

# SUCCESS BY DEGREES

## Preparing our Graduates for Alberta's Second Century

Final Report of the  
Senate Task Force  
on Graduate Employability  
May 1997



University of Alberta  
Edmonton, Canada

## Vision Statement

The Senate is an independent body of community leaders that examines, fosters and celebrates the diversity and excellence of the University of Alberta.

## Composition of the Senate

The Senate is a 62 member volunteer body whose members are drawn from as broad a representation of society as possible. The Senate comprises elected and appointed members from across Alberta, and appointed members who represent the Alumni Association, the Board of Governors, Deans' Council, General Faculties Council, the Graduate Students' Association, the Non-Academic Staff Association and the Students' Union. The Senate is chaired by the Chancellor of the University.

## Role of the Senate

The Senate acts as a bridge between the University and the public. Its role is based on the belief that an ongoing relationship with the community is fundamental to the effectiveness of the University. Through the Senate, the community can deliver an opinion or a point of view to the University; through the Senate the University can reach the community.

The Senate also provides a forum in which issues and concerns about post-secondary education in Alberta may be debated. The Senate has the power to require a report from any part of the University, and it may receive and consider submissions from any member of the public.

## Work of the Senate

Senate strives to communicate the needs and views of Albertans to the University and the Alberta government, and to interpret to the public the many different facets of the University. As one way of accomplishing this, a task force may be formed to investigate an educational matter brought to Senate's attention. This report is the result of such a task force.

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# Executive Summary and Recommendations

**T**he Senate Task Force on Graduate Employability was struck in response to a growing awareness that the employment market is changing extremely rapidly, and that the University should explicitly analyze, develop, and promote its students' employability skills. In an era of high unemployment, high student debt load, and general economic uncertainty, students and parents alike are concerned that investing in an education should provide a solid foundation for employment beyond graduation. Although the primary responsibility of a University is to its academic and intellectual effort, the Task Force believes that offering preparation for the work-world is an important secondary responsibility that the University of Alberta should consider closely.

The University of Alberta is justifiably proud of its graduates' many and varied achievements in the work-world. Its graduates have succeeded very well in an extremely competitive marketplace, with higher-than-normal wages and extremely low unemployment rates. One recent study found that University of Alberta graduates have only a 1.5% rate of unemployment five years after graduation, far below the national rate of approximately 10%. This success reflects an increasing trend both in Canada and around the world, namely, that moving to a knowledge-based economy represents the key to a successful future. Everywhere, the development of stronger economies is inextricably linked to the continuing development of advanced education systems. The University of Alberta should remain at the forefront of that transition.

A University education is no longer a guarantee of a good career, but it still remains the single most effective way of assuring success, and its effects are lifelong. Employers have told the task force that the University is the pre-eminent place to prepare our youth for the globalized 'knowledge economy' of the twenty-first century, and that broad-based skill

sets like critical thinking, adaptability, clear communications skills, and cultural sensitivity are far more important than specific skills. This is in line with President Rod Fraser's eleven desired skill sets (see page 12) for a University of Alberta student. Furthermore, the University is the ideal place to help develop those qualities in its students, no matter what the field of study.

The task force has four main recommendations to improve graduate employability. We believe that the implementation of these will ensure that graduates of the University of Alberta will continue to succeed and to compete with the world's best. Achieving the goals will require the involvement of all stakeholder groups, including businesses, governments, parents, students, and the University. To this end, the Senate Task Force on Graduate Employability makes the following recommendations:

- 1. Increase the awareness of the value of a highly educated populace generally, and of a University of Alberta education specifically.**
- 2. Improve upon graduates' general preparedness for the world of work by integrating the broad-based skill set profile outlined by University of Alberta President Fraser (see page 12) into the University's learning experience.**
- 3. Improve upon graduates' specific preparedness for the world of work by significantly elevating in importance the status of cooperative, internship, and other experiential learning programmes.**
- 4. Improve upon students' transition from high school to university to work by requiring that all Faculties offer a first-year orientation course ("University 100") which would provide introductions to, among others, the University's library, computer and information technology systems, student services, and career assessment and planning programs.**

# Success by Degrees

## Preparing our Graduates for Alberta's Second Century

### Introduction

Universities must be conducted in such a way as to relate them as closely as possible to the life of the people. The people demand that knowledge shall not be the concern of scholars alone. The uplifting of the whole people shall be its final goal."

– Henry Marshall Tory, 1908

**Q**uaecumque vera: whatsoever things are true. That was the founding vision of the tiny University of Alberta at the beginning of the twentieth century. The University of Alberta was founded in 1908 on the understanding that a University was an essential element in the fabric of the province, one that was forward-looking, knowing that education is the key to a society's ultimate success. Its vision was a noble one, and one that would help to catapult Alberta from a fledgling province with a very small population into an internationally-known, sophisticated, highly-educated "smart" province. As President Tory noted prophetically in his address to the first convocation of the University of Alberta, "The time will come when all will recognize that the founding of the Provincial University in this Province was one of the great acts of the administration of the government."

The original vision is even more applicable now than it was almost a century ago. As Alberta prepares for its second century, the University of Alberta is a prerequisite cornerstone for the continuing prosperity and success of our Province. The University's original goal and vision is being maintained and strengthened even as a new world and a new century beckon. Now, far more than in the early part of the century, when President Tory recruited four scholars and forty-five students to join him in building a University in the northwestern Canadian wilderness, education is the most important ingredient for developing a prosperous, healthy, and successful society.

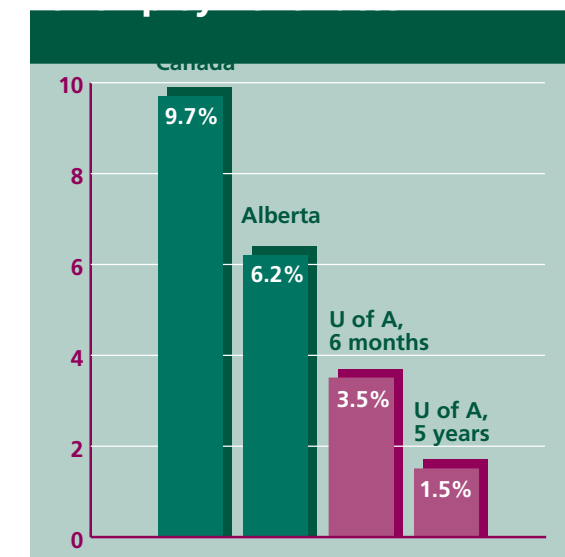
One of the measures of a University's success is the employment rate of its graduates. The University's first duty is to academic integrity, and any efforts to improve graduate employability should not be at the expense of its intellectual and academic foundations. Even so, a good education should be a solid and

excellent foundation for the work-world, and should serve a graduate long after he or she leaves the University. Graduate success is extremely important to the University of Alberta, and it certainly has much to be proud of.

The University of Alberta has done an excellent job of preparing its graduates, but there is still considerable room for improvement.

### Education = Success

**A**t the University of Alberta, the facts speak for themselves. Many studies, from the local to the global, confirm the conclusion that a University education, in particular a University of Alberta education, is the best means for achieving success.<sup>1</sup> An extensive survey of the U of A class of '90 found that, 6 months after graduation, the unemployment rate of University of Alberta graduates of that year was 3.5%, and was only 1.5% after five years, a level so low as to be practically unattainable in most economies.<sup>2</sup> The quality of those jobs has been high, as well; many of the University's graduates have 'good' jobs, because

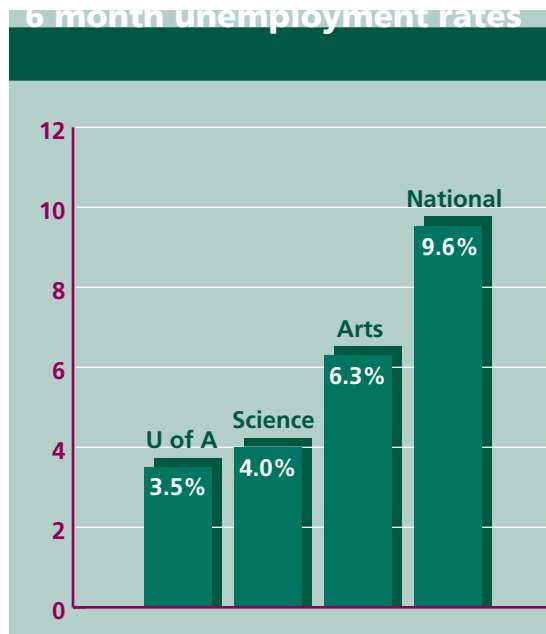


<sup>1</sup> Many employment studies and projections have informed this report: see J. Murphy and W. Coffin, Survey of University of Alberta Graduates of 1990, Career and Placement Services, 1996; H. Krahn and G. Lowe, The School-to-Work Transition in Edmonton, 1985-1992, Alberta Advanced Education and Career Development, 1993; G. Lowe and G. Betcherman, The Future of Work in Canada: A Synthesis Report, Canadian Policy Research Networks, 1997; D. Fisher, K. Rubenson, and H. Schuetze, The Role of the University in Preparing the Labour Force: A Background Analysis, Centre for Policy Studies in Education, University of British Columbia, 1994; R. Finnie, Steppin' Out: An Analysis of Recent University Graduates into the Labour Market, Industry Canada Working Paper No. 5, 1995; R.C. Allen, "The Economic Benefits of Post-Secondary Training and Education in B.C.: An Outcomes Assessment", University of British Columbia, 1996; D. Little, "Earnings and Labour Force Status of 1990 Graduates", Education Quarterly Review, 1995; Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, OECD Jobs Study, 1995; OECD, From Higher Education to Employment, 1992, 1993; G. Lowe, chair, Report of the Dean's Advisory Task Force on the Employability of Arts Graduates, University of Alberta, 1997 (draft). The Senate Task Force wishes to thank Dr. Patricia Clements, Dean of Arts, for making the draft of the Arts Employability Task Force available.

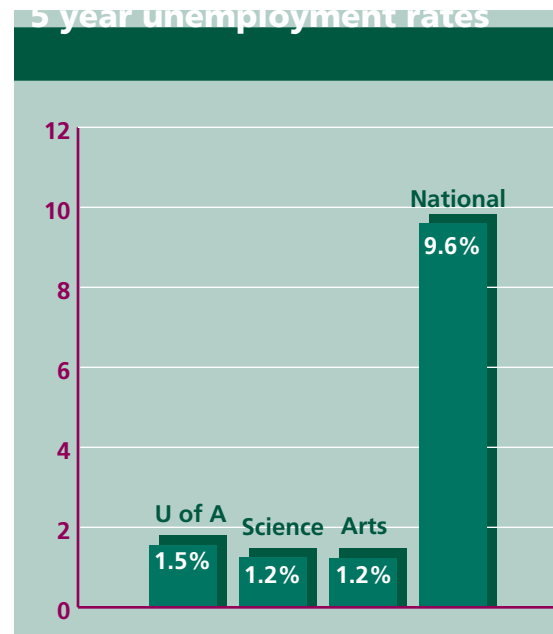
<sup>2</sup> Survey of University of Alberta Graduates of 1990, Career and Placement Services and Population Research Laboratory, University of Alberta, 1996.

Sources: Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey; Population Research Laboratory, Survey of University of Alberta Graduates of 1990

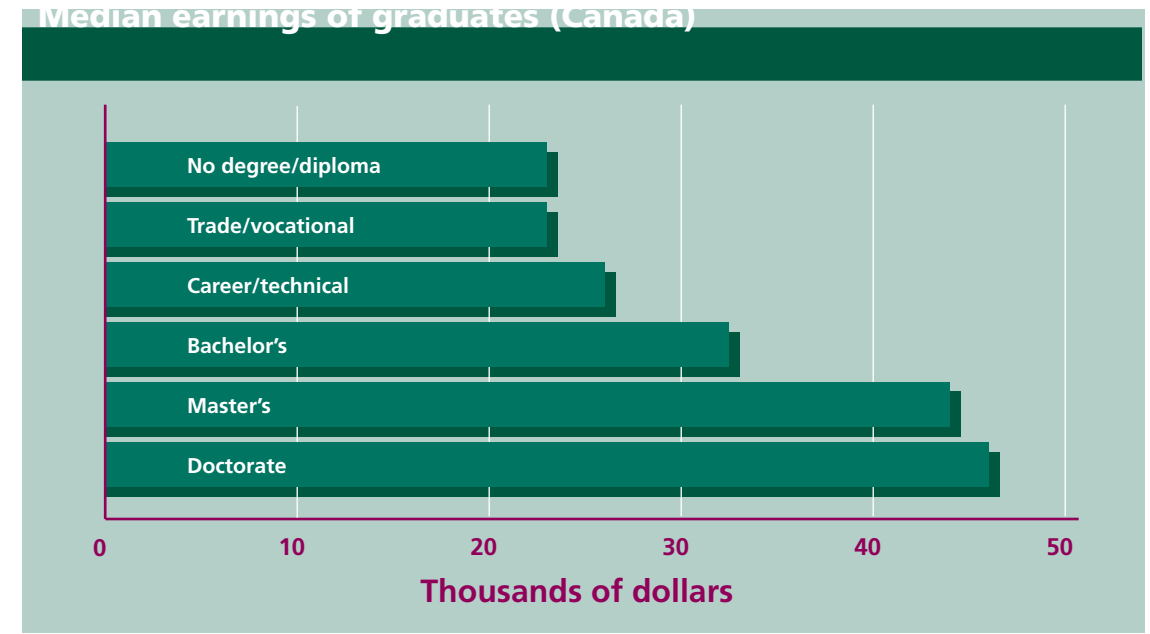




Source: Survey of University of Alberta Graduates of 1990



Source: Survey of University of Alberta Graduates of 1990



Source: Statistics Canada, Education Quarterly Review

Tara Blasco, '94 BA, graduated from the Canadian Studies programme and now edits one of Canada's most successful fashion magazines, Look.

they work full-time, in permanent, 'relevant' positions.

These findings apply to graduates of all faculties. Many faculties enable graduates to proceed directly into employment; graduates from the core faculties of Arts and Science also do exceptionally well in the labour market, though they may have to accept a longer period before finding employment. Six months after graduation, 6.3% of Arts graduates and 4.0% of Science graduates were unemployed. After three years, however, those rates dropped to an impressively low 1.2% for Arts and 2.0% for Science; five years after graduation, both of the core faculties' graduates had unemployment rates of 1.2%, below the University rate of 1.5%. These numbers shatter the myth that Arts and Science graduates are not as well prepared for the work-world as graduates of other disciplines. This conclusion is supported by research in British Columbia, which found that "the stereotype of the unemployed Arts graduate and the employed technician is a fantasy unsupported by the facts."<sup>3</sup>

The value of a University of Alberta degree in the employment market is plainly enormous, and con-

sidering that these graduates entered the market in the midst of the so-called 'jobless recovery,' the news is even more impressive. The findings are excellent news, and they agree generally with other analyses. Degree holders participate more in the labour force, have a much lower unemployment rate than any other education level, and earn considerably more. A Bachelor's degree-holder in 1992 earned, on average, more than twice as much as someone without a post-secondary degree or diploma, 45% more than someone holding a trades or vocational certificate, and 17% more than someone with a certificate in career-related or technical training. If a student takes the time to earn a Master's or Doctorate degree, the advantages are even greater.<sup>4</sup>

University graduates around the world earn more, have a lower unemployment rate, and are more resourceful and adaptive in economic terms than any other education-level grouping. Although the OECD Jobs Study has determined that unemployment has steadily risen in the long term, and that it is not a problem likely to go away at any point soon, University graduates are still affected the least by unemployment and have the best prospects for work.

Even though youth, with its lack of experience, is the most at risk for unemployment, education constitutes the best, indeed only, defense against the prospect of joblessness. Canadian males in the 20 to 24 age group, for example, with only secondary schooling or less, have a 32.7% unemployment rate, but university-educated males in the same age group have a 9.1% rate; females in the same categories have 27.4% and 6.9% unemployment rates, respectively.<sup>5</sup> Another striking fact from the OECD data is that university graduates' income levels are substantially higher than other institutions' graduates. Their data for Canada, like other countries', indicates that university-level graduates earn approximately 1.5 times the wage per year of other post-secondary graduates, and almost twice as much as high school graduates. Getting a good education is not just about well-paying work, however. According to Jonathan Murphy, Executive Director of the Population Research Laboratory at the University of Alberta, many students use their University education to pursue more fulfilling careers, rather than concentrating exclusively on earning higher wages<sup>6</sup>.

Universities have done extremely well in preparing their graduates for the work-world, and the University

of Alberta is no exception. However, the University of Alberta must make a commitment to continue to prepare its graduates for the future world of work, so that they may have the means to position themselves in the workforce in order to lead fulfilling lives. University of Alberta graduates, if they are to continue to be outstanding members of our communities, must be employable upon graduation and throughout their lives. They must be ready to face the employment market head-on, with realistic but ambitious expectations, and they must be made aware of their potential and their abilities to compete successfully with the world's best, no matter what their chosen field.

Furthermore, students and parents should recognize, even before a student enters University, the importance of education – even a few years ago it was possible to describe education as merely important; now, a good education is essential for a productive and successful life. As the University of Alberta declared in 1993, "Very few things in life provide the personal freedom that education does. The better educated you are, the more freedom you have in terms of the personal decisions affecting your life. It is exactly this form of freedom that a university degree provides – freedom to choose the place and focus of your work, freedom to think creatively, freedom to ask and answer questions, freedom to find meaning in your life, freedom to understand the world you live in."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, OECD Jobs Study, 1995; 1991 figures cited. Similar figures from other OECD countries are available for comparison in vol. II, pp. 166-167.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Jonathan Murphy, Executive Director, Population Research Laboratory, April 9, 1997.

<sup>7</sup> Degrees of Freedom, University of Alberta, 1993, p.1.

<sup>3</sup> R.C. Allen, "The Economic Benefits of Post-Secondary Training and Education in B.C.: An Outcomes Assessment", University of British Columbia, 1996.

<sup>4</sup> Statistics Canada, "Earnings and Labour Force Status of 1990 Graduates", Education Quarterly Review, vol. 2, no. 3, 1995, p. 12.

## The Challenges

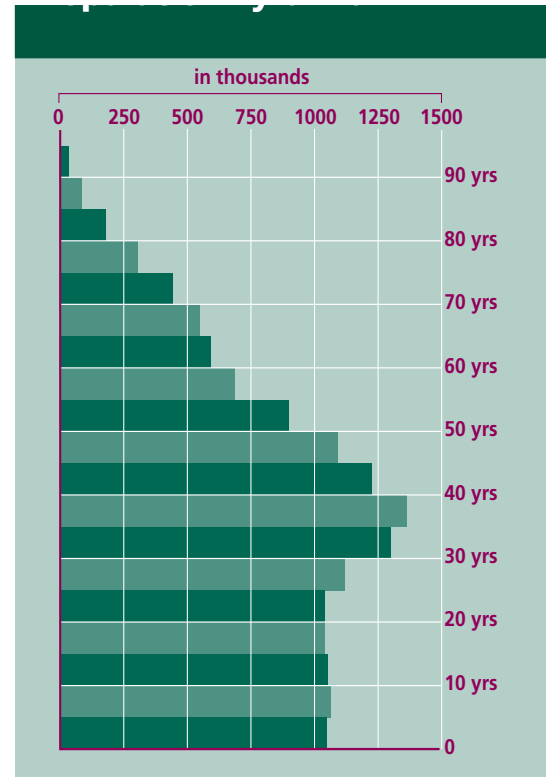
**W**hat kind of world will our graduates be entering upon completion of their studies? Simply put, an uncertain one. All sorts of pressures and difficulties will greet our graduates, and the ultimate success of our society depends upon their ability to respond to those pressures with confidence and knowledge.

For example, our graduates will face pressures that result merely from being born at a difficult time. The 'baby boom' has shaped our society in many ways; it has saturated the employment market, and this situation may not change for many years. That saturation has meant massive corporate and economic restructuring to accommodate the unique demographic position in which our society finds itself. Those born afterwards, the 'baby bust' generation, which is currently in its 20s, is graduating and finding considerable difficulty penetrating the employment market in meaningful ways.

Canada's demographic position has affected its work-world in significant ways, and will continue to do so. The traditional corporate 'pyramid' structure of corporate governance, in which a worker would spend a very long time working at a single job, with occasional promotions to take on more responsibility, is gradually giving way to a 'flatter' structure where flexibility and adaptability to new work modes are paramount, and where the idea of a 'job' may not even apply. Non-standard work patterns, such as part-time, or short-term contract work, are more common than before, but still mostly involuntary.

Part-time work, now seen as an often insufficient and unstable method of support, might in some cases be more beneficial for those with other commitments unable or unwilling to take a full-time job. Those approaching retirement, for example, might wish to slow their work rate gradually over several years, so that they can still be productive, and continue to contribute to their pensions, while acting as a mentor to younger workers. Telecommuting, to take an oft-cited but empirically rare example, has the potential to liberate workers and increase productivity, because the location of an office might be irrelevant to its success. Part-time and other non-standard work can also offer experience in managing a flexible lifestyle while sometimes providing an entrance into the full-time market.

Workers in the new economy will have to be able to demonstrate adaptability and flexibility within organizations, and may expect to switch employers nu-



Source: Statistics Canada, Population Projections for Canada, Provinces and Territories, 1993 - 2016\*

merous times over their careers. They must be willing and able to 'retool' constantly and work in entirely unfamiliar situations. Furthermore, they will be entering a workplace, as noted earlier, saturated with the baby boom generation, and may expect to be competing harder for work than their parents' generation did. As the baby boom retires, though, work opportunities will present themselves, since those retirements will create room for advancement or career switches. That opportunity, in this era of the lean business, will come only to those who are well-educated and prepared to meet the opportunities that will await.

At the same time as demographic pressures operate, our province and country are only beginning a recovery from a deep and prolonged recession, marked by massive corporate 'downsizing' and restructuring, and the economy of much of the world seems caught in a jobless recovery.<sup>8</sup> Youth unemployment is very high and is an enormous concern for society.<sup>9</sup> Youth, by definition, lacks experience in the employment market. Experience is one of the two central determinants of employment level and wage level; the other is education. The message is clear: the well-educated thrive; the poorly-educated do not.

However, governments of all levels have cut their own costs, and universities and colleges alike have had to respond by raising tuition fees, meaning that a greater proportion of post-secondary education costs is borne by parental savings, student loans, and part-time and summer work. Clearly, advanced education is an expensive prospect, and the cost of four years of education may seem like too much to be able to afford. As a result, accessibility to post-secondary education may be reduced. Tuition at the University of Alberta has indeed doubled since 1990, but in the foreseeable future, students will not pay more than 30% of the costs of education. The prospect of going into debt is a daunting one, and students need to know that they are doing the right thing when going to University. The Senate recognizes and supports the initiative of the University of Alberta CAMPAIGN (launched in April 1997) which is committed to raising \$46 million for student scholarships and bursaries in order to ensure that the University of Alberta will continue to compete for the best and the brightest, and to do its part to ensure accessibility to education.

Students and parents want to know that a large investment of time and money will be rewarded by a successful career. However, the pattern of the last five decades of going to school, graduating and getting a lifelong job, is gone. In the future, the more common standard will be someone who switches careers numerous times over a lifetime, and who is mentally equipped to do so.

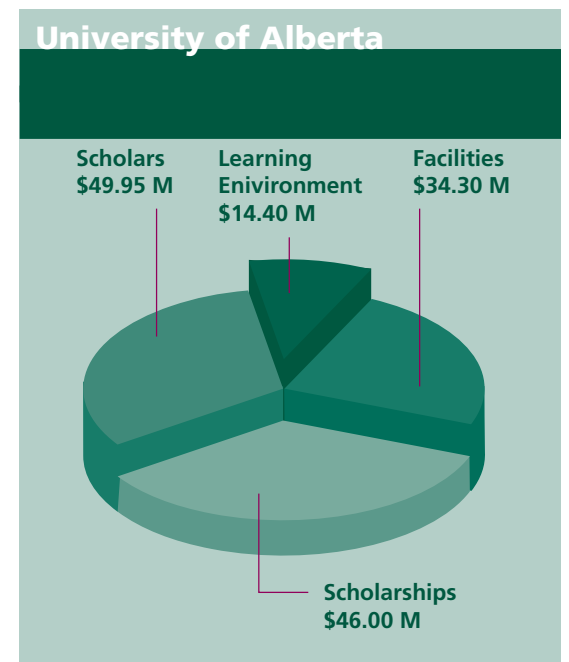
On top of all these concerns, industrial pressures are forcing even traditionally 'low-tech' industries to apply advanced technologies just to stay in business, and fears abound not just among students but in society at large that machines are taking over human work, leaving a growing mass of under- and unemployed in their wake.<sup>10</sup> The proliferation of advanced technology surrounding us has the effect of convincing people that a liberal education may not be relevant to the needs of the future, and that focussed technical education is more valuable than a University degree.

The concern that the development of technological familiarity is insufficient in a University seems to be a common one; certainly, student satisfaction rates on this point are unfortunately low: only 52% of 1996 graduates felt that a University of Alberta education had improved their computer literacy, including lows of 37% in Arts, 35% in Physical Education and Recreation, and 13% in Nursing.<sup>11</sup> Clearly, familiarity with computers and information technology is increasingly an essential byproduct of a good education, and the

University needs to do more in this area to enable its students to compete better in the employment market.

This task force urges the University to develop means by which students in all faculties will be familiar and comfortable with computer/information technology upon their graduation. The University has started on this route; there is discussion that it may be a requirement that students of the future own a computer, as some (but not many) other institutions are expecting. If the University of Alberta adopts a realistic scheme to make computer use universal on campus, it would help to resolve many of the problems of making sure that students in all programmes are assisted with developing a familiarity with information technology.

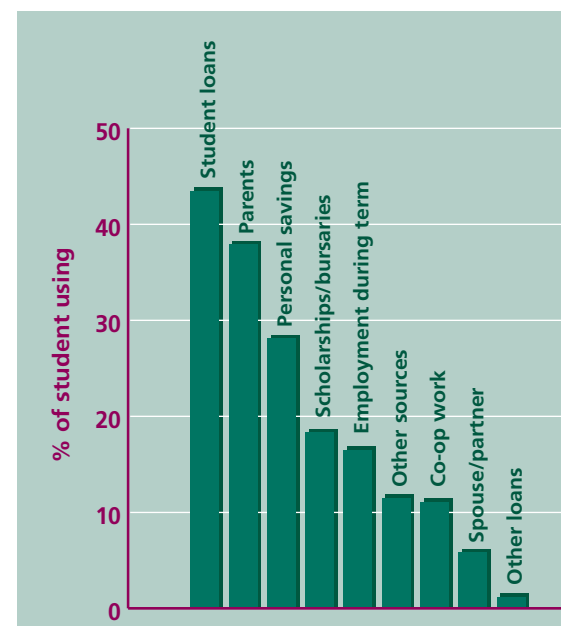
With all these elements of uncertainty and difficulty awaiting entrants to the employment market in the next decade, parents, students, governments, business, and the concerned public are right to question whether the University of Alberta is adequately preparing its students, the leaders of tomorrow, for Alberta's second century. The youth of today's world will live in a place unrecognizable by today's standards, and therefore must have the capability and the confidence to succeed. In a world beset by uncertainty, one alternative - education - offers the hope and promise of success.



<sup>10</sup> Jeremy Rifkin, *The End of Work*, 1995, throughout.

<sup>11</sup> Undergraduate Experiences at the University of Alberta: Results from the 1996 University of Alberta Student Satisfaction Survey, pp. 18-19.

Source: University of Alberta, Undergraduate Experiences at the University of Alberta, 1996



<sup>8</sup> OECD Jobs Study, "Facts, Analysis, Strategies", p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> The latest youth unemployment figures for Alberta and Canada are, respectively, 11.6% and 17.0%, while the unemployment rate is 6.2% provincially and 9.6% nationally. Source: Statistics Canada Labour Force Survey, April 1997.

## The Solutions

**E**ducation is the best way to respond to the challenges facing our society. It is an investment in the social, economic, technological, cultural, and spiritual well-being of the citizenry. It makes sense in every conceivable way. A University education remains the single most effective way of assuring success, and its effects are lifelong. A university education is one of the most important elements in a full and rewarding life. It is also a very useful element of success in the employment market, and will become only more useful as the world changes and develops.

Even though the University of Alberta has been extremely successful in preparing its students for the broader world, it must continue to improve the employability of its graduates, since what has been good enough in the past may no longer be in the future. To that end, the President of the University of Alberta, Dr. Rod Fraser, has outlined eleven skill sets which he believes every University of Alberta student should strive to have by the time he or she graduates:

- **Critical thinking** ability
- **Communications skills** (including the ability to work in teams)
- **Independent judgment**, and the self-confidence in that judgment
- Solid, in-depth **knowledge** about at least one area of study
- The ability of **knowing how to learn**, especially concerning the understanding and capacity for carrying out a research project
- A significant **international experience**.
- Familiarity and confidence of use of **information/communications technology**, as a byproduct of the learning process
- The unleashing of inherent **creative** and **entrepreneurial** talents
- **Development of the whole person**, in academic study, personal fitness, cultural environment, student involvement on campus and in the broader community
- The self-knowledge and self-confidence that our students will be **citizens and leaders of tomorrow**
- The ability and confidence to **compete successfully** with the world's best.

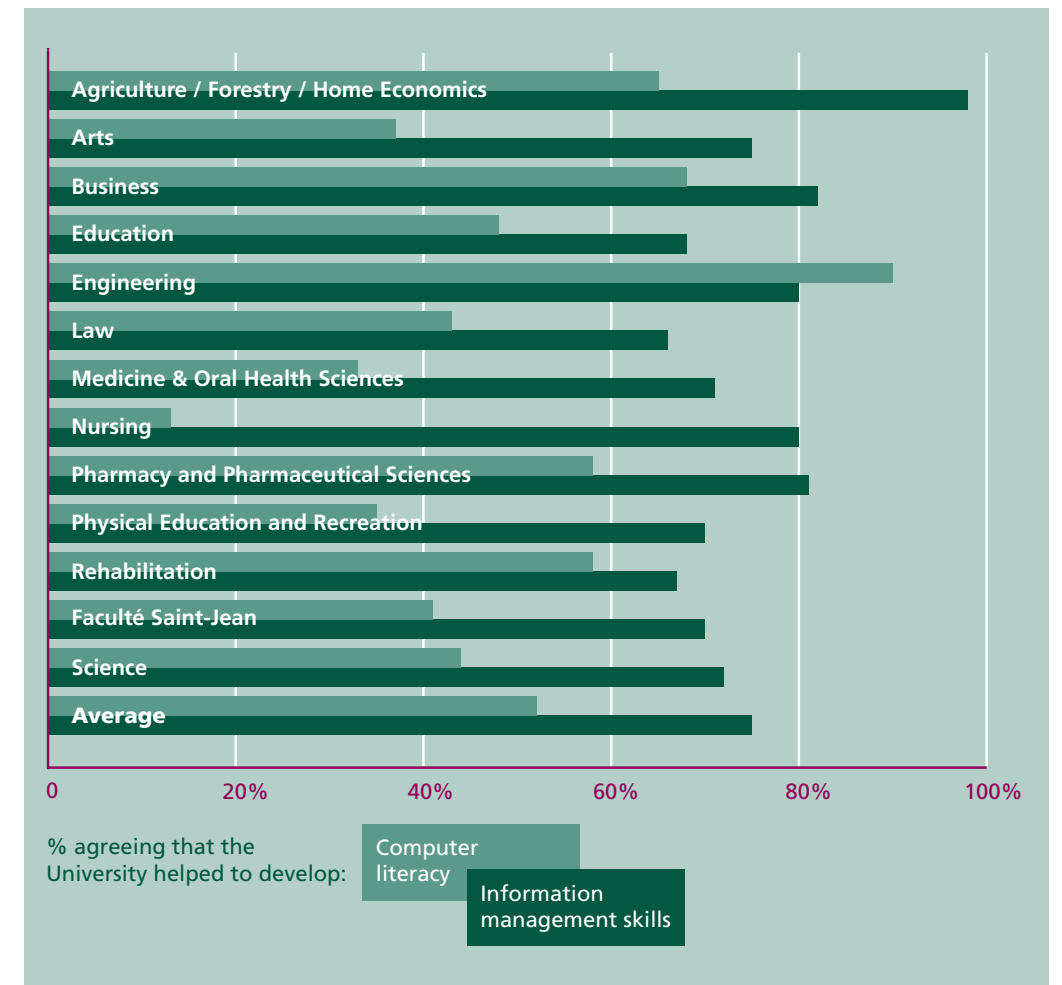
In the best universities, students develop these universally-applicable skills and abilities no matter whether they are learning about anatomy or archaeology, about chemistry or education. These skill sets are extremely useful throughout life, because they are unendingly adaptable and are exactly what today's employers are looking for when they hire. The Conference Board of Canada agrees; its Employability Skills Profile's main headings are about communications skills, the ability to think clearly and learn quickly, positive attitudes, personal responsibility, adaptability, and teamwork skills. According to Wendy Coffin, Director of the University's Career and Placement Services (CaPS), employers most often want critical thinking and problem-solving abilities, conflict resolution and mediation skills, and, increasingly, as economic globalization occurs, cross-cultural understanding.

One of the major advantages of a University of Alberta education is the excellence of services available to students. Most notable among them for aiding employment is CaPS, because it offers some of the most thorough and comprehensive job-search and career-placement services in Canada. CaPS helps students in skill-related self-evaluation, in preparing for job interviews, and in posting career-related positions in a central location on campus. To limit the description of CaPS' usefulness to that small amount would be a gross underestimation of the work that the office does: it provides market information to students and alumni, offers a solid core of reference material on careers and jobs, and brings employers to campus. It has had enormous successes: recently, it arranged for some students to go on an industry tour of a biotechnology firm, in order that they could see for themselves what sort of work might be available in that field. By the end of the tour, two of the 25 people on the tour were offered contracts. This kind of success not only helped the two who gained unexpected employment, but it helped build another bridge to an industry that will continue to look favourably on the University of Alberta in the future.

Unfortunately, not enough people on campus know of the depth and range of services offered by CaPS that improve students' employability and employment. Given that students often need assistance in the transition between University and work, the services available through CaPS can be extremely valuable for employment of University of Alberta graduates, and CaPS' visibility should be increased. The best way to make CaPS more useful to a broad cross-section of students is to develop further the "University 100" course initiative already started in the Faculty of Agriculture,

Forestry, and Home Economics, and to ensure that students know early in their University careers the range and value of CaPS. The Dean of Students has found conclusively that first-year experience courses at other North American Universities have had the effects of improving recruitment potential, contributing to students' academic success, increasing retention, shortening degree completion times, providing better integration into the University community, and increasing students' use of on-campus resources. Such a course could introduce students to the career services offered by the University of Alberta and aid them in the development of employability skills at the beginning of their University careers.<sup>12</sup> Not only would students' first-year experience become more meaningful, but a specific course would assist employability much earlier than is normal for students. We agree with the Faculty of Arts employability task force when it states, "The provision of career services at the beginning of a student's university career will encourage her or him to think about, and plan for, life after graduation in a more thorough and timely way."<sup>13</sup>

CaPS is already at work customizing their information to individual faculties and programmes, and a faculty-based University 100 course could take advantage of that to help CaPS help students even more, especially in the large faculties of Arts and Science, whose graduates tend to need more assistance in the months immediately following graduation. Furthermore, such a course would assist students in their first-year experiences and help to increase rates of student involvement on campus. The task force recommends that all faculties develop a "University 100" course, a component of which would be a CaPS information section.



Source: University of Alberta, Undergraduate Experiences at the University of Alberta, 1996

**Steven Houle, '91 BCom, is co-owner of Sparta Water Systems. He was awarded the Alberta Young Entrepreneur of the Year Award for 1996, and his company has also won the Alberta Chamber of Commerce Small Business award of distinction.**

### The critical skills required of the Canadian work force:

#### Academic Skills

- communicate
- think
- learn for life

#### Personal Management Skills

- positive attitudes and behaviors
- responsibility
- adaptability

#### Teamwork Skills

- work with others

<sup>12</sup> Office of the Dean of Students, Office of the Registrar, Students' Union, *First-Year Experience at the University of Alberta: A Comprehensive Orientation Proposal*, 1995.

<sup>13</sup> *Report of the Dean's Advisory Task Force on the Employability of Arts Graduates*, draft, p. 11.

Source: Conference Board of Canada



## Universities and Employers: Shared Interests

Employers the Task Force has interviewed say that they want what the University of Alberta is trying to provide its students: the broad-based, transferable, generalized skills that allow for constant development and improvement. Ron Triffo, the CEO of Stanley Technology Group, made the point clearly: "What we want in our business is leaders, instead of foot soldiers. Knowledge is Canada's salvation, and our universities' graduates need to have (and generally do) that 'expanded-mind' ability, the vision, the

**"University of Alberta graduates do not take a back seat to any one in this field."**

**—Ron Triffo**

flair, the imagination, that makes them as employees that extra value-added component."<sup>14</sup> What Stanley looks for in its employees is "not just the number crunching – anybody can do that. We want the imagination, the vision for understanding what changes are happening." In fact, a main difficulty with a university education, according to Triffo, is that it has a difficult time striking a balance between the time spent concentrating on the broader strokes of education that make an employee valuable and the highly sophisticated and specialized material necessary for an engineer's occupational concern. On the University of Alberta specifically, Mr. Triffo feels that "University of Alberta graduates do not take a back seat to anyone in this field."

What applies to engineering holds true in other sectors of the economy: human resources managers want employees who do not just have the skills to do the job when hired, but who can change, learn and adapt as individual 'jobs' come and go, so that they remain a valued employee; 'multi-skilling' is becoming more and more important. Wanda Wetterberg, the Associate Vice-President (Human Resources) of the University of Alberta, for example, argued that the best types of employees to hire are University graduates, because a degree signals a broad thinking ability, the ability to present ideas clearly, and to adapt quickly and successfully to new work situations. Generally, the qualifications for non-academic staff appointments at the University of Alberta are increasing, so that positions that at one time required only a high school education now insist on a University degree.<sup>15</sup> Happily for the University, many of its employees are already 'lifelong learners,' and the University accommodates retraining and retooling more easily than other organizations. As an experienced human resources

director, Ms. Wetterberg says that what is important is the capability to solve problems and the capacity to work with others. The aspects of the job itself are not as important, because a good employee will often be able to learn that quickly on the job.

The University of Alberta could improve its graduates' employability, according to Ms. Wetterberg, by increasing the number of opportunities that it now offers students for fieldwork, practicums, internships and co-operative programmes. Furthermore, she adds, the University should seriously consider some sort of formal 'mentoring' programme, so that students would have the opportunity to see up-close the needs of the employment market and gain valuable experience. In addition, the University should continue to create intentional opportunities for its students to do summer work, with an emphasis on developing the skill sets she identifies as crucial to success: presentations, in teams if possible; communications skills, both written and oral; and the intangible 'people skills' that, she feels, the University develops very well. Such programmes would necessitate both the University's greater involvement in the broader economic community, and that community's greater support of and involvement in the University's mission.

Garrett Poston, representing the Students' Union, believes that co-operative, internship, 'job-shadowing', or mentoring programmes are all important initiatives that the University should continue to develop wherever it can. Furthermore, if classes explicitly made more use of teamwork scenarios, that would help to develop the skill sets so needed for post-graduation success.<sup>16</sup> Certainly, existing co-operative and internship programmes available in the Faculties of Business and Engineering provide students valuable experience and opportunities to network in the work-world, and participants in these programmes have a valuable advantage upon graduation. These programmes should be expanded so that students in the large Faculties of Science and Arts could benefit from the experience, and understand that they too have the skills needed in the work-world. On this point, the Government of Alberta needs to review and increase the funding it provides for non-traditional co-op faculty programmes, such as Arts and Science.

Other human resources directors have similar opinions. Caroline Clark, Planning Director, and Anne McClelland, Human Resources Director for the Capital Care Group of continuing care hospitals, see the increasing applicability of a university education to the field of continuing care. Since the population is aging quite rapidly, the demand for continuing care will continue to rise, especially in the long-term as the baby boom approaches old age. This demographic

reality will apply to the entire health care sector, since an aging population requires more health services than a younger one. More and more 'multi-skilling' will be necessary in health care fields, according to the Capital Care Group. A typical employee of the future might be skilled in standard nursing care, but may need to speak languages other than English in order to understand the needs of the patient, and might well need 'customer service' skills in order to meet those needs appropriately. As with other fields, the educational qualifications for continuing care work are rising, and the University has a role to play in providing that. In the past, continuing care givers were generally not university educated, but that is changing over time. The Capital Care Group's directors stated that the University would improve its graduates' employability by expanding co-operative education programmes and by having students in applicable programmes visit facilities like theirs to give them an accurate practical impression of what to expect upon graduation.

In a completely different economic sector, the concerns of the business community are very similar. Paul Haggis, CEO and Superintendent of Alberta Treasury Branches, agrees that tomorrow's workers will have to have a greater range of skill sets, increased adaptability, and broader ability. He explains that, in the banking industry, "It is no longer sufficient to wait for customers to come at the bank's convenience; rather, a banker has evolved, from someone good at counting and maintaining a balance sheet, to a financial advisor familiar with an investor's portfolio, who has considerable aptitude and 'people skills.'" As with other sectors, the financial sector is adapting to a different world; expectations of what a bank can and should do for a customer are steadily increasing.

Thus, employees must be better educated: "In addition to proper certification, we want people with the right attitude, confidence, a willingness to learn, as well as curiosity, empathy, and credibility, combined with the leadership skills needed to be actively involved in risk-taking. That means good, solid university degrees. The days of becoming a teller out of high school and working up to being a branch manager are over. That just isn't good enough any more."<sup>17</sup> Like other sectors, financial services are becoming increasingly specialized and personalized, and as a result need employees with more education than ever before, and will have to adapt to new situations and circum-

stances so that even if what the end result of what they do (managing and lending money, in this case) is the same, the means by which that occurs will be very different.

Cheryl Knebel, President of the Alberta Chamber of Commerce, reinforced these views in a presentation to the University of Alberta Senate on November 22, 1996: from an employer's perspective, the University of Alberta is doing very well at making its graduates employable, and we can be extremely proud of our graduates. She, like others in the business community, agrees that a university education is becoming increasingly important, because in the age of small business and the entrepreneur, success in the employment market will come to those who can continually learn and adapt, who are disciplined and dependable. The University, she says, is doing a good job at developing the essential generalized skills that make an employee valuable. Alberta businesses, as a rule, are happy with our graduates, and confident in their ability to succeed.

Terry Mutton, President of the Alberta Division of the Canadian Union of Public Employees, has described how some municipal governments hire people with advanced education who look like promising employees in entry-level or temporary positions, in the hopes that this investment will mean that they will stay on with their employers in other, usually more advanced, positions. "Basic qualifications for a lot of jobs have risen from a high-school diploma or lower to at least some post-secondary education." That trend will only continue, and as one of the heads of a large union, Mr. Mutton sees the trend to greater educational need in many fields. The cliché that we are entering a 'knowledge economy' has real and direct meaning

for members of his union, and he suggests that the solution can only be retraining and increased educational opportunities.

According to Mr. Mutton, everyone will benefit if labour and management take the time to invest in ordinary workers: management, because a worker's productivity and usefulness will rise dramatically; organized labour, because a worker's strength becomes its strength; the workers themselves, because they will have greater room for advancement,

promotion, and more interesting work, as well as the personal satisfaction of knowing more; government, because better educated people earn more, and therefore pay more taxes, participate less in social assistance programmes, and tend to participate more in public policy formation; and society at large,

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Paul Haggis, CEO of Alberta Treasury Branches, November 22, 1996.

**John Acorn (BSc '80, MSc '88) has his own television show, "The Nature Nut," on the Discovery Network.**

**Thomas Wharton, who received two degrees from the University of Alberta (BA '91, MA '93), is the author of the best-selling and critically acclaimed novel Icefields.**

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Ron Triffo, CEO Stanley Technology Group, December 6, 1996.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Wanda Wetterberg, Associate VP (Human Resources), University of Alberta, November 25, 1996.

<sup>16</sup> Garrett Poston, SU President, presentation to Senate November 22, 1996.



**“Knowledge is the only instrument of production that is not subject to diminishing returns”**  
**–Matthew Barrett**

because it will reap the benefits of a well-educated, well-trained workforce. To achieve that end, though, two things are necessary: first, all stakeholders must recognize that education is an investment that repays itself in incalculable ways; secondly, in Mr. Mutton’s words, “it will become increasingly vital that labour, business, universities and governments work together to sponsor real ‘lifelong learning’ for the benefit of both employees and society at large.”<sup>18</sup>

Generalized skills, like the ability to define, analyze, and resolve a problem, and to communicate the results of that process, and the demonstrated ability to learn and communicate knowledge, are transferable anywhere, to any form of work. Employees are more valuable if they bring the broad-based, transferable skills that a university education offers – the statistics certainly bear that out. Indeed, the Alberta Public Service, as an organizational whole, will start to evaluate their employees partly on the basis of those skill sets. In an interview with Alberta Public Service Commissioner James Dixon and Staffing Manager Sylvia Moysa, task force members learned that in the governmental sector, workers will be rewarded partly on the basis of what the Public Service calls “core competencies.” Therefore, Mr. Dixon declared, the public service of the future will be oriented to university graduates, because the emphasis will be less and less on direct skills, and more and more on ‘soft’ skills that a generalist would have. Although the lack of a degree could conceivably be overcome, he added, to do so will be increasingly tough.<sup>19</sup>

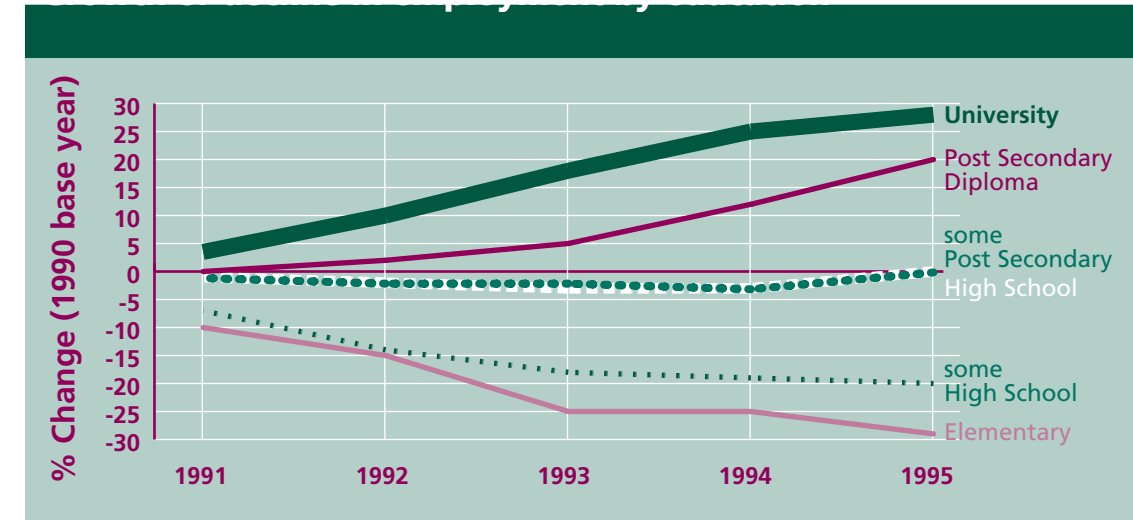
Brad Wright, of the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, describes the value of a University education succinctly: “Knowledge is power.”<sup>20</sup> The acquisition and the utilization of knowledge are the foundation for economic growth, and the universities are where that happens. Businesses, according to Mr. Wright, have the obligation to do more training, and to do it better: often, in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), training is informal, and delivered inadequately for the demands placed upon the trainees. Good worksite training is the key to unlocking the potential of new employees. Unfortunately, many smaller enterprises cannot readily participate in internship or co-operative programmes because they do not have the resources; when many businesses are small, such programmes, while valuable, do not take place in the growing SME sector. In the new economy, SMEs are responsible for most of the employment creation in Canada, and so such programmes must be tailored to incorporate an important part of the new economy. The Task Force urges the University to examine methods of implementing internship and

co-operative education programmes in the small and medium-sized business sector.

Clearly, University graduates are increasingly valuable to all sectors of the economy, and broad-based, transferable skills offer the best hope for the future success of our province and country. This unification of interests is both stunning and significant, because it means that a general education, with the emphasis not so much on direct training, but on learning how to learn, is becoming increasingly important. The Department of Advanced Education and Career Development concludes that “Businesses today are seeking ... a well-rounded generalist. ... But specific expertise is only one asset of the well-rounded future worker. Basic computer literacy and communication, leadership and team player skills will also be part of the integrated generalist’s skill portfolio. People with language and marketing skills will be highly sought after in a competitive global economy.”<sup>21</sup>

Because a university excels in developing the person as a whole, the importance of advanced education can only increase in the work-world of Alberta’s second century. Those abilities, which sound simple but cannot simply be trained, stay with someone for life, and develop and grow, and become even more valuable as time passes. Thus, the benefits of a university education will stay with a graduate for life, and remain valuable in the employment market for years to come. Indeed, in the Career and Placement Services / Population Research Laboratory Survey of the U of A class of ‘90, even after 5 years in the marketplace, 76% of graduates said that a university degree was a requirement of their position. According to Wendy Coffin, co-author of the survey, that figure may even be misleadingly low, because many of those had been promoted from work that did require a degree into positions that required previous experience.

But students are concerned: they realize that they have a great deal to offer the employment market, but when they look for work, they seem to discover that although employers want those skill sets which will make them a useful employee and a good hire in the long term, many positions demand ‘off-the-shelf’ skills in a manner that seems to belie their commitment to lifelong learning and generic skills. This represents a serious gap in expectations and reality: students can either learn direct, ‘hard’ skills that are immediately applicable to a specific job or talent, and which will in all likelihood be outdated within a few years, or they can learn to learn, to adapt, and to benefit their employers in unexpected and ongoing ways.



Source: Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey

While the University is responsible for helping to prepare students for the world of work, employers must take more responsibility for direct, on-the-job training, and give their employees the opportunities to develop and apply their usefulness. It is impossible to overstate this point: business and government must take responsibility in building a knowledge economy, and since there seems to be near-unanimous opinion among business leaders that they want the adaptability of a university degree, they must also invest in direct training so that the valuable general skills are complemented with specific and applicable ones that aid workers in their jobs. Matthew Barrett, Chair and CEO of the Bank of Montreal, describes the differences in responsibility between the universities and business in an interesting way: “... it is far more important that students graduating from university can divine the patterns of imagery in Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales than understand the practice of double-entry accounting. We can always teach them that when they first encounter a ledger.”<sup>22</sup>

The Alberta Economic Development Authority, a partnership between the business and government sectors responsible for the promotion of sustainable economic growth and employment opportunities, agrees. While one of the roles of the provincial government is to provide leadership in education and training, the AEDA also says that an important role for the private sector is to “invest resources including time, money, people and training” for the betterment of Alberta’s economy.<sup>23</sup> They have recognized that the responsibility for training does not merely come from either individuals or government, but from the sector that benefits most from a highly skilled and talented workforce, the private sector. As the AEDA

says, “education and training must be a key focus of any future economic development strategy. AEDA supports development of a human resources strategy for Alberta that recognizes linkages between human resource development for all Albertans and economic success.”<sup>24</sup> Lifelong learning can only become a reality if employers recognize the advantages of investing in their workers.

**The need for flexibility in the workforce of the future**

**Dean Bamber, ‘91 BSc and ‘95 MA, has put his degrees to use by working for the United Nations as a member of a team sent to Rwanda to investigate forensic evidence. The information he helped collect is being used to prosecute war criminals in Eastern Africa.**

is a given on all sides; adaptability is survivability in the economy of Alberta’s second century. That said, workplaces, as well as workforces, must become more flexible as well.

**Karyn Berridge-Triffo, ‘86 BCom, works in Hong Kong as General Counsel, Asia Business Development, for the Colgate-Palmolive Company. Her University of Alberta experience helped prepare her for a career in the international marketplace.**

<sup>22</sup> Excerpted from a speech entitled “Educating for the Next Century” by Matthew Barrett, given at the Canadian Club of Toronto, November 29, 1996.

<sup>23</sup> Building on the Alberta Advantage, Alberta Economic Development Authority, 1997, p. 3.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

Significantly, the demographics of the Alberta Public Service, like so much of the future employment market, will benefit those who become educated now and in the near future; 66% of the Public Service is over 41, and the average retirement age has been dropping to about 55; therefore, just to replace outgoing workers, the Alberta Government will have to hire hundreds of new employees. Since the demographics in the private sector are approximately the same, we can assume that the new century will hold many and varied opportunities for the post-baby boom, in both the private and public sectors. Since University graduates are increasingly in demand everywhere, the future is bright in the medium term.

**“Knowledge is Power”**  
**–Brad Wright**

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Terry Mutton, President, Alberta Division, CUPE, January 7, 1997.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with James Dixon, Public Service Commissioner, and Sylvia Moysa, Personnel Administration Office, Province of Alberta, December 5, 1996.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Brad Wright, Canadian Federation of Independent Business, February 6, 1997.

<sup>21</sup> Alberta Careers Beyond 2000, Department of Advanced Education and Career Development, 1996.

# Summary and Recommendations

The University of Alberta must keep its original, grand vision of being the means of the uplifting of the whole, even as it looks forward into the future. The University has for decades quietly given its students the tools needed to succeed at life, often without their even knowing it. Future graduates need to know that they are developing the skills that will serve them throughout their lives. We believe that our graduates' employability will be improved by acting on the following recommendations:

## Recommendation

Increase the awareness of the value of a highly educated populace generally, and of a University of Alberta education specifically.

### Strategies:

#### The University of Alberta should

- continue to provide funding for employment studies in order to acquire the data which demonstrate the impact of a University degree in the work-world
- include employability information in marketing materials

#### The Government of Alberta should

- provide the necessary funding and endorse policy which will ensure accessibility for all Albertans to a University education, with the end result being increased prosperity for the Province

#### Students should

- be made aware of the wide-ranging intellectual, technical and personal skills acquired during their studies

#### Alumni should

- act as ambassadors for their alma mater by promoting the advantages of a University of Alberta education and act as resources to local students seeking information on the University of Alberta

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# Recommendation

Improve upon graduates' general preparedness for the world of work by integrating the broad-based skill set profile outlined by University of Alberta President Fraser into the University's learning experience.

## Strategies:

### The University of Alberta should

- endorse President Fraser's skill set profile (see page 12) and promote the implementation of classroom strategies which will result in skill set development
- include, in the recruitment literature for prospective faculty, the skill set profile and the University's commitment to it
- offer, to all new and continuing faculty, seminars and workshops on how to build the skill sets in and out of the classroom

### Employers should

- use the broad-based skill sets as a major criterion for hiring and for performance evaluation

### Students should

- seek out volunteer and paid positions, both at the high school and University level, to assist them in developing and applying these skills and to provide opportunities to explore career options

### Parents should

- encourage and provide opportunities for their children to develop these skill sets as early as possible, and advance their learning as far as possible

# Recommendation

Improve upon graduates' specific preparedness for the world of work by significantly elevating in importance the status of cooperative, internship, and other experiential learning programmes.

## Strategies:

### The University of Alberta should

- endorse a policy which delegates to each Faculty control of, and responsibility for, an optional cooperative, internship or other experiential learning programme for undergraduate students without sacrificing academic integrity or independence
- provide funding to faculties to achieve this end
- continue to develop partnerships with employers to improve and expand such programmes
- develop opportunities for small and medium-sized enterprises to participate in such programmes
- hire, whenever possible, students or graduates to work in summer or temporary contract positions
- provide funding to the University's Career and Placement Services (CaPS) Office for the development and implementation of a comprehensive information / 'points of entry' database for both student and employer use

### Employers should

- significantly increase their job-shadowing, internships, practicums, cooperative, and other experiential education opportunities
- recognize that it is in their self-interest to initiate and continue these programmes
- accept these programmes as part of their responsibility for on-the-job training

### Students should

- voice their interest in the importance of these programmes

### The Government of Alberta should

- assist universities and the public and private sectors in the development of work-experience programmes designed to increase employability
- provide funds for programmes in non-traditional





Improve upon students' transition from high school to university to work by requiring that all Faculties offer a first-year orientation course ("University 100") which would provide introductions to, among others, the University's library, computer and information technology systems, student services, and career assessment and planning programs.

## Strategies:

### The University of Alberta should

- revisit the 1995 Dean of Student Services Report and endorse a first-year orientation course (using as a model the Faculty of Agriculture, Forestry, and Home Economics' University 100 course) which would include the core units noted in recommendation 4, but would also allow each faculty to tailor the course for its students
- in this regard, the University could follow the lead of the Faculty of Arts, as per its task force on employability, and encourage all Faculties to develop a pilot for a first-year course
- include, as a major component, a unit on the vast services offered by Career and Placement Services, including career assessment and planning programmes, so that, by their graduating year, students would be familiar with, and able to access easily, job search and job preparation services.
- include, as a major component, a unit on library, computer, and information technology systems in order to increase students' use of on-campus resources and provide them with an opportunity to acquire and develop a range of computer skills
- recognize that the programme will improve recruitment potential, contribute to students' academic success, increase retention, shorten degree completion times, provide better integration into the University community, and increase students' use of on-campus resources

### Students should:

- enquire, during the recruitment phase, about the orientation and first-year experience programmes offered by the Universities they are considering attending

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