

# Ready? Set... Go! Create Your Own Job

## *The Development of an Entrepreneurship Training Program*

by Reinhold Boehm and H. Kalpana

*Les problèmes économiques actuels posent des difficultés particulières pour les femmes. D'après les auteures, les femmes doivent avoir accès à une formation adéquate pour être en mesure de fonder leur propre entreprise et ainsi contourner les*

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*problèmes qui se présentent lors de la recherche d'emploi. Cet article retrace l'évolution d'un programme de formation de quatre jours ainsi que la réaction de ses participantes.*

With the recession, cut-backs in health, social services, education, and the transformation of the economy through new information technologies, many workplaces traditionally held by women have been lost in Canada. In an article in *The Globe and Mail*, Margaret Wentz put a now popular spin on this theme, heading her editorial "The women's recession and the women's boom." The emerging theme is that the jobs lost in the public and business world will be recreated by women starting their own businesses.

A poor economy coupled with a conservative political agenda, especially in Alberta, has deeply changed the government's attitude towards financial assistance to universities. Canadian universities have always seen it as their responsibility to offer adults in the community the opportunity to access a wide range of non-credit courses. With the cut-backs in funding, the continuing education departments have been particularly hard hit, and none more so than women's programs, which provided services to women.

Four years ago my own faculty was asked to cut 60 per cent of its budget over a five-year period. Operational costs would have to be raised from student fees and other fee-for-service projects. These new financial realities have dramatically changed the roles of academics and administrators in the continuing education fields. The emphasis in my job at the Women's Program of the Faculty of Extension, University of Alberta, shifted from being a service provider, a link with the women's community, an educational programmer, and a researcher to becoming financially self-supporting. I was faced with the reality of

having to become an "educational entrepreneur."

With thousands of other women I asked myself how it could be done. What role models could I draw on? Where could I learn skills needed to be successful as an entrepreneur? How could I remain true to the mission of the Women's Program and to my own feminist values in this new role? In discussing these issues with other women it became clear that these answers were also needed by the women's community, which was also looking for courses that would teach them entrepreneurial skills.

### Role models

Searching the edges and various planes of my life I find it curiously devoid of any examples of business women who could inform and guide my path as an entrepreneur. The fairy tales of my youth are full of topics such as "Hans who went out to make his fortune."<sup>1</sup> The corresponding female heroine in such stories cries tears of pearls, not as her investment in her own fortune, but only to attract a fortune hunter to her.

Yet I am fortunate to have two role-models in my family whose example is worth mentioning. My grandmother was widowed early and left with five children to educate and feed, with her husband's blacksmith shop as her only source of income. She didn't pick up the hammer herself, but convinced the workers and the clients that she could run the business. Sitting through the nights she started to understand the contracts and to audit the books, drawing on her four adolescent daughters for support and advice. She would often comment that she had to learn all the skills by herself. When she talked about this period later in life the fear of that task still shook her voice, but the pride of having succeeded shone even more convincingly from her eyes.

The war destroyed the smithy and the family home. The youngest, a son, had become a blacksmith but after witnessing his mother's struggle, decided not to take on the task of running the business himself and emigrated to the United States. My aunt Mia and my mother, against tremendous odds, raised money, got permits, and rebuilt the house. For my mother it was a call of duty, an act of pride to see her parents' home restored, and to create a new home for her mother. That is where she ended her sojourn into the business world.

On the other hand, Aunt Mia's was a different case. After all the siblings were paid off, she started to evolve into a sort of development genius. She borrowed against the property, invested it in houses in Italy, rented them out, reinvested in yet other properties, chaired the renters' association meetings, and so on. The family looked on her

entrepreneurial adventures with a mixture of deep distrust, fear, and incredulity; feelings sometimes still felt by enterprising women who strike out on their own today. As a young adolescent, I saw Aunt Mia as a role model who represented the possibility of change.

### The entrepreneurship training program

When I was faced with the challenge of becoming more entrepreneurial and making the Faculty of Extension's Women's Program more financially self-supporting, I gleaned a number of important cues from the life of my

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grandmother and aunt, which are shared in the experiences of many women entering the business arena:

- the element of fear women experience on entering the business world;
- the amount of courage needed to enter into an unknown world;
- the need for perseverance and hard work;
- the importance of finding role models and advisors and overcoming isolation;
- the lack of opportunity to learn the skills needed in order to be successful.

Our first step towards developing an entrepreneurship program for women was to create an advisory committee. The eight members were women who owned their own businesses, feminist scholars from the faculty of business and the university administration, and the directors of the Faculty of Extension's business and women's programs.

The target for the four day conference were women considering starting their own business as a result of having recently been affected by layoffs in their workplace. The objectives of the program were to provide an opportunity for the participants to explore the career options of entrepreneurship, to identify potential business opportunities and determine their viability, to learn and understand the process and steps of planning and starting a business, to understand the special strength that women bring to operating a business, and to offer opportunities for women to learn from already established women entrepreneurs. In order to achieve these goals it was essential to create a positive, warm atmosphere at the conference where women could learn to overcome their fear of entering business and to start building networks of support for their future enterprises.

An internal objective for the program was to at least cover the cost of the operation, if not to make a small

profit. The target was 70 participants, but in spite of intensive advertising, the summer holiday time chosen prevented many participants from attending. Thirty participants registered, representing the minimum enrollment needed in order to break even, and a list of 120 women interested in attending a follow up session was generated.

After the objectives were identified, we hired a consultant who worked closely with the advisory committee in designing the program. This was an important step as the Women's Program itself did not have the personnel or teaching resources to offer the course on its own. The following is an abbreviated outline the program:

- Day One had two objectives: developing the systems you need to ensure the help you need, and assessing where you are at and the time frame needed to achieve your goals;

- Day Two was aimed at informal networking, i.e., minimizing risks by building a safety net with three women executives from various insurance agencies, and creating support systems with partners and co-ops;

- Day Three was structured into units which examined a business' fit with the pertinent industry, selecting a marketing niche, and choosing the right product/service mix, pricing, location, and customer service;

- Day Four involved strategies to promote business: creating an image; data base marketing; choosing and using advertising, public relations, publicity and direct sales; stretching your marketing dollars; and building a promotional calendar.

### The students' story

Having received the call for papers regarding Women Entrepreneurs for the Winter issue of *Canadian Woman Studies*, a question was added to the course evaluation for participants to reflect on whether entrepreneurship can be taught. Twenty-nine evaluation reports were received.

The first consistent remark was that the course had been very effective and that the women had considerably benefited from it. Participants noted that they especially enjoyed the women speakers who gave them encouragement and understanding, and provided them with role models. The personal experiences recounted by the guest speakers taught them that one could make mistakes but also learn from them. The communication and interaction with other women increased the participants' awareness that they are not alone in this quest. One of the participants praised the conference as "one stop shopping" in her search for skills and information related to becoming an entrepreneur.

However, the participants felt that more time should have been allotted to the guest speakers. Another weak point of the course was the insufficient coverage of legal, financial, and insurance matters. Finally, although the handouts were deemed useful, some participants suggested that pamphlets and papers should not have been handed out during speakers' talks as this distracted them.

The answer to the question "can entrepreneurship be taught?" generated a lot of debate. Most of the participants made a distinction between personality traits and technical skills. They felt that the personal characteristics needed to be an entrepreneur could not be taught but that the *skills* could be. The personal characteristics participants listed as essential are spirit and drive, personal initiative, and motivation. One woman phrased it in the following way: "A person who gets into business needs to have courage, be able to take risks, and be determined and able to learn to pick other people's brain!" The need to have a belief in oneself and in the value of the enterprise

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was also touched upon.

All the women thought that courses in entrepreneurship are necessary as they provide the motivation, the necessary knowledge, and the skills of the trade. They felt that the conference helped them to increase their self-esteem and confidence, as well as providing them with information about the options available in the business arena today. It informed them of where and how to get started. The participants felt that the course also qualified them to handle the initial stages of beginning and running a business on their own in a better way. One of the women likened taking the course to walking on a "cobblestone path" where each brick across her path was gently paved down by the knowledge imparted during the course. Yet, another felt that she had "learned the nuts and bolts of entrepreneurship."

Information and knowledge desired by participants for the next level course included the following: designing a business plan; dealing effectively with competitiveness; ensuring a quality product; minimizing unnecessary damages and accidents; investing in the appropriate insurances; ways and means of acquiring financial partners; entering the production market; learning the legal aspects involved in business; and training for necessary technology. Another course could provide for more interaction between the participants and experienced business women with time for one-on-one advice. Participants also want seminars which provide a forum to practice team work which is an essential skill for an entrepreneur.

The participants' evaluation of their conference experience underlines the importance of offering entrepreneurship courses to women. The conference was essential in the participants view as it sharpened their awareness of the potential pitfalls in their future business enterprises, thereby enhancing their chances of success.

## Conclusion

Increasingly as continuing education programs and especially women's programs are forced by economic realities to move towards cost recovery, new market niches have to be found which also benefit women in their struggle to gain equality and economic independence. The first aim of a women's program must always be to offer courses which help women to gain insights into their position in society and to empower women to achieve their potential.

Entrepreneurship training which builds on women's strength has been identified as an emerging need in our society. The Women's Program of the Faculty of Extension at the University of Alberta has designed such a program. We know, however, that a first course is but a beginning. Participants clearly stated the kind of courses they feel they might need once started in their own enterprise. We intend to initiate the following activities requested by the students: regular workshops with business women as advisors; an ongoing forum with peers in order to build lasting support networks; and a workshop for developing individual business plans. At the Faculty of Extension's Women's Program we believe it is crucial to offer such courses in the future, especially as women have been sidelined from business ventures in the past and are now being increasingly forced to cope with economic realities by starting a business of their own.

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<sup>1</sup>Numerous Grimm's fairy tales follow the theme of men setting out in search for their fortune. They have to overcome obstacles such as fear, stronger men or monsters, and acquire skills in outreasoning and outsmarting their opponents.

## References

Wente, Margaret. "The Women's Recession and the Women's Boom." *Globe and Mail*. June 4, 1994.