

Arts One 30 years old, and still breaking ground

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Schools, colleges, and universities are very conscious of their need to prepare students for the world of work. Higher-level technical and professional skills are essential for work in the global knowledge economy. 'Employability' skills have also climbed the priority ladder as success in almost all kinds of work depends increasingly on the ability to analyze and evaluate, to work in teams, to adapt, and to accept greater personal responsibility for performance.

Preparing for work is important — at many stages of life. But most people see more to life than work, and at least some of them are also searching for meaning in their own lives and in society — at different stages in their lives.

The Arts One program at the University of British Columbia is a glowing example of an alternative approach to the more common academic discipline-based undergraduate university education. Still thriving after more than thirty years, Arts One offers first-year students — on a first come, first served basis — the opportunity to spend the majority of their time reading, reflecting, discussing, and writing about major works of fiction and non-fiction, past and present.

Arts One is open to all students accepted into the Faculty of Arts and some 200 of them choose this alternative each year. In addition to their readings, students and faculty meet weekly in a common large lecture session, in smaller seminars, and in still smaller tutorial groups. In addition, special events and their own building help to cultivate a sense of community that counterbalances the de-personalization common to most multiversities.

A graduate of Arts One nine years ago, now successful in her career of choice, described her experience as "wonderful." "I learned so much about society and about myself. I also learned skills that have helped me at work. We dealt with a broad range of readings from a variety of disciplines. I was pushed to perform and I am very grateful for that."

Most Arts One graduates do very well when they go on to other programs for the balance

The popular program at UBC has always been seen as an alternative to the usual academic-driven curriculum. But now, a number of schools are encouraging students to get involved in the social component of education.



Why has Arts One at UBC outlasted similar programs at other North American universities? Probably because faculty members are asked to make only a two-year commitment to this intensive program before returning to their more conventional work in their separate departments. Fresh professors as well as new students make for renewal and intellectual excitement.

Recognizing the need for students to think about the major issues of the day, Malaspina University-College in Nanaimo has developed its own Liberal

first coordinator of the program and currently an instructor, emphasizes that graduates do well in further studies and in finding work. He attributes the popularity of the program largely to "how it enriches the social component of education."

Yosef Wosk of Continuing Studies at Simon Fraser University has taken the 'Arts One' approach off the university campus and into communities around Vancouver. Philosophers' cafes, now popular again in European cities, provide people of all ages and back-

turnouts to these periodic lunch time or evening public conversations by noting that "much of our society is reeling in the face of a swift and stressful world that threatens to inundate us with electronically mediated information. Our minds ache; our emotions cry out for simple human contact." Heady stuff — but a response of growing appeal.

Shula Gribov, a café enthusiast who travels from one SFU session to the next, explains her participation simply: "I like to listen to other people, to present my own ideas to others, and to think about important social, moral, and philosophical issues after each session."

The Simon Fraser experience has prompted TALK (Third Age Learning at Kwantlen), a group of over-55s affiliated with Kwantlen University College, to initiate its own approach to structured but informal adult learning in café-style settings. In September, it will launch a series of public discussion sessions to encourage participants to engage in "big talk" (in place of the more common "small talk" that consumes so much of our time). These sessions, to be held in different locales within the college region, will be open to the public with a particular emphasis on encouraging older people to share their perspectives among themselves and with others on important social, political, and scientific issues.

Win Hunter, one of the organizers of the Kwantlen series, is not sure how many people will turn out for these sessions, but she is confident that the café approach is right for many. She expects her program to be more intimate and less formal than many others, and she insists that active participation by the members of each group — rather than the status of guest speakers or specialists — will be the benchmark for judging success.

The '60s revisited? Not at all. In a world of rapid change, continuous updating of technologies, and constant work-skill upgrading, balance is provided by lively, civilized public discourse on the big issues of yesterday, today, and tomorrow. For many, living is about learning — where all learning and all learners are valued.

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