

ALBERTA VENTURE

FEATURES

Giving the liberal arts their due: Will corporate Alberta help liberal arts graduates enter the business world? Should they?

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by Rhonda Kronyk

Illustration Christian Rosekat



Alberta corporations – particularly from the oil and gas sector – are strong supporters of many post-secondary programs in the province’s universities and trade schools. Donations to science, technology, engineering and business programs ensure that there are well-educated workers to fill vital roles in our economy. The long list includes the 2013 [Cenovus](#) donation of \$1.5 million to [Lakeland College](#) to help build a petroleum centre at the Lloydminster campus. That same year, [Canadian Natural Resources](#) donated \$7 million to

the [University of Calgary’s](#) engineering school. And in 2010, Cenovus donated \$3 million to the [University of Alberta](#) to help create a research chair for environmental engineering.

But it’s hard to find similar donations for liberal arts programs. Richard Sigurdson, dean of arts at the University of Calgary, says his faculty only receives about one per cent of all donations to the university, and most of that is from individual donors, not corporations. Lise Gotell, acting dean of arts at the University of Alberta, says that of the 1,800 donors who have given more than \$50,000 to her faculty over the years, only eight are corporations.

The core issue is whether corporate Alberta recognizes the value of a student with a liberal arts degree and whether corporations are willing to help fund those degrees. Proponents of the liberal arts argue that this question may become even more important as the province’s economy continues to fluctuate.

Sigurdson says some corporations recognize the value that liberal arts students bring to a company, but that doesn’t tend to result in financial support. “We talk to CEOs and hear stories about employees with performing arts backgrounds or training in history and the humanities being brought into the very top level of corporations,” he says. “They realize they need for critical thinking and a more creative perspective and cultural understanding. Yet, there is a disconnect between businesses understanding the value of arts graduates and actually participating in generating those students.”

Brian Menges, CEO of [Caplink Financial Corporation](#) hires arts students for the unique skills they can bring to his business. “A liberal arts student can be more valuable because of how they are taught to think,” says

Menges. “We can’t teach a commerce student to think independently, but we can teach an arts student how the business works.” Menges provides two examples: A historian who understands past business cycles can generate business plans that account for those cycles; likewise, a student of behavioural psychology may have the background to be a good salesperson.

Todd Hirsch, chief economist for [ATB Financial](#), says companies need employees who have the training to adjust to constantly changing circumstances. “The arts teach you how to learn and how to interpret information in different ways ... and help students be adaptable and able to meet changing demands.” It is in meeting the changing demands in our economy that liberal arts students can have a positive impact. “Alberta is changing, so is the world, at a rate that we haven’t experienced before,” Hirsch says. An arts education may be part of the answer to this flux.

Proponents of a liberal arts education argue that businesses will need to nurture the skills that arts students are taught. “Non-arts programs train students for specific skills that may not be needed in a few years,” Gotell says. “[The Faculty of Arts] trains people with the capacity to learn and be adaptable. Our graduates can think clearly, are comfortable with ambiguity and can weigh options.”

Sigurdson uses pipelines to demonstrate how companies will need to re-think their hiring choices in the future: “Pipelines are a big concern in Alberta. We know how to build them and calculate the cost benefit,” he says. “But we also need people that can understand the social and cultural aspects of pipelines. We need people who can cooperate with communities, and who understand sustainability and environmental protection. We don’t just need the technical skills; we need to support a broader understanding of the world in which sustainable development must occur.” Students with training in political science, communications or cultural studies would be invaluable in Sigurdson’s scenario.

But can Alberta post-secondary institutions continue to train those arts students that could have a positive impact on business? Arts programs operate on a very tight budget. Sigurdson and Gotell say that more than 95 per cent of their budgets are allocated to faculty and staff salaries. Sigurdson says this makes it difficult to provide hands-on training for students: “We could use support to help in international scholarship programs and in expanding learning opportunities like co-op programs or internships.”

Those are the experiential learning opportunities that Gotell would like to create. Yet, the [Faculty of Arts](#) at the University of Alberta has been forced to cut almost 60 faculty positions in the last five years to meet provincial budget cuts. Those cuts mean that it is more difficult to place students in community service learning opportunities where they can connect with Alberta businesses.

The onus for promoting a liberal arts education is not only on corporations who hire graduates and governments who fund universities – it is also on educators. Gotell says arts departments need to take responsibility for promoting their students. Corporations may understand the value of a liberal arts degree, “but we as educators are not very good at connecting the work we do to the world of employment. We are beginning to recognize that we need to teach our students to make connections between their learning and employment.”

Menges says connecting education to employment is a necessary step in helping arts graduates move into business. “There is a huge well of talent in the arts that goes unrecognized every year. No one tells these students that they are a gift to the business world if they want to be.”

George Andrews, vice-president of external relations at [Northern Alberta Institute of Technology](#), says NAIT has found the solution to making arts graduates more valuable: NAIT listens to Alberta’s employers and frequently redesigns their programs to meet changing needs. While much of NAIT’s training focuses on trades, they have several programs that traditionally fall into the liberal arts category. Their health care and business students have opportunities to do “real-world simulations and project management... while learning

people skills and critical thinking skills.” By intentionally teaching these skills, Andrews believes NAIT can help develop arts students who can immediately provide value to an employer.

NAIT’s model demonstrates that universities need to become more flexible in their training approaches. Menges sees value in all students taking arts courses so that they can develop skills that will help them become more adaptable. At the same time, arts students who take business courses will better understand how their creative and critical thinking skills can make them valuable to Alberta’s corporations.

But why should corporations worry about funding arts programs? As Hirsch points out, “there is no moral obligation for a company to fund education, but there is such an obligation for government. I favour the private sector funding universities, but I would hate it if that meant that governments used that as an excuse to further cut funding.”

Funding will continue to be a challenge for arts students. While the provincial government needs to be held accountable for stabilizing funding, corporate Alberta may want to consider how they can positively impact students’ learning experiences. As corporations give to non-arts faculties, they may be better served donating to the liberal arts as well to help develop graduates with the skills they will need to cope with continued economic fluctuations.

A Side of Caution

The University of Calgary is under fire right now for the way it handled a donation from [Enbridge](#). In 2013, the pipeline company committed \$2.25 million over 10 years to the [Enbridge Centre for Corporate Sustainability](#). Several faculty members expressed concern that academic freedom was taking a back seat to Enbridge’s interests, and a CBC investigation called into question the company’s influence over the research that would be done at the centre. The university is conducting an internal investigation, and the province has said it will be monitoring the university’s response.