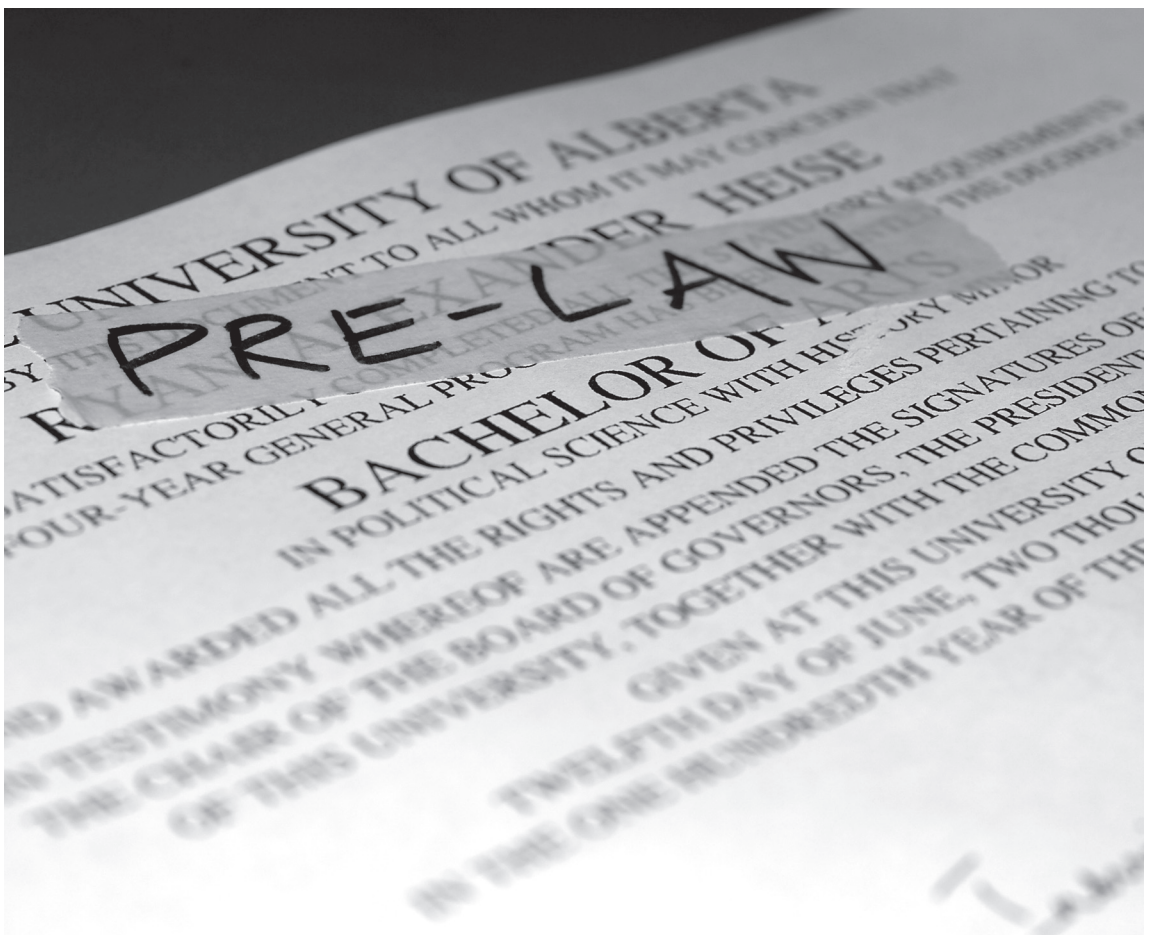

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION: KRYSTINA SULATYCKI & LIZ DURDEN

NOT JUST A STEPPING STONE Despite what other people think, your Arts degree has plenty of merit on its own.

Arts degrees are so much more than just high-priced toilet paper

JACALYN AMBLER

The most frightening thing about epidemics is that they often go under-reported and undetected until it is too late to do little, if anything, about them.

One reason why community newspapers are so important is that they help to get the word out on local issues such as this. For example, witness the *Gateway*'s coverage on last year's Norwalk virus.

However, this time I'm disappointed: I've yet to see a shred of space in this or any other newspaper devoted to the latest outbreaks of an illness that, although by no means new, has been particularly contagious as of late. I'm speaking, of course, of the dangerous and unsightly strain of "pre-lawitis" currently rampant among Arts undergraduates.

Now, I've got absolutely nothing against the profession itself. This also isn't an article about how people should stop referring to themselves with ridiculous titles meant to act as indicators of their future, as-yet-unrealized success (although it could be).

But I can't help feeling that the number of my fellow Arts students who grasp at this particular nomenclature have just had a bad experience. It might have been a distant relative (or neighbor, or salesperson) who greeted their degree pronouncement with an injurious raised eyebrow—or, as one of my high school friends did, with a guidance counselor who cut off her questions concerning the benefits of philosophy with a blunt (though paraphrased), "Go into Science. Arts is a terrible waste of time."

Unnerving as these affronts may be, they become more understandable if the dominant western worldview is given some consideration.

Distilled, this view is relatively simple: progress, of both the ideological and tangible varieties, is both good and inevitable. Any debate of whether or not this is actually true is largely ignored (and, somewhat ironically, falls largely to various liberal arts academics to debate endlessly).

Certainly, most of us, at least unconsciously, accept it to be the case. And it's scientific discovery and technological innovation that remain the twin driving forces behind our inevitable advancement.

Few (with the noted exceptions of the late Ned Ludd and his followers) would dispute the role of these hard-data disciplines in determining the essential building blocks of our world. However, they're very different from determining the kind of society we live in.

> **From science, we've learned how to build an atomic bomb, but not when and where we should or shouldn't use it.**

There's nothing inherent in any scientific development that acts alone to shape our world—science, in fact, declares itself void of the morals, customs, values and norms that act—whether we want them to or not, as society's essential guiding forces. From science, we've learned how to build an atomic bomb, but not when and where we should or shouldn't use it.

Science may one day be able to teach us how to discriminate between embryos based on pre-supposed genetic capabilities, but it won't let us know, in a footnote, that there may (or may not) be problems with doing so; that we may injure our society and what we believe it to stand for.

These problems, and issues, have nothing to do with science as it's traditionally defined. They have to do purely with the society that we wish to use science to create.

The social sciences or liberal arts are the ones that are most intimately and immediately involved in this creation. Every lens that science is seen through, and every value that determines whether or not we fight for certain developments—or think of them as abominations—is shaped, discussed, torn apart, and reformed by political scientists, philosophers, psychologists, and their fellows, and has been for hundreds of years.

The complaint of many is that this endless discussion has failed to yield definitive answers, that issues haven't been resolved, that the "best" lenses and values haven't been identified, and that, therefore, no "progress"—in society's preferred sense of the word—has been made.

It seems unexceptional to conclude that those questions which are most important are the ones that take on new meaning and significance as the society of which they're so integral a part of grows, evolves, develops, and continues, to present new considerations.

As long as such issues are discussed, they'll alter society, but those changes will be the very catalyst that raises them up for discussion once again.

Answers are, therefore, not the focus of an Arts degree, looking for them is. It's not the answers prompted by this search, but the discourse it provides, that moves certain ideas into the forefront of societal consciousness while pulling others back. And this movement is society's true propulsive force.

So, fellow Arts students, next time someone gives you the all-skeptical eyebrow raise, don't tack on a pre-law afterthought, or any other explanation, for your degree.

Tell them you're studying the Big Questions—or, if you prefer, attest to studying chemo-thermal-nuclear-radiology, and then stare at them as if suffering from an integer-induced nervous breakdown until they go away.

But whatever you do, keep talking.