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CUTTING AT THE CORE

University funding policies and the erosion of liberal education

by Patricia Clements

ACROSS ALBERTA, THE CRANES HAVE COME TO campus. Buildings are going up: at the University of Calgary, for Information and Communications Technology; at the University of Lethbridge, for Life Sciences; at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, for Electrical and Computer Engineering. The headlines are full of dollars, and not only for buildings, but for programs, too. A government press release of January 5, 2000, announced \$25.9-million for post-secondary program expansions in nursing, and health and information technologies. By month end, the government had announced \$500-million then and a likely \$500-million later toward the creation of a new Alberta Heritage Foundation for Science and Engineering Research.

This is all very welcome news. Our universities have long been starved of resources. But also in the air is an urgent note of concern. Headlines don't tell the whole story. Those highly profiled millions of dollars are tightly targeted to one side of what our universities do, to areas the government deems of "strategic importance." New dollars pour into engineering, science (including biomedical science), technology and business.

On the other side of campus, in the humanities and social sciences, there's a budgetary time warp. They are still living in the world of the old headlines, when budgets fell, class sizes ballooned, numbers of full-time academic staff dropped, and classrooms and equipment deteriorated. Students and researchers in these essential areas are not sharing the benefits of the big dollar head-

lines. Stephen Randall, dean of the faculty of social sciences at the U of C, says that intolerable pressures have developed on classroom and office space for faculty and graduate students. At the U of A, the operating budget of the faculty of arts fell from \$42-million in 1993-94 to \$37-million in 1998-99. Ken Norrie, the faculty's dean, says he has "serious budget problems because program and course commitments are far in excess of our ability to deliver with the hard dollars we have."

As budgets fell, students continued to choose arts. "The tragedy," says Bhagwan Dua, dean of arts and science at the U of L, "is that the students are there but the base budget is not. Anyone who thinks that students are not opting for the social sciences and humanities is totally wrong."

UNIVERSITIES ORGANIZE THEIR TEACHING AND RESEARCH in two areas: arts and sciences and the professions.

Traditionally, these are seen as concentric circles. On the outer rim, yet with roots at the centre, are the professional schools: education, law, dentistry, pharmacy, engineering, medicine and so on. In the inner circle, and with a combined enrolment that sometimes exceeds half of the total university enrolment, are the non-applied arts and sciences. According to the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 54 per cent of undergraduate student registrations in Alberta are in this core; for Canada overall, the figure is 58 per cent. While the money pours in elsewhere on campus, the damage of deep cuts continues unrepaired on the arts side of this core.

Percent Change in Enrolment and General Operating Grants since 1990

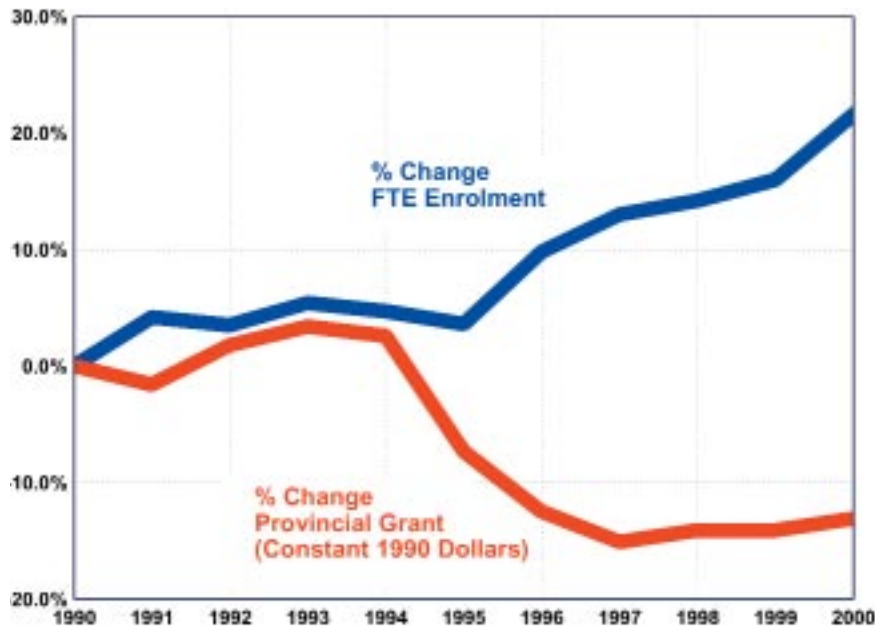


FIG. 1: Cuts in funding to Alberta universities after 1994 were deep. This graph shows the situation at the U of C—a seriously declining base budget and escalating enrolments. The University of Alberta’s average operating revenue per student was 41% higher in 1980 than in 1997. By 1999, even taking into account the difference in purchasing power, it was 67% short of the operating revenue per student received by leading U.S. public research universities.

(Source: University of Calgary Office of Institutional Analysis)

SINCE 1994, GOVERNMENT FUNDING PRACTICES HAVE changed the character of Alberta universities—both what they do and who they do it for. Universities are being reshaped as instruments of government economic policy. But the more universities conform to the economic expectations the government has imposed on them, the more they sacrifice their ability to set their own priorities. Governments have assumed a high degree of control. University autonomy diminishes every year, and the work on the human and social side of these institutions is eroded. In fact, the conditions under which some new science and technology funding is received actually further drains already depleted funding on the human and social side of the house, worsening the situation. A student or researcher working in the new ICT or Engineering building will have access to up-to-date and well-staffed equipment and space, but his counterpart across campus in the Humanities or Social Sciences building may be looking for a book or journal unavailable in the library or a seat already taken in the computer lab. Or she may be phoning maintenance for the third or fourth time with a plea to fix the running tap in the washroom. A new elitism has developed on our campuses, at very high cost for students—and for all of us.

THE IDEA OF A LIBERAL EDUCATION REACHES A LONG WAY back. The Oxford English Dictionary finds the first use of

the word “liberal” in 1375, when it meant “the distinctive epithet of those arts or sciences that were considered ‘worthy of a free man.’” It has been used since, according to the OED, to describe an education aimed at “general intellectual enlargement and refinement,” and “not narrowly restricted to the requirements of technical or professional training.” A “liberal” education, therefore, has traditionally aimed to develop openness of mind and independence of thinking: it would be “free from narrow prejudice, open-minded, candid, free from bigotry or unreasonable prejudice, open to the reception of new ideas or proposals of reform.” John Henry Cardinal Newman’s classic discussion, *The Idea of a University* (1852), makes the same distinction, but somewhat differently.

“Knowledge may be power,” Newman writes, but “prior to its being a power, it is a good...not only an instrument, but an end.”

Today, a distinction between “applied knowledge” and “knowledge for its own sake” is still central to the idea of a liberal education. If you are a student in a professional school, your subject is that of the profession you are training to enter (pharmacy, for instance, or law). If you are a student in arts, your overall project is to equip yourself with intellectual tools for understanding a changing world. Liberal arts programs require students to demonstrate depth of knowledge in a specific field, but they typically also require a broad range of intellectual achievement. By graduation, these students will have studied their own society and culture; will have some experience in understanding a culture (language, literature, politics, history) different from their own; and will have been challenged to reason clearly and convincingly through problems and issues in areas such as ethics, political systems, religions, economies and the fine arts. Their work across the disciplines will have helped them to develop important intellectual skills: critical, synthetic and analytical thinking, effective oral and written expression, the ability to identify and solve problems, the ability to ask questions that advance understanding, and the confidence to take on complex and unusual problems. At its most successful, a liberal arts education will help students develop the intellectual and cultural experience and confidence that will, as the medieval use of the word suggests, empower them as “free” and independent thinkers in a highly complex world. It will also help to create an

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abiding intellectual passion, a commitment to reason, an understanding of the motivating power of values and a sense both of human community and cultural differences.

While this knowledge is intrinsically valuable, it is also profoundly useful. This is not so readily quantifiable as it is for professional programs—dentistry, say, or pharmacy. But the broad social and economic impact of the liberal arts is great. Our sophisticated contemporary social, cultural and economic arrangements cannot function without a population of broadly educated citizens. They are essential to civil society, necessary for the kinds of discourse that drive democracy and inform public life, and foundational for the creation of our national and international cultures.

The BA is everywhere in this society and economy. Pick a few distinguished Canadians and you are likely to find BA graduates: Paul Martin (philosophy), Pamela Wallin (psychology and political science), Nancy MacBeth (French and Russian), Adrienne Clarkson (English literature), John Ralston Saul (political science), and many more—Peter Lougheed, Preston Manning, Deborah Grey, Allan Greg, Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatje, Gerald Schwartz, Joe Clark, Allan Rock, Paul Gross.... Even Canada's most widely known scientist, David Suzuki, built his career as one of our most effective communicators—and he does not fail to say so—on his BA. Beyond individuals, pick any major employment sector and you are likely to find several thousand BA graduates. They are in our school systems, civil service, business, communications, journalism, in our powerful literary and theatrical culture, in government, banking, management and retail sales, in property development and law offices, art galleries and entertainment. The indisputable fact is that graduates of the liberal arts have great impact on our lives—cultural, social and economic. If you were to pull all of Alberta's BAs off the job for a week, newspapers wouldn't be written, governments would shut down, schools would close.

Yet, in recent years, the BA has come under severe attack. And now the Alberta government is "reinvesting" almost exclusively in programs it chooses to see as strategic. This has repercussions for professors in liberal disciplines who teach students not only in the BA program, but in other programs as well—in education, law, business, engineering, pharmacy, medicine, nursing, and so on. Work in the core arts and sciences is foundational for

these programs too, and most students will at some stage take a course, or several, in arts and sciences. This foundational teaching sharply distinguishes the arts and sciences—"the university college"—from the professional faculties, most of which do little teaching of students other than those registered in their own faculties. In the liberal disciplines, by contrast, it is not unusual for this out-of-faculty teaching to represent close to 40 per cent of the total undergraduate teaching in the social sciences and humanities. Both in the extent of teaching and the breadth of intellectual engagement, then, the liberal arts are a key pillar of the teaching and learning mission of the whole university. To weaken the liberal arts is to weaken university education across the board.

But weakened it has been. Tied program envelopes and targeted research funds, however welcome they may be in

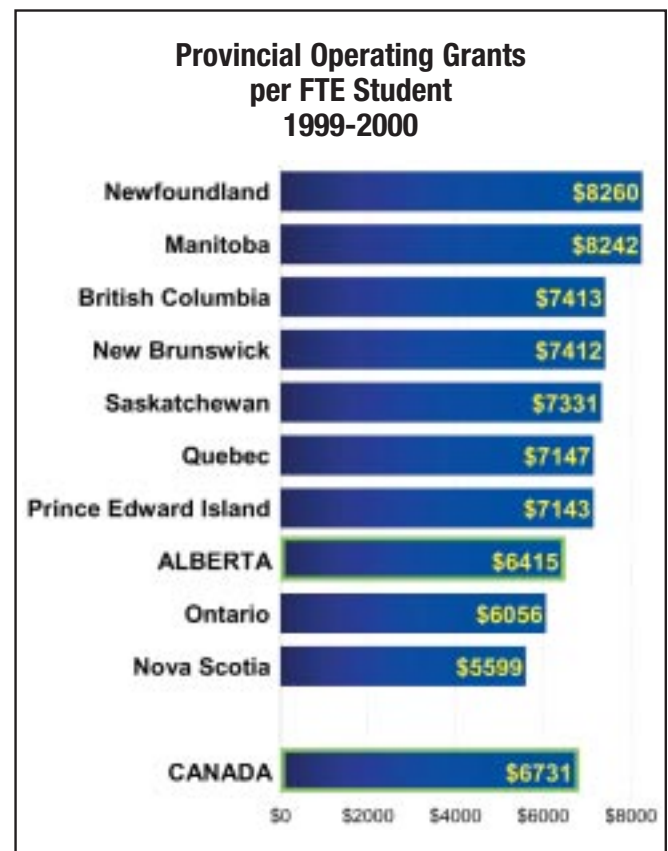
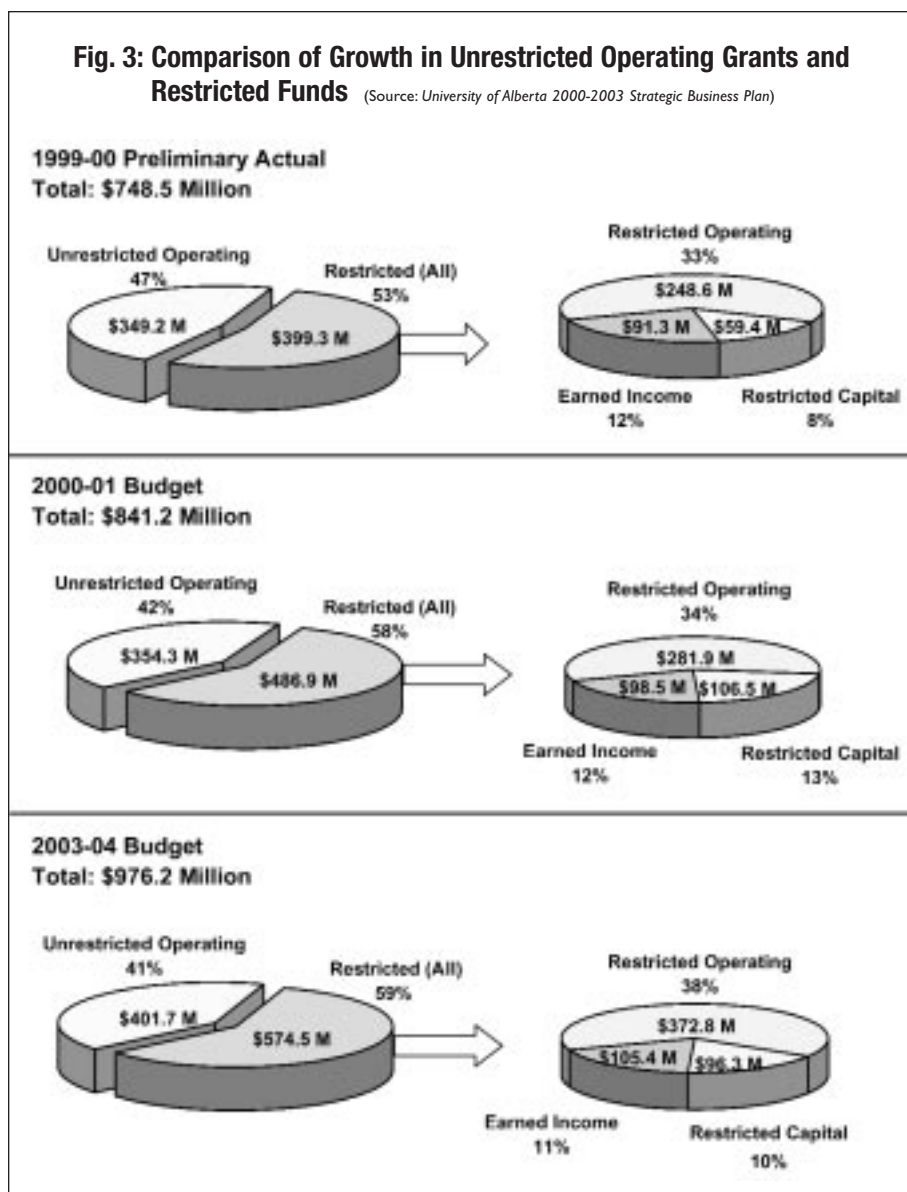


FIG. 2: This graph compares provincial operating grants per full-time student. Alberta ranks eighth—below the national average, well below both neighbouring provinces, and just behind Prince Edward Island. (Source: "Ontario Universities: 1999 Resource Document," Council of Ontario Universities, April 2000.)

Fig. 3: Comparison of Growth in Unrestricted Operating Grants and Restricted Funds (Source: University of Alberta 2000-2003 Strategic Business Plan)



specific areas, do not address the central problem of universities—the debilitating shortage of untied operating funding needed for the liberal arts and science core. The unrestricted operating funds of Alberta universities diminish steadily. Figure 3 shows the shrinkage at the U of A. Yet these funds sustain day-to-day operations of the whole system. The effect of this pattern of funding, says Doug Ooram, vice-president, academic at U of A, is “centripetal.” Large research grants are costly: they sometimes come with a matching condition and almost always with high overhead costs. “For every 72 cents you get for support,” says Roger Smith, vice-president, research at U of A, “the core budget has to come up with 28 cents.”

New programs, such as the federal government’s Canada Research Chairs program, excellent in themselves, tighten the squeeze. This program provides for new academic positions in Canadian universities to be distributed in proportion to a university’s research grants

from the three federal research granting agencies. The problem is that the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) is itself desperately underfunded by comparison with the Canadian Institutes for Health Research and the Natural and Engineering Sciences Research Council. “The primary concern,” says Ooram, “is that they have taken the relative underfunding of the SSHRC area and extended that to the Canada Research Chairs.”

Ron Bond, U of C vice-president, academic, is attempting to “develop some measures to ‘balance’ the generous funding arrangements for those in specific disciplines,” but what he can do, he says, “is limited, given the rich array of resources available from external sources” for selected areas. “If you believe, as I do,” he says, “that research, scholarship and creative activity are essential in all areas of intellectual and practical pursuit sponsored by a university, there remains a large unmet need.”

The increasing shortage in untied operating funding, says Ooram, “leaves the universities with the problem of how to ensure the survival of the whole system.” Not long ago, Internet

Radio broadcast a program under the provocative and sobering title, “The Death of the Liberal Arts.”

HOW HAS LIBERAL EDUCATION BEEN SO UNDERMINED? A recent study by the UBC Centre for Policy Studies in Higher Education and Training details the process. In “Measuring the Unmeasurable: Paradoxes of Accountability and the Impacts of Performance Indicators on Liberal Education in Canada,” G. Grosjean and co-authors look at the ways in which quantitative performance measurement models have damaged the liberal arts. Taking Alberta as a case study, it sees three steps in a process that has brought us to this point.

The first was the development of unsuitable performance indicators. When, in 1994, the government required three-year business plans with a new emphasis on performance measurement, it provided performance models and management systems suited to “science” disciplines.

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Grosjean and co-authors write that, even though the government acknowledged “the need for qualitative assessments for ‘non-science’ disciplines like the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities...in each successive business plan and report of the Minister’s Forum, there is no evidence that such measures were developed.” The inevitable effect of the ill fit between the measure and the subject is marginalization.

Step two emerged in 1995, when the Ministry of Advanced Education and Career Development (AECD) devised its system—detailed in the report “Promoting Excellence in Alberta’s Public Adult Learning System”—of “envelope funding” as “a proactive method...to guide institutions in the directions that meet specific government objectives and the needs of adult learners.” University budgets were now divided into two streams: a general operating budget to fund programs, administration and capital requirements, and “performance-driven ‘envelopes’ of funds that (a) reward performance in meeting Alberta’s goals for adult learning, and (b) assist and act as incentives for universities to make changes in support of system objectives.” This restructuring of Alberta universities’ funding was designed to create compliance, and, as the Grosjean study finds, it “redefines previous notions of what constitutes a high-quality education.”

Finally, in 1999, the government redesigned administration of the whole Alberta education system. The Department of Advanced Education and Career Development was scrapped, career development was moved to the new Department of Human Resources, and the formal research function of AECD was moved to the new Department of Innovation and Science. This move, the study concludes, “places research in the humanities and social sciences in an even more precarious position as the creation of ‘new knowledge’ becomes the responsibility of a department oriented towards innovation and production.”

Concerned for the future of social science and humanities research, the Confederation of Alberta Faculty Associations wrote to the senate sub-committee on post-secondary education, warning about the outcomes of inappropriate measures. “[A]ssumptions about the need for ‘applied’ research,” it said, “work against the cause of research in the social sciences and humanities; however, if the results of research in the social sciences and humanities are harder to quantify in terms of economic out-

comes, they are nevertheless essential to our understanding of who we are as a nation.”

THE BROAD “USEFULNESS” OF A LIBERAL EDUCATION HAS been narrowly refocused, bypassing the issue of the value of a broadly educated population in favour of the single concern about graduates’ labour market performance. Some politicians have targeted the liberal arts. Ontario’s Premier Mike Harris, for instance, won attention with his comment that historians and sociologists had nothing to contribute to society and that Canada had enough “great thinkers.” Following a plea from Syncrude CEO and U of A board chair Eric Newell for adequate funding for post-secondary education, Stockwell Day said at a Conservative convention in Edmonton that the sciences needed more money, but perhaps it could merely be reallocated out of the liberal arts.

What appears to underlie this kind of comment is the general impression that arts students don’t get jobs. This impression, however, is false. Study after study in the last five years has shown that graduates of liberal arts programs do indeed get jobs, and that their career earnings are highly competitive. To the intrinsic and instrumental values of an arts degree, add a positive market value. These studies tell a consistent story. “Success by Degrees,” a 1997 study undertaken for the U of A senate, indicates that, five years after graduation, graduates of arts and science programs are employed at the same rate and at a slightly higher rate than the university’s average for graduates of all programs. The same year, the U of A employment survey of 1994 graduates showed an employment rate almost identical with that of engineering (arts, 93.5 per cent; engineering, 93.6 per cent) while, interestingly, science was somewhat behind (90.9 per cent). UBC economist Robert Allen’s much cited and extensive work on labour market outcomes concludes that arts graduates do well in the labour market, and though figures differ by gender and by specific area of study, the salaries they earn are competitive with other professional salaries. Since his first study in 1996, Allen has held that the general education of the liberal arts is the best preparation for employability, much superior to specific technical skill training.

It appears that a liberal education may be an advantage in the knowledge economy. Last spring, the chancellors of Ontario universities issued a public statement of concern about what is happening to the liberal arts. Following that, the CEOs of 30 of Canada’s high-tech companies

issued a statement of their own. These were heavy hitters: Pierre-Paul Allard, president of Cisco Systems; Jean Monty, president and CEO of BCE; Don Tapscott, president and CEO of New Paradigm Learning Corporation. "Yes," they said, "this country needs more technology graduates, but we have an equally strong need for those with broader background.... A liberal education nurtures skills and talents increasingly valued by modern corporations.... To prosper we need creative thinkers at all levels of the enterprise who are comfortable dealing with decisions in the bigger context. They must be able to communicate—to reason, create, write and speak—for shared purposes: for hiring, training, managing, marketing and policy-making. In short, they provide leadership."

Robert Allen agrees. Computers and information technology, he says, have "revolutionized the organization of business and government bureaucracies" and changed the nature of organizations. The "new-style organizations" they have produced "put a premium on workers who can relate models to real situations, work well with other members of a management team or with clients, and who can speak and write effectively. These skills are developed in humanities and social science programs." Dawn Farrell, executive vice-president of corporate development at TransAlta told an audience at the U of C last September that "the pace of change that all of our businesses face is enormous." Catching up, she said, would depend on *people*. And, as if to confirm Allen's conclusion, she took her list of "attributes and qualities" these people would need straight out of a description of the goals of a liberal education.

DEFENDING THE LIBERAL ARTS IN AN ENVIRONMENT OF quantitative measures and funding envelopes designed "as incentives for universities to make changes in support of system objectives" has not been easy for university leaders. But university presidents are now speaking forcefully to the needs of the future. "Many of our biggest societal challenges," they said in their brief to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance, "are outside the realm of science and technology." If we intend to deal with those challenges, we will need to consider whether the increasingly narrow focus of university research aimed at immediate commercial return is more likely to obstruct than enable the development of the knowledge we need.

Martha Piper, president of UBC, told the Calgary Chamber of Commerce last June that what will be required in the new century is "an educated workforce capable of producing new ideas, at ease with cultures throughout the world, and socially responsive." Paul Davenport, president of the University of Western Ontario, said recently in Toronto that the issues addressed and skills developed in liberal arts programs "take on a special urgency in the knowledge-based socie-

ty, as we confront the social and ethical dimensions of rapid technological change, from protecting our environment to managing the results of genetic discoveries in human reproduction and health care." Robert Birgenau, newly installed president of the U of T, himself a physicist, said last November: "It is unthinkable that we could fully educate our students and equip them with the tools for critical thinking if their education were to be divorced from liberal studies."

In Alberta, a liberal education has a powerful contribution to make, over and beyond the needs of the economy, new or old. For one thing, graduates are building the imaginative and social culture that defines us. As engineer Len Bruton, former U of C vice-president, research, affirms, Alberta's growing presence on the world stage requires a strong and sophisticated cultural base. For another, the liberal arts in Alberta universities are a key point of access to higher education—and therefore to a wide range of careers—to students not likely for various reasons to seek or gain admission to other faculties. Their open door brings into our post-secondary education system people whose talent or brilliance might otherwise be lost.

The liberal arts in our society are a key instrument of social mobility, the very opposite of elitism. And, in a period characterized by radical and unceasing social change—the globalized economy, the transformation of our international relations, the overwhelming impact of new technologies, and the as yet unassessed social impact of breakthrough bio-medical research—we need a strong base in the human and social sciences more than ever.

Alberta's universities are key partners in the province's economy; and they are partners in the province's culture, too. At the end of the day, our universities will be measured by how well they have contributed to human knowledge, helped solve human problems and opened the world for students. Among the major challenges facing us now are many that will require more than technical know-how to solve, and more than a bottom-line economic perspective to understand.

Think of these issues: child poverty, family violence, youth crime, the integration of immigrants, illiteracy, the environment, social cohesion. Which discipline will solve these problems? They will certainly not be solved by technical wizardry alone. The vision necessary to meet these and other problems will be social *and* economic *and* political *and* artistic. These perspectives must be sustained in our universities. If we lose them, what will the outcome be? A society, says Roger Smith, that "will have lost touch with human values and what makes life rich."

Patricia Clements is president of the Humanities and Social Sciences Federation of Canada, a professor of English and former dean of arts at the U of A.