The Re-Humanization of the Academy

This Fall the Global Network of Research Universities, with which McMaster recently became affiliated through its membership in the Canadian U15, will meet in the Netherlands to draft and sign a declaration on the critical importance of the humanities as a field of study and as the necessary frame for understanding human activities of all kinds. Because the Global Network includes most of the world’s pre-eminent postsecondary institutions—those of the Russell Group in Britain, the Association of American Universities, the League of European Research Universities, the China 9 association of leading Chinese universities, the Australian Group of Eight, as well as the U15—this will be an event of considerable significance.

It will also be no surprise. A movement to reassert the importance of the humanities and social sciences has been gathering momentum across the globe in recent years, driven in part by the recognition not only of educators, but of governments and private sector leaders as well, that a mechanistic understanding of society and of its institutions—including the economy—condemns us to a future of unrealized potential and frustrated ambitions.

Last year saw the appearance of a report to the European Commission on Improving the quality of teaching and learning in Europe’s higher education institutions, a document remarkable for its powerfully humanistic underpinnings. It is not without irony that the process of “Modernisation” is now understood to mean not increasing subservience to an industrial model, but rather a return to values we associate with a liberal education. The report bears three epigraphs: two from John Dewey, the American philosopher and education reformer, and one from Allan Bloom, author of The Closing of the American Mind (1987). The first Dewey quote comes from his famous work, Democracy and Education (1916): “Were all instructors to realise that the quality of the mental process, not the production of correct answers, is the measure of educative growth, something hardly less than a revolution in teaching would be worked.” In Dewey’s thinking, “the quality of the mental process” fostered by education is important not just for the student, but for the quality of the society in which he or she will eventually participate. Bloom offers a similarly compelling vision for education, which he says “in our times must try to find whatever there is in students that might yearn for completion, and to reconstruct the learning that would enable them autonomously to seek that completion.” Though somewhat abstrusely put, that is a vision of education in which the realization of human potential is not instrumental to some other “engineered” end, but is an end in itself. Bloom is well-known for his not uncontroversial critique of higher education which, as he put it, “has failed democracy and impoverished the souls of today’s students.”

It was recently reported in the Wall Street Journal that at business schools in the United States and Great Britain, “the Philosophy Department is invading the M.B.A. program.” “The global

financial crisis has sparked efforts to train students to think beyond the bottom line,” with courses on subjects such as “Why Capitalism?” and “Thinking About Thinking.” These institutions now see a need for their Business students to read Plato, Marx and Kant “to know why we’re doing what we’re doing,” as one student puts it. At a much broader level, a commission in the United States has issued a report proclaiming that the humanities and social sciences are essential “for a vibrant, competitive and secure nation.” And in Canada chief executives draw attention repeatedly to the long term benefits and virtues of a liberal education, particularly in the area of public policy and effective business leadership.

The Canadian Council of Chief Executives, which includes CEOs of 150 major Canadian corporations, released a survey of its members this past January which showed that in evaluating prospective new hires today corporations tend “to emphasize soft skills—also known as non-cognitive skills—over hard skills. The soft skills most often listed by respondents included people skills and relationship-building, communication skills, problem-solving skills, analytical abilities, and leadership skills.”

There is no surprise in this, similar assertions having been made by CEOs consistently since the 1990s. There is evidence that hiring practices have indeed changed as the survey suggests—at least for certain levels and in certain types of businesses. David Helfand asked in the Globe and Mail last month, “What do Pulitzer Prize winners, the wealthiest Fortune 500 CEOs, and PhDs elected to the U.S. National Academy of Sciences have in common?” The answer: “They attended liberal arts programs. Graduates of these programs are over-represented by 300 per cent to 800 per cent at the pinnacle of their respective fields.”

Notwithstanding that fact, however, the argument persists in some quarters that to know Marx, Plato and Kant is irrelevant to the economic necessities of the country. When Helfand, President and Vice-Chancellor of Quest University, introduced himself to the B.C. Jobs Minister, she replied “I need 10,000 pipe fitters in the next decade and you aren’t going to supply any of them.” His response to this was “No, but perhaps one of our graduates will show you how you need only 5000.”

The riposte went unacknowledged. Indeed, that the research universities feel it is necessary to make a formal declaration about the importance of the humanities tells us that our message—and the message of the CEOs—is somehow not getting through. I wanted to say “to governments,” but the problem is really much greater than that. Even within the universities, where it would be encouraging to think that the human frame and foundation for everything we do in technology, health or business is always included in the calculus of value, our structures and habits suggest otherwise.

In the coming year, a sustained focus on the “rehumanizing” of the academy is planned and will be the subject of my address at the upcoming Convocation ceremonies. A variety of initiatives

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2 Wall Street Journal online, 30 April, 2014.
5 “Liberal arts is the future of work, so why is Canada pushing ‘job-ready’ skills?” The Globe and Mail online, May 12, 2014, 10:16 AM EDT.
intended to infuse existing programs with elements of philosophy, history, ethics and the arts, are already underway in areas as diverse as medicine, business and engineering. Over the coming year, I expect to see the further development and growth of inter-disciplinary collaborations of this nature as we turn our minds to a reckoning of what it means to be human and, specifically, the ways in which our mandate of education and research can both support and enable the realization of human potential no matter which field of specialization we may be engaged in.

**CAMPUS UPDATE**

**$50M gift will mean even greater heights for Michael G. DeGroote School of Medicine**

A crowd of more than 1,000 people, including over 200 students, their parents and friends, witnessed the announcement of a $50M gift to the School of Medicine from Michael G. DeGroote on May 23. The school’s benefactor made the announcement at the graduating students’ oath ceremony in downtown Hamilton. The gift will support increased focus on national and international health leadership, including developing stronger ties and alignment with the DeGroote School of Business, as well as partnerships that focus on biomedical advances.

The surprise announcement was widely covered by traditional media and through the University’s social communities. The gift was tweeted about thousands of times, reaching approximately 70,000 readers, the Daily News story was shared on Facebook nearly 1,700 times reaching another 50,000 people, the video clip of the announcement was watched by more than 4,000 YouTube viewers and another 22,000 views on Facebook, and another 11,000 visitors read the Daily News story. The story also made the front page of the Hamilton Spectator.

Social media comments were collected and displayed as part of the Daily News story. The McMaster community also took to social media to post their reaction to the surprise gift:

“I was there and it was a wonderful surprise to all.”
“A wonderful gift from an equally wonderful man.”
“He is one in a million!”
“He is one of Hamilton’s greatest citizen’s ever.”
“An amazing person and a credit to Hamilton.”
“Way to pay it forward - what a generous man.”
“Fantastically generous and forward thinking. Thank you!”
“An outstanding philanthropist!”
“What a great day to be a Mac grad!”
“An amazing gift that will provide a fantastic legacy.”
Research

**Salim Yusuf inducted into Medical Hall of Fame**

Salim Yusuf, Director of the Population Health Research Institute, was inducted into Canada’s Medical Hall of Fame on April 24. Yusuf’s work has benefitted millions of people by producing substantial changes in guidelines for the prevention and treatment of cardiovascular disease. The induction comes after Yusuf won the Canada Gairdner Wightman Award earlier this year.

**Former President recognized for work in the arts**

President Emeritus Alvin Lee received the lifetime achievement award at the Hamilton Arts Awards. Lee served as McMaster’s President from 1980 and 1990 and championed the development of Mills Library into the renowned facility it is today.

**Scientists pack lab into pill using idea inspired by breath-freshening strips**

Researchers have solved the problem of cumbersome, expensive and painfully slow water-testing by turning the process upside-down. The team, led by John Brennan and Carlos Filipe in Engineering, has reduced the process required for testing water safety to a simple pill by adapting technology found in a dissolving breath strip. The development has the potential to dramatically boost access to quick and affordable testing around the world.

**New study offers ‘tremendous hope’ for asthma sufferers**

A new treatment developed by Paul O’Byrne, Executive Director of the Firestone Institute of Respiratory Health, and Gail Gauvreau, Associate Professor of Medicine, has the potential to dramatically improve the lives of those suffering from allergic asthma. Their study has found that giving a mild allergic asthma patient an antibody – which blocks a specific protein in the lungs – significantly improves symptoms such as wheezing, breathlessness, chest tightness and coughing. The findings were published in the New England Journal of Medicine.

**Skeleton found in Mexican cave yields clues about first human movement in Americas**

A team of international researchers, including Ed Reinhardt, Professor in Geography and Earth Sciences, has found a fully intact skeleton of a girl, dating back some 13,000 years, in an underwater Mexican cave. The remains could provide clues to the early movements of mankind, long debated by scientists.

**Rare meteorites offer new clues about mysterious Red Planet**

Sang-Tae Kim, Professor of Geography and Earth Sciences, and a team of international researchers had the rare opportunity to study Martian meteorites recently. The meteorites yielded new clues about the interactions between the atmosphere and the lithosphere of Mars, a planet which is poorly understood. The findings, published in the journal Nature, suggest the photochemical reactions that occurred on Mars must have been different from those on Earth.
Professor awarded $2.5M for autism, Fragile X syndrome research

Laurie Doering, Professor of Pathology and Molecular Medicine, has received $2.5M to lead a team researching new treatments for social disability disorders including autism. The work will help determine ways to counteract the consequences of intellectual and social disabilities associated with autism.

Teaching and Learning

Explaining your life’s work in 180 seconds

McMaster hosted the provincial championship of the Three Minute Thesis competition, which challenged participants to summarize their life’s work in just 180 seconds. Competitors pitched their work to a number of celebrity judges at the event, held in Alumni Memorial Hall. McMaster was represented by Environmental and Earth Sciences student, Michelle Reid.

Community Engagement

McMaster shines at YWCA Woman of Distinction Awards gala

Six of this year’s 12 winners at the YWCA Women of Distinction Awards ceremony were members of the McMaster community. The awards are nationally recognized as one of Canada’s most prestigious honours for women. The winners include alumnae Debbie Bang (Nursing), Bernice Downey (Anthropology) and Alyssa Lai (Communication Studies), faculty member Juliet Daniel (Biology) and students Mannat Malik and Hailey Milligan.

Indigenous youth visit campus to learn about STEM studies

Hundreds of Aboriginal youth were on campus in May to learn about science, technology, engineering and math. The youths, in Grades 5 to 8, toured the Nuclear Reactor, Lyons New Media Centre and McCallion Planetarium, performed experiments and heard from guest speakers. The students stayed in residence during the free conference, hosted by the Faculty of Engineering.

Brain Bee challenges Canada’s top teens

High school students from across Canada will be on campus on May 31 for the National Brain Bee competition. The students, all winners of regional competitions, will be tested on their aptitude for neuroscience, patient diagnosis and neuroanatomy. The event is being organized by Judith Shedden, Associate Professor of Psychology, Neuroscience and Behaviour.
Student Success

**Student develops campus accessibility map**

Life Sciences student Nick Schoenhoff has developed a map designed to assist those with accessibility issues to navigate campus. The project placed among the province’s best at a recent competition designed to improve accessibility at Ontario’s universities. The map, which rates pedestrian pathways using a green-yellow-red code, will soon be offered digitally.

**PhD candidate recognized for leadership in engineering**

Chemical engineering PhD candidate Frances Lasowski has been named the 2014 Claudette MacKay-Lassonde Graduate Scholar. The $15,000 award, presented by the Canadian Engineering Memorial Foundation, recognizes female leaders in the field of Engineering. Lasowski’s work focuses on the delivery of therapeutics to prevent and treat childhood ocular conditions.