

# Why universities warrant public investment: Preparing students for living together well

December 15 2023, by Jennifer S Simpson

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A [recent report](#) noting that funding for Ontario's universities is "low when compared with support in other provinces" points to [underfunding as a serious problem](#) in the province's post-secondary sector.

Funding quickly raises the question of value: what is it that [universities offer](#) that warrants public investment?

Much of my own research has posited that universities have a [responsibility to contribute](#) to the public good and to equity.

## Universities' obligations to public life

Academic research and reports authored by [educational](#), [not-for-profit](#) and [governmental](#) organizations confirm that universities are integral to democratic societies.

[The question of the purposes of universities](#) is both long-standing and one that has elicited many perspectives. Recent global attention to both systemic forms of injustice and increasingly urgent climate crises underscore the complexity of considering universities' obligations to public life.

I contend that the central contribution of post-secondary institutions, related to graduate and [undergraduate education](#), is to prepare students to attend to the practices of living together well—with the capacities to recognize inequity and advance equity, in field-specific settings and a range of communities.

## Contested conversation about purpose

While many faculty members might agree [with the idea that a university education will ideally respond to](#) professional, intellectual and public and equity-related priorities, the conversation can quickly become contested.

Indeed, implementation of this idea does present challenges. And yet—graduates will enter a world in which systemic forms of inequity are present in a variety of settings and sectors. The likelihood of a university graduate encountering inequity in their chosen profession or field is less a question of if than when and how.

Likewise, the view that universities can educate students who can contribute to a more equitable future offers a constructive and bold response to the question of what a university education is for.

Universities can and do prepare graduates to contribute to their professions, to economic interests, and to the public good. The economic, civic and intellectual ends of a university education do not need to be placed in opposition to one another, or set up as binary or discreet.

## **The ends of a university education**

Increasingly, universities and accreditation bodies alike are affirming the multiple and overlapping interests a university degree supports, including the importance of curricular attention to [diversity and equity](#).

One obvious concrete end of a university education is the [intellectual endeavor](#), which typically includes the acquisition of knowledge and the [life of the mind](#).

Civic ends constitute a second purpose of a university education: ideally, students will be able to consider how a degree prepares them to think and [act as citizens](#) and participate in key public decisions.

Those in industry, provincial and federal governments, and the post-secondary sector stress the importance of preparing students for the [labor market](#) and for [employment](#).

Studies have demonstrated that students, whether in professional disciplines (such as nursing or engineering) or those not governed by accreditation bodies (like philosophy or film) [will make significant economic and civic contributions](#), whether in the public sector or other industries.

## All education is consequential

Directly asserting that universities have an obligation to contribute to the practices of living together well with an eye toward equity can quickly raise objections from within and outside of higher education.

There are many who are most comfortable with the belief [that universities are neutral institutions](#) and that academic programs ought to [maintain this neutrality](#) via a clear and often specific reliance on rational, discipline-specific thought or methods. In fact, in providing content in academic programs and specific courses, faculty [members endorse a way of seeing the world](#).

Faculty members teach in ways that, implicitly or explicitly and intentionally or not, variously endorse the status quo and existing forms of injustice, or call attention to the need for equity and provide an education that speaks to this need.

## Orienting students toward what is possible

Time in the classroom and in conversation with [faculty members](#) and other students will shape habits, inform priorities and orient students toward what is possible and desirable.

Graduates' choices and actions will nearly always have a bearing on how people live. Whether in sociology or biology or mathematics, courses will orient students in [how to understand the world](#) in which they live, and also in regard to what their responsibilities are to that world in the context of their chosen fields.

We can do so in ways that underscore the hallmarks of intellectual engagement: curiosity, openness to various perspectives, attention to

context, and listening to those with whom we disagree.

## The practices of living together well

Universities are places for deliberation, inquiry, curiosity and investigation. In teaching students, university faculty have the privilege of asking why, how and what for in regard to numerous settings and situations, and the pleasure of bringing knowledge and different perspectives to bear on how classroom learning affects our society.

We live in a world in which systemic forms of inequity persist. In designing courses and academic programs, faculty have an opportunity to engage students with field-specific knowledge and to attend to the practical and ethical uses of that knowledge once students graduate.

For all these reasons, a university [education](#) at its best will be attentive to the public good and to equity, and to civic, intellectual and employment ends.

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