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Restoring universities the original mission

by FRANK STRONACH

About a month from now, hundreds of thousands of students in cap and gown will attend graduation ceremonies on university campuses across Canada.

The students will graduate with a lot of knowledge regarding topics such as philosophy, sociology and political science.

The one topic they won't have explored, however, might be the most important one of all ? and that's the question of what constitutes an ideal society.

The Greek philosopher Plato founded the Academy around 2,400 years ago, regarded by many as the first university in the West. At the top of the curriculum at Plato's Academy was the subject of what constitutes an ideal society.

Plato's ideal state included features such as justice, harmony and the greater good of society.

But what about our society? What do we believe are the essential building blocks for creating a more civilized society, one that brings the greatest amount of freedom, peace and prosperity to its citizens?

Universities are the ideal place to explore these sorts of issues. After all, advancing knowledge and exploring new ideas are a fundamental part of a university's DNA.

Over the years, I've had dealings with many universities around the world. I've funded research centres related to entrepreneurship and technological innovation and given guest lectures on campuses in Canada, the US and Europe.

But until recently, it never occurred to me to consider what was the overriding purpose of a university. In conceiving and drafting the framework of an ideal society, universities should look at all aspects ? everything from the arts and sports to business and medicine. They should also consider the ideal structure of government ? one that ensures individual liberty and places certain checks on the power of elected officials.

One of the ways we currently do that is through our charter of democratic rights and freedoms. But what about other rights, including, most importantly, economic rights? Why has no society ever enshrined an economic charter of rights, and what should those rights be?

My belief is that economic charters of rights will help create economic democracies, and economic democracies ? where the greatest number of people enjoy the greatest amount of wealth ? are the foundation for democracy itself. I also believe that an economic charter of rights would be one of the cornerstones of any ideal society.

The composition of an ideal society isn't just something for ancient philosophers to ponder. It's a noble quest that we should likewise pursue ? and our universities should be leading the way.

Universities can get the ball rolling by inviting some of the world's best minds and accomplished people to talk about the framework necessary for building an ideal society. They should convene symposia and open forums and begin mapping out a blueprint for what that society would look like and what we need to construct it. And they should create new faculties solely dedicated to this topic.

That doesn't mean throwing out many of the features that have made our society a magnet for people from around the world. Instead, it's a chance to make our society greater yet ? to add new elements that would enrich the lives of its citizens while shoring up many of the shortcomings that are currently holding us back.

The ancient Greeks thought the creation of an ideal society was a noble pursuit and ended up building one of the greatest civilizations the world has ever seen.

We should also take up the same challenge. A society that stops striving for greatness is a decaying society.

To learn more about how an economic charter could improve our society, contact info@economiccharter.ca.