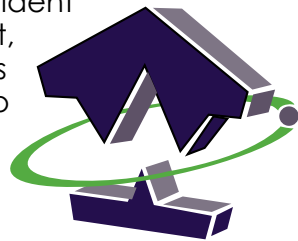




## Willis College *transition to work* program gets results...

November Fridays in the nation's capital can be grey days but there was celebration on the 2nd at Willis College of Business and Technology as another group of social services benefit recipients graduated from an *ESPORT* and *PLATO* transition program to the world of work. Most clients already have jobs in spite of some long histories of unemployment. In some cases, clients of the Willis program had never worked.

The November 2<sup>nd</sup> graduation took place in a cheery basement catering salon near Willis' downtown campus. Coffee and snacks preceded the assembly of about 25 people into an audience. College President and CEO Rima Aristocrat, and Vice President Chris Bissylas gave speeches to enthusiastic applause. Students received their diplomas to cheers, applause, hugs and some tears. Student speakers lauded the program, and one student sang an elegant solo of Amazing Grace.



**WILLIS COLLEGE  
OF BUSINESS  
AND TECHNOLOGY**  
EST. 1896

According to Laurie Tresa, *ESPORT* Program Manager, the Willis program combines individualized computer work with the *ESPORT* tools, overcoming skills gaps in *PLATO*, and lots of group work on "soft skills around employment." Each week of the eight week course focuses on one broad topic.



Laurie Tresa, *ESPORT* Program Manager (left)  
Rima Aristocrat, College President and CEO

## The Clients

All clients to the *ESPORT* project at Willis have been referred by Ontario Works and all have been off work for long periods. Some have never worked. More than 50% are immigrants. Many of them speak a different language but are accepted at Willis after an interview with Laurie. "The test is that I have to be able to understand them. We have to be able to have a conversation."

The age range in the first three deliveries of the course has been broad, from 20s – 50s. But the next session will be with youth, age range 16 – 30.

## A Structured Half Day

Laurie described the latest graduation as really an afternoon group and a morning group. "It's a three hour program. We start off the day by talking about good news. It is important to start the day with positive thoughts. After that, we spend some time learning about a soft skill, one for each day. From there they go on to *ESPORT* and *PLATO* for an hour and a half or more.

"For the last 15 minutes we talk about how the day went and I find out if they have any questions. Sometimes the students have information they would like to share with the class, websites, that kind of thing."

Clients work on the computer every day but there are "a whole bunch of soft skills that we've added to the program. In the beginning, they work on boosting their computer skills. And they get an introduction to the program. They need the basic computer experience just to work within the program. And they need it again at the end when they do their resumes.

"Another week we work on networking and learn how to attack the hidden job market. We look at how to make a networking circle. We look at interview skills in depth and do a lot of practice interviewing.

"We talk about interpersonal skills and how to get along with other people. We talk about stress for a week and conflicts on the job. Every week is divided into a category and every day we talk about a soft skill. Every day there are different readings and sometimes exercises too. They practice with each other and get homework."

## Identifying Barriers To Employment Is Key

Laurie reports, "One of the first things that they have to do is look at their personal barriers to employment. The barriers are personal and individual. It could be things like physical disabilities. Or it could be lack of skills. On an individual basis, they attack the barriers as they go through the program so that, at the end, the barriers are less of an obstacle. They may still have them but they're at least manageable. In the end, there is a lot less fear to going and getting a job. They learn their barriers are surmountable.

"For instance, if one of their barriers is they have small children which makes it hard to find work, then we look at childcare issues. If one of their barriers is they can't get to work, then we work on transportation issues like taking the bus or getting a driver's license. Other barriers might be, 'I don't have Grade 12', or 'I don't have first aid.'"

## Deep College Roots In The Capital

**Willis College of Business and Technology** has been an Ottawa institution for more than a hundred years, training thousands of office workers for public and private sector employment during its history. Of course that history encompasses many accomplishments but the world of work is something Willis has always understood. When the City of Ottawa began contracting out for transition to work initiatives, Willis found *ESPORT + PLATO* tools were a good fit for what the college wanted to accomplish with the city clientele. The course has now run 3 times.

## Individualized Work Through The Software Tools

"Every day they work on the *ESPORT* software too. They are on their own schedule because they work at different rates and therefore are at different spots in the computer program." According to Laurie, the *ESPORT* and *PLATO* software are "...integral. The interest inventory in the beginning helps them to get started and get the thinking process going. Some of the questions people have never thought about before, for example, whether they prefer to work inside or outside. The information that comes back is great for them to plan their future and look for

job satisfaction.

"The skills assessment helps them see where they are at. For a lot of them, it is great for them to know that they have skills. They often come in downtrodden and with low self-esteem. They don't think they have anything to offer anybody. They come out of the skills assessment seeing that they really have skills and that is an amazing thing for them.

"Often the skills gaps they identify aren't that big--sometimes just one or two point gaps. ... and building the resume on the computer is great."

## A Client Point Of View, 'Debbie'

**Debbie** (not her real name), reported that *ESPORT* and *PLATO* "have helped me a lot. What we did at the beginning is Essential Skills to see what level we are at in numeracy, writing, reading, document use and a bunch of other different categories. I know my weakness now is in writing. When I found that out, I did some work to improve it in *PLATO*. That helped but I am still practicing. I am also reading a lot more. I also worked on the computer which I knew nothing about before."

Debbie underlined the importance of the facilitator to course success. "The best part has been feeling more comfortable with who I am and where I am going. The course gave me confidence. I really enjoyed the personal touch from Laurie (the facilitator) and the others really helped. She knows her stuff and she is a good person to talk to, especially when you are upset."

There was clearly a good vibe among students at the graduation, evidence that group work, sharing, and participating are also keys to success. Debbie echoed this, "working with the group was great. It was an opportunity to meet and interact with other cultures. "

### 'Marie'

Another student, Marie (not her real name) was starting a job the following Monday and said, "It is not the career I want in the long run but it is a start. I want to work to get some experience. Then I can move up. I want to work in a hotel as a front desk clerk. The program has been a good experience for me. I got to meet different people. Everyone was very nice. It was a nice school. We are all friends now after the course."

### 'Mark'

'Mark', "...had been out of the workforce for a long time and an employment specialist

suggested I try this. I was out of the work force for six years for family and medical reasons and I was out of touch with how to get into the work force. The way the course was explained to me, the job would be tailored to me rather than taking a job for the job's sake.

"I am more interested in getting networking contacts and I got some through the course. It helped me look in the right direction for a job. I am looking to do something in records management or a library. I am a writer and I wanted something to do with the printed word. I am a very organized, detail oriented person.

"I used the *ESPORT* tools to narrow down my choices. I found it more useful in building resumes aimed at certain jobs rather than one generic resume like I always used to send out. It taught me you have to have targeted resumes."

'Mark' recommends the Willis *ESPORT* program to "Anyone who isn't up to date and needs to find a job. For me it was a re-evaluation. I have skills as a computer technician that I didn't want to use anymore. I wanted to do something I enjoyed rather than something I had already qualified in."

**Rima Aristocrat**, the College's CEO and President describes the Willis *ESPORT* Project this way: "We deliver *ESPORT*, to Ontario Works clients, in partnership with the City of Ottawa. With the focus on supporting long-term social assistance recipients, we need an instructional tool that can easily individualize learning plans to support a broad range of learners, who have limited work experience, limited computer skills and academic skills ranging from basic literacy, to ESL, to college preparation. We've found that the students really enjoy the College experience. They enjoy working with professional facilitators and the interaction with college staff and existing students. Combining *ESPORT* tools, Essential Skills On-Line learning and Willis College methodology, students are making significant skill gains, in a very short period of time. The success of the Willis College *ESPORT* program, and that of participants in the program, has far exceeded our expectations."

## More Success Stories

When asked for success stories, Laurie Tresa offered, "Success in terms of getting a job--right now we have half the graduating class employed. That's great.

"In the first course we had one fellow who came in very low. He had given up. He had been to a number of job workshops and really was at wit's end, tired and discouraged.. He talked to his worker, read the pamphlet and decided to come into our course.

He decided to put a lot of effort into the course and ended up doing really well. He was looking for a job as a hotel front desk clerk.

"During the course, he was offered an interview at a senior's home. Not something he really wanted. But he went to the interview anyway, and ended up getting the job. He is still working there and has been promoted to supervisor of the area he is working in and loves it.

The job turned out to be a good fit because he had wanted to work with people and in this job he got to do that. The management rave about him. Because of his placement there, they take a lot of our grads now."

Laurie believes that compassion and understanding are key to success as an *ESPORT* facilitator. "You need to believe in the equality of everyone., be able to communicate effectively and have patience."

Laurie is a Psychology grad. "I have worked in many crisis and counseling situations with all different ages and different cultures. I have done family counseling, individual counseling, teenagers, and couple counseling. I have worked in social work and corrections. I worked on the street dealing with sexworkers and kids in crisis. What helps me the most in this program is my experience dealing with all kinds of problems and counseling situations."

Does Laurie enjoy her work? "I love this program. I love working with *ESPORT*. The computer work plus the soft skills really gives the students a sense of confidence and competence when they leave. Even the ones who don't have a job when they leave the program, still leave knowing they have something to offer. That is what I love to see."