

University Education and Value for Students and Society

by Ralph C. Martin

There is a myth in our society that everyone completing Grade 12 should aspire to attend university, as soon as possible. It's not true.

The risk of students attending university in a habitual manner, solely according to this myth, is that they will waste their time, money (or someone else's money) and their potential for living fully. They will also waste the time and life energy of fellow students, staff and faculty.

Universities cannot afford to be pedantically pedagogical at a time when society deserves our best analysis and synthesis and energetic conversations that awaken faculty and students. Society is most effectively served when those of us in the academy not only pursue knowledge but question current paradigms and stretch to gain understanding and wisdom, pertaining to our disciplines.

University can be a wonderful experience for students who choose to explore based on their curiosity. It can also be an opportunity to meet people who are curious about similar issues. However, university is only one of many options for high school grads, including a victory lap of extra high school courses, community college, a job, volunteering, traveling or joining groups like Canada World Youth or Katimavik.

Colleagues and I have observed that students are happier and learn more, as they engage in university courses, at a stage of life, when they want to be here. That stage may be a few years after graduating from high school. The other organizations, affected as young people choose alternatives to attending universities, will also function more effectively with people who choose to be there.

Parents tend to worry about their sons and daughters opting to delay their university programs. Perhaps they'll be distracted or become involved in life without ever going to university. That may happen and yet if students are not as happy and fulfilled in university as they can be in another life activity, should they still go? Some deliberately accept what is perceived as the short term pain of university for a long term gain of more meaningful life work.

However, others may set a pattern of enduring university courses in order to earn more money in future jobs that are also endured. Is this healthy?

There are students who resist their trek to a university campus and then find themselves, unexpectedly fascinated. These stories can become the basis of parents' hopes as they pay fees and open campus doors for the next generation. A time limit on the wait for a surprise fascination, may be appropriate.

With or without the modern challenges of climate change, nature deficit disorder, declining biodiversity, soil degradation and air and water pollution, society will need participants who live authentically and know who they are, in the world that really is. We do and will require the smarts, business acumen, social justice lens and ecological awareness of young citizens. If university does not meet their authentic interests and life calling, then they might quite reasonably choose other options in line with their authentic potential.

When it is apparent in a person's life, that university can provide the exploratory environment, credible knowledge base and a process of discovering and re-discovering a personal world view; that is the ideal time to engage in a university. To that end, it behooves universities to offer more accommodating ways to meet the needs of life-long learners with family and income earning responsibilities. For example, universities could offer courses sequentially, with a 3 week period for one course rather than expecting all students to take 5 courses at the same time, over a term of 15 weeks, including the exam period.

Peter Senge and co-authors, in *The Necessary Revolution* state "the question is not if the industrial age bubble will end. The question is, when and how. To create the future we need: i) a vision of the future, and ii) to understand present reality." Why shouldn't universities foster such visioning as well as an understanding of what is? This will have purchase to the extent that engaged scholars in universities collaborate with other sectors of society, each of which also has engaged participants, who have chosen to fulfill their lives where they are.

This article is an argument for the value of personal engagement. By propagating the myth that all grade 12 graduates should attend university, as soon as possible, the value of universities for students and society is diminished. The value of universities and all other organizations and work places is upheld when we encourage young people to contribute where

they perceive they can best do so. The current structures of society are secondary to the opportunity to adjust as we each find our special ways to serve the greater good.

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