



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION: KRISTINA SULATYCKI & LIZ DURDEN

**NOT JUST A STEPPING STONE** Despite what other people think, your Arts degree has plenty of merit on its own.

# Arts degrees are so much more than just high-priced toilet paper



JACALYN AMBLER

Distilled, this view is relatively simple: progress, of both the ideological and tangible varieties, is both good and inevitable. Any debate of whether or not this is actually true is largely ignored (and, somewhat ironically, falls largely to various liberal arts academics to debate endlessly).

Certainly, most of us, at least unconsciously, accept it to be the case. And it's scientific discovery and technological innovation that remain the twin driving forces behind our inevitable advancement.

Few (with the noted exceptions of the late Ned Ludd and his followers) would dispute the role of these hard-data disciplines in determining the essential building blocks of our world. However, they're very different from determining the kind of society we live in.

**From science, we've learned how to build an atomic bomb, but not when and where we should or shouldn't use it.**

There's nothing inherent in any scientific development that acts alone to shape our world—science, in fact, declares itself void of the morals, customs, values and norms that act—whether we want them to or not, as society's essential guiding forces. From science, we've learned how to build an atomic bomb, but not when and where we should or shouldn't use it.

Science may one day be able to teach us how to discriminate between embryos based on pre-supposed genetic capabilities, but it won't let us know, in a footnote, that there may (or may not) be problems with doing so; that we may injure our society and what we believe it to stand for.

These problems, and issues, have nothing to do with science as it's traditionally defined. They have to do

purely with the society that we wish to use science to create.

The social sciences or liberal arts are the ones that are most intimately and immediately involved in this creation. Every lens that science is seen through, and every value that determines whether or not we fight for certain developments—or think of them as abominations—is shaped, discussed, torn apart, and reformulated by political scientists, philosophers, psychologists, and their fellows, and has been for hundreds of years.

The complaint of many is that this endless discussion has failed to yield definitive answers, that issues haven't been resolved, that the "best" lenses and values haven't been identified, and that, therefore, no "progress"—in society's preferred sense of the word—has been made.

It seems unexceptional to conclude that those questions which are most important are the ones that take on new meaning and significance as the society of which they're so integral a part of grows, evolves, develops, and continues, to present new considerations.

As long as such issues are discussed, they'll alter society, but those changes will be the very catalyst that raises them up for discussion once again.

Answers are, therefore, not the focus of an Arts degree, looking for them is. It's not the answers prompted by this search, but the discourse it provides, that moves certain ideas into the forefront of societal consciousness while pulling others back. And this movement is society's true propulsive force.

So, fellow Arts students, next time someone gives you the all-skeptical eyebrow raise, don't tuck on a pre-law afterthought, or any other explanation, for your degree.

Tell them you're studying the Big Questions—or, if you prefer, attest to studying chemo-thermal-nuclear-radiology, and then stare at them as if suffering from an integer-induced nervous breakdown until they go away.

But whatever you do, keep talking.



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