

Let's upgrade undergrads to first-class citizens

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It's a "tsunami"! Or a "Copernican revolution." So say the president of Stanford and other university leaders. Not since the turn of the last millennium have so many people rung the doomsday alarm. This time it's not the end of the world we're worrying about, but the disintegration of undergraduate university education as we know it. To which I say – maybe.

It's clear we're in a collective frenzy about the future of higher education, and the frenzy is likely to accelerate. Governments seek more accountability for the billions of tax dollars we all contribute. Students still seek transformative educations as well as job skills. Families seek access. Faculty seek meaningful engagement with students in an era that has opened up university education to the greatest percentage of any population in history. In our own ways we all seek "value for money," that awful phrase that lays bare the economics of one of the most profoundly human of experiences – the joy of getting an education.

Exactly how teaching and learning will be reshaped will, of course, be revealed over time. I say reshape rather than destroy, like a tsunami, because there are opportunities for renewing the model of university education, and doing so will liberate us all.

So, the sky is not falling. Let me offer a few ideas for revitalizing undergraduate education.

- 1.** Reaffirm the intrinsic value of an undergraduate education. There is nothing "under" about such an education. In our rush to claim fame and fortune through our graduate students, who are indeed key, we sometimes downplay the sheer value of students in the first cycle, as we call it in Quebec. First-cycle students are almost 85 per cent of our university population, even at most research universities.
- 2.** Immerse students in research—making new ideas, solving big problems – immediately upon arrival. Don't "save a major research project" for their final year. Ask them to plug in immediately. Create curriculum pathways to make that straightforward for everyone. This will revv up students intellectually, widening their horizons forever.
- 3.** Unleash student innovation. Some of the best ideas come from undergraduates who have not yet learned what "cannot be thought." Create and fund incubators, ateliers, accelerators for those ideas. Include social innovation as well as the more usual kinds of entrepreneurship. Adopt problem-based learning models.
- 4.** Require fewer courses for a degree, and expect more to happen in each course. Emphasize depth rather than surface learning, which may be all one has time for when taking five, six or seven courses in a given semester.
- 5.** Insist on rigour. On transcripts, publish the class average alongside the student's mark. Use learning portfolios alongside transcripts to capture achievements.
- 6.** Emphasize critical thinking, writing, and numeracy across all academic programs. Ask future professors to learn something about how people learn stuff while they themselves are in graduate

school, and how to teach critical thinking and writing or numeracy or both, depending on the needs of their own academic discipline.

7. Use peer teaching, especially in courses with larger enrolments. Use peer-to-peer teaching to reach out to students in similar courses at universities across the world. That would also help prepare them for success in an interconnected workplace, community and world.

8. Reconstruct academic degree programs to create more multidisciplinary learning. Today's students don't want to be hemmed in by disciplinary boundaries drawn mostly in the nineteenth century. Many faculty don't want it either.

9. Break through two decades of talk of "internationalization of the curriculum" and create significant opportunities for students, perhaps online, to engage the big world beyond the university campus. Skype?

10. Embrace online learning and other media tools. Use them to create hybrid learning environments. Make these tools your servants. Call on these online tools to help students see ideas in 3D – make a concept, a molecule, a design, a historical artifact come alive. Use them to teach basic concepts. Across Canadian universities this happens now; we must do more. We can then devote more class time to Socratic discussions and problem-solving.

At Concordia, almost 15 per cent of our course enrollments this year are in online courses. More than 30,000 registrations. These courses are carefully created by our faculty members in partnership with learning strategists, and they signal one way of the future.

Universities, I'll wager, will settle on the full range of options: some face-to-face courses; blended courses; and fully-online academic programs. And we will do it well, because quality still matters deeply to us.

I don't see a tsunami. I do see many forces pressing for change.

Universities have historic strengths, and we make substantial contributions to our nation and our world. I'm optimistic that we will rise to this new challenge.

We need to rethink undergraduate education holistically. And to do so swiftly enough, and boldly enough, that doomsday won't come.

Alan Shepard is president of Concordia University in Montreal.