Getting to Work.
Career Skills Development for Social Sciences and Humanities Graduates
Preface

While an undergraduate degree in the social sciences and humanities (SSH) leads to rewarding careers for many, the transition from post-secondary education (PSE) to a career is not always smooth for these graduates. This report examines the career outcomes of SSH undergraduate degree holders and the opportunities made available by some institutions to ease the transition from PSE to a career. It recommends, in particular, that PSE institutions, governments, employers, and other stakeholders pay closer attention to—and direct resources to address—the career transition challenges facing SSH graduates.
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The findings and conclusions of this report are entirely those of The Conference Board of Canada. Any errors or omissions in fact or interpretation remain the sole responsibility of The Conference Board of Canada.

About the Centre for Skills and Post-Secondary Education

The Conference Board of Canada's Centre for Skills and Post-Secondary Education (SPSE) is a multi-year initiative that examines the advanced skills and education challenges facing Canada today. While education is a provincial/territorial government responsibility, improving Canada's skills and post-secondary education performance is a national priority. The Centre examines important themes and issues in post-secondary education from a pan-Canadian perspective. The Centre involves a broad collaboration of public and private sector stakeholders. Together, we aim to address the future of work and the drivers of change in the educational landscape.

For more information about the Centre for Skills and Post-Secondary Education, visit www.conferenceboard.ca/spse.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Getting to Work: Career Skills Development for Social Sciences and Humanities Graduates

At a Glance

• In the long term, most individuals with an undergraduate degree in the social sciences or humanities (SSH) go on to a wide range of rewarding careers. However, in the short term, many recent graduates face challenging career transitions.

• Recent SSH graduates may face challenging career transitions due to difficulty articulating the value of the skills developed in their SSH program to employers, insufficient understanding of possible career paths, and limited work experience.

• Some post-secondary institutions have implemented initiatives to ease career transitions for SSH undergraduate degree holders. The most effective initiatives combine experiential learning with the development of career management skills.
Thousands of students graduate from Canadian post-secondary institutions each year with an undergraduate degree in the social sciences or humanities (SSH). While most go on to a wide range of rewarding careers, many face challenging career transitions as they struggle to define their career paths and expectations and establish themselves in the labour market. These transition-related challenges have led some to argue that SSH graduates lack the skills needed to be successful in the labour market and too often end up in low-paying, low-skilled jobs. They argue that post-secondary education (PSE) programs should focus on developing the applied skills required for specific careers.

In reality, SSH students acquire a wide range of valuable skills—from critical thinking and written and oral communication to cross-cultural understanding and creativity—and eventually go on to rewarding careers. Many suggest that non-applied skills will become even more valuable in the future when an increasing number of jobs or tasks are automated.¹ But the increasingly in-demand SSH skills cannot be easily replicated by computers. SSH graduates require more support and training to help them articulate and market the value of the skills they have learned to employers, as well as increase their awareness of potential career paths. By ensuring SSH students have access to comprehensive career development programming and experiential learning opportunities tailored to their disciplines, PSE institutions and SSH faculties and departments can help ensure the continued vitality of these disciplines and create greater understanding of the valuable social, cultural, and economic contributions of SSH graduates.

Purpose of the Report

This report examines the short- and long-term career outcomes of SSH undergraduate degree holders and opportunities to ease their career transitions. It discusses the extent to which recent SSH graduates struggle to find meaningful employment and characterizes the specific types of challenges SSH graduates face as they embark on their careers. The report also profiles initiatives at PSE institutions in Canada and peer countries that develop the professional skills of SSH graduates and ease career transitions.

Career Pathways and Outcomes

In the years immediately following graduation, SSH undergraduate degree holders earn less, are less likely to be employed in a job directly related to their degree, and are more likely to be overqualified for their current position compared with undergraduate degree holders as a whole. However, over the long term, the career outcomes of SSH graduates improve, and these graduates are generally satisfied with both their careers and programs of study. Earnings data suggest that individuals from PSE programs that emphasize non-applied skills may see improved returns as they progress into more senior positions later in their careers.

Easing Career Transitions

Growth in the number of people with an SSH undergraduate degree has meant more people are competing for “good” jobs compared with previous generations. Recent graduates of SSH undergraduate programs may face challenging career transitions because they have a limited understanding of potential career paths, and careers for SSH graduates are often less obvious than those for students from applied programs.² While many students turn to SSH faculty for career advice, faculty generally do not feel equipped to provide students with career advice in part because they often have limited work experience

² Interview findings; Harvey and Shahjahan, Employability of Bachelor of Arts Graduates, 116.
outside of academia. Students and recent graduates also struggle to translate the skills they have developed through their studies into language that resonates with employers. Studies suggest that students have considerable difficulty providing evidence of the skills they have learned, beyond generic language such as “critical thinking” or “written communication.”

Employer attitudes about SSH graduates further hamper their career transitions. While there is a strong alignment between the skills employers say they are looking for and those emphasized in SSH programs, SSH graduates are often passed over during the hiring process in favour of graduates from applied programs. Some employers do not have a clear idea of the skills that SSH graduates have or may not see the connections between SSH graduates and specific tasks or jobs because the link is not as direct as it is for graduates of applied programs. However, employers who do hire SSH graduates find many of their skills, such as writing, critical thinking, and research ability, to be stronger than students from applied programs.

This report profiles a number of initiatives implemented by PSE institutions to ease career transitions for recent SSH graduates. The initiatives are classified into the following three categories:

- **Supplementary employability initiatives.** Voluntary workshops, seminars, conferences, mentoring initiatives, and other short-term learning opportunities that assist students in developing the skills needed to find employment after graduation.
- **Immersive skills development initiatives.** Voluntary initiatives, generally not for academic credit, such as cooperative education and internships, that allow students to gain work experience relevant to their degree in a non-academic environment.
- **Transformative initiatives.** For-credit initiatives that integrate skills development and career management skills into SSH curricula. This can include courses with a community service component or for-credit career planning and development courses.

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4 Interview findings.
The most effective initiatives combine experiential learning with the development of career management skills. These initiatives help students define a career path, navigate the labour market, and apply the skills developed in their SSH program in a non-academic environment.

Strategies for Action

Easing career transitions for SSH undergraduate degree holders should not mean emphasizing applied or technical skills at the expense of what is traditionally taught in these disciplines. Rather, it means increasing students’ awareness of possible career paths and giving them the ability to translate and market their newly developed skills to employers. The report outlines eight strategies to ease career transitions for SSH undergraduate degree holders:

1. Collect and distribute information on the career pathways and transitions of SSH graduates.
2. Emphasize and communicate to students the skills developed in SSH programs.
3. Strongly encourage students to think about career paths and skills development at the beginning of their degree program.
4. Increase opportunities for participation in experiential learning.
5. Offer career development programming tailored to SSH students.
6. Strengthen links between SSH students and alumni.
7. Increase employer awareness of the valuable skills taught in SSH programs.
8. Evaluate and share information on career development initiatives.
CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Chapter Summary

● Most social sciences and humanities (SSH) graduates go on to rewarding careers, but the initial transition from post-secondary education to a career is often challenging.

● Negative misperceptions of what an SSH education offers in the current labour market have stifled demand for SSH programs and graduates. However, the increasingly automated work world requires workers with the skills that are developed in SSH programs.

● Post-secondary education must do more to help SSH students make successful transitions into careers.
The barista with a history degree, the unemployed English graduate living in the parents’ basement, the returned-to-school political science graduate who could not find a job—all are worn-out tropes in media coverage of the career outcomes of graduates with an undergraduate degree in the social sciences and humanities (SSH).1 Certainly, one of the most talked-about post-secondary education (PSE) issues in the mainstream media in recent years is the role of SSH programs in preparing graduates for careers.

Of the tens of thousands of students who enrol in undergraduate SSH programs annually, most enrol because of a combination of personal interest in the subject matter and a desire to enhance their employability. A recent survey of Canadian university students found the most common reason for applying to university was to prepare to enter a chosen career (77 per cent), followed closely by personal and intellectual growth (75 per cent).2 While SSH students hope their degree will lead to personal and professional fulfillment, for many students the negative rhetoric about SSH creates unnecessary anxiety about their future.

As it turns out, most SSH graduates go on to have rewarding careers, though getting there sometimes involves challenging transitions from PSE to work. Why? The reasons include a limited awareness of possible career paths, difficulty marketing the skills developed in SSH programs to employers, and limited work experience. The perceptions—and misperceptions—that some employers have about SSH graduates also dampen demand.

1 The social sciences and humanities are also referred to as the arts and non-applied arts and humanities. For the purpose of this report, SSH refers to four-year non-applied programs in the social sciences and humanities, including disciplines such as anthropology, economics, English, history, philosophy, political science, and sociology.
This report analyzes the short- and long-term career outcomes of SSH undergraduate degree holders. It pays particular attention to the PSE-to-career transitions of SSH undergraduate degree holders who do not go on to advanced degrees. The report discusses skills developed in SSH programs and the career transition challenges most commonly faced by graduates. Initiatives in Canada and the U.S. to ease transitions from PSE to careers are profiled. The report concludes by identifying strategies to ease transitions to careers for graduates of SSH undergraduate programs.

Social Sciences and Humanities: The New Work-(Meaning of) Life Debate

Critics of SSH programs argue that graduates lack the skills to be successful in the labour market and are more likely than graduates of programs that emphasize applied skills to end up in low-paying, low-skilled jobs. They argue that PSE programs should focus on developing applied skills required for specific careers.³

Defenders of SSH education argue against the marketization of education and the increasing emphasis on applied skills.⁴ They point to the role of these disciplines in nurturing softer skills or qualities, such as curiosity, compassion, and critical thinking, which are necessary for a healthy liberal democracy. As Dr. Martha Nussbaum states in *Not-for-Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, “This tradition is not just about the passive assimilation of facts and cultural traditions, but about challenging the mind to become active, competent, and thoughtfully critical in a complex world.”⁵

Dr. Azar Nafisi, author of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and *The Republic of Imagination*, insists that SSH disciplines—the humanities especially—teach awareness of self and others, empathy and hope, how to appreciate nuance and complexity within and across cultures, and how

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³ See, for example, Chiose, “Recent University Grads Increasingly Jobless”; Cohen, “A Rising Call to Promote STEM Education and Cut Liberal Arts Funding”; and Wente, “Educated for Unemployment.”

⁴ See, for example, Copley, “Humanities Degree Provides Excellent Investment Returns”; Gopnik, “Why Teach English”; and Nussbaum, *Not for Profit*.

⁵ Nussbaum, *Not for Profit*, 17.
to resist and escape “intellectual indolence” and totalitarianism. “Every great democracy,” argued Nafisi in a 2015 lecture in Ottawa at the annual Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences, “should be based on literature and the sciences,” and not be segregated, with one prioritized over the other.

Indeed, there will always be a need for individuals with SSH degrees. SSH disciplines prepare individuals to address pressing societal issues, from understanding the root causes of terrorism or what the election of United States President Donald Trump means for Canada, to considering how to achieve gender equity in the workplace.

Social Sciences and Humanities Skills and the Future World of Work

In the future, developments in fields such as artificial intelligence and robotics are expected to transform the labour market, as more and more routine or low-skill jobs and tasks become automated. Some argue this means we are heading toward an automated, technocratic world, where coding and applied skills, such as those emphasized in the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) disciplines, will be the only skills we will need. However, the future will depend just as much, if not more, on soft or non-applied skills, such as social intelligence; creative, critical, adaptive, and transdisciplinary thinking; design thinking; and cross-cultural and global competencies.

As Livia Gershon, a writer for *Aeon*, argues:

… the truth is, only a tiny percentage of people in the post-industrial world will ever end up working in software engineering, biotechnology or advanced manufacturing. Just as the behemoth machines of the industrial revolution made physical strength less necessary for humans, the information revolution frees us to

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6 Allen, “Through the Veil”; McAlpin, “‘Republic of Imagination’ Sings the Praises of Literature”; Ruark, “Defenders of the Humanities Look for New Ways to Explain Their Value.”

7 Nafisi, “Humanities and the Future of Democracies.”

8 Davies, Fidler, and Gorbis, *Future Work Skills 2020*; Lamb and Doyle, *Future-Proof*.

9 Davies, Fidler, and Gorbis, *Future Work Skills 2020*. 

Find Conference Board research at www.e-library.ca.
SSH skills help individuals work with and relate to one another, adapt to new circumstances, and remain flexible in the face of change.

complement, rather than compete with, the technical competence of computers. Many of the most important jobs of the future will require soft skills, not advanced algebra.\textsuperscript{10}

Gershon goes on to state that the changing nature of work, particularly the rapid decline in industrial sector jobs, “means that most of us have jobs requiring emotional skills, whether working directly with customers or collaborating with our corporate ‘team’ on a project.”\textsuperscript{11}

While applied skills can easily become outdated or obsolete with the advent of new technologies, SSH skills are durable; they help individuals work with and relate to one another, adapt to new circumstances, and remain flexible in the face of change, which is increasingly important in an environment when workers are changing jobs more frequently.\textsuperscript{12}

Silicon Valley venture capitalist Scott Hartley recently argued, too, that barriers for entry to technical roles in the high-tech industry are dropping, and many specialized tasks can now be done with simple tools and through the Internet. What matters more and more is how an individual thinks—“people who grasp the whys and hows of human behaviour.”\textsuperscript{13}

Christian Madsbjerg, a business consultant with a philosophy and political science background, calls this “sensemaking.” Madsbjerg argues in favour of human interaction and the ability of the human mind to solve problems over algorithms and computers. Businesses and organizations, he argues, need to be able “to imagine and intuit how the world—and their own business or institution—might be evolving.”\textsuperscript{14} It is equally important to be able to view human behaviour and stand in relationship with others in a natural setting—“the savannah—not the zoo.”\textsuperscript{15} This perspective sees the necessity in using design thinking, creativity, and the tools supplied by nature for understanding operating systems and codified data.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{10} Gershon, “The Future Is Emotional.”
\item \textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{12} Harris, “Job Hopping Is the New Normal.”
\item \textsuperscript{13} Olejarz, “Liberal Arts in the Data Age.” See also Morad, “Why Mark Cuban Believes Liberal Arts Is the Future of Jobs.”
\item \textsuperscript{14} Madsbjerg, Sensemaking, 34.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 16–17.
\end{itemize}
Technology demands the knowledge and skills of the social sciences and humanities to comprehend its possibilities for improving our world. Our ability to innovate and find new and better ways to do and make things depends on integrating SSH skills and perspectives with new and emerging technologies.\textsuperscript{16} That requires us to continue, as Sophie Gilbert recently wrote in \textit{The Atlantic}, learning to be human and what that means.\textsuperscript{17}

**Precarious Opportunities for New Graduates?**

Yet, while SSH undergraduate degree holders have the skills to succeed in the new economy, the nature of work is also becoming increasingly precarious. As is often noted, traditional 9-to-5 jobs with benefits and long-term security are disappearing. In Canada and peer countries, an increasing number of individuals are self-employed or working in jobs that are temporary or part-time.\textsuperscript{18} While low-skilled workers have been hit particularly hard by this trend, young people, including recent graduates across all fields of study, are disproportionately impacted.\textsuperscript{19} More and more young workers are employed in temporary positions, freelance, or work multiple jobs to make ends meet. While some value the flexibility and freedom of non-traditional employment as well as the opportunity to gain work experience, wages also tend to be lower and these types of positions lack benefits. Looking ahead, new graduates will have to navigate the “gig” economy for part—or all—of their careers.

**The Continuing Value of a Social Sciences and Humanities Degree**

Over the long term, we know that SSH graduates experience rewarding lives and careers. While Canadian SSH undergraduate degree holders, on average, earn less than their counterparts with degrees in STEM fields (particularly engineering and computer science), they earn more than individuals with a college diploma and have more stable careers.

\textsuperscript{16} Walker, “Why the Humanities Are More Important Than Ever.”
\textsuperscript{17} Gilbert, “Learning to Be Human.”
\textsuperscript{18} Policy Horizons Canada, \textit{The Changing Nature of Work}.
\textsuperscript{19} Fox and O’Connor, “Five Ways Work Will Change in the Future”; OECD, \textit{Adapting to the Changing Face of Work}.
As a result of declining enrolments, some universities in Canada and peer countries have merged or closed SSH departments or programs.

Earnings, though, are just one determinant of the value of a program of study. Many SSH career paths, such as working in the community or cultural industries, can also be deeply rewarding on a personal level.

Much of the negative press about SSH degrees or “the value of the arts” can be attributed to the difficult PSE-to-career transitions some graduates experience shortly after graduation. Furthermore, careers in STEM fields, particularly computer science, are often touted as key to landing the jobs of the future. This has had a detrimental impact on enrolments in SSH programs. In the 2005–06 school year, enrolments in SSH programs made up 36.9 per cent of undergraduate enrolments in Canada. By 2014–15, enrolments in SSH programs made up only 32.2 per cent of all undergraduate enrolments.

The humanities have been hit particularly hard. While the number of students enrolled in social sciences programs has increased along with undergraduate enrolments (although not at the same rate as undergraduate enrolments as a whole), the absolute number of humanities enrolments has declined. Between the 2005–06 and 2014–15 school years, humanities enrolments declined by 13.5 per cent, while total undergraduate enrolments rose by 22.1 per cent during the same period. Some SSH departments have seen even steeper enrolment declines. For example, one English department at a mid-sized Canadian university has seen a 50 per cent decrease in students majoring in the subject since the mid-2000s. As a result of declining enrolments, some universities in Canada and peer countries have merged or closed SSH departments or programs. In contrast, disciplines emphasizing applied skills, such as engineering, health, and business, have experienced significant enrolment increases.

20 See Finnie and others, Barista or Better? The earnings of SSH graduates are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2 of this report.
21 Statistics Canada, CANSIM table 477-0019.
22 Ibid.
23 Interview findings.
24 Chiose, “As Students Move Away From the Humanities, Universities Adapt”; Lewin, “As Interest Fades in the Humanities, Colleges Worry”; McMillan, “Maritime Universities See Plunging Enrolment in Humanities Programs.”
25 Statistics Canada, CANSIM table 477-0019.
Many universities and SSH faculty in Canada and peer countries have recognized the need to address the difficult PSE-to-career transitions experienced by many SSH graduates. Easing transitions does not and should not mean emphasizing applied skills at the expense of what is traditionally taught in SSH disciplines. Rather, it means helping students to better recognize and communicate the skills emphasized in SSH programs and giving them increased opportunities to apply those skills and develop new skills in both academic and non-academic environments.

PSE institutions need to do more to assist students with career skills development and transitions by expanding existing career services and opportunities, such as assistance with resumés and networking opportunities, and including more career-oriented curricula in the classroom and experiential learning opportunities, such as cooperative education and courses with community service components. The long-term success of these initiatives will hinge on changing public opinion and moving once and for all beyond the “value of the arts” debate in favour of a mutual understanding between governments, PSE institutions, students, families, and employers of the crucial social, cultural, and economic roles these disciplines play.

Purpose of the Report

This report examines the career outcomes of SSH undergraduate degree holders and opportunities to ease the transition from a PSE institution to a career. In particular, this report:

- examines the short- and long-term career outcomes of SSH undergraduate degree holders;
- analyzes skills development in SSH programs;
- discusses the extent to which SSH graduates struggle to find meaningful employment;
- characterizes the challenges that SSH graduates face as they embark on their careers;

See, for example, Universities Canada, *The Future of the Liberal Arts*. 
• examines employer perceptions and misperceptions about SSH graduates;
• profiles initiatives at post-secondary institutions in Canada and the U.S. that aim to ease PSE-to-career transitions and develop the professional skills of SSH graduates;
• makes recommendations to PSE institutions, governments, employers, and other stakeholders to address the career transition challenges facing many SSH graduates.

Methodology

The research methodology for this project involved both qualitative and quantitative methods, including:

• a review of literature on SSH graduates in Canada and peer countries, the skills developed by SSH disciplines, and strategies to enhance career outcomes for SSH graduates;
• collection and analysis of quantitative data from a variety of sources on the career paths and outcomes of SSH graduates;
• a survey of SSH students at PSE institutions across Canada on their understanding of labour market opportunities and participation in skills development;
• a survey of career services personnel and SSH faculty and administration at Canadian PSE institutions on the role of SSH in preparing students for employment, students’ exposure to career development opportunities, and the existence of programs to aid SSH students in career development. (See “About the Social Sciences and Humanities Career Transitions Surveys”);
• 26 interviews with faculty and university career centre staff on skills development in SSH programs and initiatives to strengthen graduates’ professional skills development;
• consultations with stakeholders (PSE administrators, faculty, and career services professionals) to gain additional perspectives and feedback on the research findings.
About the Social Sciences and Humanities Career Transitions Surveys

The Conference Board of Canada conducted the Social Sciences and Humanities Career Transition surveys to better understand skills development in SSH programs and transitions made from PSE to careers for SSH graduates. The SSH Career Transitions Institutional Survey was conducted between March and July 2016. The Conference Board distributed the survey by e-mail to staff at colleges and universities across Canada. The survey had a total of 285 respondents, including 77 cooperative education and career development staff and 165 faculty members and deans (not all respondents indicated their position). Eighty-five per cent of respondents were employed at universities, while 15 per cent were employed at colleges or polytechnics.

The SSH Career Transitions Student Survey was conducted between March and June of 2016. It was administered by Academica Group to its panel of university and college students across Canada; to one large introductory history class at Carleton University; and through open links on social media and the Conference Board’s website. Almost all respondents were enrolled in a non-applied social sciences or humanities program (a small number were enrolled in fine arts programs) and most were in their second year or higher of study. The largest proportions of students were enrolled in psychology (23 per cent), political science (10 per cent), history (9 per cent), or communication and media studies (7 per cent). A total of 126 students responded.

Source: The Conference Board of Canada.
CHAPTER 2

The Career Pathways of Social Sciences and Humanities Graduates

Chapter Summary

- SSH bachelor graduates face challenging transitions to careers immediately after graduation. However, over the long term, their earnings improve and their job satisfaction levels are comparable to graduates from other disciplines.

- Earnings data suggest that over time, individuals with credentials that emphasize non-applied skills, including SSH programs, may see better returns as they progress into senior positions later in their careers.

- Many SSH bachelor degree holders pursue further education within three years of graduation.
Each year, almost 60,000 Canadians receive an undergraduate degree in the social sciences or humanities.\(^1\) While in the short term many of these graduates will experience challenging transitions to careers, over the long term most will go on to rewarding careers. This chapter analyzes the short- and long-term career outcomes of SSH graduates.

Many studies focus on the career outcomes of graduates six months to three years after graduation. The data are valuable for understanding PSE-to-career transitions but do little to highlight long-term outcomes. Wherever possible, this chapter draws on short- and long-term data, examining where SSH graduates are employed, employment outcomes, earnings, and satisfaction with career and educational choices. Educational pathways pursued after an undergraduate degree are also discussed.

**Where Are Social Sciences and Humanities Graduates Employed?**

An undergraduate SSH degree provides learners with a broad-based education and a range of portable skills with applicability to a variety of career paths. SSH graduates are employed throughout the economy. The top occupational categories of working-age adults with bachelor degrees in the social sciences and humanities graduates are business, finance, and administration; and education, law, and social, community, and government services. Close to half of social sciences and humanities graduates hold occupations in these two groups. (See Chart 1.)

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1 Statistics Canada, CANSIM table 477-0030.
BAs Without Jobs? Employment Outcomes for Social Sciences and Humanities Graduates

Individuals with an undergraduate degree in the social sciences have employment outcomes broadly similar to undergraduate degree holders across all fields of study.\(^2\) In 2011, social sciences graduates had:

- a labour force participation rate of 86.7 per cent, consistent with 86.7 per cent across all fields of study;
- an employment rate of 82.2 per cent versus 82.6 per cent across all fields of study;
- an unemployment rate of 5.3 per cent versus 4.7 per cent across all fields of study.\(^3\)

\(^2\) Full-time students, such as individuals who enrolled in graduate school after completing an undergraduate degree, are excluded from employment statistics because they are not active in the labour market.

\(^3\) Statistics Canada, 2011 National Household Survey.
Humanities graduates fared slightly worse in the labour market than social sciences graduates and undergraduate degree holders in general, with:

- a labour force participation rate of 82.3 per cent versus 86.7 per cent across all fields of study;
- an employment rate of 77.6 per cent versus 82.6 per cent across all fields of study;
- an unemployment rate of 5.7 per cent versus 4.7 per cent across all fields of study.\(^4\)

Individuals with undergraduate degrees in business, math and computer science, and health had the strongest employment outcomes. (See Table 1.)

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Field of study</th>
<th>Participation rate</th>
<th>Employment rate</th>
<th>Unemployment rate</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>75.4</td>
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<td>70.7</td>
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<td>Apprenticeship or trades certificate or diploma</td>
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<td>80.7</td>
<td>5.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Business, management, and public administration</td>
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<td>84.4</td>
<td>4.7</td>
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<td>Physical and life sciences and technologies</td>
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<td>Mathematics, computer, and information sciences</td>
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<td>Health and related fields</td>
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</table>

Note: Data are for individuals aged 25 to 64.

\(^4\) Ibid.
There is a perception that holders of college diplomas or trades certificates have stronger employment outcomes than SSH graduates. The fact is that their employment outcomes are broadly similar: while social sciences graduates experience somewhat better employment outcomes, both social sciences and humanities graduates experience outcomes that are largely comparable to holders of college credentials. 

(See Table 1.) Employment outcomes of SSH graduates vary by a number of factors, including sex, major, where a degree was earned (the data include degrees earned in Canada and abroad), local labour market conditions, and citizenship and immigration status.5

**Employment Outcomes of Social Sciences and Humanities Graduates Shortly After Graduation**

While a surface examination of employment outcomes of SSH graduates tells us if they are currently working, it says little about the nature of their employment and experiences shortly after graduation. Three years after graduation, SSH graduates are somewhat more likely than graduates as a whole to be employed in part-time work, but somewhat less likely to be employed in temporary positions. Notably, only 74 per cent of humanities graduates found full-time work three years after graduation compared to 84 per cent of graduates across all fields of study.6 (See Chart 2.)

Data from the 2015 British Columbia Baccalaureate Graduates Survey asked undergraduate degree holders from the class of 2013 how many jobs they had held two years after graduation.7 Across all fields of study, 16 per cent had held two jobs and 4 per cent had held three or more jobs. The data for graduates of social sciences programs are comparable: 17 per cent had held two jobs, while 4 per cent had held three or more.

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5 While SSH programs tend to have a higher proportion of women than many other undergraduate degree programs, and women tend to have poorer employment outcomes than men, trends in employment outcomes across discipline of study remain roughly the same when taking gender into account (data not shown).


7 The British Columbia Baccalaureate Graduates Survey annually surveys individuals from undergraduate degree programs two years after graduation. In 2015, 19 public post-secondary institutions in B.C. participated in the survey. Out of 22,495 graduates eligible and invited to participate in the survey, 9,964 responded for an overall response rate of 44 per cent.
jobs. Humanities graduates, however, were more likely to have held several jobs: 20 per cent held two jobs, while 5 per cent held three or more jobs.

Graduates from engineering and applied sciences (9 per cent) and business and management (12 per cent) were the least likely to have held two or more jobs.8 In general, new graduates might have several jobs shortly after graduation before finding a career and employer that are the right fit. Nonetheless, the higher proportion of humanities graduates holding multiple jobs suggests they have a particularly challenging time establishing their careers and finding appropriate employment, although in the long term they go on to rewarding careers.

**Overqualification of Social Sciences and Humanities Graduates**

Another way to gauge how the labour market utilizes the skills of SSH undergraduate degree holders is to examine if they are overqualified for their job. Individuals are considered overqualified if their highest

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The employment outcomes of SSH graduates shortly after graduation suggest that many face initial challenges establishing a career path.

The level of educational attainment exceeds what is usually required for their occupation. Between 1991 and 2014, the number of recent university graduates, aged 25 to 34, across all fields of study who were overqualified increased from 32 to 40 per cent.\(^9\)

An analysis of university graduates (all degree levels), aged 25 to 34, found that in 2011, humanities graduates were most likely to be employed in a position requiring a high school education or less, followed by fine arts and social sciences graduates.\(^10\) Graduates from engineering, education, mathematics, computer sciences, and health were the least likely to be overqualified for their position. The number of overqualified individuals decreases by age across all fields of study.\(^11\)

The employment outcomes of SSH graduates shortly after graduation suggest that many face initial challenges establishing a career path. SSH undergraduate degree holders may either struggle to find work that explicitly demands the skills they honed during their studies or take short-term, temporary jobs to gain relevant work experience.

**Earnings**

The career progressions of SSH graduates are further illuminated by longitudinal research on the earnings of post-secondary graduates spearheaded by the University of Ottawa's Dr. Ross Finnie.\(^12\) This research links administrative data on graduates provided by 14 PSE institutions in four provinces to tax records held at Statistics Canada. The study found undergraduate degree holders from the class of 2005 had average annual earnings of $45,200 one year after graduation, increasing to $74,900 eight years after graduation.\(^13\)

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10 Calculations are based on the 2011 National Household Survey. Data include all levels of university degree (bachelor’s, master’s, PhD). Bachelor’s degree holders make up the largest proportion of graduates, and graduates from master’s and PhD programs are significantly less likely to be employed in positions requiring a high school education or less. As such, these results can be seen as broadly indicative of the employment outcomes of bachelor’s graduates.
11 Uppal and LaRochelle-Côté, *Overqualification Among Recent University Graduates in Canada*, 7.
12 See Education Policy Research Initiative, “EPRI-ESDC Tax Linkage Project”.
13 All figures in this section are in 2014 dollars.
SSH graduates had lower-than-average earnings one year after graduation—$36,300 for social sciences and $32,800 for humanities graduates. After eight years, social sciences graduates had average earnings of $61,900, an annual increase of $3,700. Humanities graduates had average earnings of $57,000, an annual increase of $3,500. Graduates from engineering and health programs had the highest earnings one year after graduation. Eight years after graduation, engineering graduates had the highest average earnings ($99,600), followed by graduates from math and computer science programs ($89,300).14 (See Chart 3.)

Chart 3
Average Earnings of Undergraduate Degree Holders by Field of Study
(2014 $; years since graduation)

Note: Data are for the 2005 graduating class.
Source: Finnie and others, Barista or Better?

Some critics suggest that the 2008 recession undermined the long-term earnings of recent graduates. But data show this is not the case, as earnings patterns for cohorts who graduated between 2005 and 2011 are

14 Finnie and others, Barista or Better? 13–15.
SSH graduates experience greater long-term income stability than graduates with degrees in computer science, math, engineering, and business.

broadly similar.\textsuperscript{15} Furthermore, contrary to notions that large numbers of SSH graduates end up employed in low-skill, low-pay service sector jobs (e.g., the barista with a BA), the mean earnings of undergraduate degree holders (except fine arts graduates, to some extent) are well above the minimum wage a barista might earn.\textsuperscript{16}

Others argue that SSH undergraduate degree holders are not as highly valued by employers as graduates from specialized, applied college programs, in part because employers want “plug and play” graduates.\textsuperscript{17} At first glance, this appears to be true. One year after graduating, the 2005 cohort of college graduates earned an average of $33,900. This was lower than social sciences graduates ($36,300), but marginally higher than humanities graduates ($32,800). The applied or technical skills emphasized by many college diploma programs initially makes it easier for these graduates to find work—they have clearly defined career paths and career-specific skills.

The broad skill sets emphasized in SSH make it challenging for graduates to determine a career path, and they may require additional training by employers to perform specific tasks. However, eight years after graduation, college graduates had earnings of $54,000, while both social sciences ($61,900) and humanities ($57,000) graduates were earning higher salaries.\textsuperscript{18} Earnings data suggest that over time the labour market places different values on applied and non-applied skills. Individuals with credentials that emphasize broad skills, such as communication and critical thinking, may see better returns later in their careers when they move into more senior positions.\textsuperscript{19}

SSH graduates also experience greater long-term income stability than graduates with degrees in computer science, math, engineering, and business. A study of University of Ottawa graduates between 1998 and 2010 used tax data to track earnings and employment outcomes. It found that while computer science, math, engineering, and business graduates

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 12.
\textsuperscript{16} Finnie and others, Barista or Better? 17; Abel and Deitz, Underemployment in the Early Careers of College Graduates Following the Great Recession.
\textsuperscript{17} Hill, “Who Will Train the New Generation of ‘Plug and Play’ Workers?”
\textsuperscript{18} Finnie and others, Barista or Better?
\textsuperscript{19} See Ostrovsky and Frenette, The Cumulative Earnings of Postsecondary Graduates Over 20 Years.
had the highest earnings both immediately after graduation and at the end of the 13-year period, their earnings were more volatile than SSH graduates, whose earnings grew at smaller but more consistent rates.\(^{20}\) Lower earnings for undergraduate degree holders from non-applied fields continued until their late 40s, but the study showed they catch up “without having to endure the fluctuations and unpredictability of their peers in the computer sciences, math, engineering, and business.”\(^{21}\)

**Job Satisfaction of Social Sciences and Humanities Graduates**

Earnings are only one aspect of career satisfaction—work-life balance, the ability to give back to the community, or work related to personal interests are all important. Three years after graduation, 61 per cent of undergraduate degree holders across all fields of study were satisfied with their job, but only 52 per cent of social sciences and 45 per cent of humanities graduates felt that way.\(^{22}\) (See Chart 4.) The lower job satisfaction rate of SSH graduates shortly after graduation can be at least partly attributed to challenging transitions from PSE to careers. Evidence from the U.S. suggests that over the long term, SSH graduates have job satisfaction levels similar to graduates from other disciplines.\(^{23}\) Another U.S. study of undergraduate degree holders found that SSH graduates of all ages are more likely to express a stronger interest in their work than business graduates.\(^{24}\)

Another indicator of career and PSE experience satisfaction is the extent to which graduates feel their education is useful in their work. In 2015, the B.C. Baccalaureate Graduates Survey asked undergraduate degree holders from the 2013 cohort if their degree was useful in their work. Across all fields of study, 86 per cent of graduates felt their degree was

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20 Finnie and others, *Post-Schooling Outcomes of University Graduates*.
23 Humanities Indicators, *Job Satisfaction of Humanities Majors*.
very or somewhat useful, while 81 per cent of humanities and 78 per cent of social sciences graduates felt that way.25

The same survey asked graduates how satisfied they were with their choice of educational program. Graduates across all fields of study indicated high levels of satisfaction—32 per cent were very satisfied and 60 per cent were satisfied. Graduates from social sciences programs indicated similar levels of program satisfaction (31 per cent very satisfied; 61 per cent satisfied). Notably, humanities graduates were the most likely to indicate they were very satisfied with their education—42 per cent were very satisfied, while 52 per cent were satisfied.26

Further Education After Undergraduate Program

Many undergraduate degree holders pursue further education to upgrade their skills and increase their employability. Indeed, the proportion of undergraduate degree holders across all fields of study who go on to

26 Ibid., 21.
GETTING TO WORK  
Career Skills Development for Social Sciences and Humanities Graduates

earn additional credentials has steadily increased, as an undergraduate degree is no longer sufficient for many graduates to achieve their desired career outcomes. Three years after graduation, 49 per cent of all undergraduate degree holders had pursued further education. The proportion of graduates who pursue further education varies by field of study. Graduates from fields of study with weaker employment outcomes are more likely to pursue further education.27 Sixty per cent of social sciences and 61 per cent of humanities graduates pursued further education within three years of graduating.28 (See Chart 5.)

Chart 5  
Bachelor Graduates Who Pursued Further Education After 2009–10 Graduation  
(per cent)

Undergraduate degree holders pursue a variety of credentials after graduation. The B.C. Baccalaureate Survey found the most common credentials pursued by social sciences graduates two years after graduation are graduate degrees (31 per cent), a certificate or diploma (29 per cent), and an additional undergraduate degree (22 per cent). Humanities graduates are most likely to pursue a graduate degree (31 per cent), an additional undergraduate degree (29 per cent), or a


27 Ferguson and Wang, Graduating in Canada, 12–13.  
certificate or diploma (26 per cent). 29 (See Chart 6.) Labour market outcomes improve considerably for SSH graduates who complete a graduate degree.

Chart 6
Further Education Pursued Two Years After Completion of Undergraduate Degree
(per cent)

Note: Percentages are based on those respondents who reported pursuing further education two years after graduating with their undergraduate degree in 2013. Missing data are not shown.

Credential Recycling
Credential recycling refers to the practice of obtaining an additional post-secondary credential that is not intended to be a continuation of the first credential (e.g., obtaining a college diploma after completing an undergraduate degree). Credential recycling has increased among undergraduate degree holders in Canada, with recent graduates more likely to engage in this practice. 30 In 2015–16, 15 per cent of students at Ontario colleges had previously completed a university credential. 31 SSH undergraduate degree holders may pursue an additional credential at colleges or polytechnics or a subsequent undergraduate degree to

31 Colleges Ontario, Student and Graduate Profiles, 16.
gain applied skills oriented to a specific career path. While there is limited research on the impacts of credential recycling, one study found university graduates who subsequently obtained a college diploma generally earned less than university graduates who had not “recycled” their credentials (although this varies based on the type of credentials).

In some cases, it may be that individuals may not benefit from credential recycling because the most motivated and capable graduates pursue advanced university degrees or have relatively smooth transitions from PSE to careers. Graduates who engage in credential recycling may enter occupations where only a college diploma is required, as opposed to occupations that require a university degree and have higher salaries.

Conclusion

Many SSH graduates experience challenging transitions from PSE to careers. In the first few years after graduation, SSH undergraduate degree holders earn less than undergraduate degree holders as a whole and are less likely to be employed in careers directly related to their degree. But the employment outcomes of SSH graduates improve over time. Over the long term, SSH graduates experience less volatile career progressions than their peers with degrees in math, computer science, engineering, and business, and most SSH graduates report being generally satisfied with both their career and program of study. Furthermore, while the career outcomes of SSH graduates lag those of some other types of graduates (e.g., engineering, computer science), they are generally better than those of college graduates. As such, an undergraduate degree in SSH continues to have considerable personal and professional value.

32 See, for example, Johansen, College After University; Johne, “University Grads See College Diploma as Key to Jobs”; Miner, People Without Jobs, Jobs Without People, 14; Pearce, “Job-Seeking University Graduates Give It the Old College Try.”
33 Walters, “Recycling.”
34 Ibid.
CHAPTER 3

The Skills to Pay the Bills? Skills Development and Social Sciences and Humanities Programs

Chapter Summary

- An undergraduate degree in an SSH discipline develops subject matter expertise and skills in critical thinking, communication, research, and creativity.

- An undergraduate degree is no longer a guarantee of meaningful employment, and a larger number of SSH undergraduate degree holders are competing for “good” jobs compared to previous generations.

- Many recent SSH graduates have a limited understanding of potential career paths; difficulty translating the skills developed through their studies into language that appeals to employers; and limited work experience.
Graduates of SSH undergraduate programs enter the labour market with a wide range of valuable skills applicable to numerous career paths. In addition to subject matter expertise, they possess broad skills, such as critical thinking and written and oral communication. But the applicability of these skills, which are emphasized in SSH programs, is both a strength and a weakness for graduates.

While broad skills allow graduates to work in a wide range of industries and careers, they can also obscure the direct connections to specific careers and employment opportunities—a challenge that is exacerbated when SSH graduates do not directly utilize their subject matter expertise. As well, the abstract nature of skills emphasized in SSH programs makes it challenging for some employers to appreciate the value that SSH graduates can bring to their organization.

This chapter discusses the skills developed in SSH programs, and how these programs prepare students for the labour market. Also discussed are career transition challenges for SSH graduates: a lack of career direction; difficulty translating skills learned into language that appeals to employers; limited work experience; and employer perceptions of SSH graduates.

What Skills Do the Humanities and Social Sciences Develop?

Undergraduate SSH programs develop both subject matter expertise and broad skills. These broad, or soft, skills allow individuals to succeed in their careers, communities, and personal lives. Axelrod, Anisef, and Lin state that the arts “require students to demonstrate the ability to think analytically, to question received wisdom, to express themselves clearly (orally and in writing), to apply different perspectives and theories to a text or real life situations, and to cultivate one’s own philosophy...”
and sense of values.”1 In addition to subject matter expertise, the skills developed in SSH programs include the following:

- **Problem-solving and critical thinking.** Students analyze and evaluate texts. Through oral and written work, students must construct arguments and defend them using carefully gathered evidence.

- **Written and oral communication.** Students learn to express and defend complex ideas through assignments, such as class presentations and long- and short-form essays. They learn to structure their arguments in a logical and engaging manner.

- **Cross-cultural and socio-political understandings.** By learning about the history, culture, religion, philosophy, and politics of other countries and regions, students develop an appreciation of diversity and a global perspective.

- **Research.** Students develop research questions and gather supporting evidence. This requires students to organize, understand, and assess information.

- **Creativity.** SSH programs value “big picture” and “out of the box” thinking. Students exercise creativity in developing research questions and structuring arguments. In coursework, they may have the opportunity to present work through visual or technological mediums.2

In addition, the completion of an SSH degree strengthens an individual’s time management skills and ability to learn. Because students are required to take a variety of courses, they must quickly become knowledgeable in new subject areas. An SSH degree demonstrates personal initiative and an individual’s ability to work independently. In some programs, students may also have significant opportunities to work collaboratively. Of course, a graduate’s skills will vary depending on a number of factors, including their major, personal aptitude, and other work and life experiences.

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2. Interview findings; Harvey and Shahjahan, Employability of Bachelor of Arts Graduates; University of Regina, “What Skills Will You Gain?”
The Future of Work and the Value of the Social Sciences and Humanities

Global connectivity, smart machines, and new media may transform future workplaces, with significant implications for the skills demanded by the labour market. As Tomlinson states: “[T]he new ‘knowledge-based’ economy entails significant challenges for individuals, including those who are well educated. Individuals have to flexibly adapt to a job market that places increasing expectation and demands on them; in short, they need to continually maintain their employability.” In this world, individuals with narrowly focussed technical skills may be at greater risk of finding their skills obsolete or of continually needing to upgrade their skills than individuals with broad skills, such as those emphasized in the social sciences and humanities.

To thrive in future workplaces, the Institute for the Future hypothesizes that individuals will need the following skills:

- **Sense-making**—Determine the deeper meaning or significance of what is being expressed.
- **Social intelligence**—Connect to others in a deep and direct way, sense and stimulate reactions and desired intentions.
- **Novel and adaptive thinking**—Think and come up with solutions and responses beyond those that are rote or rule-based.
- **Cross-cultural competency**—Operate in different cultural settings.
- **Computational thinking**—Translate vast amounts of data into abstract concepts and understand data-based reasoning.
- **New-media literacy**—Critically assess and develop content that uses new media forms and leverage these media for persuasive communications.
- **Transdisciplinarity**—Develop literacy in and an ability to understand concepts across multiple disciplines.
- **Design mindset**—Represent and develop tasks and work processes for desired outcomes.
- **Cognitive load management**—Filter information for importance and understand how to maximize cognitive functioning using a variety of tools and techniques.

3 Tomlinson, “Graduate Employability,” 413.
• **Virtual collaboration**—Drive engagement and demonstrate presence as a member of a virtual team.  

These skills have significant overlap with those emphasized by SSH programs, demonstrating the continuing relevance of SSH degrees in the workplace.

Sources: Tomlinson, “Graduate Employability”; Davies, Fidler, and Gorbis.

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**Perceptions of Skills Development in Social Sciences and Humanities Programs**

While SSH faculty generally recognize employment as an important outcome for graduates, they also place emphasis on enabling students to succeed in other aspects of their lives. An Australian study surveyed SSH faculty for their thoughts on the employability of BA graduates. It found the majority do not view employability as the primary goal of their teaching. The study states: “These academics tend to object to focussing on the development of students’ job skills but believe their role is to educate students so they become good citizens which will, in turn, make them employable…”

The Conference Board of Canada’s SSH Career Transitions surveys asked university staff and students which skills are emphasized in undergraduate SSH programs. In general, SSH faculty were more positive in their assessment of skills development than students or career development staff. Faculty were more likely to say programs almost always or often emphasize analytical or critical thinking, the appreciation of differences, verbal and written communication, creativity, research skills, and adaptability. While students were generally less enthusiastic in their assessment of skills development in SSH programs, the skills they felt their programs place the most emphasis on were similar to those most emphasized by faculty, with some exceptions. For example, fewer

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4 Davies, Fidler, and Gorbis, *Future Work Skills 2020*.
5 Harvey and Shahjahan, *Employability of Bachelor of Arts Graduates*, 105.
6 Ibid., 16.
7 Faculty include faculty members, department chairs, and deans. Career development staff include both career centre staff/advisors and cooperative education staff.
than half of students felt their programs emphasized adaptability, verbal communication skills, and creativity. (See Table 2.)

### Table 2

**Skills Most Often Emphasized by Undergraduate SSH Programs**  
(percentage of respondents)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Career development staff</th>
<th>Faculty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethical, social, and professional integrity</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analytical or critical thinking</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appreciation of differences</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written communication skills</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civic-mindedness or good citizenship</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research skills</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest in learning/learning ability</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time management</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptability</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal communication skills</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Data show percentage of respondents answering "Almost always/Often/A great deal/Completely."  
Source: The Conference Board of Canada, SSH Career Transitions Surveys.

Students may be less likely than faculty members to indicate that SSH programs develop specific skills because SSH courses and programs often do not directly articulate how skills are being developed. As well, students may not make connections between course activities and the development of broad, non-applied skills. Faculty members may feel that either students are developing specific skills, but the acquisition of those skills may be weak, or students may be unable to identify and articulate the skills they have developed. Research from the U.S. suggests a significant minority of students (36 per cent) do not demonstrate significant skills development at the end of their undergraduate degree (across all fields of study). The same research found that SSH students see greater development of broad skills, such as critical thinking and written communication, than students in fields such as business and

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8 One notable difference was verbal communication skills. While 90 per cent of faculty felt SSH programs often or almost always emphasize verbal communication skills, only 42 per cent of students felt that way.

9 Martini and Clare, *Undergraduates’ Understanding of Skill-Based Learning Outcomes*. 

Find Conference Board research at www.e-library.ca.
education. The relatively stronger skills development of SSH graduates, then, may be due to more demanding reading and writing assignments in SSH programs.¹⁰

Notably, surveys of SSH degree holders shortly after graduation show positive assessments of the role that their degree plays in the development of these types of skills.¹¹ The B.C. Baccalaureate Survey asked undergraduate degree holders two years after graduation if their institution was very helpful or helpful in developing certain skills. SSH graduates gave high marks to the helpfulness of their degree in developing writing skills (91 per cent of humanities graduates, 87 per cent of social sciences graduates); the ability to read and comprehend material (94 per cent of humanities graduates, 90 per cent of social sciences graduates); and the ability to conduct research (88 per cent of humanities graduates, 85 per cent of social sciences graduates).¹² Many SSH students may not recognize the development of non-applied skills or be able to articulate how they have demonstrated them until they have applied their skills in a non-academic setting.

Career Transition Challenges for Social Sciences and Humanities Graduates

While undergraduate SSH students view their degree as necessary for meaningful employment, they also see it as playing an increasingly limited role in guaranteeing meaningful employment. The growth in the number of SSH graduates has led to a larger number of individuals with similar qualifications and experience competing for “good” jobs compared to previous generations.¹³

The Conference Board of Canada’s SSH student survey on transitions from PSE to careers found that 82 per cent of the student respondents were concerned about their career prospects after graduation (n = 125).

¹⁰ Arum and Roksa, Academically Adrift; Jaschik, “Academically Adrift.”
¹¹ See, for example, B.C. Stats, 2015 Baccalaureate Graduates Survey Report of Findings, 17–19; Harvey and Shahjahan, Employability of Bachelor of Arts Graduates,” 86; MacKay, “No Dilemma at All.”
¹³ Tomlinson, “Graduate Employability,” 419; Tomlinson, “The Degree Is Not Enough.”
Career development staff and especially faculty were more optimistic about the career prospects of recent graduates, with 30 per cent of faculty and 54 per cent of career development staff agreeing that SSH graduates “almost always” or “often” struggle to achieve their post-graduation career goals. (See Chart 7.)

Chart 7
Do SSH Graduates Struggle to Find Meaningful Employment?
(per cent)

Students differ from SSH faculty and career development staff in terms of what they perceive as the major challenge in their transition to a career. While 83 per cent of students see the main challenge as heavy competition for jobs, just 33 per cent of faculty and career development staff cite this. Faculty and career development staff are less decisive in attributing one reason to the challenges SSH graduates face, though just over half (52 per cent) say the challenges are due to employers not valuing or understanding SSH graduates. Insufficient work experience and lack of social connections are other major issues that concern students.14 (See Chart 8.) Notably, an inability on the part of SSH programs to prepare students for employment was not among the top reasons indicated by students (40 per cent) or university staff (13 per cent).

14 The SSH Career Transitions surveys gave students and university staff slightly different lists of challenges from which to select their answers.
Barriers to Successful Post-Secondary Education-to-Career Transitions

Lack of a Career Focus

Many SSH students are bewildered or overwhelmed when thinking about potential career paths. Students may enrol in SSH programs because of an intrinsic interest in the subject itself and may be less focused on their future career path. Others may go into SSH programs because they are unsure about what to study and lack the prerequisites required for other programs.15

Research has shown that undergraduate students in general tend to have a limited understanding of what life after university might involve and only engage in active thinking about their career path as they approach graduation.16 SSH students, in particular, often have only a

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15 Interview findings; Harvey and Shahjahan, Employability of Bachelor of Arts Graduates, 25; Judd and others, Case Studies to Enhance Graduate Employability, 173; Mestan, “Why Students Drop Out of the Bachelor of Arts,” 5.

16 Interview findings; Bridgstock, “The Graduate Attributes We’ve Overlooked,” 40.
A lack of clear skills connections to the labour market affects both transitions to careers for recent graduates and university attrition rates.

Limited understanding of future career paths. As one career counsellor at a Canadian university noted, “Non-arts students are more narrowly focused in their career aspirations and are interested in a few careers.”\(^{17}\) Potential careers for SSH graduates are often less obvious than those for students from applied fields, and many employment ads applicable to recent SSH graduates do not make obvious connections to what they have studied.\(^{18}\)

A significant source of stress for many students is uncertainty about their future career. A lack of clear skills connections to the labour market affects both transitions to careers for recent graduates and university attrition rates.\(^{19}\) If students feel their degree will not lead them to a rewarding career, they may lose motivation to complete their studies, choosing instead to either enrol in a program with an applied focus or seek immediate employment.\(^{20}\)

While most PSE program websites or career services pages provide students with information on possible career paths, too often the advice given is too generic and does not coincide with the realities of the current job market. For example, political science programs may list “diplomat” as a career option or history programs will list “museum curator.” While these may be viable career paths for individuals with graduate degrees in these disciplines, they are an unlikely career path for a student pursuing an undergraduate degree who does not intend to go on to graduate school.\(^{21}\) Too often, this distinction is not made clear.

**Limited Faculty Awareness of Possible Career Paths**

Many SSH faculty members struggle to provide students with career advice, because they have limited work experience outside of the post-secondary education sector and lack knowledge of possible career paths and labour market realities.\(^{22}\) This is problematic, as they are one of the

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17 Interview findings.
18 Interview findings; Harvey and Shahjahan, *Employability of Bachelor of Arts Graduates*, 116.
19 Interview findings; Bridgstock, “The Graduate Attributes We’ve Overlooked,” 35.
20 Mestan, “Why Students Drop Out of the Bachelor of Arts.”
21 Interview findings.
22 Ibid.
primary sources of career information for students. An Australian survey of undergraduate students across multiple fields of study found that 63 per cent of students had asked faculty members for career advice. As well, students were more than twice as likely to turn to faculty members for career advice than to use other information sources.23

The Conference Board of Canada’s SSH Career Transitions Survey asked faculty members if they feel well equipped to help prepare SSH students for employment. Only 10 per cent of those surveyed strongly agreed and 36 per cent agreed. Conversely, 24 per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed that they were well prepared to assist students, while 26 per cent neither agreed nor disagreed. The SSH Career Transitions Survey also asked faculty members if they would benefit from training to help them provide support to SSH students in developing their employability skills, to which 55 per cent strongly agreed or agreed and only 19 per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed.24

Skills Translation Challenges
When SSH students and recent graduates determine a career direction and/or begin applying for jobs, they often have difficulty translating the skills they have developed through their studies into language that resonates with employers (as is the case for most students from non-applied programs). To be successful in the job market, students must articulate and “sell” the value of the skills developed through their SSH degree25—for example, how their choice of essay topics reflects an ability to think creatively or how leading a class discussion is evidence of strong verbal communication skills.26 Evidence suggests that students have considerable difficulty providing evidence of the skills they have learned, beyond using generic language such as “written communication.”

23 Bennett, Richardson, and MacKinnon, Enacting Strategies for Graduate Employability, 14.
24 The Conference Board of Canada, unpublished survey findings.
25 Chapnick, “Why We Undervalue a Liberal Arts Education.”
26 Interview findings; Harvey and Shahjahan, Employability of Bachelor of Arts Graduates; Ruehlicke, “How to Translate Your Arts Degree Into a Consulting Career”; Tomlinson, “Graduate Employability,” 413.
A recent study of undergraduate students in psychology found that even when students were given explicit instructions on how to provide evidence of skills development, many still found it challenging to provide concrete examples of how they developed a particular skill. Some students are so academically focused during university that they fail to reflect on how what they are learning will apply to their future career.

Canadian PSE has seen a trend toward outcomes-based education, which includes initiatives such as listing learning outcomes on course outlines. While such initiatives may help students better understand and articulate the skills they have learned, SSH courses and outcomes often focus on disciplinary subject matter and “skill-based learning is not often discussed explicitly in university courses.” Martini and Clare argue that:

… university instructors are more likely to explicitly communicate with students about course content than they are about the skills they are attempting to foster through course-based assignments…. When instructors fail to make students explicitly aware of the skills that their assignments are intended to foster, it is possible students will focus exclusively on how the assignment furthers their understanding of content and will miss skill development as an intended outcome.

Furthermore, undergraduate programs are generally not structured to give students the opportunity to “think integratively about skills development” over the course of their studies. This, too, is problematic because the skills developed in SSH programs are typically developed throughout an undergraduate degree, rather than in a single course.

Linkages between skills gained through coursework and potential careers tend to be more clearly articulated in applied programs, giving these students an advantage in the labour market and disadvantaging SSH students who may be competing with students from applied programs.

27 Martini and Clare, Undergraduates’ Understanding of Skill-Based Learning Outcomes, 5.
28 Deller, Brumwell, and MacFarlane, The Language of Learning Outcomes; Liu, Outcomes Based Education Initiatives in Ontario Postsecondary Education.
29 Martini and Clare, Undergraduates’ Understanding of Skill-Based Learning Outcomes, 6.
30 Ibid., 8.
31 Ibid., 6.
programs for jobs. For example, while jobs in communications are suitable for graduates from both English and communications programs, communications graduates may have an advantage because they are better able to articulate to employers the skills they have learned.\textsuperscript{32}

**Limited Experience**

As for many recent post-secondary graduates, limited work experience is a challenge for SSH graduates attempting to enter the labour market. To compete, students must have additional experience to differentiate themselves from their peers. As one career centre coordinator stated: “An arts degree is not enough, it has to be arts plus.”\textsuperscript{33} Too often, students may not realize that they need to supplement their BA with additional experience and qualifications until they are close to graduation, at which point opportunities to do so in the context of the university are limited. Career centre staff at some institutions also note that many students are already stretched timewise by their minimum program requirements and other life commitments.\textsuperscript{34}

Many students work part time during their studies. While this activity can be beneficial to their later career outcomes, it is of limited benefit to their future employability if they are unable to identify a connection to their area of study or future career path.\textsuperscript{35} As will be discussed in the next chapter, an increasing number of SSH students do have the opportunity to gain career-relevant work experience through work-integrated learning. However, the number of SSH students taking part in work-integrated learning is still relatively small.

**Employer Perceptions and Misperceptions**

There is a strong alignment between the skills that employers say they are looking for in new hires and those emphasized in SSH programs. For example, a 2013 survey of almost 1,000 Canadian employers who hire new graduates found the skills they most value in applicants are

\textsuperscript{32} Interview findings.
\textsuperscript{33} Interview findings; see also Gatt, “For Today’s Grads”; Tomlinson, “The Degree Is Not Enough.”
\textsuperscript{34} Interview findings.
\textsuperscript{35} Kinash, Crane, and Judd, *Nurturing Graduate Employability in Higher Education*, 21.
verbal communication, teamwork, analytical skills, a strong work ethic, and problem-solving skills. A 2013 survey of U.S. employers found the vast majority (93 per cent) agreed that an individual’s “demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than their undergraduate major.” However, research has also found that employers generally do not feel graduates possess sufficient non-applied, or “soft,” skills such as those emphasized in SSH programs. As the following chapter highlights, these types of skills are most effectively developed through a combination of formal and experiential learning.

Furthermore, while employers say they are looking for the skills that SSH graduates possess, these graduates are often passed over in favour of graduates from applied programs immediately after graduation. Even employers who have successfully hired SSH graduates may preferentially screen for applicants from applied programs. One university career centre representative stated she had been told by a recruiter at a major Canadian bank that, while they value SSH hires and find them to be on par with hires from business programs, they prefer to hire business graduates because it makes their automated screening process easier. Some employers do not have a clear idea of the skills that SSH graduates have or may not see the connection between SSH graduates and specific tasks or jobs because the link is not as direct as it is for graduates of applied programs. As Harvey and Shahjahan state, “... in a job market driven by short-term demand, the generalist degrees have been undervalued.”

These challenges are exacerbated because employers today are less likely than in the past to invest in training for employees. In 1993, Canadian employers spent 56 per cent more per employee on training and development than they did in 2014–15. Furthermore, investments

36 Smith and Lam, 2013 Campus Recruitment Report, 10; see also Harvey and Shahjahan, Employability of Bachelor of Arts Graduates, 144–145.
37 Humphreys and Kelly, How Liberal Arts and Sciences Majors Fare in Employment, 6.
38 Cukier, Hodson, and Omar, “Soft Skills Are Hard.”
39 Interview findings.
40 Interview findings; Harvey and Shahjahan, Employability of Bachelor of Arts Graduates, 23, 114.
41 Harvey and Shahjahan, Employability of Bachelor of Arts Graduates, 157.
42 Hall and Cotsman, Learning as a Lever for Performance, 25.
by Canadian firms in training and development lag those in most OECD peer countries. This is despite evidence that investments in learning and development lead to improvements in business performance and productivity.

Employers increasingly demand job-ready employees who require minimal training. This puts SSH students at a disadvantage compared to graduates with applied degrees that emphasize applied skills and tasks, such as writing a press release or business plan. While employers should expect recent SSH graduates to have advanced skills, such as communication and critical thinking, it is unreasonable to expect candidates to slot into a new position without workplace training and guidance. Furthermore, employers who do hire SSH graduates find many of their skills (e.g., writing, critical thinking, research ability) to be stronger than students from applied programs. As The Conference Board of Canada has previously stated, “Many employers and commentators expect universities and colleges to produce work-ready graduates, and they criticize students for choosing majors that do not perfectly align with labour market needs. This way of thinking underemphasizes the responsibility that employers themselves have in training a skilled workforce.”

Conclusion

An undergraduate SSH degree develops valuable skills—including critical thinking, written and verbal communication, and appreciation of differences—that enable an individual to succeed in a wide range of career paths. Too many SSH graduates, however, face challenging transitions from PSE to careers due to a lack of career focus, a difficulty translating the skills developed in their studies into language that appeals to employers, and limited work experience. Many employers also lack

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43 OECD, “How Many Adults Participate in Education and Learning?” tables C5.1a and C5.2a.
44 Munro, “Developing Skills.”
45 See, for example, Blouw, “Universities Should Educate”; Hill, “Who Will Train the New Generation of ‘Plug and Play’ Workers?”
46 Interview findings; Friese, “Why Are We Training Our Arts Grads to Be Baristas?”
47 Interview findings; Harvey and Shahjahan, Employability of Bachelor of Arts Graduates, 145.
48 Munro, “Developing Skills.”
awareness of the value that SSH graduates can bring to the workplace. While the majority of faculty members feel SSH programs equip students with valuable skills, most do not feel capable of advising students on potential career paths. Easing transitions to careers for graduates of SSH undergraduate programs will require a multi-faceted approach that includes faculty members, campus career services staff, employers, and students.
CHAPTER 4

Improving Transitions to Careers for Social Sciences and Humanities Graduates

Chapter Summary

- PSE institutions have introduced initiatives to help SSH students transition to careers after graduation: supplementary programs, such as workshops or conferences; immersive stand-alone programs, such as cooperative education; and transformative programs that integrate skills development and career management into curricula.

- Some career services offices are placing more emphasis on career services specifically for SSH students.

- The most effective professional development initiatives combine experiential learning with the development of career management skills.
Too many SSH undergraduate degree holders leave school without a career path and with little idea of how to pursue one. Specifically, they lack sufficient career management skills, defined as “the abilities required to proactively navigate the working world and successfully manage the career building process, based on attributes such as lifelong learning and adaptability.”

Career management skills include finding and applying information about careers and labour markets, employment opportunities, and career advancement avenues. They include an individual’s ability to understand and reflect on their values, aptitudes, interests, and desire for work-life balance and how that intersects with their career plans.

Canadian universities have long recognized the need to help students transition to the world of work. PSE institutions have had career services offices since the 1940s and ’50s, and these services have evolved and expanded in response to changing student and labour market needs. In recent years, some universities and academic departments have introduced initiatives specifically targeting SSH graduates. The most effective initiatives go beyond teaching students the mechanics of conducting a job search (e.g., resumé writing, interview tips) to giving students the ability to identify a personally rewarding career path and successfully navigate the world of work over their lifetime. These initiatives include targeted career services offerings, experiential learning opportunities, and the integration of career management skills into SSH curricula.

1 Bridgstock, “The Graduate Attributes We’ve Overlooked,” 35.
2 Ibid., 36.
3 Usher and Kwong, with Mentanko, Career Services Offices, 2.
This chapter profiles initiatives at PSE institutions in Canada and peer countries to help SSH students transition to the labour market. Initiatives were selected because they represent best practices or were particularly innovative. Research on high-impact educational practices (HIEPs) informed our evaluation of initiatives. (See “High-Impact Educational Practices and Successful Strategies for Employability.”) For ease of analysis, initiatives are classified into three categories:

- **Supplementary employability initiatives.** Initiatives include voluntary workshops, seminars, conferences, mentoring initiatives, and other short-term learning opportunities that assist students in developing the skills needed to find employment post-graduation. Campus career services play a significant role in delivering these initiatives.

- **Immersive skills development initiatives.** Initiatives include voluntary programs generally not for academic credit, such as cooperative education and internships, that allow students to gain work experience relevant to their degree in a non-academic environment.

- **Transformative initiatives.** These for-credit initiatives integrate skills development and career management skills into SSH curricula and can include courses with a community service component or for-credit career planning and development courses.

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**High-Impact Educational Practices and Successful Strategies for Employability**

Research has shown that some PSE experiences are more effective than others at promoting positive learning outcomes. High-impact educational practices (HIEPs) have been shown to increase deep learning, retention, and engagement. Kuh identifies the following five characteristics of HIEPs:

- **Effortful**—Fostering commitment to a program or institution through purposeful tasks requiring considerable time and effort;

- **Interactive**—Building relationships, engaging in mentoring, and sharing ideas through opportunities that enable interaction with faculty and peers;

- **Rich and frequent feedback**—Helping students understand their progress and successes;

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• **Application of ideas and skills to new situations**—Giving meaning and value to information learned in an academic setting;

• **Personal reflection**—Increasing awareness of personal beliefs and assumptions.⁴

Examples of HIEPs include writing-intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, diversity/global learning (e.g., study abroad, international field schools), service or community-based learning, internships, and capstone courses and projects.⁵

Sources: The Conference Board of Canada; Kuh.

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**Supplementary Initiatives**

Most PSE institutions offer a wide range of voluntary workshops, seminars, conferences, and other short-term learning opportunities that SSH students can use to strengthen their career management skills. These supplementary initiatives are often delivered through a campus career services office. Career services offices vary widely in the breadth of services offered. Many have staff members who focus specifically on the needs of SSH students, while a small number (typically large universities) have career services offices specifically for SSH students.⁶

The Conference Board of Canada’s SSH Career Transitions Institutional Survey found the most common career services offered to students across all disciplines are career fairs; advice on preparing resumés, cover letters, and job interviews; career counselling; job boards; and a career information resources library. While career services offices were far less likely to offer services specifically tailored to SSH students, those that did most frequently offered the following: opportunities to network with alumni; employer visits or information sessions; mentoring programs; career workshops and courses; and advice on preparing resumés, cover letters, and job interviews. (See Table 3.)

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⁵ Kuh, “High-Impact Educational Practices.”
⁶ Conference Board of Canada, The, unpublished survey findings.
### Table 3

**Common Career Services Offered at PSE Institutions in Canada**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Available to students in all disciplines</th>
<th>Tailored to SSH students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Career fairs</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice on preparing resumés, cover letters and job applications and preparing for interviews</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career counselling</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job board or e-mails about employment opportunities</td>
<td></td>
<td>●</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career information resources library</td>
<td>●</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employer visits, information sessions, or presentations</td>
<td></td>
<td>●</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career workshops or short courses</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities to network with alumni</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentoring programs</td>
<td></td>
<td>●</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-graduation advice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career workshops or short courses</td>
<td></td>
<td>●</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


For example, two initiatives offered by the Career Centre at the University of Alberta (U of A) are the annual ArtsWORKS conference and a job shadow week. ArtsWORKS, a one-day career development conference tailored to SSH students, covers topics such as gaining international work experience, skills identification, and networking. Panels with professionals employed in different industries who share their experiences and advice are also offered. The job shadow week, which is coordinated by the career services office and open to students in all disciplines, is held during the fall and winter reading weeks. Students apply to be matched with a mentor for four days in their professional area of interest. Notably, SSH students have been among the most engaged in the initiative.

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7 Interview findings; University of Alberta, “ArtsWORKS Conference 2016.”
8 Interview findings.
Many PSE institutions are placing more emphasis on career exploration and personal development rather than just providing resumé and interview tips.

These types of initiatives give students valuable learning opportunities and show them that their degree is applicable to a wide range of careers. But such initiatives often reach only a small proportion of SSH students, and arguably those students most in need of career services are the least likely to access them. A U.S. survey of 11,000 undergraduate degree holders who graduated between 2010 and 2016 found that 61 per cent visited their campus career services office. Of those who visited, 43 per cent said career services were “very helpful” or “helpful” while 37 per cent said they were “somewhat helpful” and 17 per cent said they were “not at all helpful.” Notably, students who viewed their experience with career services positively were more likely to believe they were prepared for life after graduation, be employed full time, and find a job quickly. First-generation post-secondary learners, however, were less likely to access career services, which is problematic since these students are less likely to have access to career advice or a professional network through family relationships.

For a greater impact on student outcomes, many PSE institutions are increasing the visibility of their career services offices (e.g., locating them at a central campus location and close to related student services), as well as placing more emphasis on career exploration and personal development rather than just providing resumé and interview tips. (See “Rethinking Career Services at Wake Forest University.”) As Chan and Derry state, “… this means creating and executing visions that prioritize the developmental process to teach, engage and equip students to find the unique intersection between who each student is and where they fit in the world of work.” As part of an increased focus on career exploration, many career services offices are encouraging students to think about career outcomes earlier in their degree program.

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9 Ibid.
11 Chan and Derry, A Roadmap for Transforming the College-to-Career Experience, 9.
12 Interview findings; Chan and Derry, A Roadmap for Transforming the College-to-Career Experience; Mitchell and others, Case Studies to Enhance Graduate Employability.
Rethinking Career Services at Wake Forest University

In response to criticisms about the value of a liberal arts degree, Wake Forest University, a small, private, liberal arts college in North Carolina, fundamentally revamped its career services. The career services office has been rebranded as the Office of Personal and Career Development (OPCD) and relocated to a large, new, state-of-the-art building at the centre of campus. Since 2009, career services has quadrupled its number of staff members and broadened its mandate to include mentoring, leadership, innovation, creativity, entrepreneurship, and professional development. The OPCD is a key part of the university’s strategic plan and is led by the vice-president for personal and career development.

Beginning with orientation on the first day of school, students are encouraged to think seriously about their career goals. The OPCD works with individual faculty members and departments to host career-related events and provides resources to faculty to help them act as mentors and career advisors. It also offers four for-credit college-to-career courses. For example, the Personal Framework for Career Exploration course provides students with activities and readings to help them understand their strengths, interests, and values and make sound career decisions. In the Strategic Job Search course, students learn résumé and cover letter writing, interviewing, and networking skills. Twenty-one per cent of the 2016 graduating class took at least one college-to-career course.

Undergraduate students can also participate in annual career treks to San Francisco; Washington, D.C.; and New York. Career treks are organized into thematic industries (e.g., performing arts, consulting, government and politics). The students visit organizations and interact with alumni and other professionals while immersing themselves in a new city.

13 Dominus, “How to Get a Job With a Philosophy Degree.”
14 Chan and Derry, A Roadmap for Transforming the College-to-Career Experience, 16.
15 Ibid., 17.
17 Chan and Derry, A Roadmap for Transforming the College-to-Career Experience, 17; Wake Forest University, “Career and Professional Development.”
Other OPCD initiatives include the following: career self-assessments; career fairs; networking events; guidance on networking, resumé writing, and interviews; assistance with internships; job shadow days; in-depth information on over 35 different career paths, which include videos, job feeds, and social media accounts to follow; in-depth information on majors, including relevant careers and skills developed; job postings; and one-on-one advice. The university also tracks the first career destinations of all its alumni and posts the information online together with the alumni’s major and location of residence.18

In general, students and parents have responded positively to the revamped career services office. However, some students have been critical of efforts to integrate skills development into SSH courses (e.g., bringing in alumni to speak about potential careers or career advisors to speak about skills development), stating that they would rather more time be dedicated to subject matter. Some faculty members have expressed concerns that the heavy focus on careers and skills is leading to the marketization of learning.19

Sources: Dominus; Chan and Derry; The Conference Board of Canada; Office of Personal & Career Development; Wake Forest University.

For example, about five years ago, Simon Fraser University’s (SFU’s) Career Services office began focusing more on first- and second-year students to encourage earlier thinking about career paths. As a result, more students are accessing career services earlier in their educational program, giving them more time to prepare for the job market.20 To encourage students to think about their career earlier in their studies, Queen’s University’s Career Services office created “major maps” for each of its 44 undergraduate programs. The “maps” are spread over two pages and include information on academic pathways, relevant extracurricular activities, networking, international opportunities, and career development.21 The aim is to “help prospective students choose a program of study, assist current students with identifying career options and potential learning opportunities during their degree(s), and guide

18 Wake Forest University, “Career and Professional Development.”
19 Dominus, “How to Get a Job With a Philosophy Degree.”
20 Interview findings.
21 Queen’s University, “Welcome to the Queen’s Major Maps”; Queen’s University, “Queen’s First Canadian University to Develop ‘Major Maps.”
Tailored initiatives are especially valuable because they address the skills translation challenges experienced by many SSH students.

graduating students as they think about ways the skills they developed at university can be transferred to the workplace."

In addition, many academic departments offer career development initiatives, such as organizing alumni to speak to current students about their career paths. Career services offices may work with academic departments to offer initiatives tailored to their students. While initiatives aimed at undergraduates across all programs are valuable, tailored initiatives are especially valuable because they address the skills translation challenges experienced by many SSH students, as well as give them realistic and specific information about what they can do with their major. Tailored programming is typically more expensive to deliver than more general programming, and resourcing tailored programming can be challenging for smaller PSE institutions and departments.23

Memorial University’s ArtsWorks Program

ArtsWorks is a non-credit career exploration program for SSH students at Memorial University (MUN) that helps students to narrow their career focus and prepare for a career. The eight-week course is offered each term by the Career Development and Experiential Learning (CDEL) office. It is free to students and funded by the Faculty of Arts.24

The program includes a 50-minute session each week on a range of topics, such as developing a skills inventory (where students self-reflect on their skills), identifying career options, and researching the labour market. Students leave the program with a career plan. The sessions include guest speakers, group and individual activities, and resource-sharing. There is a service-learning component where students volunteer for at least seven hours over the course of the program. CDEL maintains a list of volunteer opportunities for students, or students can make an ongoing volunteer commitment. The volunteer component is intended to help students explore career options; acquire skills or experience they

22 Queen’s University, “Queen’s First Canadian University to Develop ‘Major Maps.’”
23 Interview findings.
24 Ibid.
lack or hone skills that are weak; and make connections to help identify future career opportunities.25

Over the nine years that ArtsWorks has been offered, student recruitment has been a challenge. Program administrators attribute this to a lack of awareness and the heavy workload associated with many SSH programs. To raise awareness of the program, CDEL has used class presentations, posters, and social media. Feedback from program participants is positive, and CDEL uses participant suggestions to continually improve the program.26

**Arts ePortfolios at the University of British Columbia**

Universities across Canada have introduced ePortfolios to help students reflect on their learning experience and articulate their skills to employers.27 The University of British Columbia (UBC) recently began offering ePortfolios to students in the Faculty of Arts. Initiated by the Arts Co-op program, but available to all SSH students, ePortfolios are an optional tool for students to publicly share academic and non-academic work. Essentially a website or blog, an ePortfolio allows students to share samples of their work, reflect on what they have learned, and post photos or videos highlighting skills and experiences. Students are encouraged to use UBC’s blogging platform to create their ePortfolio, and guidance on setting up the ePortfolio is available through a website and e-mail communication.28

ePortfolios have been identified as a HIEP when implemented in a comprehensive and sophisticated manner, such as integrated into coursework requirements.29 Research suggests that when ePortfolios are well integrated into a curriculum, they can improve learning outcomes, student retention, and program completion times.30

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25 Interview findings; Memorial University, “Artsworks Program.”
26 Interview findings.
27 Bowness, “Tracking the Learning Journey Through E-Portfolios.”
28 Interview findings; University of British Columbia, “Arts ePortfolio Resources for Students.”
29 Eynon and Gambino, “Professional Development for High-Impact Eportfolio Practice.”
30 Jaschik, “Getting the Most Out of ePortfolios.”
Additionally, ePortfolios may allow SSH students to develop and demonstrate technical skills, such as web design.31

Some SSH courses at UBC use ePortfolios as a course requirement. For example, a geographic information science (GIS) course required students to set up an ePortfolio, including a 50-word personal statement or elevator pitch, along with an accomplishment statement outlining what they learned in the course. Students also use ePortfolios to showcase other assignments completed as part of the course.32 Making the ePortfolio a course requirement on which students are evaluated encourages students to take the exercise seriously.33

Research suggests that ePortfolios are most effective when used throughout a student’s degree program. They have little impact on students’ ability to articulate skills and experience when used only once as part of a course or at the end of a degree program.34 However, many faculty members lack the pedagogical knowledge to successfully implement ePortfolios in the classroom. Moreover, while ePortfolios can be valuable tools in the learning process, the technology can be clunky, making them time-consuming to create and requiring considerable support (although technology is continually improving).35 Another challenge is that many institutions host ePortfolios on university servers and students may lose access to their ePortfolio once they graduate if they do not take the initiative to move it off the university server.36

**Simon Fraser University’s English Network**

The English department at Simon Fraser University (SFU) created the English Network, a network of over 100 alumni available to mentor current students, in response to a significant decline in the number of English majors at SFU. The Network aims to help students understand

31 Scott and Kim, “ePortfolios.”
32 Interview findings.
33 Ibid.
34 Eynon and Gambino, “Professional Development for High-Impact Eportfolio Practice”; Martini and Clare, Undergraduates’ Understanding of Skill-Based Learning Outcomes, 6.
36 Bowness, “Tracking the Learning Journey Through E-Portfolios.”
possible career paths and assists them in translating their skill set into language that appeals to employers. Alumni in the program have careers in a wide variety of fields, such as law, environmental activism, teaching, professional and creative writing, marketing, public relations, and the performing arts. Most alumni are recent graduates (2005 or later), but some graduated as far back as 1967.37

The English department launched the network after reaching out to its alumni to ascertain interest. The Network is open to all English majors at SFU, as well as graduate students (although the program mostly focuses on undergraduates). Before accessing the program, students read a list of expectations and guidelines (e.g., how to conduct an informational interview), and sign a form agreeing to abide by those expectations. Students are then given access to the Network’s website, which includes profiles and contact information for alumni. Alumni or mentors are expected to have one meeting with students (in person or electronically), although many meet with students two or three times. At the meetings, mentors discuss their career path and may also give résumé and other job search advice.38

The Network was officially launched in April 2017, but was informally running for about a year prior. So far, students have been slow to take advantage of the program—only about 15 students have accessed the website. The program coordinators attribute the slow uptake to the requirement that students must physically come to the department to sign the form, as well as a tendency on the part of students to avoid thinking about their career until their final semester of university. The department holds open houses twice a semester to promote the Network to students, as well as promoting it through e-mails and posters. It held a successful launch party for the Network, which both students and alumni attended, as well as a career panel with mentors. Going forward, the program coordinators will be doing brief presentations about the Network to undergraduate classes.39

37 Interview findings; Simon Fraser University, “The English Network.”
38 Ibid.
39 Interview findings.
Despite the slow student uptake, the Network has succeeded in helping students find jobs after graduation. While the Network is clear that students are not contacting mentors to get a job, mentors have contacted the department directly about job opportunities for graduates. The Network has received considerable interest from other departments at SFU, particularly in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. Several departments are now considering starting their own alumni networks.40

**Immersive Skills Development Initiatives**

Immersive initiatives are voluntary, non-credit initiatives that allow students to apply the skills developed through coursework in a non-academic environment, while also developing new skills. Work experience gained through immersive initiatives may be paid or unpaid, but involves a substantial time commitment and work related to a student’s program of study. Programs include a cooperative education component and internships. Benefits of participating in immersive work experience opportunities include:

- career exploration
- personal growth
- increased confidence about career prospects
- exposure to a professional work environment
- skills development and enhancement
- the creation of a professional network41

In an extensive survey of Ontario students who participated in work-integrated learning (WIL) opportunities, including voluntary immersive experiences, SSH students strongly agreed that it helped them to better understand their career interests, and influenced their career goals.42 Indeed, a survey of Ontario graduates from the class of 2012—

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40 Ibid.
42 Work-integrated learning refers to educational activities that integrate educational study and practical experience relevant to a student’s program of study. It can include cooperative education, internships, and courses with a practicum or community service component. For-credit courses with a work experience component are discussed in the following section. Sattler and Peters, *Work-Integrated Learning in Ontario’s Postsecondary Sector*, 151.
18 months after graduation—found that SSH graduates who participated in WIL experienced somewhat better labour market outcomes than those who did not participate.

Fine arts or humanities graduates who participated in WIL had a labour force participation rate of 77.6 per cent, while those who did not participate had a labour force participation rate of 74.3 per cent. Social sciences graduates who participated in WIL had a participation rate of 77.2 per cent compared to 75.7 per cent for non-participants.43 Fine arts and humanities graduates who participated in WIL also saw higher salaries—$35,845.83 compared to $33,192.56 for non-participants. Social sciences graduates who participated in WIL made slightly less ($35,578.27) than those who did not participate (35,819.12).44 Immersive initiatives also give employers a low-risk way to see the valuable skills that SSH students can bring to the workplace and can assist in recruitment.

While opportunities for SSH students to gain relevant work experience through immersive experiences are increasing, SSH students are less likely than students from other disciplines to participate in such opportunities.45 Students may be reluctant to participate in immersive initiatives because they do not want to add to the time it takes to complete their degree and/or have considerable family and work commitments outside school. In the case of internships and cooperative education, employment opportunities can be somewhat limited or wages may be low.46

Cooperative Education
Many Canadian universities offer cooperative education for SSH students. Cooperative education alternates academic study with semester-long, paid work experience (typically three semester-long,
full-time work placements). Students in cooperative education also generally complete career development workshops.

For example, UBC students in the arts coop program complete a pre-employment course series prior to their first work placement, where they to learn how to market themselves to employers and become acclimatized to the workplace. Activities include mock interviews with employers and completing job applications. The course is facilitated by employers, alumni, and senior students to ensure a strong link to what employers need from and expect of students.47

Cooperative education has numerous benefits for students—students explore different career paths, take a break from academic study, and earn money during their degree. Upon graduation, many students gain jobs directly related to the skills honed during their work placements, and some coop employers hire students full time once they graduate.48

Coop programs for SSH disciplines face unique challenges. SSH faculties are typically large and cover a wide variety of fields. For example, the arts coop program at U of A encompasses 20 different majors and departments, and it can be difficult for staff to meet the needs of such a diverse student population. Some coop coordinators state that it is hard to find suitable jobs for SSH students, particularly jobs that pay adequately.49 SSH students compete with students from business and communications programs for positions. They often lose out to students from applied programs because employers find it easier to translate the skills these students offer. SSH student participation in coop programs lags behind other disciplines where there is a stronger culture of WIL. Low student participation may make it difficult to offer coop programs at smaller schools.50

47 Interview findings.
48 Interview findings. For example, a survey of Ontario employers found that 82 per cent of employers who hired PSE graduates and participated in work-integrated learning (including coop) hired one of their students after graduation. See Sattler and Peters, Work Integrated Learning and Postsecondary Graduates, 29.
49 Interview findings; see also Tamburri, “Co-op Programs Are Popular and Growing at Canadian Universities.”
50 Interview findings.
A Student-Led Online Journal at Nipissing University

The English Studies Department at Nipissing University created an online journal, NuSense, to allow undergraduate students to apply the skills developed in their studies in a non-academic setting. Offered as an extracurricular activity, NuSense “provides a venue where divides between disciplines are challenged and diverse forms of writing are explored. One of the mandates of the online journal is to promote a creative way of teaching students how to write critically without the challenge of writing academically; it teaches the professionalism of university-level writing in a context that millennials find familiar.”

The creation of the quarterly journal is supervised by a faculty member and is operated and peer-reviewed by seven or eight students from humanities and fine arts programs. Each issue has a specific theme selected by students (e.g., freedom, technology) that connects all articles and artwork. Themes help students “learn that creative thinking is not unbridled but a principled and disciplined process that requires the fleshing out of ideas, proper sequencing and logical organization, and reining in excess.” Working on the journal strengthens students’ ability to work both independently and collectively, as well as their critical thinking, writing, media literacy, and leadership skills. Students also strengthen their professional skills—they are accountable for tasks and deadlines and hold monthly board meetings.

NuSense was founded by a faculty member who volunteered their time and personally paid the webhosting costs. Smaller institutions, such as Nipissing, often have less funding available for experimental or extracurricular skills development activities.

As students typically volunteered for the journal in the third or fourth year of their program, there was a lack of experienced senior students who could take over running the journal, creating a need for significant faculty guidance. The faculty member responsible for the journal has moved into university administration, and the journal is on hiatus. Ensuring students

52 Ibid., 133.
53 Interview findings; Lucas and Radia, “Experiential Learning in the Humanities,” 133.
Many universities and departments are altering SSH curricula to place greater emphasis on experiential learning and/or career management skills. Were committed to the journal was also a challenge—many of them had competing demands, which made it challenging to provide the significant time commitment that was necessary. Some of the challenges involved in offering this type of initiative may be addressed by integrating it into a for-credit experiential learning course.54

Students found the experience of working on an online magazine to be personally and professionally rewarding. Participants have gone on to graduate school or rewarding jobs, such as working for a magazine in Toronto.55 As the faculty advisor responsible for the journal has stated, “Creative education through project-based learning can serve as a much-needed intervention against rhetoric and policy that so often places humanities students at a disadvantage….”56 By participating in a project such as NuSense, students “conceive of their life beyond the university with greater confidence.”57

Transformative Initiatives

In reaction to declining enrolments in some SSH disciplines and negative press about the career outcomes of SSH graduates, many universities and departments are altering SSH curricula to place greater emphasis on experiential learning and/or career management skills. Some SSH programs are being introduced or reoriented to be more interdisciplinary in nature, incorporating skills from more applied disciplines such as business or computer science.

For example, the University of Texas at Dallas introduced a program called Arts and Technology and Emerging Media Communications that integrates the humanities, creative arts, computer science, and engineering. Students learn about the impacts of digital technology for communication, culture, and commerce while acquiring technical skills in animation, interactive narrative and games, and sound design.58 McMaster University introduced the interdisciplinary Integrated Business

54 Interview findings.
55 Ibid.
56 Lucas and Radia, “Experiential Learning in the Humanities,” 130.
57 Ibid., 137.
58 Mintz, “Reimagining Undergraduate Education.”
and Humanities program where students take both humanities and business courses, graduating with a bachelor of commerce degree.59

In other cases, individual courses are being reimagined. A growing number of SSH programs offer courses with a community service component, such as a project with a local not-for-profit organization. Several universities, such as Kwantlen Polytechnic University in Surrey, B.C., and Thompson Rivers University in Kamloops, B.C., offer for-credit courses on career management or post-graduate transitions. In other cases, individual departments are introducing courses to provide information on career paths and help students reflect on skills development. For example, the English department at Southwestern University in Texas introduced a course to help English majors lead “fulfilling and financially viable lives.”60 Students reflect on career and skills development through the use of literary texts, while also taking part in activities such as job-shadowing and alumni job talks. At the end of the class, students collectively map their skills to help them recognize the marketable skills they can demonstrate.61

Of course, the transformative nature of these initiatives can make them difficult and costly to implement. Revamping courses and programs to include an integrated experiential education component can be a time-consuming and costly process for faculty members.62 Some universities, such as UBC and York University, have special funding and other logistical supports to help instructors incorporate experiential learning into courses. Another challenge is that recognition systems at many PSE institutions, including promotion and tenure, may not adequately reward faculty for the time and effort involved in integrating experiential education and career management components into SSH courses.63 These innovations, nonetheless, have the potential to significantly impact SSH graduates’ transitions to careers, as well as attract more students to SSH courses, programs, and disciplines.

59 Chiose, “As Students Move Away From the Humanities”; McMaster University, “Integrated Business & Humanities.”
60 Meyers, “Feeding English Majors in the 21st Century.”
61 Ibid.
York University’s “Doing Culture” Course

York University’s Department of Humanities recently revamped an upper-level course entitled Doing Culture: Narratives of Cultural Production to combine classroom work and a community-based research project. The revamp was funded by York’s Academic Innovation Fund, which has invested over $9 million since 2010 to support the development or update of courses in the areas of e-learning and experiential education.64 The course is offered through York’s Culture and Expression program.

A two-semester course, the first semester takes place in the classroom and online. Students learn about key cultural theories, narrative-based research techniques, research design, project management, professional and oral communication, and techniques of visual presentation. Students also receive instruction from career services staff on topics such as finding a job in their field and résumé writing. The first semester culminates in the development of a research project proposal, which is submitted to the university ethics board for approval.65

In the second semester, students are put into groups of four and paired with an arts and culture organization (e.g., museum, art gallery, theatre company) in the Toronto area. Partner organizations are selected based on students' interests, schedules, and availability. Students conduct a research project that fulfills the needs of their partner organization. At the end of the course, students present their research projects to their classmates and project partners.66

After completing their projects, students see culture as something people do for a career, rather than just a theoretical framework or approach. Course coordinator Dr. Carolyn Steele notes that many students are interested in careers in the cultural sector, but are discouraged from pursuing a career in this sector due to perceptions of limited career opportunities or because career paths are not obvious. After completing the course, however, students are more aware of the pragmatic challenges of running a business or having a career in the cultural sector—for example, marketing shows and products to the

64 York University, “Academic Innovation Fund.”
65 Interview findings.
66 Ibid.
Because projects are conducted in groups, students gain valuable teamwork skills, which are not often emphasized in SSH courses.

public or determining the audience for an event or product. Student research projects address topics that not-for-profits are often unable to examine in depth due to limited resources. Project findings are used by partner organizations for research grants, marketing, and planning.67 Students report feeling more engaged with their community at the end of the course.

As part of their work with partner organizations, students gain professional experience. For example, they learn how to send a professional e-mail and must think about how to dress professionally. They also begin developing a professional network. The format of the final project—a report rather than the essay typical of SSH courses—gives students experience in writing in a different format and for a different audience. Finally, because projects are conducted in groups, students gain valuable teamwork skills, which are not often emphasized in SSH courses.68

In disciplines such as health or social work, courses with a community service learning component typically rely on one partner organization (e.g., a hospital). However, the nature of the arts and culture sector, where organizations are smaller and courses will likely need multiple partner organizations, can create more work for faculty to deliver this type of course. York has a coordinator responsible for organizations interested in taking part in experiential education, which eases the workload of offering experiential courses for faculty members and ensures multiple people are not repeatedly contacting potential partner organizations. Another challenge is that, at times, students have been disappointed because partner organizations are not interested or are unable to work with them within a specific time frame. In particular, larger organizations in the arts and culture sector tend to be more bureaucratic, making them more difficult to partner with, especially within short time frames.69

67 Interview findings; see also Lenton and others, Community Service Learning and Community-Based Learning.
68 Interview findings.
69 Ibid.
Kwantlen Polytechnic University’s Post-University Transition Course

Kwantlen Polytechnic University (KPU) offers a senior-level course on post-university transitions called Transitioning to Work, Graduate School, and Post-University Life. The three-credit course is offered by the Faculty of Arts as an elective within the Educational Studies program. It is open to all KPU students who have completed 60 or more coursework credits (approximately two years of undergraduate work).

The course was created in 2011, when instructors and administrators in the Faculty of Arts recognized that many students were not well-prepared to transition out of PSE. KPU offers several first-year courses that help acquaint students with academic life, so the course designers thought a similar type of senior course could help “bookend” the PSE experience for students. Another impetus behind the creation of the course was that upper-level students were often ill prepared to take part in practicums and capstone courses. Students interviewed by employers for work experience placements would be unable to articulate their skills, career objectives, and experiences.

The course description states that students in the course “develop representational portfolios in the transition from university into work, graduate studies, and post-university life. They will integrate their educational experiences by tracing their intellectual journey through reflective writing and examining artifacts from their undergraduate career.” As part of the course, students complete the following activities:

• construct an inventory of interests, preferences for work environments, and ambitions for their ideal life;
• create a personal mission statement and life objectives;
• analyze the skills needed for jobs in the future (students are asked if their desired career will exist in 15 years);

70 Interview findings; Kwantlen Polytechnic University, “Course Descriptions.”
71 First-year courses at KPU to transition students into PSE include Introduction to Higher Education, Introduction to Higher Education for Student Athletes, Introduction to Higher Education for Aboriginal Students, and Introduction to Higher Education for High School Students.
72 Interview findings.
73 Kwantlen Polytechnic University, “Course Descriptions.”
• participate in mock job interviews;
• construct a career genogram (students interview family members about their careers, success, ambitions, and pathways);
• conduct an informational interview;
• develop a final portfolio that documents their skills and experiences and includes a resumé tailored to their field of interest.74

Students who complete the course have greater self-awareness, clarification of their goals, and more knowledge of career options and feel more confident and prepared to apply for jobs.75

When the post-university transition course was first initiated, it was offered as an educational studies course open to students in the Faculty of Arts. The course failed to attract many students outside of the Educational Studies program, and was subsequently moved to the Faculty of Arts, where student awareness and enrolment has increased. Finding an appropriate instructor for the course can be a challenge, however, as many faculty lack significant non-academic work experience, which helps prepare them to teach the course. Experience with workplace human resources responsibilities is also a helpful skill for course instructors to have.76

California State University San Marcos’ Career Readiness Initiative

California State University San Marcos’ (CSUSM) College of Humanities, Arts, Behavioral, and Social Sciences (CHABSS) launched its Career Readiness Initiative (CRI) in fall 2012 to prepare SSH students to transition out of university and into careers. CRI is offered to all CHABSS students, but is designed with the unique challenges faced by first-generation learners in mind. As Dr. Katherine Brown, Director of CRI, stated:

… some students have access to models for building a career path versus getting a job. Some have contacts who can help them
gain access and navigate occupational and professional routines and cultures, while others do not. We understand this when we build ladders and pipelines to higher education.... [W]e also must understand this when we relate to our students’ transition from our campuses into occupational and professional routines, cultures and networks.77

The intention of CRI is not to overlap with what university career services already offers, but to provide something tailored and connected to the CHABSS curriculum. CRI consists of three main components: a mentoring program, panel discussions and talks, and a for-credit career readiness course.78

The mentoring program matches students with a mentor based on their career interests (broadly defined). Over the course of a year, students and mentors discuss topics such as professional etiquette, interview skills, résumé writing, and job search strategies by phone, through online communications, and in face-to-face meetings. Mentors are expected to devote between two and four hours a month to communicating with their mentee. Students in the program are also encouraged to connect with mentors other than their own to help build their professional network. In the 2016–17 school year, 25 students were matched with mentors.79

CRI offers free panel discussions and workshops to help SSH students develop their career management skills. Events include short workshops (one half day or less) on developing interview and interpersonal communication skills, and panel discussions with professionals in different industries.80 Brown notes: “These panels offer deeper kinds of engagement for students than interactions typically possible at a large campus-wide job fair, namely opportunities to discuss connections between college majors and career paths.”81

77 Brown, “Employability and the Liberal Arts,” 55; see also California State University San Marcos, “CHABSS Career Readiness Initiative Picking Up Steam.”

78 Interview findings; California State University San Marcos, “CHABSS Career Readiness Initiative Picking Up Steam.”

79 Interview findings; Brown, CHABSS CRI Mentoring Program.

80 Interview findings; California State University San Marcos, “Career Readiness Initiative Events.”

Finally, as part of CRI, CHABSS offers a variable unit, for-credit, upper-level course entitled Career Readiness and Professional Communication. This course can be taken by any SSH student and can be customized to allow students to acquire a half, one, or two credits (as some majors are very prescriptive and give students little opportunity to take electives). Course activities include business writing, résumé writing, creating a five-year plan for career growth, reflections on scholarly texts regarding the role of education in developing citizenship (e.g., Martha Nussbaum’s writings on the humanities), and reflections on skills developed. Emphasizing reflection on what students have learned “helps prepare students to explain the contribution their studies have made to their toolkits for living.”82

CRI was initially funded by a $25,000 donation and operating funds. Student participation is voluntary. The CRI has one part-time coordinator, two part-time administrative assistants, and a faculty member who acts as a director (who is relieved of one unit of departmental duties per semester to do CRI work).83

By providing CRI to all SSH students, CSUSM can offer targeted career management resources at a lower cost than if they were offered by individual academic departments. While it may be feasible for large departments to offer their own career management resources, many smaller departments do not have the resources to do so, which puts their students at a disadvantage. One of the major challenges in creating CRI has been the amount of time and work needed to build and sustain it. Operational funding for the initiative is also precarious, as CRI is still proving its value.84

82 Ibid., 53.
83 Interview findings; California State University San Marcos, “CHABSS Career Readiness Initiative Picking Up Steam.”
84 Interview findings; Brown, “Employability and the Liberal Arts,” 54.
Lessons Learned From Successful Career Development Initiatives

Universities have introduced numerous initiatives to ease PSE-to-career transitions for SSH graduates. The most common type are supplementary initiatives offered by career services offices. These voluntary initiatives do not require a significant time commitment from students and allow them to pick and choose the type of assistance they require. The introduction of initiatives to encourage students to think about career paths earlier in their studies is a particularly promising trend.

But these initiatives continue to reach far too few students. Owing to their voluntary nature, these initiatives are most likely to attract students who make the effort to seek them out—arguably the students who are less likely to face challenging transitions to careers. Furthermore, the literature on HIEPs suggests the short-term nature of many of these initiatives may dampen effectiveness in teaching career management skills.

The most comprehensive initiatives combine experiential learning with the development of career management skills. These initiatives help students define a career path, navigate the labour market, and apply the skills developed in their SSH program in a non-academic setting. Experiential initiatives that involve employers have the added benefit of helping to promote the value of SSH students in the workplace.

While voluntary immersive or experiential experiences have been positively received by students, uptake of these can be a challenge. For-credit initiatives generally see better student interest. Together with supplementary initiatives to provide guidance on job search skills, these initiatives give students both the ability and the confidence to succeed in their post-graduation career transition.
CHAPTER 5
The Skills to Succeed: Recommendations

Chapter Summary

• Improving the transition to careers for SSH students and graduates will require action on the part of university administrators, faculty members, career centre staff, employers, and students.

• This chapter offers eight recommendations to improve the transition from PSE to a career for SSH students and graduates.

• With improved PSE-to-career transitions, more SSH graduates will quickly put their valuable skills to work.
Each year, thousands of Canadians complete an undergraduate degree in the social sciences and humanities. These graduates leave university with valuable skills that allow them to succeed in a wide range of rewarding careers. In the initial years after graduation, though, many graduates struggle to establish a career path. While this experience is not unique to SSH graduates, they are more likely to experience a more challenging career transition than students from applied disciplines with more clearly defined career paths.

The SSH disciplines teach individuals to be engaged citizens who can ask questions and think independently. An SSH degree gives students marketable skills, including the ability to analyze complex arguments, appreciate and understand diversity, and articulate information in both verbal and written form. These skills are valuable in today’s labour market, as well as in the future where the ability to adapt, learn, and interpret new information will be essential.

Easing transitions from PSE to careers for SSH undergraduate degree holders should not mean emphasizing applied or technical skills at the expense of what is traditionally taught in these disciplines. Rather, it means increasing students’ awareness of potential career paths and giving students the ability to translate and market the skills developed in SSH programs to employers. Facilitating transitions to careers for SSH students and graduates will require action on the part of university administrators, faculty members, career centre staff, employers, and of course, the students. Eight strategies to ease transitions from PSE to careers for SSH undergraduate degree holders are outlined as follows:

1. Collect and distribute information on the career pathways and transitions of SSH graduates.
Universities and the provincial and federal governments should collect information and fund additional research on the career pathways
Universities should also collect and share discipline-specific data on the career pathways of SSH graduates, including recent graduates.

and transitions of SSH graduates. There is limited information on how the career outcomes of SSH graduates vary by discipline, which is problematic given the diversity of SSH subjects. There is also limited recent longitudinal information on the career paths and further educational choices of SSH graduates and how employment outcomes change over time. Dr. Ross Finnie’s longitudinal research is particularly valuable—for example, helping to dispel myths that many recent SSH graduates are employed in low-paying, service sector jobs. Publicizing these types of research findings can help to counter negative stereotypes about SSH graduates and may help to combat declining enrolment in some SSH programs.

Universities should also collect and share discipline-specific data on the career pathways of SSH graduates, including recent graduates. While many academic departments provide students with examples of possible careers, more detailed information, including a breakdown of the career destinations of all students, not just those deemed “successful,” would provide current and prospective SSH students with information on potential careers and typical career trajectories. Collecting information at the university level would also help to capture regional variations in labour markets. Collecting and publicizing information on career destinations would increase faculty understanding of typical career paths, thereby assisting them in providing career advice to students. Additional research on the career outcomes of SSH graduates who pursue further education other than a graduate degree (e.g., an additional undergraduate degree or college credential) would also be valuable. Such information would, for example, help PSE institutions and policy-makers better understand the rewards that additional education confers on those with an SSH undergraduate degree.

2. Emphasize and communicate to students the skills developed in SSH programs.

While students in SSH programs develop a wide range of valuable skills, they often struggle to communicate how they have demonstrated these skills to employers. Students need to better understand the skills they are developing through their studies and how those skills are applicable to non-academic environments. While students can often use generic
terms to describe the skills they have (e.g., written communication, critical thinking), they also need to be able to describe or provide evidence of how those skills have been acquired.

This does not mean changing how SSH subjects are taught; rather, it means clearly communicating the broad skills emphasized in individual classes and programs and how students acquire those skills. While course outlines and program descriptions generally describe the subject matter that students will learn, they communicate less frequently the broad skills that students gain through a course. More effectively communicating the skills learned in SSH programs and courses can include outlining what and how skills are developed on course outlines and program websites, as well as providing guidance and time for students to reflect on their skills development. More broadly, universities must do more to build faculty members’ awareness of career services and create meaningful connections between academic departments and career services (such as in the case of California State University San Marcos) so that faculty members know where to direct students who ask for career advice.

3. **Strongly encourage students to think about career paths and skills development at the beginning of their degree program.**

Too often, SSH students fail to think seriously about their future career path until they are close to graduation. This leaves students with little time to gain relevant work experience, build a professional network, and strengthen their career management skills before graduation. As a result, students often spend time immediately after graduation doing these things, but without many of the supports they would have had while at university.

Students must recognize that a university degree is not enough to ensure a promising career. They also need to use their time in PSE to build their résumé through extracurricular activities and experiential education. Ultimately, students must take responsibility for their future—too many students fail to take advantage of the career development opportunities at their post-secondary institutions. Faculty and career services staff can play an important role by continually and consistently...
articulating to students the need to reflect on possible career paths and by creating awareness of on-campus opportunities to build career management skills. Career advice should take into account the current and future labour market trends, including the increasing number of temporary or freelance jobs. Students need advice on both how to find “traditional” jobs and how to succeed in non-traditional jobs.

Initiatives such as Queen’s University’s Major Maps can help by providing students with direction on the types of activities they should be engaging in to build their résumés throughout the entire duration of their degree program. If well implemented, ePortfolios also have potential to help students reflect on the skills they have developed and their potential career paths.

4. Increase opportunities for participation in experiential learning.

Experiential learning opportunities allow SSH students to apply the skills they have learned in the classroom in a non-academic environment, as well as to build new skills. When students apply what they have learned in their SSH program in a professional environment, they see the value of their skills and gain increased confidence in their ability to succeed in the labour market. In some instances, employers will hire students as full-time employees once they graduate. Currently, participation by SSH students in experiential learning lags behind other disciplines. Non-credit opportunities for SSH students to participate in experiential learning, such as cooperative education or internships, may be limited or may pay poorly. While opportunities to participate in for-credit experiential learning through coursework are increasing, they are still limited.

Universities and SSH faculties should work to increase experiential learning opportunities and widely promote these to students from the time they start their programs. Ideally, students will have access to experiential learning opportunities of varying duration and intensity. While some students may be keen to participate in cooperative education, for others the considerable time commitment may be a deterrent. For-credit experiential learning opportunities, such as courses with a community or service learning component, may be particularly effective at reaching
learners who are resistant to making a significant time commitment in addition to their program of study.

Of course, developing and delivering courses with an experiential learning component can be more time-consuming for instructors than the delivery of traditional course formats. Universities, along with provincial and federal governments, should provide funding to support the development and delivery of SSH curricula with an experiential education component. York University’s Academic Innovation Fund, which provides funding for projects related to experiential education, is a promising model. As smaller universities may not have funding for these types of extra initiatives, targeted government funding may be necessary to ensure SSH students at all PSE institutions have adequate experiential learning opportunities. Having an office or individual on campus responsible for liaising with employers can help to lessen the burden for instructors of offering courses with experiential education components and ensure that employers are not bombarded with multiple requests.

5. Offer career development programming tailored to SSH students.

While SSH students benefit from career development planning designed for undergraduates across all programs, they also require tailored programming. The broad nature of the skills developed in SSH programs and the lack of a defined career path mean that SSH students may have greater difficulty determining and pursuing a career path than students in other disciplines, particularly those in applied disciplines. Tailored programming is necessary to give students a sense of the specific career paths they can pursue with an SSH degree, and the skills they have developed. Ideally, tailored programming would include initiatives directed at SSH students as a whole, as well as discipline-specific programming. Courses that integrate the development of career management skills into existing curricula can be particularly valuable for students.

While an increasing number of SSH programs and university career centres are encouraging students to begin thinking about their future career early in their program, a large proportion of students will continue to delay focusing on their career development until they are close.
to graduation. Unfortunately, this group of students is often most in need of guidance and support. PSE institutions should ensure alumni have access to career development programming (many already do), including by providing assistance with resumés, cover letters, and interviews; offering career panels; holding networking events; and providing mentors.

6. Strengthen Links Between SSH Students and Alumni.
SSH faculties and departments should strengthen connections to alumni. Since SSH faculty are generally limited in their capacity to provide non-academic career advice to students, one reason for universities to reconnect with alumni is to increase mentoring opportunities by SSH graduates who have integrated successfully into the labour market. Alumni can speak on panels, work one on one with students, and help students develop career management skills and their own professional networks. Recent studies of the future of the PhD have suggested that universities take this approach, and it could be replicated at the undergraduate level. Previous cohorts of SSH graduates might be ideally placed to speak to graduating students about career trajectories. Initiatives such as SFU’s English Network do not require significant resources to implement, but provide valuable opportunities for students. Indeed, alumni are often enthusiastic about participating in career development initiatives and assisting current students.

7. Increase Employer Awareness of the Valuable Skills Taught in SSH Programs.
Too frequently, hiring processes are biased in favour of undergraduate degree holders from applied programs at the expense of students from non-applied SSH programs. This bias impacts graduates, as well as students participating in experiential education opportunities, such as cooperative education programs and internships. This bias in favour of applied programs can be attributed to a lack of employer awareness about the skills emphasized in SSH programs; the ease of screening job candidates based on their degree program, rather than skills developed; and a preference for plug-and-play graduates. Yet, employers that hire SSH graduates find that they have valuable skills that are
comparable to graduates of applied programs. While SSH graduates may not have some of the job-specific skills possessed by graduates of applied programs, employers that hire them report that their skill levels exceed those of graduates from applied programs in other areas (e.g., written communication).

Employers should ensure their screening processes are not biased against SSH degree holders. Universities, including career centre staff, can encourage employers to hire more SSH graduates by communicating what skills are emphasized in SSH programs and how they are developed. Involving a greater number of employers in experiential education initiatives for SSH students, particularly employers that traditionally do not hire large numbers of SSH graduates, can help to educate employers about the value that SSH graduates can bring to the workplace.

Furthermore, employers must realize that most undergraduate degree programs are not in the business of producing plug-and-play graduates. It is the job of SSH undergraduate degree programs to produce graduates with the skills to succeed in the workplace. In the case of SSH programs, these skills include critical thinking, creativity, strong written and oral communication, and adaptability. Graduates should possess a strong learning ability and be able to develop the applied skills needed to advance throughout their careers. However, employers should not expect employees to come pre-trained for specific positions. PSE institutions, federal and provincial stakeholders, and other key stakeholders in industry can play a role in rebuffing increasing demands for plug-and-play graduates.

8. Evaluate and Share Information on Career Development Initiatives.

While PSE institutions across Canada and peer countries have introduced a wide range of initiatives to address the challenging transitions to careers faced by many SSH graduates, evidence on their effectiveness is often limited to student uptake and anecdotal feedback from students and employers. Comprehensive evaluation of initiatives, including a comparison of the career pathways of participants who participate in these initiatives versus those who do not, would
be beneficial. Research on HIEPs should also inform analyses of the effectiveness of career development initiatives.

PSE organizations should facilitate the sharing of information on career development initiatives, particularly best practices and lessons learned. Career development initiatives are often institution- or even department-specific, and the existence of successful initiatives may be largely unknown outside of an institution or department. Regularly sharing information can help to ensure the continuous improvement of initiatives, avoid the repetition of mistakes, and reduce the resources required to introduce and deliver initiatives.

Conclusion

Graduates of SSH undergraduate degree programs leave school with a wide range of skills that give them the flexibility to pursue a variety of career paths. This is both beneficial and detrimental to students. While such flexibility allows students to choose from any number of careers, it also means that there is typically less explicit demand for a credential from their area of study.

Easing transitions to careers will involve creating greater awareness among SSH students, faculty members, PSE institutions, and employers about skills profiles and career paths. It will require teaching students to articulate and market to employers the skills they developed in SSH programs. A variety of innovative initiatives have been introduced to ease transitions from PSE to careers, but they are reaching only a small proportion of SSH students and for too short a period of time.

Addressing the challenging transitions to careers that many SSH graduates face is not just about addressing difficult individual circumstances. It is also about ensuring the continued vitality of the SSH disciplines. Negative publicity about the value of studying SSH is impacting SSH disciplines in the form of declining enrolment. Easing transitions to careers will combat myths about baristas with BAs and demonstrate to employers the value that SSH graduates can bring to their organization. In today’s increasingly complex world, we need the skills of SSH graduates more than ever.
APPENDIX A

Bibliography


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