

Why university?

The Cranky Professor

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Why should a young person want to go to university? Why should taxpayers pay any of the cost of her going?

These are always good questions, but they are especially pressing for Nova Scotians right now, as we study the O'Neill report on the future of post-secondary education in our province. That report, commissioned by the province in January, and prepared by economist Tim O'Neill, was released last Friday.

Only if we have a good sense of what a university education is for and why people should care about universities will we be able to evaluate whatever recommendations the report contains.

A common view is that a young person should go to university in order to prepare herself for a career. On this view, taxpayers should be happy to foot at least part of the bill, for they will benefit economically from the skills the university graduate will eventually bring to the workplace and from the taxes she will pay on her higher income.

One problem here is that most of what's taught to undergraduates at a university, especially in arts, has little if anything to do with jobs or careers. Moreover, whatever knowledge or skills a student might gain that would be relevant in the workplace could be acquired elsewhere—from parents or mentors, in college, in professional school, in the workplace itself.

The view that getting a bachelor's degree is about preparing for a career has had bad effects on students and universities. It's at least partly responsible for the high percentage of university students who don't care much about their studies but just want to have a degree to show to prospective employees. It's also responsible for the tendency of universities to try to find ways of making what they offer relevant to the workplace, by, for instance, tailoring academic programmes to the perceived needs of employers or professional schools or instituting co-op education, in which students gain credit for job experience.

This tendency to make university relevant to jobs harms universities by distracting students from what universities are really all about and diluting the experience they provide.

What universities are really all about, of course, is liberal education. The only sound reason a person could have to attend university is that she wants an education—better, that she wants the experience of becoming educated.

Liberal education concerns both understanding and taste. At a university, a young person gains knowledge of the world, of the natural and the social world, and, more, gains the ability to explore the world for herself. Her knowledge consists in theories, theories backed by arguments and evidence. She understands competing theories of the world and possesses the resources needed to criticize and extend those theories. And she possesses the sensitivity required to respond aptly to the world as she understands it.

Liberal education produces a critical cast of mind, including habits of circumspection and open-mindedness, and a concern for argument and evidence. An educated person wants first to understand. She always approaches things in the spirit of investigation, even if her ultimate concern is to reform what she finds.

That attending a university is about becoming educated can make it difficult for people to see why they should support students financially. Clearly education is good for the individual student, so long as she cares to travel on an intellectual journey and to acquire the skills and habits of mind of an intellectual. But why should taxpayers care to fund her journey?

The primary reason why the public should support those who wish to cultivate their intellect and taste is that education is also a social good. The habits of mind and action that university students acquire are not just habits of intellectual life. They are also habits central to responsible citizenship.

When we study the O'Neill report, our task will be to take its recommendations one at a time and ask, would following this recommendation enhance the universities in this province as places of liberal education? We should then seek to enact any recommendation to which our answer is yes. And we should firmly set aside any that threatens liberal education, whatever else can be said in its favour.