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Scott Stirrett is founder and executive director of Venture for Canada, a not-for-profit that connects top Canadian university graduates to work at startups.

Venture for Canada

## Why liberal arts degrees are more valuable than you might think

Scott Stirrett

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What are you going to do with your humanities degree? This is a question that almost anyone who has studied the humanities faces at some point from a skeptical relative or friend.

The belief that humanities graduates, which [can include](#) those who studied philosophy, literature, religion, art, music, history and language, bring little or no value to the work force is unfortunately an all too common narrative in our society.

With a surge in demand for technical graduates, it is easy to see why one would question the value of a humanities degree. STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) graduates bring vital technical skills to Canadian startups, which are in short supply. At [Venture for Canada](#), we have seen this demand first-hand and as a result have gone out of our way to recruit STEM talent for Canadian startups.

Nevertheless, when building a team, it is important that entrepreneurs hire individuals from all academic backgrounds, which means seeking out and hiring more humanities graduates as well, recognizing the unique skill-sets and experiences these individuals can bring.

Every academic discipline equips individuals with valuable tools and perspectives. Part of building a diverse workplace is ensuring there is a diversity of academic backgrounds. As a consequence of different life experiences and training, a chemical engineer is likely to see an issue differently than an art history graduate. The best, plans, strategies, and ideas are hashed out through bringing many unique perspectives to the table.

This has been backed up by countless studies, which have proven that companies that foster diversity are more successful than those that don't. As a recent Harvard Business Review [article](#) argues, "diversity unlocks innovation by creating an environment where 'outside the box' ideas are heard." Companies where everyone thinks similarly are less likely to innovate and more likely to embrace tunnel vision and group think.

Making a similar point, Steve Jobs [said](#) that "it's in Apple's DNA that technology alone is not enough – that it's technology married with liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yields us the result that makes our hearts sing." Jobs also [commented](#) that "creativity is just connecting things" and "the broader one's understanding of the human experience, the better design [users] will have." Teams with minimal academic diversity are not as easily able to connect seemingly unrelated experiences or concepts, because their collective backgrounds are less diverse.

In the same vein, Jeff Bezos, CEO/founder of Amazon, is a bibliophile who requires senior executives to write six-page memos, which are read by attendees at the beginning of meetings. In a Fortune profile, Bezos [says](#) "there is no way to write a six-page, narratively structured memo and not have clear thinking."

Writing a 40-page paper on *Hamlet* may seem like a waste of time if one is planning on working in business. However, the exercise of writing that paper is as much or more about sharpening one's communication and logic skills as it is learning about Shakespeare.

In a 100-person software company, as many as 40 of the employees [will likely work](#) in sales alone. In roles such as marketing and sales, the ability to communicate effectively is paramount, which means studying the humanities is a great training to potentially excel in these fields.

Studying the humanities also equips one with skills useful for inter-cultural understanding and communication. Through studying and reading about the history, religion, culture, and philosophy of other countries, an individual is able to develop a heightened understanding of how different societies function, which can help in everything from small-talk to closing international sales deals.

In addition, numerous studies have demonstrated how reading fiction develops empathy by forcing readers to put themselves in others' shoes. In a world where inter-personal skills are ever important, the humanities help to develop core skills essential to most careers.

These findings have also been backed up by my experience leading [Venture for Canada](#), where we have seen the substantial number of humanities graduates, who we recruit, train, and support in the transition to working in startups, thrive in their roles.

There is no better time than today for small businesses to hire humanities graduates, who are a considerably untapped area of the work force.

Next time you see on a résumé someone has studied art history or political science – don't rule the person out – he or she could be your next great hire.

*Scott Stirrett is founder and executive director of [Venture for Canada](#), a not-for-profit that connects top Canadian university graduates to work at startups.*

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