

# Arts degree — Still a ticket to success?

By Steven Hunt

Reprinted from the *Uniter* Canadian University Press. Somehow, coming on the tail end of a recession and back in the middle of a technological revolution, the question "What is the value of a B.A.?" comes across as the sort of accusation, like "defending nuclear weapons," that the Blue Bomber's pass defence. Nevertheless, an informal survey of business, government educators and students indicates there is still a role for an arts education. Students value the liberal arts and bosses of the world. Some are admitting "open for business-oriented students", old thinkers in enough reverence to hire one, now and then.

The value of the Bachelor of Arts degree still, thankfully, can't be determined by routinizing an income flow chart, or any of those other technical means most arts students are hazy about. Income flow charts? You mean like the United Way thermometer?" Its value lies in combining marketable talents with a deeper understanding of life in general.

But controversy over the degree's value are affecting university program directions. Liberal arts universities are listening to the jobs versus life-skills arguments, and are trying to meet the concerns somewhere in the middle.

From an economic perspective, an arts degree is definitely not obsolete. A Bell Systems study, conducted among its nearly one million employees, found liberal arts graduates rate a 46 per cent likelihood of rising to management level positions. The study ranked business students at 32 per cent with engineer/science/math students on the bottom at 21 per cent.

Liberal arts grads rated superior in interpersonal communications, innovation and problem solving. Likewise, Great West Life

Insurance Company still hires arts students. "We hire a certain number of business-oriented graduates to work in areas such as finance and accounting," said Bill Hook, the company's personnel representative, "but in other areas, such as underwriting and general insurance we hire graduates with all types of university degrees."

Hook said personal performance ranks higher than formal education when it comes to promotions, citing himself as an example — a psychology major who moved up to senior management.

"A B.A. will close some doors," he admits, "but there are jobs out there for arts graduates ... you just have to go out and find them."

One place you're not likely to find them is in government. Manitoba's public service commission, the body responsible for hiring bureaucrats, isn't talking to any recent university graduates very much these days, and not at all to arts students.

"In the early seventies, your discipline didn't matter very much, but today the various governments want to see your inventory," said Ken Graham, the man who used to hire students there. "They want students with business-oriented training — MBA's, MPA's, Honours Accelerated Commerce. It's become extremely difficult for liberal arts."

To Graham, that fact is not surprising. "Nobody ever expected to get a job with a liberal arts degree anyways," he said.

Graham advises unemployed arts graduates to "Go back to school and get some business and administrative training."

Jim Fyles, an employment officer at the University of Winnipeg, said employers are not jumping at the chance to hire arts graduates.

"We hardly get any (employers) up here," he said. "In bad times, employers go for the specialized skills first and hardly any arts students.

And believe me, these are very bad times."

But Bill Hook said Great West Life hires all its arts students from applications off the streets. "We don't recruit arts students on campus ... only students with professional training," he said.

The economic value of an arts degree fluctuates. While "idea people" are recruited during growth periods, Fyles said in bad times companies are more concerned with holding their own, and hiring office managers.

While an arts degree may not pay off quickly in terms of a job, many point to its value in training the mind.

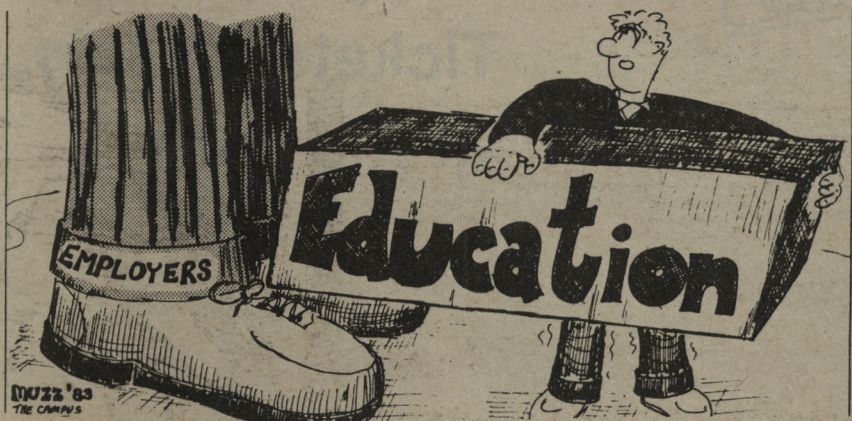
Psychology student Heather Weiss is blunt about what her degree is likely to bring in terms of financial gain. "Probably nothing," she said, "but I never expected it to." Rather, she said, "I'm learning about life. While commerce is a business apprenticeship ... arts are an apprenticeship for society ... and everyone has to live in society."

Universities and colleges are being pressured to stress skills training over liberal arts, and the system is beginning to respond. A 1981 employment and immigration department report said the federal government should tailor education funding to "increase the system's flexibility in responding to changing market needs." In other words, Canada needs more engineers and less liberal arts.

Walt Stein, University of Winnipeg's Dean of Curriculum, recognizes a need for more skills training in an increasingly technological society. He said new skills programs are being introduced, possibly childcare and nursing, but arts courses will be included in the programs.

Universities are responding reluctantly to society's demand for more skills-oriented programs, Stein said.

"When you're holding on to something that precious, you're reluctant to give any of it up."



Yes Sir, I realize it's unbalanced, over-rated and too theoretical to be of any practical use, but it's the only thing I've got to offer...



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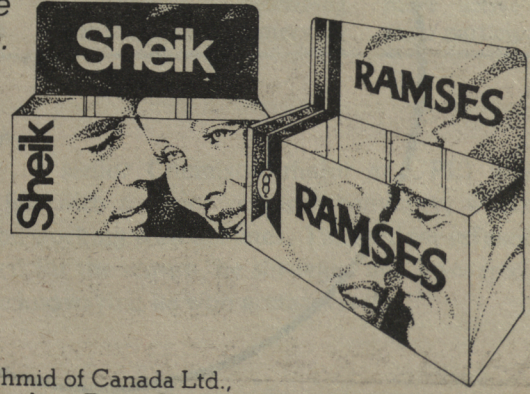
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