

On Campus: Pioneering inclusive education

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On Campus is an inclusive education initiative for persons with developmental disabilities at the University of Alberta. Now celebrating its 20th Anniversary, we pause to reflect on the implementation, structure, function and evolution of the program, the first of its kind globally. Increasing social change has led to more and more inclusive opportunities for persons with developmental disabilities, many of which were born due to the influence of the inclusive efforts of this initiative. From its inception to present, On Campus continues to challenge attitudes, stereotypes, perceptions and beliefs in regards to what might be possible for adults with developmental disabilities. We challenge you, the reader, to do the same.....

Imagine that you are the parent of a young adult with a developmental disability in the 1980s. Your child has just graduated from high school and, at a time when future possibilities should be celebrated, the gnawing question of “*what now?*” extinguishes the joy from the occasion. Other parents envision their children pursuing post-secondary education or blazing into the “real world” of full time employment, but your child has probably grown up in a segregated environment, in a world of limited opportunities, presumptions, stereotypes and prejudice.

There was a time when most people with developmental disabilities were forced to live like plants in a terrarium, their experiences artificial and their growth stunted by imposed borders that contained them, hindering their true potential. In 1987, a group of parents and advocates came together to create a positive and viable answer to the question of “*what now?*” with the goal of creating for their children a future where

inclusion is a reality instead of a goal. This was the day that *On Campus* was born.

The pioneering inclusive education program the world over, *On Campus* makes its home at the *University of Alberta*. The initiative has been opening doors for students with developmental disabilities for the past twenty years, promoting inclusion within the university campus as well as in the community at large.

Eleven students attend for approximately four years, which mirrors a typical university career. *On Campus* hopefuls are evaluated in an interview format and students are selected based on a number of criteria, including their desire to attend university, their families' commitment to support them in their endeavor as well as the individual's interests and goals. The initiative does not consider academic ability as one of its criteria, because the program is highly individualized and students set goals that range from academic to social depending on their priorities.

Although, in recent years, some of the *On Campus* students have had previous inclusive experiences, many students have come from the special education system and have had limited exposure to diverse subject areas and activities. As a result, the first year is often a buffet of opportunity, spent exploring new interests, developing an awareness of the possibilities and acclimatizing to university culture. Students audit courses as guests of the professor and work with their own personal Educational Facilitator to review coursework and to complete modified assignments. They maintain an average workload of three classes per semester, in courses that range across Music, Dance, Drama, Art, Sociology, Criminology, Animal Science, Physical Education, Nursing and English, although this is not an exhaustive list.

On Campus would cease to function at an inclusive level without natural supports within the classroom, campus and employment environments, as they comprise the cornerstone of the initiative. Educational Facilitators focus on recruiting volunteers to provide a friendly face in class, to serve as a point of contact for information sharing with

facilitators and to serve as a guide for the *On Campus* student, should the need arise.

To be concise, the *On Campus* body can only function properly with all of its working parts, which include the collaboration of students, staff, professors, parents and volunteers. At the heart of this body is the shared goal of creating a community where everyone is valued and encouraged to develop his or her own unique talents, gifts, interests and potential.

Students are encouraged to take full advantage of the opportunities available to them, and many support university sports teams or become involved with clubs, associations and groups on campus. Efforts are made to marry the students' interests with their extra-curricular endeavors and course selections, although courses are never taken exclusively within one faculty and students are encouraged to explore new and diverse interests both in and out of the classroom.

During the summer months, *On Campus* supports students as they focus on relevant employment experience, and many students will continue with employment obtained over the summer throughout the school year. Upon graduation, students have the option of entering into *On Campus'* sister program, *Alumni Support*, to continue on with employment as the principal focus. Established in 2000, *Alumni Support* was created to continue inclusive efforts for *On Campus* graduates. Those who had been labeled "profoundly multiply disabled" were of particular inspiration for this sister initiative, as other post-graduation inclusive alternatives were non-existent, especially with regard to employment. Like *On Campus*, *Alumni Support* is individualized to each graduate and also functions to support lifestyle choices such as volunteerism, associational involvement, recreational pursuits, continued education and other avenues of meaningful participation within the community.

To date, the *On Campus* model has been studied by numerous national and international post-secondary institutions. Too numerous to name them all, some examples of other initiatives now in operation include the *University of Calgary*, *MacEwan Community College*, *Lethbridge Community College*, the *University of Prince Edward Island*, *Red Deer College*, the

University of British Columbia, Mount Royal College, the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology, the University of Jyväskylä in Finland, and the University of Manitoba. With the continued success of the program graduates, it is easy to see why others endeavor to follow in *On Campus'* footsteps.

There were five *On Campus* graduates this year (2007): Darwin, Erin, Josephine, Tanson and Alex.¹ All five graduates have demonstrated advancement in their maturity and self esteem over the past four years, and have positively impacted on the university community in turn.

When asked about his experience having Darwin in his class, one instructor commented that "the students and I all enjoyed having Darwin in the class ... we learned as much as he did!" *On Campus* students have also become role models for their peers. One student volunteer noted that "Alex did well in the class, asking questions I was too scared to ask."

The *U of A* community has embraced *On Campus* students, many of whom have been recognized for their positive attitudes. A student volunteer reported that Josephine "...was included in some way by every person in the class," while an instructor noted that Tanson was a "great addition" to her class and that he "showed up most days with a big smile." In addition to individual professors and volunteers, entire faculties and departments such as *Educational Psychology*, the *Faculty of Physical Education & Recreation* and the *School of Library and Information Studies* have been particularly supportive of *On Campus* and its students.

The *University of Alberta* has also benefited from academic contributions of *On Campus* students. Erin, who has been labeled "profoundly multiply handicapped," has been creating artwork with her Personal Facilitator, Pam, for several years.² Erin and Pam often donate their artwork to charitable auctions, and one of Erin's pieces was purchased at auction by

¹ Students' first names have been used with their permission or the permission of their legal guardians.

² Personal Facilitator's first name used with permission.

a *University of Alberta* Dean. Erin's art instructor commented that "...all the students welcomed her and benefited immensely from her contribution to this very special educational experience." For Erin, discovering a love for art meant finding a deeper meaning and a dream. In the past, Erin was used to people making snap judgments about her abilities, or, to be more concise, her *disabilities*. Today, her newly discovered talent demonstrates that she is a multilayered individual, with a gift that many people can only dream of. This discovery enriches her life with purpose and reveals her value to others who might not have seen her potential.

The *On Campus* initiative allows potential employers to see past stereotypes and to view students and graduates as valuable assets. Combined, the five graduates will be working at *Home Hardware*, *Home Outfitters*, the *City Arts Centre*, the *Student Union and Community Daycare*, the *Northeast Community Health Center*, *Safeway* and *Organic Roots*. Having their post-secondary achievements on their resumes will, without a doubt, open yet more doors for them in the future.

To illustrate the experiences of the initiative's most recent students, below are brief snapshots of the five graduates of the Class of 2007:

Darwin

Transcript:

Basketball, Drama, Recreation & Leisure Studies, Anthropology, Aquatics, Field Hockey, Volleyball, Badminton, Human Ecology, Football, Tennis, Health Education, Wrestling, Film Studies.

About Darwin...

"Darwin was awesome in this class, and he's a real charmer. Everyone in the class knew him well, and he always tried his best."

- Student Volunteer

University Life

An extremely social person, Darwin could always be found hanging out with one of his many friends on campus. Darwin spent much of his time having coffee with someone from his wide social circle at the Student Union Building or working out at Van Vliet, the physical education building attached to the Butterdome.

Future Opportunities

Darwin will continue working at *Home Hardware* while he considers his future options and is planning to move into his own apartment in the near future. Although he is graduating, his social circle is sure to follow.

Erin

Transcript:

Dance, Elementary Education, Women's Studies, Drama, Library Studies, Music, International Dance, Sociology, Art History, Art – Painting, Child Studies.

About Erin...

“Both Pam and Erin were actively involved in class discussions. Also, they interacted with other students in terms of topics of the course... instructors must provide material and social conditions for students like Erin.”

- Student Volunteer

University Life

Erin became very involved with the art community within the *University of Alberta*. One of her paintings was auctioned off and purchased by a Dean. Much of her work was also displayed within the Art Department. Erin enjoyed a variety of classes and also enjoyed socializing in the Education Building cafeteria or hanging out at H.U.B. Mall.

Future Opportunities

Erin currently works at *Home Outfitters* and at the *City Arts Centre*. She has plans to continue to develop her artistic talent through community offered art classes.

Josephine

Transcript:

Music, Library Studies, Women's Studies, World Religions, Classics, Dance, Yoga, Sociology, Human Ecology, Elementary Education, Health Education.

About Josephine...

"Josephine was a delight in class; always smiling and offering friendly comments... she assisted with another student when working in creative group process with young children and was quite successful!"

- Dance Instructor

University Life

Josephine is a very social person, and perhaps her favourite thing to do on campus was to spend time with her friends. Josephine could often be found chatting in the cafeteria of the Education Building or studying in the Coutts Library with friends. Josephine also liked to spend time walking the track at the Butterdome for a little exercise.

Future Opportunities

Josephine is currently working at the *Student Union & Community Daycare* and at the *Northeast Community Health Center*, which she will continue on with at *Alumni Support*.

Tanson

Transcript:

Engineering, Kickboxing, Dance, Human Ecology, Health Education, Recreation and Leisure Studies, Anthropology, History, Wrestling, Drama, Music, Soccer, Classics, Earth and Ocean Science.

About Tanson...

“He was always so cheerful in class and loved to discuss the coursework with the other students.”

- Student Volunteer

University Life

Tanson is very sociable, and could always be found chatting with classmates and professors around campus, and with other *U of A* students in the study lounge. Tanson could also be found socializing in the Education Building cafeteria with his friends or studying at the Coutts Library.

Future Opportunities

Tanson currently works at *Safeway* and *Kelsey's* in addition to volunteer work at *Fountain Tire*. Tanson will continue on with his employment post-graduation.

Alex

Transcript:

Health Education, Art History, Drama, Astronomy, Jazz Dance, Classics, Modern Dance, Film Studies, Music, Squash, Modern Language, Elementary Education, Soccer, English, Anthropology.

About Alex...

“He listened intently and responded appropriately to the other students’ presentations, and when he did his own we were all very impressed. Not only was it visually interesting and thoughtfully put together ... his verbal presentation was also well handled ... Alex is an integral member of our class and on those rare days when he is not there, we miss him. He has got to be one of the politest people I’ve ever met!”

- Education Professor

University Life

In the last four years, Alex has been very involved in activities both on and off campus, including a cooking class, sporting events, swimming and getting together with friends to study or go to the movies. On campus, he could often be found hanging out with friends in the cafeteria, studying with classmates or doing work in the Coutts Library.

Future Opportunities

Alex is currently working at *Organic Roots* and will continue with his employment upon graduation. Additionally, Alex has formed many friendships with his classmates that have extended beyond the classroom and will likely continue beyond graduation. He continues to be active within his community and especially within the arts community.

Looking back over the past twenty years, *On Campus* has evolved in several different ways. Structurally, the program has grown from 8 to 11 students. Efforts have been made to keep the program small in size in order to ensure quality course availability for students. *On Campus* only permits one student per class in order to facilitate a successful inclusive experience for everyone in the class, including the professor and fellow students in addition to the *On Campus* student. The implementation of the *Alumni* program further demonstrates that the needs of students are growing just as much as the list of *On Campus* graduates.

Over time, people at the university have come to know about *On Campus*, and relationships have formed with departments, faculties and professors that open new doors for the students. With these relationships, *On Campus* is slowly making strides toward new opportunities. For instance, this was the first year that a student was admitted into a senior level art class, after years of trying with no success.

The experiences that others have with *On Campus* are beginning to affect social change in such a way that it is propelling the program forward; the social change inspired by *On Campus* is coming back like a boomerang effect or an infinite circle. To demonstrate, a *University of Alberta* Elementary Education graduate contacted the *On Campus* office to share her story. She had been a volunteer for one of the *On Campus* students while she herself was a student at the university. Now that she was a teacher, she had been approached with the prospect of allowing an intellectually-challenged student to participate in her class. Prior to her experience through *On Campus*, she had never had any contact with anyone with a developmental disability, let alone within an educational context. Her volunteer experience with the *On Campus* student was very positive and she enthusiastically agreed to allow this young student into her class.

As such, it seems that the ways that *On Campus* students are impacting on the individual lives of professors and classmates are immeasurable, but attitudes are changing due to this ripple-effect. The teachers of tomorrow are more socially conscious after sharing a classroom with an *On Campus* student. This, in turn, opens doors for inclusive education within the school system. The *On Campus* students of tomorrow will come into the program with an inclusive background, and inclusion will begin to be seen as a right rather than a privilege. This phenomenon is already emerging and is evident with students that have been admitted to the program in recent years.

For instance, a recent *On Campus* student was the first to have a serious interest in taking an Engineering course, and consequently was also the first to be admitted to such a course. The student and his family shared a

“can-do” attitude and were not hindered by thoughts of barriers, an outlook that had sprung from prior inclusive experiences. More and more students are entering into the program with diverse interests, evidencing a shift in attitudes. Thus, just as water always returns to its source, *On Campus* is affecting social change, and the results of this change are what keep propelling the program toward evolution as attitudes and needs also evolve.

Societal attitudes are beginning to transform within the university community as well. At the onset of the initiative, *On Campus* students were not invited to participate in convocation. Later, they were invited but unable to wear a cap and gown. This evolved into permission to wear a gown but no cap; later, consent was given to wear both cap and gown. Today the students are still not given acquiescence to walk across the stage at convocation, even though in recent years, thanks to the growing support of staff and faculty members, *On Campus* graduates have had their photographs featured during the ceremony. Although appreciated, families and students dream of the day when the magnitude of the achievements of these incredible young men and women will be fully acknowledged and recognized within the university community in the same way as for other university students.

Looking toward the future, *On Campus* hopes to see its students walk across the stage at convocation one day. Despite the strides already made, there is still room for growth and further advancement in this area. Although convocation is steeped in tradition and ceremony, it would be the mark of true social change to see the university fully embrace *On Campus* and its students by allowing them to fully participate at convocation.

Broadcast journalist Linda Ellerbee once said, “People are pretty much alike. It's only that our differences are more susceptible to definition than our similarities.” The inclusive goal of *On Campus* is to change the way that the community defines, perceives, labels and relates to people with intellectual disabilities. From its inception in the late 1980s to today and beyond, *On Campus* will continually strive for the day when definitions are altogether unnecessary.

References:

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