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ROUNDTABLE

Work-Integrated Learning in Social Sciences, Humanities, and Arts:

Strengthening Career Pathways for Liberal Arts Students, and the Employers Who Need Them

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Executive Summary

BHER and its partners have developed a suite of work-integrated learning (WIL) programs that address dual needs for Canada's employers and higher education ecosystem: the demand for human skills, and the school-to-work transition for liberal arts students.[1]

Canada's employers need new hires with critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, and other social-emotional skills (also known as human skills). Human skills are least likely to be replaced by AI and are consistently identified as the top skills employers want in BHER's Skills Survey reports, year after year.

Social Sciences, Humanities, and Arts (SSHA) programs are strongly aligned with employers' needs in this way. But that's not always obvious to employers. And declining SSHA enrollment, related to barriers to employment, threatens the development of this critical talent pipeline just when it's needed most.

WIL is a proven pathway to stronger post-graduation career outcomes, but only 29% of social sciences, 16% of humanities, and 34% of arts students participate in WIL — far behind professional programs like healthcare (79%) and education (88%). Expanding WIL in the liberal arts is an opportunity to strengthen school-to-work transitions, support equity-deserving students, and help employers tap into a talent pool with the skills they need.

BHER'S SSHA WIL PROGRAMS HAVE PROVEN BENEFITS FOR BOTH EMPLOYERS AND STUDENTS:

This report reviews successful strategies for increasing student access to WIL in SSHA, which we have identified through our extensive work with SSHA WIL delivery partners across Canada, as well as the positive impact of BHER's WIL programming on students and businesses seeking to apply crucial human skills to the new opportunities brought about by AI, cleantech, and related economic disruptors.

→ **88%** of employers reported a positive return on investment from hiring SSHA WIL students

→ **86%** experienced improved access to qualified students and recent graduates.

→ **84%** reported strengthening their talent pipeline.

→ **83%** saw increased organizational productivity.

→ **73%** reported that their WIL involvement strengthened their partnerships with post-secondaries.

→ **90%** of humanities WIL participants found jobs related to their studies, compared to **45%** of non-participants of WIL in humanities.

→ Humanities students who participated in WIL earned **23%** more than those who did not.

→ **88%** of SSHA WIL participants report gaining the skills, knowledge, and experience to work towards their career goals.

→ **78%** feel better prepared for the workforce because of their WIL experience.

→ **77%** are better able to articulate their skills to employers after WIL.

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1   We use the term "liberal arts" interchangeably with Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts (SSHA) in this report for brevity, but acknowledge that there is a distinction between the long history of liberal arts pedagogy and this specific group of disciplines. This distinction does not affect the scope of this report.

SSHA Training for the Future of Work

Human skills consistently top employers' wish lists when hiring talent (BHER Skills Survey). While specialized technical skills evolve quickly, human skills remain durable and in high demand (RBC, 2019).

As AI capabilities advance, employers are placing even higher value on uniquely human skills like critical thinking, creativity, empathy, and reasoning (Smith & Shum, 2018). The ability to frame questions and guide AI LLMs, and to think critically about the answers it returns, has become a new power skill.

SSHA programs specifically train for these skills. As use of AI increases, the need for SSHA expertise in ethics, human behaviour, politics, and philosophy to guide and set parameters for responsible AI will also increase (Leibler, 2022). Canada's leading employers and BHER members have expressed increasing concern that declining enrolment in SSHA programs may imperil our ability to train young people on the human skills that are most needed to complement and make better use of AI.

Canadian post-secondaries have struggled to attract students into liberal arts programs over the past decade. SSHA programs lag behind the growth in STEM disciplines: between 2011-12 and 2021-22, engineering enrollment grew by 38% and science by 46%, while social sciences grew by just 14% and humanities declined by 32% (HESA, 2024).

Employability heavily influences student decision making, with a 2022 survey showing that job-related motivations are a primary driver for post-secondary enrollment (CUSC, 2022). As institutions struggle to sustain programs with declining enrollment, there are calls to re-imagine liberal arts to better meet student and employer expectations.

DEBUNKING THE "FALSE CRISIS" MYTH

The image of the arts major working as a barista, frustrated with the return on their educational investment, is often invoked to support the idea that SSHA graduates have poor labour market outcomes. There's a grain of truth to the stereotype, but also lots of misinformation.

Relative to STEM graduates, SSHA graduates have historically struggled with school-to-work transitions and have reported lower job satisfaction and earnings, feeling overqualified for their role, and an increased likelihood of working part-time (Edge et al., 2018; Galarneau et al, 2020).

However, this is only the short-term story. On a longer post-graduation timeline, arts graduates succeed in multiple sectors, including finance, social services, and cultural industries, and others. They often experience greater career stability and strong earnings growth over time, relative to other disciplines (Edge et al., 2018). Clearly, the gap is in the short-term period directly after graduation, which is why WIL can be a game changer for SSHA students.

WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING AS A SOLUTION

Integrating WIL into SSHA programs can both strengthen human skills outcomes and address concerns about employability. One of the best ways for students to build human skills is by applying what they've learned in the classroom to real-world projects, with the guidance of industry mentors.

Data from Statistics Canada's 2023 National Graduates Survey shows that SSHA students who participated in WIL experienced vastly improved career outcomes:

→ **90%** of humanities graduates who completed WIL were employed in jobs related to their studies, compared to only **45%** of those who did not.

→ WIL participants in the humanities earned **23%** higher salaries than their non-WIL counterparts.

As SSHA faculties face cuts and declining enrolments, WIL is a way to demonstrate the professional value of liberal arts degrees to employers, students, and parents.

THE UNDERREPRESENTATION OF WIL IN SSHA

Despite the clear advantages of WIL, SSHA disciplines lag STEM, healthcare, and education programs in WIL participation. According to the National Graduates Survey, only **29%** of social sciences, **16%** of humanities, and **34%** of arts students participated in WIL compared to **53%** of STEM, **79%** of healthcare, and **88%** of education students.

Why the discrepancy? **There are four key reasons:**

Lack of Vocational Focus. Unlike programs such as nursing or teaching, liberal arts programs are not tied to one specific career pathway. The broad applicability of SSHA degrees to diverse careers makes designing WIL opportunities more complex for administrators (Gannaway & Shepherd, 2017).

Employer Awareness Gaps. Many employers struggle to connect the dots between the human skills they seek and the skills SSHA students have, especially if they have never hired from those programs before.

Institutional Resource Constraints. WIL development requires funding, administrative support, employer partnerships, and faculty engagement — resources that many liberal arts departments lack.

Faculty Buy-In Challenges. Many arts faculty are hesitant about WIL due to concerns about their own workload, misalignment of WIL with their research and tenure priorities, lack of industry experience, and the perceived role of a liberal arts education (Coates & Goedegeburre, 2012; Balleisen & Chin, 2022; Harvey & Shahjahan, 2013).

None of these challenges is insurmountable. In fact, with support from BHER's WIL program, several post-secondaries are already leading the charge in overcoming them.

Based on five years of experience with WIL partners across Canada, BHER has identified the "key ingredients" for a successful SSHA WIL strategy. They include 1) shared leadership, 2) tailored program design, and 3) faculty support and incentives. Industry collaboration is crucial to each one. And we have found that it's possible to create a culture of WIL in SSHA that holds true to the values of a liberal arts education but also adapts programs to meet today's student expectations and employer needs.

WIL Strategies in the Liberal Arts

1. SHARED LEADERSHIP & ALIGNED PRIORITIES

The expansion of WIL into the liberal arts needs institution-wide leadership and commitment. A growing number of post-secondaries are setting goals for 100% experiential learning and WIL participation to ensure that every student gains work experience before graduation.

For example, in 2022, BHER member Concordia University committed to giving every incoming undergraduate student at least two experiential learning opportunities by 2025. This type of executive leadership on 100% WIL legitimizes the expansion of WIL in the liberal arts.

Another example is Huron University, which has paired liberal arts education with a guaranteed WIL experience. Human skills and other traditional strengths of the liberal arts are supplemented with a focus on in-demand business skills and WIL. Huron attributes their **30% increase in student enrollments** in part to their promise of "a well-rounded liberal arts education complemented by experiential learning opportunities and guaranteed paid internships" (Huron University, 2023).

Beyond institutional commitments, leaders can leverage other recognized skills priorities to encourage the expansion of WIL in the liberal arts, such as:

→ **United Nations Sustainable Development Goals** (e.g. engaging SSHA students in global sustainability projects)

→ **Entrepreneurship education** (e.g. engaging SSHA students in creative and social enterprises)

→ **Tech sector talent pipelines** (e.g. engaging SSHA students in innovation industries)

To scale WIL efficiently, universities must also educate employers on SSHA talent. Although SSHA students have the in-demand skills they need, many businesses that have not historically hired liberal arts students may not think of this talent pool. One successful approach to this challenge is engaging WIL champions — employers who have experienced the value that SSHA students offer — to educate other employers about what SSHA students can bring to the table.

For employers, this means that you can level up your new talent strategies by employing a few simple best practices. Reach out to local post-secondary institutions about options to engage liberal arts students. You may be surprised by the number of ways you can increase access to students with in-demand skills that may be overlooked by business competitors. Explore working with local industry associations that may have more experience in facilitating connections with post-secondaries.

EXAMPLE IN ACTION

BHER partnered with **Western University and TechAlliance of Southwestern Ontario** to bring SSHA students into the tech sector through WIL. TechAlliance played a key role in engaging local tech companies from across Southwestern Ontario to build awareness of the benefits of WIL, and to identify industry challenges that would align with the skills and interests of SSHA students. Industry projects were created to solve those real world-challenges and embedded into SSHA courses, providing students with an early opportunity to engage with employers in a way that builds pathways to internships and jobs.

This initiative connected over 1000 students with SSHA skills to tech sector employers who need them, diversified regional talent pipelines, and helped boost tech workforce resilience.

2. TAILORING WIL PROGRAM DESIGN TO THE LIBERAL ARTS

When designing WIL programs for the liberal arts, it's important to keep in mind that SSHA disciplines have an overrepresentation of equity-deserving students,[2] that there is no single vocational path for SSHA programs, and that SSHA graduates will likely need to work across disciplines in their careers. Successful WIL programs are designed to work with these factors, not against them.

To increase WIL participation for equity-deserving students, institutions need to offer a range of WIL types, from low- to high-intensity models and through innovative and traditional means.

Four key strategies to try include:

- **Scaling up industry projects.** Integrating industry projects into core liberal arts courses can maximize student reach while minimizing disruption to students' schedules and responsibilities outside of school.

- **Multiple entryways.** Offering a mix of WIL opportunities like industry projects, paid internships, long term co-ops, applied research, community service learning, consulting, and others allows students to choose the level of involvement to suit their needs.

- **Financial support.** Targeted student bursaries can reduce financial barriers to WIL for equity-deserving students.

- **Flexible scheduling.** Developing WIL programs with timeline flexibility makes them more accessible to students who may have to juggle coursework alongside multiple jobs, caretaking, and other priorities.

Scaling up industry projects and offering a variety of opportunities also helps with scaffolding WIL for SSHA students. Unlike professional programs with a well-defined career path, liberal arts programs lead to a diverse breadth of possible careers. Therefore, liberal arts students need more support with career exploration.

One way for program design to support this exploration is to introduce lighter-touch WIL early in the academic journey. Light-touch opportunities, like the industry projects Western University students completed through TechAlliance, can help students try out new industries or career pathways in less time and with less commitment. This acts as a stepping stone to higher-intensity WIL options like internships later in their program.

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2   The demographic profile of students in SSHA disciplines participating in BHER's WIL programs is generally consistent with Canada's post-secondary student population. However, women and non-binary students are notably overrepresented (72%) in these programs, particularly in the Humanities, Visual and Performing Arts, and Communication Technologies disciplines.

The non-vocational nature of SSHA disciplines also means that creating opportunities for liberal arts students to work with students from other disciplines is of the utmost importance. SSHA students gain an edge in the labour market when they have exposure to working with students in business, STEM, and other backgrounds in multidisciplinary teams.

One way to achieve interdisciplinary experience is through consulting, applied research or other WIL projects tied to "wicked problems" like climate change, global poverty, or AI ethics. These challenges can be a framework for curating projects that benefit from multidisciplinary perspectives.

EXAMPLE IN ACTION: THE PROJECT COMMONS AT YORK UNIVERSITY

Through York University's Project Commons, liberal arts students worked on industry projects linked to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), tackling challenges from climate change to food security. The web-based Project Commons platform created opportunities for liberal arts faculty to easily access SDG-linked industry projects aligned with their courses. By making it easier for faculty to embed WIL into core SSHA courses, this initiative allowed more students to gain hands-on experience with solving complex societal issues through collaboration with multidisciplinary teams.

For employers, these considerations suggest that you should focus on required skills rather than a required program of study when hiring for student opportunities and entry-level roles. Liberal arts students bring valuable skills to a wide range of industries, but are often overlooked in favour of explicitly vocational degrees and diplomas. By focusing on skills instead, you can ensure you are not inadvertently screening out this qualified talent pool.

3. SIMPLIFYING THE PROCESS FOR FACULTY

Effectively engaging faculty members is pivotal to delivering curricular WIL for liberal arts students. Faculty is best engaged by reducing administrative burdens while aligning WIL with research and teaching interests.

In our experience with BHER partners, senior leaders have successfully engaged faculty by using strategies such as:

- **Declaring WIL a departmental priority.** This creates an avenue for faculty engagement in WIL to be formally recognized and rewarded through annual reviews (Arsenault & Fenton, 2021).

- **Recruiting faculty with a commitment to hands-on learning.** Faculty with an existing commitment to experiential learning are more likely to engage in curricular WIL, so this priority should be taken into account during recruitment.

- **Integrating faculty research interests.** Aligning WIL projects with faculty expertise not only makes WIL more relevant to faculty research interest, but also helps to attract industry partners who can benefit from a faculty member's subject matter expertise and oversight.

- **Reducing workload.** Teaching release and administrative support help lower barriers to WIL implementation for faculty members. Specialized WIL staff who can handle logistics and employer engagement allows faculty to focus on WIL supervision and teaching. For example, Capilano University has paired course release with dedicated WIL support staff, as well as training for faculty to embed WIL. This resulted in more seamless integration without increasing faculty workload, and leads to long-term program sustainability.

# BHER's Impact on WIL in the Liberal Arts Today

As part of our commitment to 100% WIL, BHER has developed 8 partnerships with 11 post-secondaries and 21 industry organizations to strengthen employment outcomes for SSHA students. We work closely with our WIL partners to make sure they have what they need to develop and scale up effective WIL. Through these partnerships, we've created **over 5,000 WIL opportunities** for liberal arts students across every region of Canada except for the northern territories. These opportunities prepare SSHA students for the workforce before graduation, and provide employers with the in-demand human skills needed to remain competitive in the rapidly changing AI and cleantech landscape.

Atlantic Region
300+ WILs

West Coast
1400 WILs

Prairies
750+ WILs

Central Region
2750+ WILs
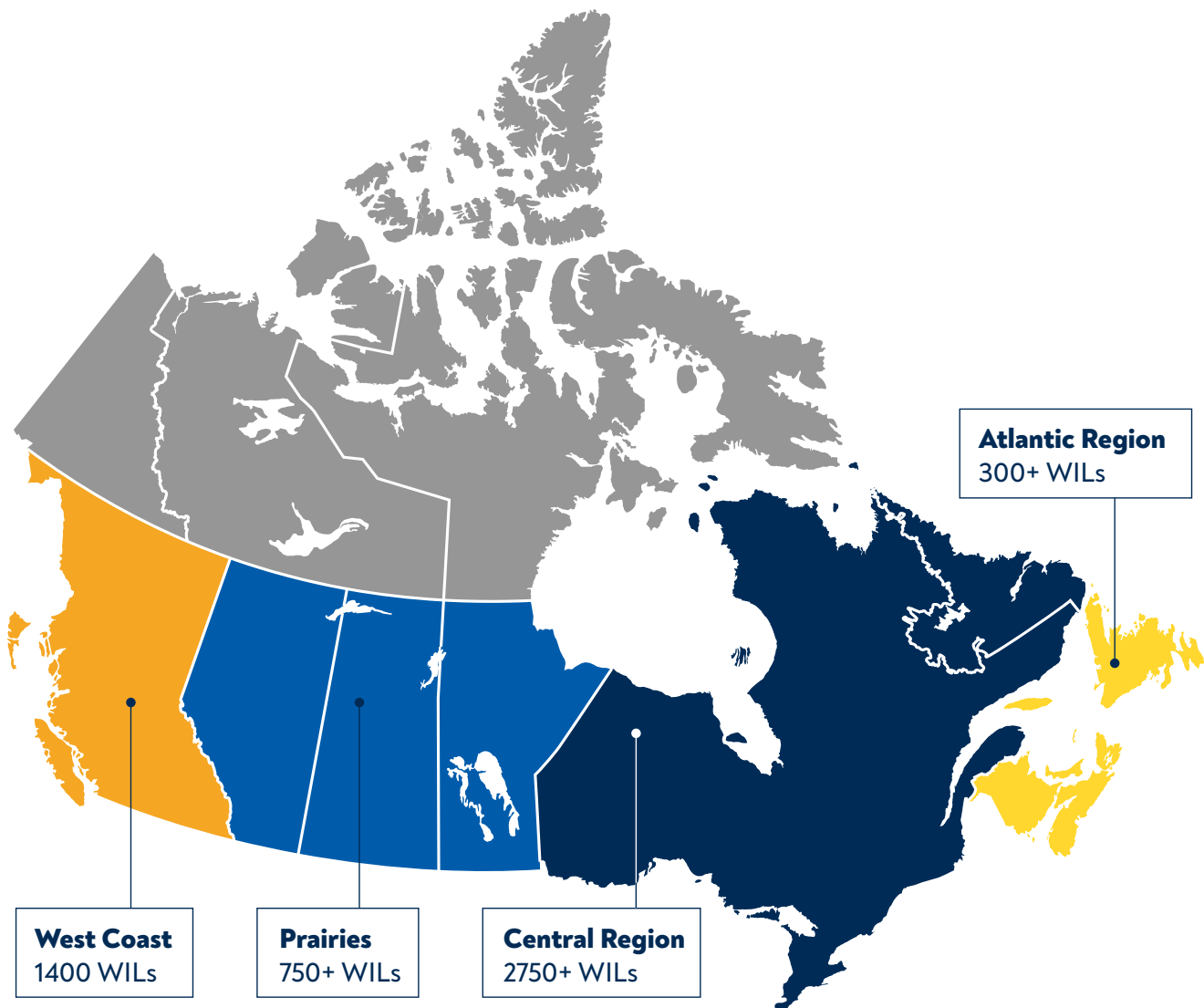
OUR IMPACT IN NUMBERS

→ **$1.9 million** invested in WIL projects in the liberal arts across Canada.

→ Seven sectors supported in four major regions.

→ A wide variety of WIL programming, with the top three WIL types for SSHA students being industry projects **(45%)**, applied research projects **(28%)**, and community service learning **(17%)**.

→ A wide variety of SSHA fields served, with WIL opportunities for students in the visual and performing arts and/or communication technologies **(40%)**, social and behavioral sciences and/or law **(32%)**, humanities **(22%)**, and interdisciplinary studies **(6%)**.

Diversity of SSHA fields served
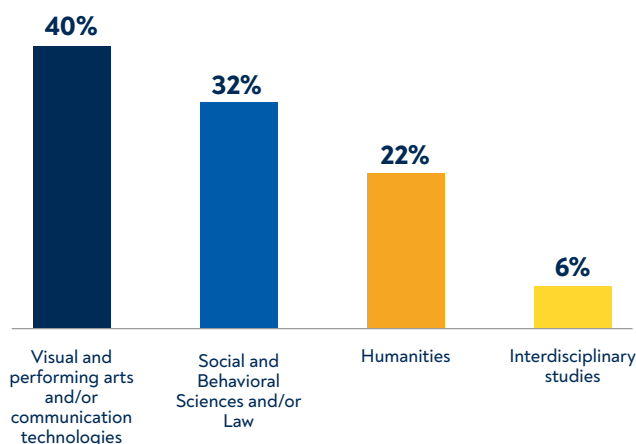
VALUE FOR EMPLOYERS

The majority of surveyed employers reported positive outcomes from hiring SSHA students through BHER's WIL programs:[3]

→ **88%** report experiencing a positive return on investment from WIL.

→ **88%** report gaining new skills, ideas, and knowledge from students.

→ **86%** report improved access to qualified students and/or recent graduates.

→ **84%** experienced a strengthened talent pipeline.

→ **84%** became a more innovative organization.

→ **83%** increased organizational productivity.

Additionally, BHER's WIL programs work to build and strengthen relationships among employers and post-secondaries, paving the way for increased meaningful opportunities for SSHA students while helping employers meet their talent needs.

→ **73%** of employers report that their involvement in WIL strengthened their partnerships with PSIs .

→ **94%** report establishing new connections with PSIs.

→ **96%** say it is easier to work PSIs as a result of BHER's WIL program.

Industry liaison staff were crucial to helping employers establish and maintain relationships with post-secondaries.

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3   To capture the impact of BHER's WIL programs, partner organizations administer a standard survey to employers upon the completion of their WIL program. The following responses are collected from 6 partners whose WIL programs focused on SSHA students, and include a total of 163 employer responses. Data is unavailable for two partners, not included in these findings.

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> **"TechAlliance did a really good job and the university did a really good job with their point person, stewarding the relationship os that when [the instructor] and I were brought in, it was really time efficient."**
>
> *– Employer*

Employers also commented on the value of support received from faculty. One employer reflects,

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> **"Unlike other students I have taken on before, I was not left to do all the training or teach them how to move from thinking like a student to thinking like an employee. They seemed prepared but the faculty support was impressive and, for that reason I am fully onboard with this approach."**
>
> *– Employer*

VALUE FOR SSHA STUDENTS

Students from SSHA disciplines who participate in a BHER-supported WIL report that they developed professional skills, expanded their networks, and gained workforce readiness from their experience.[4]

→ **81%** have the skills, knowledge, and experience to work towards their career goals

→ **88%** are optimistic about achieving success in the workforce as a result of their WIL experience

→ **77%** are better able to articulate their skills as a result of their WIL experience

→ **78%** are better prepared for the workforce as a result of their WIL experience.

These outcomes empower liberal arts students to demonstrate the value of their skills and debunk myths about the employability of their degree or diploma. As one SSHA WIL student reflects,

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> **"The best part was how my WIL experience shocked my parents. They did not think I would be able to do anything with my degree, but when they saw what I was doing they were amazed - so much so that they stopped bugging my brother about finding something more applied than me."**
>
> *– SSHA WIL student*

4   As part of the BHER WIL program, partners are required to administer surveys to the students at the beginning (pre) and end (post) of their program. The pre survey focuses on collecting student demographics while the post survey captures student outcomes. As of September 2023, 24 partners conducted a total of 8,778 pre and 4,658 post surveys. Analysis of the surveys collected was conducted using the statistical software, R. We extracted SSHA and non-SSHA survey responses in order to conduct our analysis. The extracted SSHA dataset was used to get the descriptive statistics outlined in this section of the report.

BHER is Scaling WIL in the Liberal Arts for Tomorrow

BHER will build on the success of our SSHA WIL programming in the years ahead and continue to strengthen school-to-work transitions through industry-aligned skills training, ensuring that liberal arts students can contribute meaningfully to Canada's evolving economy. Our plan for what's next includes:

Creating and scaling proven curricular WIL models for liberal arts. BHER will expand curricular WIL opportunities in SSHA disciplines by scaling successful models like industry projects, applied research, and consulting-based WIL. These models ensure that liberal arts students engage with real-world challenges while developing in-demand skills that align with industry needs. By leveraging partnerships with PSIs and employers, BHER will create new curricular WIL pathways that prepare students for meaningful careers in both traditional and emerging industries.

Co-designing industry projects to bridge the private sector engagement gap. Many post-secondary institutions struggle to connect SSHA students with private sector employers, often relying more heavily on nonprofits and public sector partners. BHER will work directly with private sector partners to co-design industry projects tailored for SSHA students, ensuring they gain hands-on experience with employer-led, workforce-relevant challenges. This will provide students with exposure to high-demand sectors while supporting businesses in solving real-world problems.

Scaling industry projects to connect liberal arts students to priority sectors. BHER will prioritize industry projects as a cost-effective, scalable WIL model that bridges the gap between liberal arts graduates and Canada's priority sectors. By fostering cross-disciplinary partnerships, we will align WIL with key areas like digital transformation, green skills, and social innovation. This approach will provide liberal arts students with applied learning experiences that enhance their employability in a rapidly changing economy and directly meet Canada's most urgent needs.

Expanding paid WIL for liberal arts. To ensure liberal arts graduates are equipped for the future of work, BHER will scale industry-paid WIL opportunities in the digital economy, AI, and other high-growth fields. Building on successful models that have already connected SSHA students with roles in tech, we will expand paid placements that integrate digital skills development for liberal arts students. This will create new pathways for SSHA graduates to enter Canada's innovation economy and contribute to the country's digital transformation.

BHER's efforts to expand WIL in the liberal arts will ensure that more students, regardless of their discipline, have access to high-quality, hands-on learning experiences that build essential skills for today's workforce. By integrating proven WIL models, strengthening industry engagement, and prioritizing employer-led projects, we will continue to create meaningful pathways from study to work for liberal arts students across Canada in a way that also meets the needs of Canada's businesses.

BHER is a non-profit, member-based organization that brings together leading companies and post-secondaries to create opportunities for young people, foster innovation, and promote collaboration. Since 2019, we have run a federally funded WIL program that prepares students for school-to-work transitions and makes it easier for employers to collaborate with PSIs on shared skills and research priorities.

Our goal is to build capacity and drive change in Canada's skills and talent ecosystems to help businesses navigate the future of work. We aim to scale and create resilient and sustainable WIL ecosystems across Canada where employers of all sizes and from all industries have access to the support and talent they need to grow their business and contribute to Canada's prosperity. To date, we have created a total of more than 70,000 WIL experiences for students across Canada.

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