Employer Responses to the Co-Curricular Record

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The Co-Curricular Record at Trent University

Over the last 5-10 years across Canadian university campuses, there has been a growing attempt to encourage student involvement in extra-curricular activities, and acknowledge students who are involved on campus in a co-curricular capacity. As the post-university job market has become leaner, students have had to work harder to make an impression in applications or interviews for employment. It is now apparent that students need more than a bachelor’s degree in order to stand out from the crowd – indeed, a blend of schooling, work experience and extra-curricular involvement is deemed important for today’s successful candidate. The movement toward recognizing co-curricular accomplishments on campus has paralleled this shifting work climate, and an increasing number of Canadian institutions have purchased co-curricular record software systems as a result (see Appendix A).

Trent University’s co-curricular record program was implemented in September 2010 after a year of consultation and negotiations with stakeholders on campus. Orbis Communications Inc. was selected as the software provider after a request for proposals process; this decision reflected Trent’s interest in the co-curricular record software, but also in the career module which was included in the software package. The Trent University Career Centre has been working with the MyJob Board, and has found it to be an effective tool for connecting students with local and Trent-based employers. Recently, the Faculty of Education at Trent University has also purchased the Field Placement Module through Orbis.

The inception of the co-curricular record program at Trent saw some standard start-up challenges, which included creating a policy to guide the operation of the software and the program; identifying parameters for inclusion with regard to activities on campus; developing a list of learning achievements to be associated with campus activities; integrating the software with Trent’s student database; and identifying and assigning validators for each activity.

Each year of co-curricular record operation at Trent has seen a steady increase in student participation. During the program’s inaugural year (Sept. 2010-Aug. 2011), 310 records were created by students. The following year (Sept. 2011-Aug. 2012), another 319 records were added, for a total of 619 participating students. During the past year (Sept. 2012-April 2013), 238 more records have been created, for a total of 867 students with co-curricular records. By the end of August, 2013, Trent will have sufficient data to paint a complete picture of student usage over the past three years.

Increases in Co-Curricular Record Participation at Trent University by Year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th># Co-Curricular Records Created</th>
<th>Cumulative Total</th>
<th>% of Student Population*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2010-2011</td>
<td>310</td>
<td>310</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011-2012</td>
<td>319</td>
<td>629</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
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<td>2012-2013**</td>
<td>238</td>
<td>867</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
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</tbody>
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*includes all undergraduate and graduate students

**data available is for September to April, due to the time of publication of this report
Trent’s co-curricular record program is now entering its fourth year of operation. With the start-up phase now past, the focus of co-curricular record administrators has shifted toward identifying how to guide students in the most effective use of the software. With co-curricular record software and programming fairly new to the university landscape, there is a lack of evidence-based research highlighting best practices in terms of student and institutional usage. In an attempt to better understand how the co-curricular record software might be of maximum benefit to students, the Trent University Office of Student Affairs, in partnership with the Trent University Career Centre, endeavored to gain some insight from potential student employers. Over the winter of 2012-13, one focus group with local employers from the Trent and Peterborough communities was held, and one employer survey was administered. In addition, a survey was sent out to Trent students who currently use the co-curricular record system. The trends which emerged from both the focus group and the surveys are highlighted below.

**Employer Focus Group**

On December 10th, 2012, a group of Trent- and Peterborough-based employers met at Trent University to share ideas about the importance of student extra-curricular involvement and the co-curricular record. Organizations represented included: Sun Life Financial, RBC Royal Bank, the Peterborough District Red Cross, the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, Cambium Environmental Inc., Trent University Conference Services, and Trent University Housing Services. Representatives from the Trent University Career Centre were also present. The focus group was facilitated by a representative from Trent University’s Office of Student Affairs (responsible for the administration of the co-curricular record program).

The group of employers present were asked the following questions, and encouraged to share their responses:

1. What are the top skills or qualities looked for when hiring a student or recent graduate?
2. When hiring, what importance do you place on the diversity and amount of co-curricular experiences that a candidate has? How does this compare in importance to a) academic achievement and b) work experience?
3. What elements in the presentation of an application package do you value most?
4. How would you view an additional document being added to an application package that specifically outlines co-curricular involvement?
5. In examining the types of activities that a student can add to a co-curricular record, how would you value the following:
   a. One-time workshop
   b. One-time volunteer commitment
   c. Longer-term volunteer commitment
   d. Completed program
   e. Membership on a team or in an organization
   f. Leadership position in an organization
These questions generated much discussion amongst focus group participants. From each question, key themes emerged as the discussions progressed. These themes are summarized in point form below:

1. **What are the top skills or qualities looked for when hiring a student or recent graduate?**

   **Key Themes:**
   - Problem Solving Abilities
   - Adaptability/Flexibility
   - Enthusiasm/Dedication
   - Communication (Written and Verbal)
   - Personable Nature
   - Ability to Learn
   - Reliability

2. **When hiring, what importance do you place on the diversity and amount of co-curricular experiences that a candidate has? How does this compare in importance to a) academic achievement and b) work experience?**

   **Key Themes:**
   - Co-curricular experience, academic achievement and work experience weigh in equally – work experience can be considered less important if the candidate has related co-curricular experience (ex. relevant volunteer work)
   - In an application, no distinction needs to be made between ‘volunteer’ and ‘work’ experience – more important is that the skills gained from each can be articulated well
   - Diversity of co-curricular experience is less important than demonstration of longer-term commitment (particularly in a volunteer position, or when serving in a leadership capacity)

3. **What elements in the presentation of an application package do you value most?**

   **Key Themes:**
   - A professional introductory email
   - Introductory email sent from a professional email address
   - A direct correlation between the application and posting
   - Inclusion of a cover letter
   - Grammatically sound
   - Clear and concise
   - Sent as a PDF rather than a Word document
4. How would you view an additional document being added to an application package that specifically outlines co-curricular involvement?

Key Themes:
- Minimal interest in the inclusion of an extra document
- Information from a co-curricular record can be integrated into a resume or cover letter instead
- The resume and cover letter are an opportunity to take everything in a student’s portfolio and link it together; the co-curricular record could be one component of such a portfolio
- Rather than adding an extra document to an application, students should use the document as a tool for reviewing their co-curricular experiences and reflecting on what skills/learning achievements were gained from each

5. In examining the types of activities that a student can add to a co-curricular record, how would you value the following:
   a. One-time workshop
   b. One-time volunteer commitment
   c. Longer-term volunteer commitment
   d. Completed program
   e. Membership on team or in organization
   f. Leadership position in an organization

Key Themes:
- One-time workshops are less important, unless they provided the student with a certification or marketable skill (ex. Standard First Aid; ASSIST Suicide Helper Training) which relates to the position
- The main priority is that the co-curricular experiences identified in an employment application are relevant to the position
- Longer-term commitments demonstrate a greater level of student investment
- Commitments that demonstrate that the student held a leadership role are valued

Employer Survey

In January of 2013, a survey was sent to approximately 600 employers through the Trent University Career Centre’s employer database. While the employer focus group provided an opportunity to speak with local employers about student co-curricular involvement in some depth, the employer survey intended to reach a broader group with similar questions. A total of 66 responses were received, from a wide variety of employers – both local and regional. A complete list of the organizations that responded can be found in Appendix B. The survey questions were presented as follows:
1) What are the top skills and qualities that you look for when hiring a student or recent graduate (please check all that apply)?
   - Communication Skills
   - Flexibility/Adaptability
   - Problem Solving Skills
   - Trainability
   - Initiative
   - Work experience within the field
   - Other (please specify)

2) Please rank the relative importance that you place on a candidate’s:
   a) academic achievement
   b) work experience
   c) co-curricular experience

3) What elements in the presentation of an application package do you value most (please check all that apply)?
   - Cover letter and resume included
   - Instructions from job posting followed accurately
   - Sent as a PDF file
   - Grammatically sound
   - Direct relationship to the position as posted
   - Well written
   - Sent from professional email address
   - Other (please specify)

4) How would you view an additional document – an official co-curricular transcript outlining a student’s co-curricular experiences – being added to an application package? (rating scale 1-5)

5) What value do you place on the capacity of a candidate to reflect on and articulate knowledge gained from past experiences and involvement? (rating scale – no value to much value)

6) a) Have you ever received a co-curricular transcript or co-curricular record as part of an application package? (y/n)
   b) If the answer to the above question is yes, approximately how many times have you received a co-curricular transcript or co-curricular record as part of an application package?

7) In examining the types of activities that a student can include on a Co-Curricular Record, how would you, as an employer, value the following (rating scale of 1-5):
   - A one-time workshop
   - A one-time volunteer commitment
   - A longer-term volunteer commitment
   - A completed program
   - Membership on a team/in an organization
   - An award
   - A leadership position within an organization (board of directors, executive position)
The responses to the survey have been presented in chart form below, with key themes identified for the questions that were open-ended in nature. ‘Key Themes’ are based on recurring answers, with the most common answers listed first:

1) What are the top skills and qualities that you look for when hiring a student or recent graduate (please check all that apply)?

- Communication Skills – 78.8%
- Flexibility/Adaptability – 59.1%
- Problem Solving Skills – 51.5%
- Trainability – 57.6%
- Initiative – 69.7%
- Work experience within the field – 50.0%
- Other (please specify)

Other – Key Themes:

- Strong work ethic/drive
- Positive, personable nature
- Creativity
- Position-specific knowledge
2) Please rank the relative importance that you place on a candidate’s:
   a) academic achievement
   b) work experience and
   c) co-curricular experience

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Please rank the relative importance that you place on a candidate’s academic achievement, work experience and co-curricular experience.
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Comments - Key Themes:

- Directly applicable work experience is highly valued

3) What elements in the presentation of an application package do you value most (please check all that apply)

   o Cover letter and resume included
   o Instructions from job posting followed accurately
   o Sent as a PDF file
   o Grammatically sound
   o Direct relationship to the position as posted
   o Well written
   o Sent from professional email address
   o Other (please specify)
Other - Key Themes:

- Important for the candidate to reference the skills identified in the job posting
- Accuracy and conciseness are valued in applications

4) How would you view an additional document – an official co-curricular transcript outlining a student’s co-curricular experiences – being added to an application package? (rating scale 1-5)
Comments – Key Themes:

- Only desirable if the positions on the co-curricular record document relate directly to the job posting
- Any relevant co-curricular experiences should be incorporated into the resume, and potentially referenced in the cover letter

5) What value do you place on the capacity of a candidate to reflect on and articulate knowledge gained from past experiences and involvement? (rating scale)

Comments – Key Themes:

- This ability is very important – but students must make efforts to link their reflection and their identification of knowledge gained to the skills required by the position
6) a) Have you ever received a co-curricular transcript or co-curricular record as part of an application package? (y/n)

b) If the answer to the above question is yes, approximately how many times have you received a co-curricular transcript or co-curricular record as part of an application package?

Key Themes:

- For the employers who have received a co-curricular transcript, it has been a very infrequent occurrence
7) In examining the types of activities that a student can include on a Co-Curricular Record, how would you, as an employer, value the following (rating scale of 1-5):

- A one-time workshop
- A one-time volunteer commitment
- A longer-term volunteer commitment
- A completed program
- Membership on a team/in an organization
- An award
- A leadership position within an organization (board of directors, executive position)

**Other – Key Themes:**

- Any of the above could be considered important/significant, as long as they are directly applicable to the requirements of the position.
Co-Curricular Record – Student Survey

In addition to the employer focus group and survey, a survey was administered to Trent University students in an attempt to gauge their responses to the co-curricular record. In total, 81 responses to the survey were received. The survey was fairly broad in its scope, but included several questions that probed student perceptions of how an employer might respond to a co-curricular record document. Some of the questions were designed to complement questions asked in the employer survey, so as to make a direct comparison between student perceptions and employer responses.

The questions from the survey which pertain to this study are listed below:

1) What value do you see in creating a record of your extra-curricular involvement at Trent?
2) What types of activities would you consider for inclusion on your co-curricular record (assuming you had participated in all of these types of activities)? Please check all that apply.
   a. One-time workshops (ex. attendance at a workshop on academic skills)
   b. A one-time volunteer commitment (ex. volunteering to lead tours at an Open House)
   c. A longer-term volunteer commitment (ex. volunteering once per week at the Seasoned Spoon)
   d. A completed program (ex. completion of the Impact Leadership Program)
   e. Membership on a team or in an organization (ex. member of campus rec volleyball; member of Trent Penpal Program)
   f. A leadership position within an organization (ex. member of the executive for the Trent University Anthropology Society)
   g. An award (ex. Otonabee College Athlete of the Year)
   h. Other (please specify)
3) Have you ever used your co-curricular record (either the information contained in it, or the printed copy itself) in a job application or interview setting? If so, how?
4) How do you expect to use your co-curricular record in the future?
5) Please rank the relative importance that you believe an employer might place on a student’s academic achievement, work experience and extra-curricular involvement. (rating scale 1-5)

The responses to the survey have been presented in chart form below, with key themes identified for the questions that were open-ended in nature. ‘Key Themes’ are based on recurring answers, with the most common answers listed first:
1) What value do you see in creating a record of your extra-curricular involvement at Trent?

Key Themes:
- Can be a useful as a reflective tool for resume development
- Can be handed in directly as part of an application package or presented to an employer at an interview
- Can be added to a portfolio
- Useful for the student’s own tracking purposes – as a memory aid
- Not useful - co-curricular records are not recognized or seen as valid by employers
- The process of creating a co-curricular record encourages a culture of involvement at Trent

2) What types of activities would you consider for inclusion on your co-curricular record (assuming you had participated in all of these types of activities)? Please check all that apply.

   a. One-time workshops (ex. attendance at a workshop on academic skills)
   b. A one-time volunteer commitment (ex. volunteering to lead tours at an Open House)
   c. A longer-term volunteer commitment (ex. volunteering once per week at the Seasoned Spoon)
   d. A completed program (ex. completion of the Impact Leadership Program)
   e. Membership on a team or in an organization (ex. member of campus rec volleyball; member of Trent Penpal Program)
   f. A leadership position within an organization (ex. member of the executive for the Trent University Anthropology Society)
   g. An award (ex. Otonabee College Athlete of the Year)
   h. Other (please specify)
Other - Key Themes:

- Suggestion to allow for inclusion of on-campus employment experiences
- Suggestion to allow for inclusion off-campus experiences

3) Have you ever used your co-curricular record (either the information contained in it, or the printed copy itself) in a job application or interview setting? If so, how?

If so, how? – Key Themes:

- Used to enhance information on resume
- Used as a reflective tool before a job interview or application
- Used as a supplement to a job application package
- Added to a portfolio
4) How do you expect to use your co-curricular record in the future?

Key Themes:
- For use in an application package, portfolio, or used to help prepare for/bring to a job interview
- For use in a graduate school application
- For personal tracking purposes
- Do not plan to use it, or are unsure of whether they will use it

5) Please rank the relative importance that you believe an employer might place on a student’s academic achievement, work experience and extra-curricular involvement. (rating scale 1-5)

Other – Key Themes:
- Many students identified that they think employers value having a well-rounded applicant, with a balance in all three areas
Conclusion

The concept of a document giving ‘credit’ for non-academic campus involvement is fairly new to the realm of student development; thus, there is a definite lack of research supporting best practices in the implementation of co-curricular record programming. Many Canadian schools have had their co-curricular record systems in place for five years or less, and many more are only just in the process of implementing such programs.

This study was undertaken with the intention of gaining insight into how the co-curricular record program at Trent University can better serve its student population. This project, in particular, looked at the benefit of the co-curricular record to students as they transition into the job market; in addition, it would be useful to complete a study examining responses to the co-curricular record by graduate schools.

One predominant theme that arose repeatedly from employers, in both the focus group and the survey, was the importance of conciseness, clarity and relevance in a job application. Throughout their responses, employers referenced the importance of students tailoring their application to the specific skills and qualities identified in the job posting. This highlights the importance of teaching students to reflect on their experiences – academic, work-related and co-curricular – and identify the skills gained which relate directly to the position being applied for. In this vein, the co-curricular record can be a useful tool for reviewing past co-curricular experiences and the learning outcomes associated with each of them.

Overall, the employer response to the notion of receiving an additional document in an application package was lukewarm. Most employers emphasized the importance of the instructions in the job posting being followed accurately; as such, if a job posting requests both a cover letter and resume, the student is better served to provide the employer with those two documents only. Again, the co-curricular record can be used as a tool for the student to review co-curricular experiences and decide which achievements should be included in the resume or cover letter, with the intent of maximizing relevance to the position as posted. However, if the student is required to submit a portfolio, the co-curricular record document itself could be included here.

It is also worthwhile to note that students have the ability to log in to their co-curricular record account and select which activities they wish to display on their co-curricular record document. Thus, the student is able to print off different versions of their own co-curricular record which might highlight some activities over others. Students should be made well aware of this function so that they can maximize the effectiveness of their document if they do intend to use it in a portfolio.

In examining the results from the student survey, it is apparent that many students believe that it might be good practice to include a co-curricular record document in a job application package. This demonstrates that some strategic coaching is required in order to ensure that students understand the ways in which the co-curricular record can be most useful to them when seeking employment. In this
interest, it would be useful to develop a ‘translation’ program that works to assist students in understanding how best to use their co-curricular record beyond their undergraduate studies. This translation program could start as a simple workshop, co-created by the Office of Student Affairs and the Trent University Career Centre, and offered to students as part of the repertoire of Career Centre workshops.

This study provides a starting point for understanding how the co-curricular record program can be of maximum benefit to students in their search for employment. The following recommendations have emerged as a result of the information gleaned from both employers and students. With continued attention and investigation into best practices with respect to the co-curricular record system, Trent University can work to provide students with a program that serves their interests and needs in a changing employment climate.

Recommendations

- The co-curricular record should be marketed to students as a tool for a) personal tracking of co-curricular achievements and b) reflecting on skills and learning achievements gained from activities as they relate to specific job postings.
- The co-curricular record should not be marketed to students as a supplementary document for a job application package.
- The co-curricular record should be marketed to students as a document for inclusion in a portfolio, as long as the student is careful to tailor their document to suit the requirements of the position being applied for.
- Additional information about strategic uses of the co-curricular record document should be posted on the Trent University co-curricular record website.
- A co-curricular record ‘translation’ workshop should be developed as a partnership between the Office of Student Affairs and the Trent University Career Centre. This workshop should guide students in how to effectively use their co-curricular record when leaving Trent and moving toward employment or graduate school.
- An increased number of co-curricular record information sessions should be run throughout the school year, with specific coaching on how best to use both the co-curricular record software and the document itself.
- Greater emphasis should be placed on the reflective process of identifying learning achievements from each activity, so the student is better able to articulate these outcomes in a resume, cover letter or job interview context. This may require some modifications to the software to allow for a more meaningful reflective process to occur.
- An additional study should be completed which examines the responses of a variety of graduate schools and programs to the co-curricular record document.
**Appendices**

**Appendix A: Canadian Post-Secondary Institutions and their Co-Curricular Record Software Providers**
(based on information gathered by the Canadian Co-Curricular Records Network in February, 2013)

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<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Software Provider</th>
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<td>Acadia University</td>
<td>In-house</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brock University</td>
<td>In-house</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bishop’s University</td>
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<tr>
<td>Carleton University</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conestoga College</td>
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<td>Wilfrid Laurier University</td>
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Appendix B: Organizations that Responded to the Employer Survey

1. Ministry of Labour
2. RBC
3. Undisclosed
4. Peterborough Utilities Group
5. Community Care Durham
6. Christian Horizons
7. Trent Radio
8. Engage Education
9. B-STREET COMMUNICATIONS
10. CIBC
11. Freedom 55 Financial
12. Fairhaven LTC
13. SGS Canada Inc
14. Royal Ontario Museum
15. Parks Canada - Trent Severn Waterway
17. LANXESS Inc
18. Oxford Seminars
19. The Senate of Canada
20. Trent Centre for Community Based Education
21. ProHome Health Services, A Division of We Care Health Services
22. CAST
23. Kawartha Sexual Assault Centre
24. Municipal Gov't
25. Safari Zoo Camp
26. City of Peterborough
27. Scotiabank
28. Omni Health Care-Springdale Country Manor
29. Pegasys Systems & Technologies, Inc.
30. Oxford College
31. Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services
32. Selwyn Public Library
33. Canadian Diabetes Association
34. Investors Group
35. County of Peterborough
36. Trent Queer Collective
37. Hydro One Inc
38. Employment Planning & Counselling
39. Queen's University
40. Halton Healthcare Services
41. Bark Lake Leadership Centre
42. Camp Ponacka
43. Canadian Mental Health Association
44. GreenUP
45. Easter Seals Ontario
46. Millennium Research Group
47. Peterborough Regional Health Centre
48. GM CAMI Assembly
49. The Staff Room
50. CMA
51. Rideau Hill Camp
52. Algonquin Wildlife Research Station
53. FOOTPRINTS
54. Scholars Education Centre
55. Burt's Greenhouses
56. Sun Life Financial
57. McLean Berry Farm
58. Emtec
59. Kawartha Lakes Food Source
60. Community Counselling & Resource Centre
61. Enterprise Rent-A-Car
62. Jones Collombin Investment Counsel Inc
63. Business Development Bank of Canada
64. Ontario Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs
65. Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources
66. CANTEACH