

Builders Of Brilliance: Disrupting Theory In Practice

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*Essays advance a new idea, summarize a development, or initiate or engage in discussion. They may be narrower in scope than the above categories, but the subject matter should be of general scholarly interest.

Abstract

Amidst Canada's productivity crisis and widening social inequities, Humber Polytechnic's *Building Brilliance* vision proposes that economic and social development must be treated as mutually reinforcing priorities rather than competing priorities. Rather than optimizing traditional systems to reinforce the status quo, *Building Brilliance* aims to redesign Canada's educational system by transforming pedagogy, embedding personalized learning pathways, rethinking assessment, leveraging Universal Design for Learning, recognizing prior learning and lived experience, and broadening access to valued forms of economic, cultural, and social capital. Through its polytechnic approach, Humber opens new pathways for learners to acquire and convert capital in ways that enable fuller, more equitable participation in high-demand sectors of the workforce through flexible, learner-centred educational journeys while remaining deeply anchored in the needs of local communities.

Situated within Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital and educational reproduction, this essay examines how traditional post-secondary institutions disproportionately reward learners whose cultural capital already aligns with dominant academic norms, thereby reproducing social inequality under the guise of meritocracy. While Bourdieu's analysis emerged from a specific historical and national context, its insights remain highly relevant to contemporary Canadian post-secondary systems shaped by inherited structures of recognition, credentialing, and access. In contrast, Humber's *Building Brilliance* vision challenges these mechanisms by shifting from a model of educational reproduction to one of intentional system redesign that prioritizes learner agency, flexibility, and recognition of diverse forms of capital.

Polytechnic education, when deliberately structured around learner-centred pedagogies, personalized learning models enabled by inclusive design, and authentic, flexible assessment practices, can disrupt entrenched inequities while enhancing economic productivity. In doing so, Humber is positioned as an institutional exemplar and catalyst for systems-level transformation,

demonstrating how expanding participation in higher education can simultaneously advance social equity, strengthen economic resilience, and redefine excellence in the Canadian post-secondary landscape.

Introduction

As Canada faces a dual challenge of economic stagnation and persistent social inequities that constrain broad participation in the workforce, Humber Polytechnic's ambitious new vision, *Building Brilliance*, is intentionally designed to address social and economic development as mutually reinforcing priorities (Humber Polytechnic, 2024a). Humber's commitment to becoming "Builders of Brilliance" is a shared, social project—one that seeks not only to widen access to opportunity, but to reshape the systems and assumptions that determine whose knowledge, skills, and experiences are valued, ensuring that learners from underrepresented communities participate actively in defining, producing, and legitimizing the cultural, social, and professional capital recognized within the post-secondary ecosystem and across Canada's workforce.

Situating this work within Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital and mechanisms of educational reproduction provides a critical lens for understanding how traditional post-secondary systems bestow advantage by legitimizing particular forms of capital while rendering others invisible. As Bourdieu observes, cultural capital retains its power precisely because access to advanced education remains structurally constrained, particularly for learners from marginalized or economically restricted communities (Bourdieu, 1986). Through this lens, Humber's systems-change approach to polytechnic education aims to both expand and reconceptualize the forms of capital that are recognized and rewarded, thereby disrupting the reproduction of social inequality while contributing to a more productive, innovative, and resilient economy.

Building on its longstanding applied, competency-based, and learner-centred traditions, Humber is working with students, employees, alumni, and partners to reimagine capital itself and to redesign the institutional and ecosystem structures that shape learners' pathways. Central to this work is a shift away from one-size-fits-all models of education toward personalized learning journeys, enabled by inclusive pedagogical design and recognition of prior

learning. The sections that follow outline the theoretical framework and examine practical ways Humber is disrupting historically entrenched mechanisms of social and educational reproduction by positioning itself as an institutional exemplar and modelling what equitable, accessible education looks like in practice.

Pierre Bourdieu on the Forms of Capital & Educational Reproduction

Pierre Bourdieu argues that traditional educational institutions function as mechanisms of social reproduction that perpetuate inequality while appearing meritocratic (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Far from operating as neutral sites of knowledge transmission, these institutions are structured around particular forms of cultural capital—the dispositions, communication styles, ways of knowing, and credentials historically associated with dominant social classes. As a result, students who already possess these forms of capital, often through inherited family background rather than educational experience, are systematically advantaged (Bourdieu, 1986).

For Bourdieu, participation in education is never simply an individual act of learning; it is an encounter with a pre-existing traditional system whose norms and standards have been shaped over time by those already authorized within the field. Educational systems therefore tend to reward students for competencies they arrive with rather than for knowledge and capacities developed through the learning process itself (Medvetz and Sallaz, 2018). This dynamic produces credentials that carry social legitimacy and economic value, positioning some learners for mobility and influence while limiting others to less-valued forms of labour.

Bourdieu emphasizes that the unequal distribution of educational outcomes is inseparable from the unequal distribution of economic capital. Access to prolonged and advanced education depends on whether individuals and families possess the financial resources, time, and security required to sustain participation beyond the minimum level necessary for labour market entry. In this way, educational credentials function as a mechanism through which cultural capital is converted into economic capital, reinforcing class-based advantages across generations. Graduates who benefit from these systems are then positioned to pass those advantages on to their children, reproducing

inequality while preserving the appearance of fairness and merit (Bourdieu, 1977).

Crucially, Bourdieu argues that working-class and marginalized students do not simply possess different forms of cultural capital; rather, the educational system frequently fails to recognize their knowledge, lived experiences, and competencies as valuable at all. Dominant cultural preferences, such as abstract reasoning, theoretical knowledge, and particular modes of communication, are treated as natural indicators of intelligence and merit, while alternative ways of knowing are rendered invisible. This process of symbolic violence allows institutions to claim they admit and reward the best students while systematically privileging those whose cultural capital already aligns with institutional norms (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

While Bourdieu's theory emerged from a specific mid- to late-20th-century French class context, his analysis of the institutionalized reproduction of inequality remains highly relevant to understanding post-secondary systems that continue to be shaped by inherited 19th- and 20th-century educational structures. In contemporary Canada, the mechanisms and environments may operate differently, but the underlying dynamics of recognition, credentialing, and access remain deeply embedded. From this perspective, addressing educational inequity requires more than widening participation within unchanged systems; it demands disrupting and intentionally redesigning the systems themselves.

It is here that Humber Polytechnic's Builders of Brilliance institutional identity becomes particularly significant. *Building Brilliance* does not seek simply to redistribute access to existing forms of capital, but to redefine what counts as capital in the first place—and to transform how cultural, social, and economic capital are recognized, acquired, and converted into opportunity, particularly for learners facing structural barriers to participation (Humber Polytechnic, 2024a). This shift from reproduction to redesign requires moving beyond deficit-based interpretations of capital toward frameworks that recognize and legitimize the strengths learners already possess when they arrive. This framing raises a central question: *How can a polytechnic design educational systems that both expand opportunity for marginalized communities and contribute to a more equitable, socially just, and economically productive society?*

Reimagining Educational Systems: Building Brilliance in Action

Amidst global uncertainty and a widely noted national productivity crisis, Humber has articulated a clear institutional response with our ambitious vision: *Building Brilliance*. Guided by three strategic pillars and grounded in four building blocks, this ambitious vision offers a new North Star for Humber's applied, inclusive, and future-focused approach to education (see [Figure 1](#)). More than a strategic plan, *Building Brilliance* positions Humber as an active builder of a more accessible and adaptive education-to-economy pipeline: one that treats equity and economic productivity as mutually reinforcing outcomes rather than competing priorities. Humber is not waiting for the future, we are building it; and this commitment is expressed through our institution's focus on reimagining learning through personalized, learner-driven journeys, deepening partnerships with industry and government, and driving impact in our surrounding communities.

Importantly, this vision does not represent a departure from Humber's historic role as a community-rooted educational institution, rather it is a deliberate articulation and scaling of what has always been central to our mission and purpose. Read through the lens of Bourdieu's theory, the significance of *Building Brilliance* is about more than expanding access to existing educational structures, the real value proposition is in the redesign of mechanisms through which capital is recognized, accumulated, and converted into opportunity—particularly for learners who have been historically underserved by post-secondary systems (Smith, 2025). If traditional post-secondary systems reproduce inequality by legitimizing narrow forms of cultural capital (often inherited rather than learned) then disruption requires rethinking what counts as knowledge, whose experiences are valued, and how learning is translated into economic and social participation while intentionally redesigning learning pathways to reflect the realities of learners' lives.

Humber's polytechnic model of education responds to this challenge by reimagining learning, pedagogical practices, and modes of recognition around the individual while remaining deeply anchored in the local communities our institution exists to serve. Rather than expecting learners to adapt to rigid institutional norms, Humber is deliberately designing curricula, programs, and learning environments that meet learners where they are, shifting away from standardized,



Figure 1. Building Brilliance overview.

time-bound delivery toward more flexible and personalized learning journeys that expand access and broaden pathways to capital accumulation. Even as Humber’s reach and impact become increasingly global, this commitment reflects our long-standing responsibility to our surrounding communities.

This approach asserts that expanding access to high-quality, future-focused education does not dilute the value of cultural capital; rather, it cultivates a broader and more diverse pool of talent, knowledge, and expertise required to build a modern innovation economy. In this sense, Humber’s global relevance is strengthened by its continued investment in local access, mobility, and belonging. Put differently, Humber’s approach demonstrates that productivity gains and equity gains emerge together when more people can access, accumulate, and convert the forms of capital required to thrive in a rapidly evolving labour market. In practice, this vision is reflected in a personalized pedagogical model grounded in the principles of Universal Design for Learning

(UDL), as articulated by CAST (2004). The model recognizes learners’ prior learning and lived experience as legitimate forms of capital while blending academic learning, technical expertise, and applied, real-world skill development through flexible curricula that embed choice and multiple pathways for engagement, representation, and expression from the outset.

Humber’s commitment reflects Yosso’s (2005) articulation of community cultural wealth, which challenges deficit-based educational models by recognizing the cultural, linguistic, and social resources learners already possess. Rather than treating lived experience as peripheral to academic success, *Building Brilliance* positions these assets as foundations for further learning and capital accumulation. At a minimum, teaching should be about providing access to the privileged discourse by explicitly unpacking that discourse for marginalized learners (Northedge, 2003). *Building Brilliance*, however, aims to go further by disrupting the theorizing

space itself and recognizing that learners already possess valuable forms of cultural, linguistic, and social capital that traditional institutions and educational systems have historically overlooked, while giving learners greater agency to shape how they engage, demonstrate learning, and progress through personalized academic journeys.

As Yosso (2005) illustrates through Orellana's research on bilingual youth, learners who navigate multiple cultural and linguistic worlds often develop sophisticated competencies long before entering formal education, including "vocabulary, audience awareness, cross-cultural awareness, 'real-world' literacy skills, math skills, metalinguistic awareness, teaching and tutoring skills, civic and familial responsibility, [and] social maturity" (p. 79). Yet within traditional educational systems, such assets are rarely recognized as legitimate capital. *Building Brilliance* responds by redesigning educational structures that foreground strengths rather than deficits while positioning learners' lived experiences as foundations for further learning rather than obstacles to be overcome, including allowing learners to demonstrate mastery in varied ways aligned with their goals, responsibilities, and stages of readiness.

This reframing is evident in Humber's institution-wide learning outcomes and co-curricular experiences, which emphasize adaptability, collaboration, ethical reasoning, creativity, and lifelong learning alongside technical and academic competencies. The institution seeks to cultivate not only job-specific skills, but the mindsets, confidence, and agency required to navigate complex professional and personal pathways over time. In Bourdieu's terms, this represents an intentional effort to expand the forms of economic, cultural, and social capital that education helps learners acquire, and to ensure that these forms of capital are transferable across multiple fields through learning models that prioritize competence, flexibility, and learner progression over uniform duration.

Equally important are Humber's efforts to change how capital is acquired and how it is converted. Our longstanding academic upgrading programs and youth pathways provide structured entry points for learners whose educational trajectories have been shaped by economic insecurity, caregiving responsibilities, or systemic marginalization. Rather than functioning as remedial side routes, these

pathways are designed as legitimate on-ramps to post-secondary participation, supporting learners to build readiness, belonging, and momentum within personalized learning journeys that adapt to individual circumstances.

Finally, Humber's expansion of credit transfer and free Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) addresses one of the most persistent mechanisms of educational reproduction: the failure to recognize prior learning as legitimate capital. Reducing barriers to mobility and acknowledging learning gained through work, community, and life experience strengthens learners' ability to convert educational participation into meaningful credentials and, ultimately, into economic security (Humber Polytechnic, 2024b). These practices reduce the likelihood that education becomes a dead end for those with the least time, money, or institutional familiarity, and instead positions post-secondary learning as a viable and flexible pathway to opportunities for success.

Recent Ontario evidence reinforces the importance of this systems-level redesign. A 2025 study using Statistics Canada administrative data found that graduates of Ontario community college baccalaureate (CCB) programs earn a wage premium of between 5 and 14 percent within two years of graduation compared to university graduates, while being significantly less likely to incur significant student loan debt (Corral, 2025). These findings underscore that while college or polytechnic credentials can deliver strong early economic returns, inequitable pathways to advanced credentials risk reproducing long-term patterns of unequal access to advanced credentials and mobility. This is precisely the tension *Building Brilliance* seeks to address by expanding not only access to education, but also the legitimacy and portability of applied credentials across the post-secondary ecosystem.

Collectively, these efforts illustrate how *Building Brilliance* operates as a systems-level intervention. Rather than simply widening access to an unchanged hierarchy of capital, Humber is working to broaden and democratize the forms of capital that education recognizes, develops, and rewards; through personalized, learner-centred pathways enabled by inclusive design. Ultimately, disrupting mechanisms of reproduction while contributing to a more equitable, productive, and resilient society.

Redefining Excellence and Equity: Recommendations for Achieving Social Change Through Higher Education

For *Building Brilliance* to function as an instrument of social change that extends beyond simply creating parallel educational pathways, this transformation must occur both within and outside of Humber's institutional boundaries. Internally, this work builds on Humber's long-standing applied, competency-based, and learner-centered pedagogical traditions, extending them into a more explicitly equity-oriented redesign of systems, practices, and cultures. Rather than implying a wholesale overhaul, the redesign involves deepening and integrating existing institutional strengths through learner-centred pedagogies and inclusive design principles: reimagining curriculum, assessment methods and metrics, and institutional culture; expanding conceptions of capital to reflect diverse lived experiences; and strengthening structures that elevate underrepresented learners' knowledge, agency, and advancement. Consistent with the principles of UDL, this transformation requires re-evaluating not only what is assessed but how assessment methods are designed, shifting from reactive accommodation toward proactive, flexible, and inclusive approaches that enable learners to demonstrate knowledge and competency in multiple ways.

At the same time, Humber's leadership role in the sector requires catalyzing change across the broader post-secondary ecosystem in Canada. As we elevate our own existing systems, Humber is modelling how applied institutions can drive sector-wide transformation by working with employer partners to recognize and reward emerging competencies; influencing labor market expectations around what is considered expertise; and contributing to societal reframing of applied, technical, and holistic learning as rigorous, valuable and future-defining. Only through this combination of internal evolution and external alignment can the movement achieve the scale and coherence needed to shift assumptions about educational value and pathways to success across Canada's post-secondary landscape.

Conclusion

Ultimately, *Building Brilliance* has the potential to disrupt Bourdieu's theory of capital and mechanisms of reproduction by showcasing what is possible when

educational institutions intentionally redesign their systems around individual learners to expand access and equity. To catalyze a movement toward systemic change, Humber is well positioned as an institutional exemplar by reimagining learning and reconceptualizing capital in ways that reflect learners from marginalized backgrounds. In doing so, Humber aims to support these learners in achieving economic mobility, career advancement, and positions of influence at rates comparable to their privileged peers, positioning all polytechnic credentials as genuine vehicles for social transformation rather than new markers of class-based educational tracking.

Note on Contributor

Dr. Ann Marie Vaughan is President and CEO of Humber Polytechnic. With nearly 30 years of leadership in the post-secondary sector, her work focuses on advancing social and economic development through equitable, learner-centred system design and innovations in polytechnic education.

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