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The arts degree of the future

How are schools responding to lower enrollment in the humanities? By creating integrated hybrid programs



Attracted by the wide range of skill sets it would provide, Amy Zhou, 23, opted for the University of Waterloo's honours arts and business program.

By **ANDREA JANUS**

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Three years ago, when Anna Moro was relatively new as associate dean (academic) in the faculty of humanities at McMaster University, she started thinking about the kind of education the students in her department were getting.

While a strong believer in the value of a liberal arts education — from fostering emotional intelligence and social awareness to instilling writing and critical-thinking skills — Moro recognized the pressures her students were facing about what, exactly, their degrees would lead to.

“Even when they come in knowing what they want to do, English or philosophy or linguistics, they feel the pressure — peer pressure or parental pressure — of, ‘What are you going to do with that?’” Moro says.

“That there isn’t an immediate job in mind that one is trained for.”

Noticing a slight drop in enrollment in humanities courses — less than the provincial average of about 14 per cent over the last decade — Moro approached her counterpart at the university’s DeGroote School of Business about business training for her students. Emad Mohammad, associate professor, accounting and financial management services, agreed immediately, and the bachelor of arts with a specialized minor in commerce was born.

The limited-enrollment program — it’s capped at 30 students — was first offered in the fall of 2015, and is currently at two-thirds capacity. Students must meet the same math and economics requirements as business students to be accepted, says Moro. “We’ve been working to get the word out that incoming humanities students should come prepared with stronger math requirements if they wish to pursue that program,” she says. Moro didn’t want to respond to the decline in applications by buying into an argument that a humanities education is less relevant today, and doing away with courses.

“Perhaps we need it now more than ever because we need to understand different people’s perspectives, we need to understand the cultural, historical and religious implications of many conflicts around the world,” she says. Lindsay D’Souza, 21, of Mississauga, in her fourth year in honours English with the specialized minor, transferred to the program after taking an elective commerce class in organizational behaviour.

The program is not only a “better fit” for her, she says, but also offers her “balance” in her education. “In commerce, it’s very much working with people, organizations, marketing, human resources, but then in English I get a different side of leadership. It’s how to communicate, how to analyze critical readings in different topics like gender studies,” D’Souza says.

According to the Council of Ontario Universities, in 2015-16 there were 38,500 full-time students enrolled in humanities in this province, about nine per cent of the total population of full-time students.

It’s the fourth-most popular field of study, the council says.

While enrollment in humanities has grown by 41 per cent since 2000-01, the data for more recent years show a decline. In the decade between 2006 and 2015, humanities enrollment has dropped by 14 per cent.

Applications for these programs are down despite the fact that nearly 92 per cent of humanities graduates report being employed two years after graduation, the council says. While the average

starting salary for a humanities graduate is low at about \$40,000 a year, it is a reflection of the fact that many of these graduates go

into the social services, arts and education.

Like McMaster, some schools are altering their humanities offerings to integrate learning with other disciplines,

including the University of Waterloo, which offers an honours arts and business degree, and Carlton University in Ottawa, which has a bachelor of humanities and biology.

The seemingly unlikely pairing of science and humanities began in 2008 to give students an opportunity to combine two subjects they were interested in at the time. While Carleton's College of Humanities was also experiencing what director Shane Hawkins calls a "small drop" in enrollment, response to this program, as well as the journalism and humanities option, has been robust and applications have been up in the last four years.

Currently, nearly a third of the school's 70 humanities students are in biology or journalism. "There are probably a lot of students who found the humanities program interesting, but maybe they were hesitating and they decided to do something else,"

Hawkins says. "Now that we have them combined, they say, 'Okay I'll do that.'" Students have gone on to science careers, med school, law and other professions. "It gives graduates kind of an advantage, and it doesn't necessarily close them off in one direction," he says.

Over at Waterloo, well known for its co-op programs, the honours arts and business program offers opportunities for students to gain on-the-job experience.

The program was born out of the honours applied studies program, which was created in the 1980s, to extend co-op opportunities across the Waterloo's faculty of arts. The name was officially changed to honours arts and business in 2004.

"All of a sudden not only did our first choices increase, but overall admissions to the program went up dramatically," says Emanuel Carvalho, associate dean, co-op, administration and planning for the Waterloo's faculty of arts. The program admits 400 students, which represents approximately 31 per cent of total students admitted to the faculty of arts. Students go on to graduate studies including MBAs, law school or teachers' college, Carvalho says, or straight into the workforce. "It offers you the opportunity to pursue that education, that passion, and at the same time build a business component to your degree," he says.

Amy Zhou, 23, planned to study English with a second major in political science or economics, but didn't have well-defined career goals when she started at Waterloo. The variety of courses in the arts and business program appealed to her. "Having both an English and economics background, I feel, gives me a lot of breadth in terms of the types of things I could be doing," says Zhou, this year's valedictorian and graduate of the faculty of arts. "And then having the business component added in, where I was able to supplement a lot of things I was learning to help me be more marketable, has really opened up my world."

She now holds a full-time job (councillor's assistant) with her local councillor in her hometown of Ottawa, but is considering a graduate program in urban planning.

Back at McMaster, Mohammad was inspired by the commerce minor to offer a new Integrated Business and Humanities (IBH) program, designed to give commerce students the so-called “soft” skills of communication, writing, critical-thinking and problem-solving.

“In addition to giving commerce students the skills of liberal arts education, the IBH provides different perspectives that allow multiple framing of problems and reflexivity,” says Mohammad. “The skills employers look for in students.” He had more than 450 initial applications for 80 spaces in the program. Moro believes such integrated programs McMaster, Waterloo and Carleton are now offering will become more commonplace. “Sure there’s been a slight decline over the years, but we’re trying to reach out to students in different ways,” Moro says. “Also recognize it is a different world, and we need to show people what we can offer,” she says, “and if it’s offering humanities in combination with other things, I think that’s just fine.”



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