grants increased by only 4 per cent.²²

Universities have known hard times in the past, but for the first time since the 1950s, the current cuts have been accompanied by an apparent sea change in public policy. The principle of ample public funding to relatively autonomous universities, which enabled the liberal arts to thrive, is in question. The doctrines

of globalization, privatization, institutional competition, market driven programming, and user-pay fee schedules are now pushing at the gates of higher learning. For some corporate leaders and politicians, the changes can't happen fast enough. The Alberta Chamber of Commerce, the Toronto Board of Trade, and the President of Scotiabank are proponents of what Sheila Slaughter and Larry Leslie call "academic capitalism."²³ This is a world in which students pay something much closer to the full cost of higher education, in which corporations play a greater role in shaping university policy, in which research support from the public and private sector is targeted to business and high technology needs, in which tenure disappears, and in which faculty entrepreneurialism and private universities are encouraged.

According to Peter Godsoe, CEO of Scotiabank, these types of policies are not only desirable but inevitable.

Our university system will see a period of rationalization over the next decade; overlapping programs must be eliminated or merged, and greater efficiencies in program delivery and in administration will have to be found and developed We need to unbundle our funding and allow universities to compete for research grants; we need to tolerate variation in tuition fees to promote institutional excellence; and we need to permit private institutions to play a role in our university system. Let the market, not the government, determine which universities succeed and where our centres of excellence are.²⁴

Premier Mike Harris of Ontario raised questions last year about the "surplus" number of university programmes in fields such as geography and sociology, adding to academics' anxiety about the future of the liberal arts in the province.

Consider the policies already in place to reorient the direction and reshape the funding allocation practices of Canadian universities. Between 1980 and 1995, operating revenues derived from tuition rose from 13 per cent to 24.3 per cent.²⁵ Research funding from both federal and provincial agencies now favours mission and market-oriented studies over basic, curiosity-driven scholarship. The new Canada Foundation on Innovation, for example, will provide \$800 million dollars to universities in the areas of science, health, engineering and the environment, and require some 60 per cent of project costs to be funded by the private sector. This should ensure that economic rather than scholarly interests determine the content of research proposals. Similar research priorities and private sector participation are the basis of the new ten year, 3 billion dollar Ontario Research and Development Challenge Fund.²⁶ All of this was preceded by the Centres of Excellence programmes which have channelled research efforts into the demands of high technology and the marketplace.²⁷ Those of us in the arts are familiar with the "strategic" grant dimension of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council which has provided special support in areas of "national importance" such as "education and work in a changing society" and "managing global competitiveness."²⁸ And here is a revealing and pertinent trend: in 1978-79, one-third of Canadian scientists claimed to be conducting applied research compared to two-thirds who described their work

as contributing to the advancement of knowledge. In 1987-88, 55 per cent were in the applied category and 45 per cent in the advancement of knowledge category.²⁹ But of course, if liberal education includes the goal of "service to society," then all of this market-driven scholarship, conducted by scientists and social scientists alike, can be justified, or at least rationalized.

Have you heard of the latest trend in the allocation of university funding called "performance indicators"? Alberta, soon to be followed by Ontario, has led the way on this front. Universities are judged and rewarded by governments on the extent to which they achieve specified goals, including successfully sending their graduates into the labour market. But consider this dilemma, raised by William Bruneau and Donald Savage in a critique of this new accountability system. If a philosophy graduate gets a job in an area evidently unrelated to his or her academic work, would this aid or damage the cause of the institution's philosophy programme?³⁰ Presumably, unemployed arts graduates would indeed tarnish the reputation, and potential funding support, of their respective academic fields. But then would the accountability police consider the ex-student's employment status 3 months after graduation, when underemployment is probable, or 3 years later, when the situation is likely to have improved? Depending on the rules employed in this zero sum game, the p.i. system can be used to skew university priorities away from the liberal arts and towards the more "relevant" fields. That, in all likelihood, is its very purpose.

Ontario's approach is especially crass. It has provided a number of targeted or incentive grants to universities, none of which include the humanities or social sciences.³¹ By contrast, it plans to double the number of students in computer science and engineering over the next three years. Universities will be permitted to double tuition fees in these areas if they meet their enrolment targets. Significantly, the technology-rich University of Waterloo initially refused to participate in the scheme because it contended that the quality of education in these fields would suffer if they were compelled to grow so quickly. Others are sceptical of government efforts to anticipate the needs of the labour market. According to one economist, "the history of attempts by government to forecast needs for people for various types of skills does not fill one with confidence," a conclusion borne out by a series of erroneous "manpower" planning projections in the 1970s, including in such applied, market-worthy fields as engineering.³² Indeed, a 1998 Statistics Canada report claimed that the assumed massive shortage of computer scientists and systems analysts in Canada, which is driving the Ontario enrolment-steering policy, is a myth.³³

Ironically, governments committed to the *laissez-faire*, free enterprise model are among the most interventionist in the affairs of higher education, Ontario's being a case in point. The Conservative government of Manitoba has new legislation requiring the province to approve a university's plan to expand, alter, or end an academic programme, and as I noted, the Alberta Tories pioneered the performance indicator system. But social democratic governments have

been, at times, equally directive. Significantly, two of British Columbia's major higher education initiatives—Royal Roads University and the Technical University of British Columbia—are designed explicitly to serve economic needs. The arts have no evident role to play in this mission.

Some business leaders do indeed speak glowingly of the importance of the liberal arts. Matthew Barrett, the president of the Bank of Montreal, contends that

[I]t is far more important that students graduate from university having read Dante, or the great historians of today and yesterday, than understanding the practice of double-entry accounting.... Education should impart not fact, not training, not even skills above essential literacy and numeracy, but rather the "cross-curriculum" abilities to reason, to imagine, to think laterally, and perhaps most important, to welcome learning as a continuing essential part of life.³⁴

Judging by corporate donation and recruiting practices, these noble sentiments reflect theory more than practice. A former vice-president of development and university relations at the University of Toronto made this observation. "On Friday [a business executive] will speak in glowing terms of the value of the humanities. On Monday morning the money goes to engineering."³⁵ Marsha Hanen, president of the University of Winnipeg agreed. "Corporations say they want graduates with broad analytical, thinking and organizational skills. But more and more, when they actually hire, they say, 'I need this, and I need this, and I need it now.'³⁶ And Matthew Barrett's very own director of recruiting for North America was more circumspect than his boss about how banks hire. Having academically well-rounded employees is desirable, but line managers are not necessarily looking for Dante experts. "It's a lot easier to assimilate into a bank if you have some banking classes."³⁷ Sociologist Graham Lowe contends that Canadian employers are in fact failing to take advantage of the types of skills that university graduates actually have. Jobs, consequently, are less rewarding and employees are less productive than they otherwise might be.³⁸

Universities are increasingly dependent on private sector funding support, and corporations are far more insistent than they used to be about how their donations to universities are spent. In an era when all academic endeavours were deemed economically valuable, donors set relatively few conditions on the disbursement of their gifts. Today, there are more strings attached.³⁹ Peter Godsoe contends that

Business has a responsibility to ensure that it supports institutions financially and in program development, making sure that programs are aimed at real needs, real skills and real benefits to students and to our community.

Consequently, Scotiabank has funded university projects on the information highway and entrepreneurial studies for aboriginals and women.⁴⁰ As the Chair of the Corporate Higher Education Forum said in 1991 (he also happened to be the president of Xerox Canada), business now favours "partnerships" with universities, not merely donations. "Unless there's a synergy there, industry

won't get involved."⁴¹ More bluntly, a former chairman of Bell Northern Research Ltd. said that

Most university work is curiosity-oriented and unfortunately pure and not particularly relevant ... We fund research but we control the directions it will take.⁴²

Fittingly, business schools have been among the leading recipients of corporate largesse in Canada and elsewhere. An international conference of management educators from 77 countries found that business faculties are increasingly developing courses to meet the needs of individual fee paying companies, which critics say is "pushing university business schools too far from their traditional missions [of] focusing on broad-based management issues."⁴³ A surprisingly critical article on the ethics of these emerging relationships appeared this year in the *Globe and Mail's* Report on Business. Among its most startling findings was the practice at the University of Toronto in which students in science and business write theses essentially commissioned by corporations. In turn, if the companies are "happy with what the students deliver," they make donations to the students' academic departments.⁴⁴

One is unlikely to find similar support for the liberal arts. The President of the University of Saskatchewan was pleased to receive a 5 million dollar grant from the Potash Corporation of Saskatchewan, but he noted that it has "been remarkably hard to find [a similar] commitment to the arts and humanities." The university owns a set of 17th-century Amati violins valued at one million dollars, but was unable to solicit any support for an endowment to have a quartet play the instruments.⁴⁵

Recent changes in Canadian law entitle corporations to higher tax breaks in exchange for donations to higher education, and permit universities to sell patents to corporations—patents developed from academic research subsidized by government. Despite these incentives, and despite some highly publicized and successful fund raising campaigns, Canadian universities are unlikely ever to offset successfully public funding cuts with business and industry donations, even as the universities shift their academic priorities in an effort to attract the corporate dollar. Canada's population and capital base are too small, especially in comparison to that of the United States, and foreign-owned corporations, to which our economy is so tied, have never contributed substantially to Canadian higher education.⁴⁶ According to a recent study cited by the Toronto Board of Trade, this remains the case.⁴⁷ To repeat, the liberal arts thrived in a period when government support was abundant, when universities were fairly autonomous, and where higher education in general was seen as a valuable public investment. Declining (and more targeted) public funding, greater government control, and more selective private sector support combine to imperil the general arts.⁴⁸

So too does the enduring problem of graduate underemployment. This is a story with two entirely different interpretations. Statistics Canada and university officials generally offer the good news. Surveys of Canadian higher education graduates over the past two decades consistently show that the univer-

sity-educated have better job prospects, higher levels of full-time employment, and higher incomes than the non-university trained. Furthermore, their employment situations improve the longer they are in the labour force.⁴⁹ However, once the Statistics Canada studies are parsed, a more sobering story appears, confirmed by other sociological surveys. First, graduates in the arts do not fair as well as those in the more applied disciplines. Secondly, the percentage of those who see either no relevance or only partial relevance between their education and employment is high. The National Graduates Survey found that for (employed) 1990 graduates reporting in 1995, 34 per cent were working in jobs directly related to their educations, 60 per cent in jobs partly related, and 6 per cent in jobs they considered unrelated.⁵⁰ Statistics Canada did not probe what students meant by “partly” related jobs— which is surely the missing ingredient of the study— but a goodly number of respondents were undoubtedly overqualified. The combination of steady enrolment growth, government hiring freezes, corporate downsizing, the growing predominance of the service sector, and a prolonged recession during the 1990s have contributed in all likelihood to the problem of credential inflation in the labour market. As one B.A. graduate, working as a coat checking attendant put it,

Coat checking does involve being able to be efficient ... You need the ability to keep a cool head. But pretty much any trained chimpanzee could do it.⁵¹

You undoubtedly have friends, relatives, or even children with similar experiences. In 1989, those with at least some post-secondary education comprised 29 per cent of the country’s unemployment insurance recipients.⁵²

In July of this year, Angus Reid pollsters claimed to have been “stopped cold” by a survey showing that a B.A. in Arts was considered by only 3 per cent of the population to be the most valuable type of education to have in the work force ten years from now. Ranking higher was “high school education with lots of on-the-job-training.” A university degree in science drew an 18 per cent response. At the top of the list, at 35 per cent, was “a college diploma in a technical occupation.”⁵³ A recent American study sponsored by liberal arts colleges similarly found that “the liberal arts are neither understood well nor held in high esteem by a critical segment of society.”⁵⁴ Such findings can only further diminish enthusiasm for the social sciences, the humanities, and the fine arts. And because women now enrol in the liberal arts at a significantly higher rate than men, declining support for these disciplines threatens to undermine the educational inroads made by women over the past two decades.⁵⁵

Those committed to securing the health of these disciplines must argue more persuasively, in clear and accessible language, for the intrinsic value of the liberal arts. James O. Freedman, president of Dartmouth College, has attempted to convey this message in these eloquent words:

A liberal education ... stirs students to probe the mysteries of the natural world, to reflect on the rise and fall of cultures, to find meaning in the enduring achievements of Western and Eastern civilizations, and to consider ambiguities and arguable lessons of human history. Further, a liberal education encourages

students to seek the affirmation of their most authentic selves. It sets in motion a process of critical examination and imaginative introspection that leads students towards personal definition. It helps students to develop an independent perspective for reflecting on the nature and the texture of their lives ... More than any historical datum, any experimental result, or any textual explication, a liberal education conveys to students a sense of joy in learning—joy in participating in the life of the mind...⁵⁶

Should we also make the case for liberal education, as Michael Useem does, on the basis of its demonstrable but under-acknowledged applied value in the labour market? He argues that even in a world of globalization and corporate restructuring, the broadly trained have a viable place. Its employees' understanding of foreign languages, cultures and environmental concerns can help smooth a company's path into foreign markets. Domestic corporations require managers to "cultivate relations" with politicians and community leaders. Academic backgrounds in such areas as politics, religion, and ethnic relations might eventually prove materially valuable for the "otherwise culturally challenged."⁵⁷

Testimony, too, from liberal arts graduates who have obtained fulfilling employment in a variety of fields also might aid the cause. As one psychology graduate put it,

I don't think there is one psychology course that [offered] actual material I am using day to day but the general concepts and the skills I have learned from having a university education, the research skills, the presentation skills, the analytical skills—weekly, daily, hourly, I am using those skills.

Other employee traits attributed by graduates to a liberal arts education included critical thinking, flexibility, tolerance, the ability to integrate new information and to "grasp the big picture."⁵⁸

These are useful, though risky arguments on behalf of liberal education, echoed by most university spokespersons. If the arts are sold on the basis of their economic utility, then what happens to the argument when an economy remains stagnant, and arts graduates underemployed? We cannot ignore the demands of the market, or of the students, which as surveys show are increasingly utilitarian in their academic choices.⁵⁹ Aging faculty who do not plan to retire early should learn all they can about students' concerns rather than simply disparaging them. From our usually safe positions as tenured professors, we are, at times, too quick to dismiss students' bread and butter preoccupations, and to bemoan their failure to love learning for its own sake. We can make our arts courses as engaging, exciting and innovative as possible—which may mean changing how we teach—in order to retain student enthusiasm for the humanities and social sciences. Faculty might also have to address thoughtfully the relevance of the courses they offer to the world of employment. But we must also attempt to make university officials and policy makers understand that higher education is neither capable of rescuing economies nor of accurately anticipating long term labour force demands—a challenge that has, to date, confounded business and government themselves. By transforming their academic

programmes to meet expected market needs, universities will pay the price for promoting the myth that they are the key engines of economic growth. If current trends continue, we will wake up early in the 21st century with universities shorn of cultural life, serving merely as a "subsector of economic policy."⁶⁰ Some institutions are already there.⁶¹

III

The challenges to liberal education are not only externally driven. They arise, too, from inside the academic community, and in recent years have been expressed through the so-called "culture wars." On one side are those who lament the modern, and especially the post-modern, direction of the liberal arts. With Allen Bloom, they deplore the specialization, fragmentation and politicization of the curriculum, and especially the incursion into universities of "identity" politics. Liberal arts programmes used to require students to study the classics, English literature, and the towering figures of western thought. Now the curriculum, a smorgasbord of academic fads, has no core or coherence, and thrives in an "anti-intellectual" university. The "crisis of liberal education, argues Bloom "is a reflection of ... the crisis of our civilization."⁶²

Critics of this perspective have scarcely been silent. In *The Opening of the American Mind*, Lawrence Levine exposes the thin research, the historical distortions, and the ideological partisanship of works that oppose recent curricular revision. He argues that it is precisely the fields of social history, multiculturalism and women's studies that introduce students to previously invisible worlds, thus strengthening liberal education by pushing back the frontiers of knowledge. Indeed, Martha Nussbaum finds justification for the new curriculum in the Socratic tradition itself which stressed not only the centrality of the "examined life," but, in the hands of the Stoics, was "pluralistic," in that it explored different cultural traditions.⁶³ Ironically, were it not for a form of multiculturalism in the middle ages, in which Arab translators made the work of the ancient Greeks accessible to European scholars, the western canon itself might still be unknown.

I favour genuine diversity in undergraduate education, and I believe efforts to reimpose a core curriculum to be misguided and probably unachievable. Furthermore, I am disturbed by the claims of authors such as Jack Granatstein that multiculturalism has contributed to the "killing of Canadian history."⁶⁴ Surely, the health of the liberal arts requires scholars to respect the academic choices, even if they dispute the methodologies or research findings, of their colleagues.

This applies, too, to the proponents of the new curricula. Social historians should neither ignore nor disparage the study of political history, especially in a country that was built and will endure only through the process of political negotiation. Those post-modernists who doubt that truth is discoverable should

at least abide the efforts of their colleagues who believe otherwise. I also think that liberal education is in jeopardy if we accept the argument of some academics that one cannot teach and write outside of one's own cultural experience. By this logic, non-aboriginals would avoid research of First Nations societies, and perhaps only women would study women's lives. Among other casualties of this approach would be the discipline of history itself, for how could any of us pretend to understand earlier societies in which we did not live? Liberal education should seek to liberate the literary imagination, not confine it.

In his profoundly pessimistic book *The University in Ruins*, the late Bill Readings contends that in this era of globalization, the university has lost both its nationalist role and its moral authority. The culture wars are a manifestation of uncertainty and frustration over the institution's *raison d'être*. In the absence of a unifying cultural or ideological vision, the university can only manage conflict without resolving it. But this, paradoxically, can be a source of strength for the liberal arts in the current era. Accepting the principle of cultural "dissonance," which requires genuine pluralism, the university can "incorporate a very high degree of internal variety without requiring its multiplicity of diverse idioms to be unified into an ideological whole."⁶⁵ Readings provides too few practical suggestions as to how this atmosphere can be sustained. But I have one. When departments make new teaching appointments, they should avoid intellectually reproducing themselves, which is too often their current tendency. Instead they should promote diversity by bringing alternative perspectives to the discipline, thereby offering students genuine intellectual choices. Liberal education is endangered not by diversity but by intolerance and dogmatism.

Indeed, I would like to call for an end to the culture wars. However much academics in the arts politically disagree, they should recognize that they are collectively at risk amid the external pressures now facing higher education. Given the reordering of university priorities, the pertinent curricular issue may not be Plato or Foucault, but neither Plato nor Foucault. Gerald Graff, an articulate exponent of curricular reform appeared on the Oprah Winfrey show to debate Allen Bloom. He recalls

I am no friend to the Allen Bloom view of education, but once I began to visualize myself debating Bloom before the 'Oprah' audience I was forced to think of him less as an ideological enemy than as a fellow intellectual in a common predicament: how to clarify a debate about relativism, nihilism, and other abstractions not commonly presented on daytime TV.⁶⁶

The debates on these and other matters go on, and if the liberal arts survive, it would be exhilarating, at least in my view, to engage these issues continuously in a spirit of respect and civility, the absence of which further degrades university life. As Rothblatt wisely notes, "there is no subject that cannot be taught illiberally, no subject that cannot be taught liberally."⁶⁷ Let's make the latter a resolution for the new millennium, if not sooner.

CONCLUSION

This presentation on the state of liberal education may be more gloomy than the facts justify. The majority of students in Canada are still enrolled in the liberal arts, and most professional programmes require applicants to have some exposure to the humanities or social sciences. Ads for positions in these fields still appear in *University Affairs*, and tenure, for the time being, endures in Canada. (The abolition of tenure, incidentally, would enable universities heading down the globalization road to freely and quickly reset academic priorities). These are all positives, but we would be naive to ignore the ill winds not only wafting through Canadian government policies but also gusting through other countries, such as New Zealand and Australia, where academic life is experiencing unprecedented forms of redirection and regulation. The decentralized structure of the Canadian federation may impede the march of economic "progress" which appears to have little room for cultural and other "useless" studies. Perhaps those who care can confront this struggle more effectively at the local or provincial level. But the enemy also lies within. In the spirit of liberal education, or at least a contemporary expression of it, academics should be open-minded, self-critical, and genuinely inclusive in their research, teaching, and relations with colleagues.

They should defend with passion the right and ability of students and professors to pursue curiosity-driven research. They should seek to sustain the institutional balance between arts and science, between professional and undergraduate education, and between pure and applied scholarship—a balance directly threatened by targeted and conditional public and/or private funding. Finally, they should find persuasive ways of defending the true value of an arts curriculum considered increasingly, in market terms, to be "irrelevant" and "useless." The liberal arts survived the industrial revolution. May they also survive the economic and cybernetic designs of the new masters of the universe, and potential masters of the university.

NOTES

¹Delivered as the keynote address to the biennial conference of the Canadian History of Education Association, Vancouver, Canada, October 1998.

²Paul Axelrod, "Romancing the Past: Nostalgic Conservatism, the Great Brain Robbery, and the History of Education," in E. Ricker and A. Wood, eds., *Historical Perspectives on Educational Policy in Canada: Issues, Debates and Case Studies*, (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 1995), 61-74. This paper was initially delivered to the 1986 conference of the Canadian History of Education Association in Halifax.

³J. Vanderleest, "The Purpose and Content of a Liberal Education," in Christine Storm, ed., *Liberal Education and the Small University in Canada* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), 3. See also Sheldon Rothblatt, "The Limbs of Osiris: Liberal Education in the English-speaking World," in Sheldon Rothblatt and

Bjorn Wittrock, eds., *The European and American University since 1800: Historical and Sociological Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 19-73.

⁴Vanderleest, "The Purpose and Content of a Liberal Education," 4.

⁵Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Harvard University: Cahners Publishing Company, 1997), 293.

⁶Vanderleest, 10. See also Bruce Kimball, "A Historical Perspective," in Nicholas H. Farnham and Adam Yarmolinsky, eds., *Rethinking Liberal Education* (New York: Oxford University Press 1996), 17; and Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, 293-4.

⁷Rothblatt, "The Limbs of Osiris," 28.

⁸Frank M. Turner, "Newman's University and Ours," in John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University*, ed. Frank Turner (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 289.

⁹*Ibid.*, 291.

¹⁰A.B. McKillop, *Matters of Mind: The University in Ontario, 1791-1951* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 108.

¹¹Roger Sale, "A Mind Lively and at Ease," in Herbert Costner, ed., *New Perspectives on Liberal Education* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1989), 4.

¹²"Inaugural Address, 1920," cited in Marni De Pencier, "Ideas of the English-speaking universities in Canada to 19201," Unpublished Ph.D dissertation, University of Toronto, 1978, 478.

¹³Paul Axelrod, *Making a Middle Class: Student Life in English-Canada during the Thirties* (Montreal-Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990).

¹⁴Rothblatt, "The Limbs of Osiris," 31

¹⁵University of British Columbia Calendar, 1969-70, Al 3.

¹⁶W.B. Carnochan, *The Battleground of the Curriculum: Liberal Education and American Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1993), chapter 2.

¹⁷McKillop, *Matters of Mind*, 41-2.

¹⁸Cited in Axelrod, *Making a Middle Class*, 81.

¹⁹See Paul Axelrod, *Scholars and Dollars: Politics, Economics and the Universities of Ontario, 1945-1980* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982) for a fuller discussion of this process. See also David M. Cameron, *More Than an Academic Question: Universities, Government, and Public Policy in Canada* (Halifax: The Institute for Research on Public Policy, 1991).

²⁰As Rothblatt, "The Limbs of Osiris," 63-4, notes,

The desire to turn liberal education into an article of private consumption, which individualist and relatively wealthy societies permit, thwarts [its] larger purpose but is itself able to draw on historical sources of support and justification.

²¹President's Office, Dalhousie University, "Strategic Directions for Dalhousie University," unpublished (1998)

²²Don Little, "Financing Universities: Why are Students Paying More?" *Education Quarterly Review*, 4, no. 2 (Summer 1997), 13.

²³Sheila Slaughter and Larry L. Leslie, *Academic Capitalism: Politics, Policies and the Entrepreneurial University* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press), 1997.

²⁴P.C. Godsoe, "Universities Must Excel Despite Less Funding," *Canadian Speeches*, April 1996, 10, no. 1, 1-6 (Internet). See also The Toronto Board of Trade: *Beyond the Status Quo: A Business Perspective on Enhancing Postsecondary Education* (Toronto: The Toronto Board of Trade, February 1998); "Alberta Chamber of Commerce Advocates Higher Tuition: Special Report," September 18, 1997 (CUFA News— Internet).

²⁵Little, "Financing Universities," 12.

²⁶Deborah Flynn, "The New Design for Universities," *OCUPA Forum*, Spring 1998, 8-9.

²⁷Stephen Bell and Jan Sadlack, "Technology Transfer in Canada: Research Parks and Centers of Excellence," *Higher Education Management* 4: 227-44.

²⁸Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, Strategic Grants Guide for Applicants, 1990 (Ottawa: SSHRC).

²⁹Cited in Slaughter and Leslie, *Academic Capitalism*, 54.

³⁰William Bruneau and Donald C. Savage, "Not a Magic Bullet: Performance Indicators in Theory and Practice," Paper to the Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education, Annual Meeting, June 1995. See also Sid Gilbert, "The Search For Education Indicators," *Education Quarterly Review*, 1, no. 4 (Winter 1994): 44-52.

³¹George Fallis, "Message from the Dean," *Faculty of Arts Newsletter*, York University May, 1998.

³²Jennifer Lewington, "Ontario Universities Weary of Tory High-Tech Plan," *Globe and Mail* June 6, 1998. The economist cited is Michael Skolnik. For a detailed discussion of the limits of "manpower planning," see Paul Axelrod, *Scholars and Dollars*. A pertinent example: one consultant's report on the future of employment needs in engineering in Ontario (in 1974), refuted the conclusions of a study on the same theme done only four years earlier.

Examples of inaccurate and misleading forecasts are numerous, and it is difficult to assess the damage to national needs and economies created by such erroneous forecasts. Probably the most damaging results from erroneous surveys are on the careers of young people who believe implicitly in the accuracy of the forecasts and proceed to make career decisions which may not be their preferred choice. Even at this period in time, students are witnessing a complete reversal of the predictions of the past three years that there will be a scarcity of jobs for engineers in the next decade.

Advisory Committee on Academic Planning, *Chemical Engineering*, report no. 11 (1974), A-7. This was part of a series called *Perspectives and Plans for Graduate Studies*, cited in *Scholars and Dollars*, 176-7.

³³Patrick Bretour, "High-tech Skills Keeping Pace with Computer Job Boom," *Globe and Mail*, June 11, 1998.

³⁴Cited in Tema Frank "What do Employers Want?," *University Affairs*, May 1997.

³⁵John Harris, "Universities for Sale," *This Magazine*, 25, no. 3 (Sept. 1991): 18.

³⁶Cited in Victor Dwyer, "A Crash Course in Reality 101: Generation Y Asks Universities to Deliver for their Futures," *Macleans*, November 25, 1996 v. 109, n. 48, p 50.

³⁷Tema Frank "What do Employers Want?," *University Affairs*, May 1997.

³⁸Graham S. Lowe, "Youth, Transitions, and the New World of Work," paper presented to conference on "Restructuring Work and the Life Course: An International Symposium," University of Toronto, May 7, 1998.

³⁹"Corporations are Changing the Way they Give, College Fund Raisers are Told," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 13, 1998.

⁴⁰P. C. Godsoe, "Universities Must Excel Despite Less Funding," *Canadian Speeches*, April 1996, 10, no. 1, 40-5 (from the Internet).

⁴¹John Harris, "Universities for Sale," *This Magazine*, 25, no. 3 (Sept. 1991): 14-18.

⁴²Cited (from a 1983 conference) in Cynthia Hardy, "Managing the Relationship: University Relations with Business and Government," in James Cutt and Rodney Dobell, eds. *Public Purse and Public Purpose: Autonomy and Accountability in the Groves of Academe*

(Halifax: Institute for Research on Public Policy, 1992), p 210.

⁴³Katherine S. Mangan, "Corporate Universities said to Force Business Schools to Change their Ways," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 18, 1998.

⁴⁴Trevor Cole, "Ivy-League Hustle," *Report on Business Magazine, Globe and Mail*, June 1998, 34-44. Also, "Business schools are also offering more and more courses geared toward a single company" from report on an international management conference in Chicago, of 1500 management educators from 77 countries, Katherine S. Mangan, "Corporate Universities said to Force Business Schools to Change their Ways," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 18, 1998 (Internet).

⁴⁵Victor Dwyer, "Academia Inc.: Scrambling to Make Ends Meet Universities are Turning Themselves into Sleek New Profit Machines," *Maclean's*, Nov. 24, 1997, p 66 (from the Internet).

⁴⁶See Axelrod, *Scholars and Dollars*, chapter 2; Paul Axelrod, "Higher Education in Canada and the United States: Exploring the Roots of Difference," *Historical Studies in Education*, 7, no. 2 (Fall 1995): 141-75.

⁴⁷"Preliminary Analysis" conducted by James Gillies and Michael Dickinson, Schulich School of Business, York University, 1998, cited in *The Toronto Board of Trade, Beyond the Status Quo: A Business Perspective on Enhancing Postsecondary Education* (Toronto: The Toronto Board of Trade, February 1998), 11. As Dalhousie University notes, "[T]he local private sector [in Nova Scotia] generally is too small to support large corporate initiatives in research and development partnerships." President's Office, Dalhousie University, "Strategic Directions for Dalhousie University" (1998).

⁴⁸For discussions of similar trends in other countries, see Slaughter and Leslie, *Academic Capitalism*; Michael Engel, "Ideology and the Politics of Public Higher Education: Responses to Budget Crises and Curricular Reorganization," in Barbara Ann Scott, *The Liberal Arts in a Time of Crisis* (New York: Praeger, 1991), 33-46; and Clark Kerr, in association with Marian L. Gade and Maureen Kawaoka, *Troubled Times for American Higher Education: The 1990s and Beyond* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

⁴⁹Geoff Bowlby, "Relationship Between Postsecondary Graduates' Education and Employment," *Education Quarterly Review*, 3, no. 2 (Summer, 1996): 35-44; Michael Paju, "The Class of 1990 Revisited: Report of the 1995 Follow-up Survey of 1990 Graduates," *Education Quarterly Review*, vol 4, no 4 (1997): 9-29; Institute for Social Research, "Arts Graduates Get Jobs," York Student Experience Study, Bulletin 30, (York University: Institute for Social Research, March 15, 1998).

⁵⁰Michael Paju, "The Class of 1990 Revisited: Report of the 1995 Follow-up Survey of 1990 Graduates," *Education Quarterly Review*, vol 4, no 4 (1997): 29. See also a survey of 1000 18-30 year olds in *Metropolitan Toronto*, exploring the pervasive problem of under-employment, *Toronto Star*, December 6, 1997.

⁵¹David W. Livingstone, "Living in the Credential Gap: Responses to Under-employment and Overqualification," in Ann Duffy, Daniel Glenday, Norene Pupo, eds., *Good Jobs, Bad Jobs. No Jobs: The Transformation of Work in the 21st Century* (Toronto: Harcourt Brace Canada, 1997), 226.

⁵²Benjamin Levin, "How Can Schools Respond to Changes in Work?, Paper presented to the Canadian Vocational Association Research Colloquium, Moncton, N.B., April 2-4, 1995. See also Harvey J. Krahn and Graham S. Lowe, *Work, Industry, and Canadian Society*, chapter 10, for a discussion of the underemployment question. (Scarborough, Ont.: Nelson, 1993).

⁵³"University Won't Beat College Diploma: Poll," *Toronto Star* July 15, 1998, E3.

⁵⁴Richard H. Hersh, "Intentions and Perceptions: A National Survey of Public Attitudes towards Liberal Arts Education," *Change*, 29, no. 2 (March-April 1997).

⁵⁵Elaine Carey, "Women Outpacing Men in University Stakes," *Toronto Star*, April 15, 1998.

⁵⁶James O. Freedman, *Idealism and Liberal Education* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 2.

⁵⁷Michael Useem, "Corporate Restructuring and Liberal Learning," in *Liberal Education*, Winter 1995, 18-23.

⁵⁸Sharon D. Crozier and Patrick Grassick, "I Love My B.A.: The Employment Experience of Successful Bachelor of Arts Graduates," *Guidance and Counselling* 11, no. (Winter 1996): 19-26.

⁵⁹Alexander W. Astin, "The Changing American College Student: Thirty-Year Trends, 1966-1996." *The Review of Higher Education* 21, no. 2 (Winter 1998), 115-38. Sid Gilbert et al., "The First-Year Experience in Canadian Universities," in *From Best Intentions to Best Practices: The First Year Experience in Canadian Postsecondary Education* (Columbia, South Carolina: National Resource Center for the Freshman Experience, University of South Carolina, 1997).

⁶⁰Guy Neave, cited in Slaughter and Leslie, *Academic Capitalism*, 40. See also Michael Engel, "Ideology and the Politics of Public Higher Education: Responses to Budget Crises and Curricular Reorganization," in Barbara Ann Scott, ed., *The Liberal Arts in a Time of Crisis* (New York: Praeger, 1991), 33-46.

⁶¹See Slaughter and Leslie, *Academic Capitalism*. Universities using the "virtual" education model especially gear themselves to perceived market needs. See report on the University of Phoenix by Kim Strosnider, "An Aggressive, For-Profit University Challenges Traditional Colleges Nationwide," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 6, 1997 (Internet) A32; Ed Neal, "Using Technology in Teaching: We Need to Exercise Healthy Skepticism," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 19, 1998, (Internet) B4; and David Noble, "Digital Diploma Mills: The Automation of Higher Education (Part One)," *OCUFA Forum* (Spring 1998): 12-16.

⁶²Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 346. Among many other similar treatises, see Mohammed Mujeeb Rahman, *The Betrayal of Intellect in Higher Education* (Toronto: Omniview Publishing, 1997), 27.

⁶³Lawrence W. Levine, *The Opening of the American Mind: Canons, Culture and History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996); Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Harvard University: Cahn Publishers Company, 1997), 33-5.

⁶⁴J.L. Granatstein, *Who Killed Canadian History?* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 1998), chapter 4.

⁶⁵Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 168.

⁶⁶Gerald Graff, *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1992), 93.

⁶⁷Rothblatt, "The Limbs of Osiris," 64.