



Assessing the Value of Higher Education

Attempting to assess the value of higher education is a pursuit of increasing importance and relevance in the 21st century. In fact, a Google search of “value of

higher education” turns up almost 29 million hits. Though this can't be seen as definitive proof that our society is preoccupied by the question, “what is a degree worth?” It does, however, demonstrate in a tangible way that there is a great deal of interest from researchers, governments and individuals alike.

For universities, considering the question and how it can be answered is of particular importance: it is an assessment of the benefit of what we do, not just for our students but for society more generally. The Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada recently released its own take on the question, in which it identified a series of advantages for university graduates like increased employability, more rapid income increases over their careers, and increased adaptability to the changing needs of the employment market. It also articulated others that are not strictly individual, but also societal in scope, like reduced reliance on social programs, better health status, and greater engagement in social and political activities.

With benefits like these, it is little wonder that investment in education is one of largest calls on the public purse in Canada, and considerations of the degree to which governments should adjust the levels of investment generate healthy debate over fundamental questions of public policy.

What these discussions sometimes miss, though, are the more intangible benefits of post-secondary education that have a less quantifiable, yet powerful value of their own.

At the 2010 Fall Convocation dinner, at which our community had the opportunity to celebrate the achievements of honorary degree recipients Dr. Bernard Weiner and Dr. Phil Fontaine, those in attendance also got to hear from two students about the opportunities they had, while studying at the University of Manitoba, to contribute their ideas and energy to something that transcended their individual interest, and to build from the

framework of their classroom education an experience that they each might describe as transformative.

David Tang, a recent graduate, spoke about his work with Let's Talk Science, a national science literacy program for children, through which he had the opportunity to bring science to children in Winnipeg's inner city and excite them about the possibilities that learning about science can bring to their lives. Tito Daodu, currently a second year medical student, shared her experiences doing community health research work for her BSc (Med) project in Nigeria, and how it fuelled her passion for pursuing a world where basic health care is available to all, despite their financial circumstances. Their experiences were very different, but what was consistent was their compelling passion for what they were doing and their unmistakable view that it was because of the University of Manitoba that they were able to make these contributions.

These stories are not unique. Time and again, when I meet with alumni of our university, I hear variations of this message—that being part of the University of Manitoba helped you find your calling, pursue your dreams, identify ways to contribute to your communities and define a future that promises not only economic well-being, but fulfilment.

I believe it is because so many of our students have benefited from this potential for transformation at the University of Manitoba that alumni fingerprints can be found on a range of activities that support students' learning outside of the classroom.

Many graduates donate to their faculties' endowment funds, which support a variety of initiatives—including travel to student competitions and the development of student spaces. The BSc (Med) program, for instance, benefits from support from the MD Class of 1949 and has done for the last decade. Several noted alumni have provided their support to a diversity of initiatives that enhance the student experience, including leadership in student government, participation in international exchanges and student competitions with their counterparts from other universities around the world. Our alumni also play an important role in mentoring our students, both informally and through organizations like The Associates and Friends of Engineering, and offer opportunities for them to gain experience outside the university through research projects or co-op placements in their organizations.

Our mission—communicating knowledge through teaching, pursuing knowledge through research and applying knowledge to serve society—is, at its heart, about building bigger futures. In thinking about your time at university, I hope you are able to point to your time here at the University of Manitoba as having done so for you, and consider whether there are ways you now can help current students do the same.

David Barnard president and vice-chancellor