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University of Lethbridge establishes first therapeutic recreation degree program in Alberta

The University of Lethbridge's Faculty of Health Sciences is unveiling a new post-diploma degree program that will advance the discipline of therapeutic recreation and eventually lead to the establishment of the first accredited therapeutic recreation degree in Canada.

The Bachelor of Therapeutic Recreation is designed to prepare graduates to become eligible as Certified Therapeutic Recreation Specialists (CTRS), a career field that is emerging as one of the most promising growth professions in health care.

"In conversation with government, employers and other post-secondary institutions we became aware of the need in Alberta for a degree option in therapeutic recreation," says Dr. Chris Hosgood, dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences. "In the spirit of Campus Alberta, we created a task force that included all stakeholders in the province, including NorQuest College and Lethbridge College, to develop a laddering opportunity for students to move into a two-year post-diploma degree program at the University of Lethbridge."

Therapeutic recreation is described as a process that utilizes functional intervention, education and recreation participation to enable individuals with cognitive, physical, emotional and social limitations to acquire or increase the skills and knowledge that allow them to enjoy the leisure aspects of their life.

What it translates to in the workforce is varied and open-ended.

"The profession is really client driven, having the client tell you what they need as opposed to a therapeutic recreation professional telling them what they need," says Tristan Hopper, a CTRS and master's student who is currently at the U of L supporting Dr. Jerry Singleton as he assists in setting up the new program. Singleton is on secondment from Dalhousie University, where a therapeutic recreation degree has been offered since 1990.

“I’ve worked in hospitals with clients who have a mental illness. People often think that therapeutic recreation has to be involving clients in sport, but some people aren’t into that,” says Hopper. “Maybe they just want to go to a coffee shop to meet friends and socialize but don’t know how to ride transit or how to properly order a drink once they get there. That’s all a part of what we do.”

The new degree program is being lauded by the Alberta Therapeutic Recreation Association (ATRA) as addressing a provincial need.

“This degree program supports ATRA’s mission to regulate therapeutic recreation through defined programs of study and educational courses for the purpose of registration requirements, a clearly defined entry level for applicants and continuing competence programs for practitioners, standards of practice and a code of ethics,” says ATRA Executive Director Dianne Bowtell. “With this clearly defined therapeutic recreation educational program in place in Alberta, the profession can advance the discipline to improve the health and quality of life of Albertans living with disabilities and illnesses, older adults and others who are marginalized in society.”

Those eligible to apply to the new degree program must first complete a therapeutic recreation diploma course, such as that offered at Lethbridge College. Singleton says the value of the added two years of study and a degree designation is substantial.

“Lethbridge College is doing great things with their program but a diploma allows graduates the ability to be a programmer, not a CTRS,” he says. “The two extra years will enable the individual to develop the critical thinking skills to not only provide an engagement opportunity but to assess the effectiveness of it and how it could be applied to help other individuals in the future. The degree also indicates to the field a minimum level of competency, a quality assurance that will enable graduates the opportunity to compete for positions across Canada and the United States.”

The U of L is also beginning the process by which the degree program will be professionally accredited, something that even Dalhousie has yet to pursue. It would make the University’s Bachelor of Therapeutic Recreation the first accredited therapeutic recreation degree in Canada.

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