



## CASE STUDY 6

*A core product of the Employability Skills Forum, National Business and Education Centre*

**Program**  
*University*

**Date Established**  
1996

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**Name of Program**  
*University of Alberta*  
*Faculty of Arts*  
*Employability Skills Initiative*

**Skills Developed**

- *Academic*
- *Personal Management*
- *Teamwork*

Developing university students' employability skills

# UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA FACULTY OF ARTS CAMPAIGN

## *Making Explicit the Value of a Liberal Arts Education for the World of Work*

BY KURTIS KITAGAWA

*August 1998*

The University of Alberta's Faculty of Arts is enhancing the value of its programs by making explicit its commitment to developing its students' employability skills.

### **Overview**

The Faculty of Arts Employability Skills Initiative is enhancing the employability of University of Alberta graduates by raising the awareness of professors, students and employers of the importance of acquiring employability skills in getting and keeping a job and advancing in one's chosen career.

For several years, the Faculty of Arts has concentrated its strategic planning on ways of enhancing the marketability of its graduates. The Dean of Arts set up committees to study employment among the Faculty's graduates and the use of technology in teaching and learning within the Faculty. The committees are a response to the interest of students' associations in enhancing the employability profile of arts graduates. They build on experience with co-op programs and other work-based learning initiatives, and learn from research focusing on the employment experience of graduates. The latest—and most comprehensive—of

the initiatives that have grown out of this process is the Faculty of Arts' Employability Skills Initiative.

The Faculty of Arts recognizes that while the professional schools within the modern university—such as education, nursing, engineering, medicine and law—consciously prepare their students for specific occupations, the Faculty of Arts generally does not. While most arts graduates do find rewarding employment in a wide range of professional, managerial and technical positions, they are more likely to take longer to do so because their skills and knowledge are not as widely recognized as those of graduates of the professional faculties. As a result, they are more likely to occupy a series of temporary positions before gaining permanent employment.

The Faculty of Arts is also aware that in addition to building on its achievement of creating value for individuals and society at large by producing fully rounded citizens, it must increasingly prepare its graduates to be full-fledged labour force participants, who have portable generic skills and a learned aptitude for mastering rapidly changing computing applications. Accordingly, it is extending its commitment to its students beyond imparting the

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contents of academic disciplines to the complementary purpose of developing the employability skills of its students. It is now making this latter commitment, for which it is eminently well-suited, (1) an explicit promise to students, employers and the community at large and (2) a conscious factor in professors' minds as they design and deliver their courses.

**Groups Served**

- Students, professors, employers.
- Community at large.

**Objectives**

The four main goals are to:

- heighten students' awareness that they can acquire or augment their employability skills while pursuing specialized fields of study,
- sensitize faculty members to the importance of emphasizing to students that employability skills are developed alongside subject-specific knowledge as products of the same process,
- increase employers' recognition that arts graduates are equipped with an impressive range of employability skills, and
- bring a specifically university perspective to discussions of employability skills initiatives.

In achieving these objectives, students, professors, employers and the community at large will develop an understanding of the value of employability skills in getting and keeping a job. By striving to reshape the attitudes of students, professors and employers to accommodate this new perspective, important strides can be made in matching employers' needs with students' aspirations to build a meaningful future for themselves.

**Activities**

- Encouraging departments to develop innovative ways of communicating to students how individual courses can enhance their employability skills.
- Promoting the sharing among departments of innovative teaching practices

that further the Faculty of Arts' objective of engendering employability skills in its students.

- Making explicit and publicizing the value of an arts degree, and emphasizing that the Arts Faculty's commitment to students entails a rigorous preparation in one or more academic areas (i.e., humanities, social sciences, fine arts) as well as the acquisition of important intellectual and practical employability skills that they can bring to bear in the workplace (this focus is featured in the *Faculty of Arts Campaign 1997–2002* brochure and in the new Arts recruitment brochure, which identifies employment opportunities for arts graduates and underlines transferable skills derived from each Arts Faculty program).
- Developing and piloting an interdisciplinary first-year course, "Frontiers of Knowledge," to be taught by a senior faculty member, who will emphasize how arts-based skills and knowledge relate directly to employability (the Faculty of Arts hopes to offer three sections of this course in 1998–99). If the budget permits, participants in the different sections of these first-year courses will be involved in collegial, social and other activities to make them feel at home in the university.
- Ensuring that students acquire a wide range of computer skills as part of their academic program.
- Raising the profile of the Career and Placement Services office among arts students by setting up, specifically for them, a drop-in career counselling centre. This centre will have a storefront appearance, be located in a high visibility area on campus and be staffed by an arts graduate, who is sensitive to the value of acquiring key employability skills in the course of obtaining a solid liberal arts education.

While crucial impetus for these initiatives comes from students' concerns and the Faculty of Arts' responsiveness to socio-economic trends, the success of

### The Employability Skills Forum Mission

We are committed to improving the productivity and quality of life for individuals, organizations and society by enhancing the employability skills of the current and future workforce of Canada.

This study was made possible through funding by members of the Employability Skills Forum.

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the Employability Skills Initiative in its early stages depends on concrete steps taken by the Faculty of Arts.

The Faculty of Arts is stepping up efforts to revise course content and redesign the way courses are taught to ensure that employability skills are learned while subject-specific knowledge is imparted.

While these activities are currently limited to the Faculty of Arts, they are transferable to other faculties.

#### Resources Required

- \$50,000 to develop, advertise and deliver three sections of a new “Frontiers of Knowledge” course.
- Teaching release time for the chair of the task force: \$5,000.
- Participation of faculty members in developing the Employability Skills Initiative: \$14,000.
- Storefront careers office: start-up costs, \$21,000; annual operating costs, \$66,000.
- *Faulty of Arts Campaign 1997–2002* brochure: \$8,000.
- Arts recruitment brochure: \$11,250 per year.

#### Achievements/Outcomes

Employers are financially supporting scholarship programs because learning about the Employability Skills Initiative has convinced them of the value of investing in the Arts Faculty:

- The Bank of Nova Scotia has provided \$1 million to set up a scholarship/bursary fund for arts students. At the outset, 19 students will be funded, but as the endowment grows the number will rise (to 26 by 2014). Seeking to take advantage of the special skills and knowledge of arts graduates, the Bank is also offering summer employment to the recipients, with the prospect of full-time employment after graduation.
- *The Edmonton Journal*, recognizing the importance of the Arts Faculty within the university, has set up a \$100,000 scholarship fund for Faculty of Arts students.

#### Benefits

##### *Students*

Students who study in the Faculty of Arts develop an impressive set of employability skills that will enhance their employment prospects; they are encouraged to choose a roster of courses that will not only give them a firm grounding in a discipline and earn them a degree, but also develop their full personalities.

##### *Employers*

Employers are made aware of the advantages of hiring Faculty of Arts graduates. These graduates are good critical thinkers, able to raise questions of structure and purpose and to communicate effectively; they are self-motivated people who make good team players; and they are creative, lifelong learners, who possess up-to-date computer skills. In other words, these graduates are fully rounded citizens and labour force participants, eminently capable of adapting to a rapidly changing sociocultural, economic and demographic environment.

#### Innovation

The Faculty of Arts' Employability Skills Initiative is not an add-on program, nor does it seek to change the essential nature of the Faculty of Arts within the university. Its unique contribution lies in its focus on inducing a change in thinking and perception among faculty members, students, employers and the community at large. In this model, professors revise their teaching strategies to actively develop the employability skills of their students while imparting the knowledge of their discipline. In addition, students are called upon to make course selections that satisfy their intellectual needs and at the same time enhance their employability profile. Finally, graduates' awareness of their own employability skills and employers' awareness of the advantages of hiring a liberal arts graduate enrich the talent pool and thereby improve the quality of the workforce.

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*Patricia Clements  
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Graham Lowe  
Robert Merrett*

**Keys to Success**

- Sensitizing students to the need in our changing economy to develop a portfolio of portable, positive employability skills and making them fully aware of the value and importance of the internal skills they acquire by pursuing an arts degree.
- Getting student input into the process of making the development of students' employability skills an explicit object of undergraduate preparation in the Arts Faculty.
- Ensuring that the career centre staff person works closely with faculty members, students and employers to provide effective counselling and successful placements for students.
- Encouraging employers to recognize the value of skills—such as the capacity for flexible thinking that the successful completion of liberal arts courses engenders in students—and to realize the long-term benefits of hiring generically skilled people.
- Overcoming the prejudice of employers that people who teach liberal arts do not work or live in the real world and therefore cannot be relied on to engender the work ethic in students or train them with the skills they need for the world of work.
- Explaining to faculty members that focusing on employability skills is not an attempt to justify the existence of traditional university programs, but a way of highlighting more clearly for students some of the practical, social and intellectual advantages that accrue from earning a Bachelor of Arts degree.

- Encouraging professors to develop innovative teaching practices that help their students acquire key employability skills.
- Reassuring sceptical instructors that the intention of the Employability Skills Initiative is not to compromise the distinctiveness of a broad, liberal arts education and turn a traditional educational institution into a mere training facility, but to develop effective techniques for combining the communication of an academic discipline with the development of employability skills.
- Overcoming fears among faculty members and support staff that implementing the Employability Skills Initiative will unload responsibilities on people who are already overburdened.

**Greatest Challenge**

Perhaps the greatest challenge for the Faculty of Arts' Employability Skills Initiative will be in communicating the message that the acquisition of employability skills goes hand-in-hand with preparation in an academic discipline without alienating faculty members in the process. The way forward may lie in the understanding that imparting the contents of an academic discipline and developing employability skills both address the human capacity for judgement and the corresponding imperative to instill an awareness of the interconnectedness of individuals in a social whole. (For another example of how employability skills development is conceived as building the human capacity for judgement, see Case Study 2).

**NBEC Publications Relating to Employability Skills Development and Assessment**

*Employability Skills Profile*

*Science Literacy for the World of Work*

*Best Practices in Assessing and Developing Employability Skills—20 Case Studies (Sept. 98)*

*The Economic Benefits of Improving Literacy in the Workplace, 206-97 Report.*

*Enhancing Employability Skills: Innovative Partnerships, Projects and Programs, 118-94 Report.*

*Linking Teachers, Science, Technology and Research: Business and Education Collaborations That Work, 144-95 Report.*

*1998 100-Best Partnerships IdeaBook*

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