

Introduction to this Special Issue

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This issue of the *Canadian Journal of Higher Education* includes articles based on presentations made at the International Conference on the Liberal Arts: Looking Back and Moving Forward; the Next 100 years of Liberal Arts: Confronting the Challenges, held at St. Thomas University, September 30–October 2, 2010. The conference, which focused on the challenges facing the liberal arts and how these might be addressed, was one of the events that marked the centenary of St. Thomas University, an undergraduate university dedicated to the liberal arts.

A liberal education “implies distinct purposes: breadth of awareness and appreciation, clarity and precision of thought and communication, critical analysis, honing of moral and ethical sensibilities” (Shoenberg, 2009, p. 56). Liberal arts can cover a range of subjects and seeks to impart general knowledge and develop the student’s rational thought and intellectual capabilities. As George Will stated, it “connotes a certain elevation above utilitarian concerns. Yet liberal education is intensely useful” (as cited in Shoenberg, 2009, p. 56). The vast number of liberal arts programs and universities dedicated to the study of liberal arts speaks to the value of liberal education. There is a long-standing tradition in many professions (such as social work, which is my profession) of valuing a foundation in liberal arts education.

Despite claims of its value, a liberal education is not without its critics and challenges, especially in light of the attention given to the financial cost and value of “the arts” relative to more focused study in higher education in programs such as those dedicated to business, engineering, and the sciences. Further, as Schoenberg (2009) notes, a liberal education is possible “only if faculty members are committed to liberal learning and not primarily to the apparatus of their own disciplines” (p.58).

Before initiating planning for this conference, the conference planning committee was aware of some of the issues and challenges confronting the liberal arts; however, as proposals were reviewed, it became evident that post-secondary education was changing in profound ways and that the issues and challenges facing the liberal arts were even greater than originally thought. As planning progressed, I became more aware of the diverse ar-

eas where the liberal arts are being challenged and of the depth and severity of the consequences. Of course, some of these challenges are faced by all university programs—shifts in demographics, cutbacks in government funding, advances in technology, and increases in the costs of university education. Several of these factors impact enrolment and determine who attends universities.

While there are commonly accepted observations, there is a sense of urgency now, urgency brought on by factors that more directly challenge the liberal arts, such as emphasis on job-ready graduates, pressure for training rather than education, and research linked to business and job creation. As I became more cognizant of these challenges, I learned that other university faculty members were similarly unaware of the seriousness of these challenges and the breadth of their impact on the liberal arts. The pressures of modern academia lead faculty to be very engaged in discipline-specific issues that are important for teaching, scholarship, and promotion; as a result, many are less engaged in the issues surrounding the impact of larger international and national structures within which liberal arts education operates. What perhaps is more alarming is that many academics are not aware that they are not aware, and, as a result, are not in a position to effectively argue for the proper role of the university in Canadian society. I hope this publication will help put the issues in focus and, more importantly, move more faculty members to participate in the dialogue.

Of the many challenges that confront universities, a number pose specific challenges to liberal arts programs:

- The cost of education is increasing. The *CAUT Bulletin* (2010, September) revealed that tuition has increased 20–35% over the past decade. Further, in 1980, tuition across Canada was 13% of university revenue; by 2005, it was 35%; and today it is much higher. These increases have a severe impact not only on student debt but also on who can afford to study the liberal arts. (Students from lower income families tend not to study liberal arts.) Further, as tuition revenues catch up to revenues provided by the government, Canada's efforts to make public university accessible to all are being eroded and, if this trend continues, may eventually disappear.
- Since Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, and Brian Mulroney, the political lineage of Canada's current prime minister, the social contract has changed. Giroux (2010, April 5) notes that the bridges between public and private life have been dismantled as "the market became the template for structuring all social relations." In a recently published article, "A Society Consumed by Locusts: Youth in the Age of Moral and Political Plagues," Giroux (2010, April 5) refers to the "neoliberal juggernaut" and the "holy trinity of deregulation, privatization, and commodification" that impact our economic, political, and social lives, as well as our public institutions. These pressures include market-oriented criteria for research funding, targeted support from government (usually for industrial research), increased competition among students for scholarships and bursaries, and program evaluation criteria that include the success of job placements of graduates.
- A significant player, which is shaping the direction of university programs despite the fact that its influence on the university community is yet largely unknown, is the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The OECD member countries represent some of the world's most dominant economies and

politicians. An interesting paper by Morgan (2009), “Transnational Governance: The Case of the OECD PISA” (PISA refers to the Programme for International Student Assessment), examines the transnational reach and influence of the OECD. Morgan argues that “international organizations, like the OECD, play a significant role in transmitting and constructing knowledge” (p. 1). What she reveals is the significant, some might say alarming, degree of cooperation among the OECD, the Canadian government, and the Council of Ministers of Education Canada (CMEC), which is made up of and chaired by the provincial Ministries of Education, Industry Canada, and the Conference Board of Canada, to name some of the most powerful agencies. In their interaction and planning, there is a reliance on a scientific-technical approach that reflects power relations. Education is viewed in instrumental terms as programs are designed to equip workers with the necessary knowledge and skills to compete in a knowledge-based economy (p. 3). The emphasis is on success in international standardized tests, harmonization of educational goals among OECD members, competition and comparisons among countries and schools, and test results achieved by students from each member country who received outcome-based education.

- Closely related to PISA, possibly an extension of it, is the OECD’s AHELO (Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes) initiative, which will test what students in higher education know and can do upon graduation. More than a ranking, AHELO is a direct evaluation of student performance. “It will provide data on the relevance and quality of teaching and learning in higher education” (OECD, 2012, “What is AHELO?”). While program evaluation is worthwhile and AHELO aims to be valid across cultures and languages, the focus of the OECD on economic development should signal alarm about the intent and implications of such initiatives. Three most pressing questions come easily to mind. Will program and research funding be based on AHELO results? Will humanities and social science offerings be further disadvantaged relative to science and business programs? Will future funding be impacted by the employment rates of graduates?

Many parents and academics are familiar with the practice in elementary and high schools of requiring students to take proficiency tests and of publishing comparisons of scores with other students and schools. OECD does this with PISA in 65 member countries. Now, with AHELO being adopted by OECD member countries and sponsored in Canada by CMEC, among others, these practices (with their related challenges) are likely to be implemented in universities to test all university programs, including liberal arts education.

Another example of programs that pressure universities to shape their offerings to conform to Industry Canada is the Conference Board of Canada’s “Employability Skills 2000+” (Conference Board of Canada, 2000). This seemingly innocent document outlines the skills that all levels of education should be developing in students to prepare them for the “workplace.” And, the concept and measure of employability skills are applied to all educational levels, from elementary to post graduate. Research by Kwok (2004), for example, reflects the growing attention given to the development of employability skills at universities. Most teachers could defend what they are doing to help students develop these skills, but the major issue is that industry and economics appear to have taken

ownership of education, which in their mind is job training. There is increasing evidence of this on our campuses. For example, one Maritime university's teaching and learning centre offered an "employability skills" training workshop so faculty could learn how to connect course content with post-university career options.

Countering efforts to evaluate and quantify the outcome of post-secondary education are the publications of scholars such as Giroux (2010b), Nussbaum (2010), and Tuddiver (1999), as well as the voices of scholars such as Orwin (2010), who argue effectively in support of the long-standing purposes and values of a liberal arts education—citizenship, appreciation of different points of view, creativity, and moral reasoning. Such arguments in support of the relevance of a liberal arts education within society also point to its relevance for employment. For example, Clifford Orwin (2010), a research chair and professor at the University of Toronto, praised the role of the humanities and social sciences as vital to universities and questioned our societal obsession with the utility of knowledge.

When you take an overview of all these developments and perspectives, it seems clear that the dialogue and debate surrounding the value of liberal arts in society and its place in higher education will continue for some time. This special issue of the *Canadian Journal of Higher Education* will contribute, at least in a small way, to a better understanding of some of the issues involved.

With universities having to confront the job-training and job-readiness pressures that corporatization and neo-liberalism have imposed on higher education, liberal arts programs are increasingly challenged to create a "public space" where issues such as justice, ethical behaviour, and even critical thinking itself can be discussed and debated. In this context, this issue of the journal begins with an article by Emery Hyslop-Margison and Hugh Leonard, who discuss the impact of neo-liberalism and market logic on post-secondary education, and strategies for countering the limitations of neo-liberal pressures and constraints.

Hyslop-Margison, professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of New Brunswick, and Leonard, a PhD student in that faculty, argue that post neo-liberal suppression of democratic dissent challenges the university as a site for dialogue and discussion of democracy and social transformation. They trace the emergence of market logic in Canada to show how it infected and permeated public and government discourse so that education came to be aligned with social efficiency, employment demands, and the need for human capital, which is reinforced by increased power to the state to discipline public dissent. They argue that, as neo-liberalism has been naturalized as an unchangeable social reality, there is an increasingly important role for the liberal arts in educating students and the public overall on the importance of humanities for democratic societies. They challenge faculty to resume roles as public intellectuals and point to the indispensable role of the humanities in nurturing a critical form of societal self-reflection that can maintain open and engaged political discussion.

Phil Davison has been involved with post-secondary education for over twenty-five years and discusses several findings from his recent research on university leaders in the Maritime provinces. These leaders are under increasing scrutiny from corporate and community interests, and feel pressured to make sure universities and colleges measure up to the new standards of accountability, which often includes a profit-focus and consumer orientation. In this context, learning is becoming a global commodity. The shift from citi-

zanship and personal growth to more socio-economic purposes seems to correspond with debates about leaders as either visionary individuals or subject to corporate influence. Davison's article presents an insider perspective by discussing how university presidents and vice-presidents understand their roles within the contexts of higher education and their daily challenges in navigating dissonance and finding grace.

Arielle Dylan, of the School of Social Work at St. Thomas University, brings forward the importance of classroom safety—the conditions within which students and teachers can take risks and express and discuss various and personal perspectives without fear. Using a critical lens, she explores several elements, such as norms, safety standards, and inclusive practices, all of which serve to create a classroom environment that is welcoming and encouraging of critical thinking, dialogue, and intellectual development, as well as self-examination and transformation. Classroom safety promotes the development of critical thought and reflective practices that can facilitate not only more effective decisions but also informed behaviour and social action. While acknowledging that a degree of risk is ever present, attending to classroom safety can facilitate university classrooms in contributing to a vibrant public discourse that enables the personal growth and the development of society through engaged citizenship.

Colm Kelly, a Derrida scholar at St. Thomas University, critiques two contemporary efforts to install liberal arts frameworks “as the guardians and overseers” of the modern university. Kelly critiques the feasibility of a core curriculum that can provide a moral and civic education; he maintains that the division of knowledge into different departments (Kelly refers to them as divisions) means one set of disciplinary concerns will prevail. Building on Derrida's writing on the modern university, Kelly argues for and uses two case examples to illustrate that attempts to set up a curriculum that transcends disciplinary divisions will have serious problems. He argues for the value of promoting and defending pure research rather than promoting liberal arts to a privileged position.

Robin Lathangue, dean of studies at Sacred Heart University, provides an engaging critique of critical thinking and its elevated position in liberal arts education. He argues that, in many contexts, the meaning of critical thinking has degraded into a theoretical conformity that frequently shows itself in student acquiescence to certain ordained forms of disapproval (disenchantment). He sees this disenchantment originating in perceptions of what it means to be an intellectual in a society dominated by liberalism, the neutrality of which he draws into question. He concludes with references to the work of David L. Schindler, and, while recognizing the need to analyze and see different points of view, Lathangue describes a different understanding of liberal arts education where teaching and learning celebrate unpredictability rather than conformity, and enable safety and comfort to explore and enjoy the intensity and enchantment of learning rather than be dominated by fear and criticism.

The articles in this dedicated issue draw attention to a few of the many ongoing and significant debates within and about liberal arts education. In the neo-liberal and market oriented values that currently prevail in society, the challenges may well become more intense. It is important that, as teachers and scholars, we become more engaged in the debates so that we have a role in their resolution. While the articles in this issue address only a few of the many concerns and challenges, they contribute to the ongoing discussion on the place of liberal arts education as we move forward in the 21st Century. ♣

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