

# Universities collaborate to win public support for the liberal arts

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Experts say countering bad press requires “good stories,” champions, experimentation



Universities Canada president Paul Davidson addresses the recent workshop on the value of the liberal arts held in Montreal. Photo credit: Leslie Schachter.

Christopher Manfredi, provost and vice-principal, academic, at McGill University, stood before a room of his peers and made a bold statement: “Social sciences and humanities cured cancer.” To the 50 university presidents, vice-presidents and deans gathered at the workshop hosted by Universities Canada in Montreal last March, it was an example of how administrators might pitch the ongoing value of the liberal arts to a Canadian public facing rapid economic, digital, environmental and social change.

In his opening remarks at the two-day event, Universities Canada president Paul Davidson made reference to “ongoing and misguided assaults on the value of a liberal arts degree in popular media.” Dr. Manfredi, a political scientist and former dean of McGill’s faculty of arts, picked up this thread in his panel talk. He suggested reports on declining program enrolment in the humanities and social sciences, and the supposedly dire employment prospects of graduates in these fields, have created a false crisis. Instead of approaching the situation as though they’re putting out a fire, university administrators and faculty should focus instead on crafting “a good story.”

Hence the comment about curing cancer: in less than a generation, what changed public favour against smoking wasn’t mounting data from the health sciences linking smoking to cancer, he said. It was effective communication of that research to the public, improved regulation of the industry and a new taxation scheme on cigarettes that led to a decline in smoking and smoking-related illnesses. It was a wide-ranging and life-saving public health strategy “driven by disciplines in the social sciences and humanities,” Dr. Manfredi said.

Ross Finnie, associate professor of public and international affairs at the University of Ottawa, was on hand to offer another spin on the humanities and social sciences — that contrary to popular thinking about these disciplines, they ultimately lead to employability and high earnings for grads. Last year, Dr. Finnie and his colleagues at the Education Policy Research Initiative [released a study](#) that reviewed the income tax records of U of Ottawa grads from 1999 to 2011. They found that in just a few years, the salaries of social science grads went from \$40,000 up to \$80,000, while humanities grads saw a jump from \$40,000 to \$70,000. “It is a mistake to judge the value of a degree, a lifetime investment, prematurely right after graduation. The real value of education becomes more apparent in the long run, as the evidence suggests here,” Dr. Finnie said.

EPRI has expanded the scope of its study to include seven universities and seven community colleges in Canada and expects to publish new findings this spring. “Early indications are that the University of Ottawa findings are not an anomaly in terms of strong earnings among social sciences and humanities graduates,” Dr. Finnie said.

Many attendees focused on the need to find and encourage liberal arts “champions,” people who will extol the benefits of an education in the liberal arts. Several mentioned the need to mobilize students in this role. At the University of Windsor, a “manifesto” contest encourages undergraduate students to come up with compelling reasons for why the humanities matter. With a semester’s free tuition up for grabs, U of Windsor president Alan Wildeman said the competition brings out stories that are relevant and accessible.

Faculty members like Dr. Finnie are also natural champions. David Docherty, president of Mount Royal University in Calgary, noted that despite a tendency among Albertans to claim science, technology, engineering and math as the future of the province, many still acknowledge the importance of the political pundit or film critic on the news. “I’m not convinced we need more articles in high-rated journals. We need more op-eds in the *Calgary Herald*,” he said. “We underestimate the role of the public intellectual at telling the good news stories.”

Good news stories, however, don’t dismiss the fact that at several institutions, humanities and social sciences programs such as comparative literature, women’s studies, or classical languages have been cancelled, compressed or are up for review due to a lack of student interest. For his part, Robert Campbell, president of Mount Allison University in Sackville, N.B., views such enrolment declines and cuts as a sign that it’s time to refresh. “It’s up to us to devise programs that look interesting and that have salience. If we have a program that’s not getting enrolment we’ve got to ask ourselves, well why is that? ... Obviously we’re not communicating very well the value of this program, or the program as it is constituted isn’t offering what we think it’s offering.”

Several participants supported the idea of experimenting to make programs more enticing to millennial students, and to make clear to employers the transferable skills that graduates are picking up from their studies. Keynote speaker Kathy Wolfe, vice-president for integrative learning and the global commons at the Association of American Colleges and Universities, expounded on the value of “signature” projects (similar to a capstone project or an honours thesis). Later in the day, Kevin Kee, dean of the faculty of arts at U of Ottawa, presented the digital humanities as an area of cutting-edge research in the liberal arts.

Meanwhile, attendees including Dr. Manfredi and Dr. Campbell trumpeted co-op placements, internships, summer work opportunities and study abroad programs as initiatives that create the clearest links between the liberal arts classroom and the workplace. “Back in the day you came to Mount A., you went to Victoria College [now Victoria University, affiliated with the University of Toronto] and got your classical liberal education, and then government and private sector were all queuing up at the door to hire you,” Dr. Campbell said. “[B]ig companies, or government, or entrepreneurs understood because they were hiring people like themselves, who also had that education.” That’s not the case anymore, he said, so “experiential education ... that’s the complement to what we’re doing right now.”