

NAIT NUGGET

NAIT'S INDEPENDENT STUDENT NEWS

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Photos via NAIT

NAIT receives \$384 million from Government of Alberta to fund Advanced Skills Centre



A mockup of what the Advanced Skills Centre could look like.

Photo via NAIT

By Amy St. Amand, *Editor-in-Chief*

Budget 2026 was released on Feb. 26, and NAIT's Advanced Skills Centre (ASC) was named as one of the government's capital projects. NAIT will receive \$384 million over three years towards a \$560 million total investment: \$52 million this year, \$130 million in 2027/28 and \$203 million in 2028/29.

"We are incredibly grateful to the Government of Alberta for its support for NAIT and the commitment to the Advanced Skills Centre," said NAIT president and CEO Laura Jo Gunter in an emailed statement. "This investment will support Alberta's long-term prosperity and amplifies NAIT's vital role in training Alberta's future workforce."

Alberta is facing a shortage of skilled trades workers. A 2024 Business Council of Alberta report

on labour supply in the skilled trades says there is both an increasing demand for workers and not enough people to fill the gaps. The report says that by 2028, 700,000 skilled trades workers will retire, leaving a huge gap. Other reasons for the labour shortage include bias against the trades, low program completion rates and underrepresentation of women and immigrants. They also report a lack of resources to train students — something NAIT hopes to fix.

"For Alberta, [the ASC] helps build a workforce ready to meet the province's growing demand for essential trades professionals," said Gunter.

Once completed, the ASC will allow NAIT to train 5,500 additional students, bringing their total

to over 15,000 a year. The space will be highly collaborative; 29 programs will work together in environments that mimic a real job site.

"HVAC and carpenters and electricians are working on top of one another like they have to do in the real world, and think about the consequences of their work on the next trade that comes in," said Mike High, vice-president Administration and Chief Financial Officer, in a previous interview.

The total project is forecasted to cost \$779 million. NAIT will contribute \$196 million from fundraising, real estate sales and reserve funds. NAIT is hoping to begin site work this year and have foundations in place by 2026/27. The ASC is expected to be completed in 2030.

NAIT NUGGET

Informing and entertaining the NAIT community since 1964

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The Nugget recognized for excellence in student journalism with two national awards

By Alleah Boisvert, Senior Editor

The NAIT Nugget won two national student journalism awards in Vancouver last month. The John H. McDonald Awards for Excellence in Student Journalism, better known as the JHMs, recognize student journalists from across Canada.

The JHMs are presented by the Canadian University Press (CUP), a non-profit organization owned by member publications at Canadian universities, colleges and polytechnics. CUP received almost 600 submissions for this year's awards, which were judged by a team of volunteer journalists.

The Nugget was shortlisted for three JHM awards in total — Science Reporting, Opinion Writing and Investigative Reporting.

Crash, bleed, repeat: Healthcare students rehearse for real life by Blair Garneau, an article published online and in the April 2025 print issue, was shortlisted for the Science Reporting award. Garneau reported on NAIT's Centre for Advanced Medical Simulation, a training facility for health sciences students unique to NAIT.

Smoking my life away by Sanjyven Alfred Joseph, the Nugget's former entertainment editor, was shortlisted for the Opinion Writing award. The article was published in the March 2025 print issue and is an emotional piece about Joseph's identity as a smoker.

Procurement rules bypassed in \$25k washroom renovation for NAIT President by Josh Gwozdz, Alleah Boisvert and Amy St. Amand was shortlisted for the Investigative Reporting award.

The September 2025 article was a team effort by the Nugget's editorial team and outlined a 2023 incident in which NAIT sidestepped procurement processes to soundproof Laura Jo Gunter's private washroom on the seventh floor of the T-building.

Documents and emails in the article were acquired last spring by Nugget staff through Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (FOIP) requests.

It was the first time the Nugget had used FOIP to acquire information for an article.

At the JHM Awards Gala in downtown Vancouver on Feb. 14, *Procurement rules bypassed in \$25k washroom renovation for NAIT President* won silver in the Investigative Reporting award category. *Smoking my life away* won gold in Opinion Writing.

Though the Nugget has submitted for JHMs in the past, this was the first recorded time the 62-year-old campus newspaper was shortlisted for — and won — a JHM award. (Editor's note: **Two JHM awards!!**)

The JHMs take place on the same weekend as NASH, a three-day national student journalism



Nugget Senior Editor Alleah Boisvert (left) and Editor-in-Chief Amy St. Amand (right) pose with the certificates from the team's JHM wins. Photo by Pia Vistro/The Nugget

conference. This year, the Capilano Courier hosted NASH88 at Capilano University in North Vancouver from Feb. 13 to 15.

In 2024, the Nugget hosted NASH86 at NAIT and the JHM Awards Gala in downtown Edmonton.

NAIT and academic staff association sign collective agreement, avoid strike

By Amy St. Amand, Editor-in-Chief

After over a year of bargaining, multiple legal disagreements and the threat of a strike looming, NAIT students can finally breathe easy. A new collective agreement has been approved by NAIT Academic Staff Association (NASA) members. On Feb. 12, 77 per cent of NASA members voted, with 92.5 per cent supporting the new agreement. It was also approved by NAIT's Board of Governors.

Some of the bargaining sticking points involved wage increases, benefits and coming to an agreement on AI usage. Details have not been made available to the public as the agreement is finalized.

NASA president Shauna MacDonald said in a press release that members may not see everything they were asking for, but the four-year agreement "represents a solid move forward and a stable foundation to build upon."

NAIT's bargaining webpage also says the agreement "recognizes the important contributions academic staff make to student learning and supports NAIT's priorities of student success, long-term sustainability, and service to the broader NAIT community."

Collective bargaining began in January 2024, but



Snowy NAIT campus.

File photo by Noura Eltinay/The Nugget

the first bargaining meeting didn't occur until July 2024. By August, both parties had filed complaints with the Alberta Labour Relations Board. In April 2025, after disagreements on proposals, NAIT and NASA began voluntary mediation. A strike vote

was held in January 2026, and 85 per cent of voting NASA said yes to a strike. The parties returned to mediation in late January, and after weeks of uncertainty for the NAIT community, a deal was reached in February.

Proposed NAIT Applied AI diploma must have a competitive edge for future viability



Photo via NAIT

Editorial by Bradley Houston, Masthead Writer

Alleah Boisvert, Senior Editor

NAIT might get an Applied Artificial Intelligence diploma. The full-time, two-year program was first brought to Academic Council before being approved by the Board of Governors.

NAIT currently has a continuing education course, AI-Driven Project Management, but the proposed diploma would be a full-time two-year program.

The program proposal isn't fully approved — it still needs approval from the Government of Alberta before NAIT can comment on it, they told the Nugget.

Instead, I talked to NAIT students, grads and industry professionals to ask what their opinions are and what outcomes they'd want from a course like this.

What NAIT students think

Ronan Leister, a first-year Business Administration student, thinks it's a good thing.

"I think the world's evolving," he said.

According to the program proposal obtained by the Nugget, 70 students and grads from NAIT's School of Media and Information Technology were surveyed about the proposed diploma, and "results demonstrated clear alignment" between student needs and an Applied AI program.

Leister agrees. "AI has been becoming much more vital in today's society, and I think if people understand how to use it better ... there's not really

a harm in that," Leister said.

In my experience, I think people are generally adopting this opinion. But ethical concerns surround the use of AI. Some students, like Leister, say it can help "quicken research" or make studying faster, but think "it can be dangerous if we rely on it too much."

"As long as we're not using it to cheat or beat the system as to not actually doing the work, but just making AI do it for us," Leister explained.

Learning how to curb unethical behaviour, or even detect it, could be useful. In the proposal from Oct. 20 Academic Council Package, there is mention of an "Introduction to AI and Ethics" course. But my interest is more about the career and application outcomes of such a diploma.

Career outcomes are most important

Aaron Kennedy, a NAIT graduate of the now paused Wireless Systems Technology diploma, says

Why Now. Why NAIT. What's Different.

Why Now

- Employers told us they need **practitioners who can move prototypes to production**; our consultations and focus groups validate an applied AI skills gap
- From 2021 – 2023, firms adopting AI nearly doubled
- A recent paper by Microsoft Canada and Amii identified a skills gap in development and integration of AI solutions

Why NAIT

- **Polytechnic DNA:** hands-on, industry-connected WIL—leveraging Alberta's ecosystem (e.g., Amii/Alberta Innovates).
- **Brand recognition:** We've heard from employers the recognition that the NAIT name brings. Additionally, NAIT will be joining the Applied AI Association and establishing an Edmonton chapter.

What's Different

- **Built to deploy:** Students learn real processes with monitoring and rollback plans.
- **Trustworthy by design:** Human-Centered AI and Evaluation & Testing embed usability, transparency, and reliability—not just accuracy.
- **Sector-aware skills:** Students develop understanding of nuances of deploying AI solutions across various industries.
- **Business outcomes, not just models:** Students are trained to deliver measurable business impact
- **Entrepreneurial mindset:** Commercialization and stakeholder engagement are a focus of the program

A slide from the presentation provided to NAIT's Academic Council about the proposed Applied AI diploma.

Program Rationale

<p>Alberta AI/ML job market:</p> <p>19,500+</p> <p>job posting over 5 years, 13% growth since 2022¹</p>	<p>AI skills gap</p> <p>35%</p> <p>of employees in AI have received AI training²</p>	<p>Student and skill demand</p> <p>+195%</p> <p>global growth in generative AI course enrolments³</p>
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Key Skills of Program Graduates

				
AI Solution Development	Data Management	AI Systems Evaluation	Responsible AI Practice	Collaboration and Project Management

A slide from the presentation provided to NAIT's Academic Council about the proposed Applied AI diploma.

there are lots of applications for AI in his field.

“The sort of basic programming, like say, ‘Let’s just clean up this small data set for some invoicing’ Writing a script to do such a thing would have taken paying a pro, would have probably taken me contracting it out to a proper programmer or taking me weeks to do and I can write basic scripts in five minutes now.”

He said he predicts people running “into situations where they’ve built a lot of complexity that they don’t understand.”

Maybe this is where Applied AI could be useful.

“There’s a small portion of my job that I feel the tooling has given me superpowers to do.”

But he doesn’t think someone with a two-year AI diploma could replace his job.

“A large part of that is the customer interaction portion of coming from a small business world. Sure, somebody could replace the programming that I do at my job, but I’m not a programmer.”

“There’s a small portion of my job that I feel the tooling has given me superpowers to do,” Kennedy said. But he reiterated how important customer satisfaction and interaction is.

“Everybody hates when people put AI in charge of their customer service.”

Nico Schiavone, a University of Alberta Bachelor of Science alumnus and current computer science graduate student at the University of Toronto, agrees. “A lot of people like the human touch,” he said.

Schiavone is studying multi-agent systems and reinforcement learning and large language models.

He recently interned at Microsoft Copilot and will be returning to work there permanently in March.

To clarify, he works and learns more on the development side of AI. At his level, he would expect that the two-year diploma would be a comparison to a “course-based computer science master’s degree” that you would take after a four-year degree.

“I don’t think two years is enough if you’re coming out of high school,” he said.

While Schiavone says it’s common for employers in his industry to require specialized technical training, the training on its own might not be enough to land a job.

He explained that the competition for low-level positions in the industry is already high for degree holders and even master’s degree holders.

“If you only have a two-year [diploma] without a bachelor’s degree in this already highly overqualified market where you have a ton of people who don’t [care] about computer science [degree holders] trying to get these jobs, there’s better ways for you to show your commitments or for you to show your skills.”

The Applied AI diploma program proposal states that while a mathematics or computer science background would be “beneficial,” it is not mandatory.

“The program is designed for recent high school graduates, career changers, working professionals looking to upskill or reskill, as well as entrepreneurs and innovators,” says the proposal document.

Schiavone’s perspective speaks to my uncertainty of an Applied AI diploma.

Are there jobs there for those without any former experience or education in AI besides the proposed

diploma? The diploma emphasizes Applied Artificial Intelligence, but as Kennedy pointed out earlier, he was able to quickly deploy AI himself.

“Everybody hates when people put AI in charge of their customer service.”

But in NAIT’s October Academic Council package, they report that “there is an expected imbalance of over 1000 more job openings than job seekers in software development and over 1300 more data analyst jobs than job seekers” in 2026.

“A significant number of companies are adopting AI, yet only 35% of their employees have received AI training,” the proposal says, citing a 2024 article from the recruitment company Randstad.

Application of diploma is key

I think credibility and differentiation for this diploma is key.

The Work Integrated Learning, industry partnerships and institutional collaborations and pathways components in the program proposal are the critical ones for me — and Schiavone agreed.

“What I would be looking for is something to differentiate it from that course-based degree, like mandatory work experience component, or perhaps something to connect you with industry, given the reputation it made,” said Schiavone.

Students need to be directly and clearly connected with the industry if they want to hedge out other institutions’ computer science degrees and graduate programs.

If that part isn’t visible and successful, I have my doubts about the viability of the diploma.

How NAIT's new Executive in Residence paddled through a changing media industry

By Bradley Houston, *Masthead Writer*
Alleah Boisvert, *Senior Editor*

There is a new Executive in Residence at NAIT's Mawji Centre. Rob LeLacheur is a NAIT business graduate with a long history in traditional media. Now, he's a digital media entrepreneur and the owner of Road 55.

After graduating from NAIT's marketing diploma program in 1994, LeLacheur kickstarted his career in news media.

"My last semester, I was doing work experience with the *Edmonton Sun*, the advertising department, and actually got on full-time with them right after finishing at NAIT," he said.

"And that started a pretty long career in the newspaper industry."

LeLacheur's entrepreneurial journey started with weekly publications in St. Albert. In the early 2000's, he was the publisher of *Saint City News*, an award-winning community newspaper, before starting the *St. Albert Leader* in 2011.

But like entrepreneurship, careers in print media can come with turbulence. The changing industry caused LeLacheur to move back to media sales and content solution management with Postmedia in 2015. Just over two years later, he would start his own media company again.

"It was a good transition," said LeLacheur about his experience working for Postmedia's prairies region. "I focused on how to use content for the purpose of marketing, so podcasts, infographics, articles, video."

This led him to starting Road 55.

LeLacheur describes Road 55 as being like a "fractional marketing director" for organizations. That means he offers ideas and strategy on a contractual basis with companies. Road 55 also has a full in-house team for content creation to produce media "from in the studio to out in the field" for a diverse range of client projects.

"We're in our ninth year now," he said. According to LeLacheur, that determination and willingness to try and experiment with what works is part of why his entrepreneurship is successful.

"Perfection is the enemy of progress. Sometimes you just have to put it out there and get some forward momentum going. You'll build the canoe as you're paddling forward," said LeLacheur.

At the beginning, entrepreneurs want to strive for their best, he explains. But finding out what works and what doesn't — looking for opportunities to "keep fine-tuning as you go," as LeLacheur puts it — is just as important.

"A lot of the valuable iterations that you're going to take on going forward are a result of what's happening or not happening, what's selling or what isn't selling, and getting that client feedback."

Teamwork and community matters, too.

"Taking that first big step out and talking to people about your idea and the validation of it. Ultimately,



Rob LeLacheur (right) snaps a selfie with Ishita Sharma (left), who won the 2025 Pitch it to Me competition at the Mawji Centre. Photo via LinkedIn

will people pay money for this product or service?"

For aspiring entrepreneurs, the Mawji Centre is a good space to hone these skills while building community. LeLacheur believes NAIT excels in "making a very real world" for students with its material and business connections.

LeLacheur encourages current students to build those connections while still at NAIT.

"You have an opportunity to make lifetime friendships and connections with your fellow students. They are going to be future decision makers," he said.

Even if they can't help you right now, LeLacheur explains those investments are worth it: "Your path's going to change directions multiple times."

In fact, LeLacheur's residency at the Mawji Centre is a result of networking and relationships. He said he thinks the opportunity stems from 10 plus years of involvement with the polytechnic.

In 2025, LeLacheur received NAIT's Distinguished Alumni Award. Now, he's in the midst of a 55-day red lollipop challenge, where one \$15 red lollipop is traded until a new item is valuable enough to be auctioned off in support of NAIT student scholarships. LeLacheur is hoping to fundraise over \$5000.

"I've been pretty actively involved with different NAIT programs and mentorship and coming to events and support. So there was a pre-established relationship. I didn't know of this opportunity and when they reached out ... I thought, 'Oh yeah, that sounds great.'"

NAIT's Executive in Residence program helps students and faculty connect with influential executives to get industry advice, feedback and, of course, network.

A good networking start might be to sign up for and pay attention to Mawji Centre's events. Plenty of events are held there, and they're open

to students from all NAIT programs. In fact, if you need something to do, maybe head over there right now and ask when the next events are — it'd be good practice to meet and network with people.

As for meeting LeLacheur personally, he said the Mawji Centre is "going to be booking some one-on-one opportunities." Students can also find him attending workshops and at other events in the Mawji Centre.

"Sometimes you just have to put it out there and get some forward momentum going. You'll build the canoe as you're paddling forward."

His advice to business students in general? Actively look for connection opportunities through networking events and reach out to business leaders who make their time, experience and expertise available.

"They're there because they want to help NAIT business students," he said. "Whether it's a connection or a future job opportunity or just some help with feedback."

The first step to landing opportunities to meet influential figures might be in your hands right now. But you have to ask for it, LeLacheur said.

"You got to work for it a little bit. But trust me when I say that a lot of good's going to come out of that."

Students interested in connecting with LeLacheur can reach out to Colin Macdonald, an entrepreneurship advisor at the Centre, by emailing cmacdonald@nait.ca.

For more information about the Executive in Residence program and the Mawji Centre, students can visit CAT309A on the third floor of NAIT's CAT building.

NAIT culinary grad takes over award-winning French restaurant

By Liam Salmon, *Masthead Writer*

NAIT Culinary Arts grad and IKA Culinary Olympic silver medalist Crystal Higgins is now executive chef at Beaumont's beloved Chartier.

In January, the French-Canadian restaurant announced that the new executive chef would be introduced to the public through a "Local Love" themed Valentine's menu. The feature menu showcased ingredients from some of Higgins' favourite local artisans.

"It was such a symphony to just watch them put the food on the plate, love putting the food on the plate, being excited to put the food on the plate," said Higgins about her launch menu.

Initially, the cooks felt like the menu was ambitious. But Higgins said the team put their best into it, and everyone was pleased with the results.

Higgins 'naturally gravitated' towards food

From early beginnings as a 10-year-old chef helping her single mom to getting her first job in a grocery store, food has always been part of Higgins' life — including hours spent watching her hero, chef Emeril Lagasse.

"All the garlic and 'bam, bam, bam!' That's really where I started to understand ingredients and understand cooking techniques and wanting to apply that into the kitchen."

After sidebars in finance, oil and gas and evenings at the Abbotsfield Walmart, Higgins was driven to pursue her true passion.

"I kind of said to myself, 'Well, if I'm going to get paid 15 bucks an hour to get yelled at by random people, then maybe I should go into a profession that I want to do,'" she explained.

Higgins' dad offered to help watch her kids while she was in culinary school, and the then 35-year-old was accepted into NAIT's Culinary Arts program.

"I'd never felt more at home than being in those hallways and in those kitchens," she said.

Experience at NAIT taught her to lead

She graduated in 2021 and later represented NAIT in 2024 as the captain of an all-female team at the IKA Culinary Olympics. The validation she got from her instructors helped her lead the team of dedicated women to a silver medal win.

"Your friends can tell you that you cook, and your family can tell you that you cook," she explained. "But when you have an instructor going 'you killed that,' it's just a whole 'nother level."

The team's experience at the IKA Culinary Olympics had all the hallmarks of a perfect cooking competition story.

"It was kind of a whirlwind, to be honest," Higgins recalled. "This whole time we had practiced our salad with kale. But when we get to Germany, there is no kale anywhere!"

There were long days of prep, cooking and even an interruption from a fire alarm during the "crunch time" of the dinner competition.



Higgins plans to launch a menu that sticks to the award-winning restaurant's roots.

Photo via Chartier

But the team pressed on with their 120 plates and still received inspiring feedback from the judges.

She recalled one of the judges saying the team cooked with love. Higgins "started bawling" when she heard this — her motto is "food is love."

"It's food, it's fuel, it's medicine, it's going to get you through everything in your life, and so if you put that love and attention into it, it'll give back to you," she said.

"I'd never felt more at home than being in those hallways and in those kitchens."

Their efforts paid off once they found out on the train to Munich that they won silver.

"We all started screaming on the train. It was really cool," said Higgins, smiling.

Big dreams for her future

The women have stayed in touch since, and Higgins even brought one of her close teammates and coworkers at Royal Glenora Club with her to work at Chartier. The executive chef has big dreams for the restaurant in the heart of Beaumont.

"I want people to talk about Chartier the way they talk about RGE RD," she said. Blair Lebsack, chef and owner of award-winning Alberta cuisine restaurant RGE RD, is one of Higgins' inspirations. He was also a former Culinary Arts instructor at NAIT.

"And I want you to Google where to eat in Alberta,

and it's Chartier that comes up first," she added.

New rustic menu coming in spring

Higgins is aiming to launch her first mainstay menu at Chartier in the spring. She plans on sticking to the restaurant's roots and getting more familiar with rustic French-Canadian cuisine, but French techniques and food feel natural to her.

"Right now, there's a big focus on poutine. Poutine is a big one," she said. Other classics like the 'haricot vert' or green bean won't be going anywhere.

Higgins said she wants to bring more seafood and beef to the menu, including bringing back an authentic beef bourguignon for comfort and hominess.

"I also really enjoy the French, the way they treat vegetables," said Higgins. This means a classic ratatouille to "revive the freshness" of a heavy, meat-focused menu.

It all sounds like something not to be missed and Higgins is ready for the challenge.

"The team here has been so warming, so welcoming ... and they're just ready to dig in and give me their best," said Higgins. The buy-in and trust at Chartier is there, she explained. "Now the rest is just like, let's just learn together and see where the food is going to take us."

For more information on Chartier and to keep up with their new executive chef, visit their website dinechartier.com or follow @dinechartier on Instagram.

Tate McRae: from ‘Canada down’ to letting Canada down

Editorial by Rafael Luis Flores, *Opinion Editor*

The first time I came across Tate McRae was last year. I was shopping for new sneakers and she was the endorser of a particular shoe model that I was interested in. As someone who is not Canadian, I had no idea who she was or what she was famous for. Reading the online reviews of those shoes (many of which mentioned her in a positive light...in some cases, even more than the shoes themselves) gave me my first inkling that she has considerable influence over Gen Z audiences in Canada. This was confirmed when I later got to read a few more articles about her. My impression of McRae was that she was a pop star steadily rising in fame and, along with it, the prospect of more rewarding brand endorsement deals.

Then came the 2026 Winter Olympics. Calgary-born McRae was featured in an NBC ad where she appeared to support Team USA in the Olympics. This action was widely regarded by Canadian audiences as a betrayal. Some Canadians even viewed the Team USA promotion as treason. While obviously not the best idea public relations-wise, what exactly went wrong here that warranted the use of the word treason?

Bad timing

Canada and the USA share many cultural ties, and the days of the two countries being very close allies is still fresh in the memories of most Canadians. At any other time before the second Donald Trump presidency, a famous Canadian endorsing Team USA would not have produced the same level of outrage that is apparent now.

But that’s just it: The US, under Trump, has imposed punitive tariffs against Canadian goods and, more alarmingly, has made threats against Canada’s territorial integrity. Expressing support for a country whose leader threatens to effectively destroy your own defies logic. Unless, of course, McRae has actually switched loyalties. The singer is now based in Los Angeles and was quoted last year as saying, “Canada doesn’t feel like home anymore, which is weird.” In this case, Canadians may indeed feel justified using the word treason.

A shifting support base

While McRae has achieved the peak of her fame and popularity in the US, she is nevertheless someone who established her career on her Canadian identity. Canadian pop culture commentator Liz Duff said it best: “Tate McRae’s entire brand of her pop music in her career has been so entwined with being Canadian and specifically pulling on Canadian aesthetics.”

“So seeing her do a direct endorsement for Team USA going into the Olympics when we’re feeling Canadian pride at its peak is just a shock to the system for fans across Canada,” Duff told CBC.

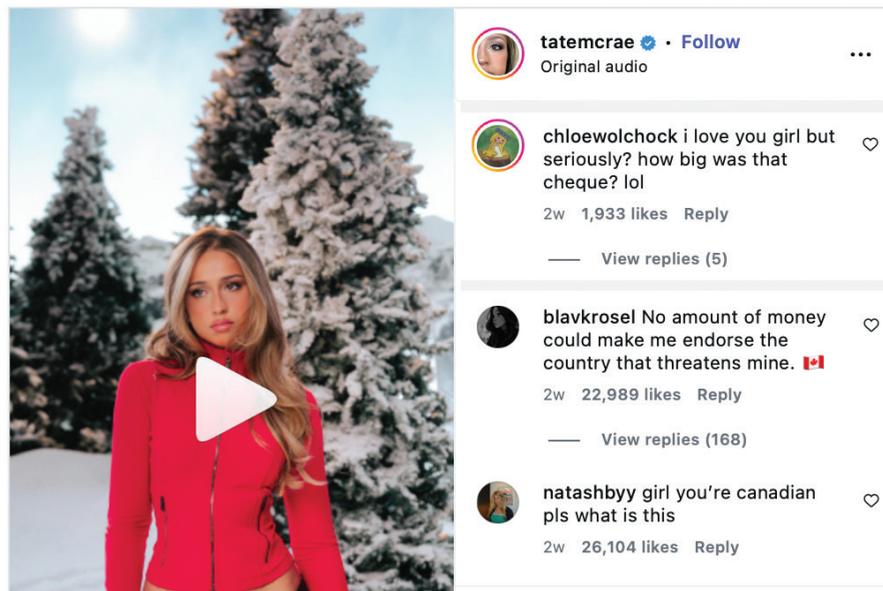
If we view public relations (PR) as managing relationships between a person or organization and its publics, we can interpret the situation as McRae making an effort to elevate her relationship with her secondary public (the US market) at the expense of her primary one (Canadian fans).

There is also the alternate possibility that McRae or her label no longer regard her Canadian fans as her primary public. From a purely monetary perspective, it would make sense for them to view where she generates the most revenue as where her primary public lies. It used to be Canada. But as she gained fame, it shifted to the US.

For sure, good PR practice would seek to maintain a positive relationship across all audiences, even those with competing interests. But if there is a large enough incentive, choosing to alienate one or more support bases can boil down to a pure business decision. As Instagram user @chloewolchock puts it: “I love you girl but seriously? How big was that cheque?”

‘Canada down’

In response to the backlash, McRae posted an Instagram story of herself as a child waving a Canada flag with the caption “...y’all know I’m Canada down.” While this was meant to placate the strong feelings of many Canadians against her, it had a wildly different effect instead.



McRae’s Instagram post garnered strong reactions from fans.

Image via Instagram

Almost immediately, partly in jest and partly in nationalistic fervor, “y’all know I’m Canada down” was turned into a viral meme. Canadians all over social media began posting the same caption with the most obscure pieces of Canadian pop culture they could find.

The humour seemed to soften the public anger against McRae, but it is doubtful whether this outcome was what she or her publicists intended. And unfortunately for her, the anger appears to have been replaced by ridicule. It is rarely a good thing when your original support base ridicules you so much that you become an entire meme.

Poor PR

It is impossible to know McRae’s exact motivations for promoting Team USA. But at 22 years old and being based in the USA but “Canada down,” she must be at least aware of the current state of Canada-US relations. McRae and her PR team must have expected a backlash would occur, but they went ahead anyway with the NBC deal in a calculated move to chase growth in the larger US market.

What could have been handled better was her response to this backlash. The “ya’ll know I’m Canada down” response was ridiculed because it appeared tone-deaf. It reduced the outrage of a country being threatened by a vastly more powerful neighbour to a matter of cutesy sentimental loyalty.

It is impossible to please everyone, given that her action was tantamount to burning bridges with the Canadian public while building new ones with deep-pocketed US corporations. But she or her PR team could have responded by acknowledging the shock and betrayal that many Canadians feel and then explaining that her business decisions do not necessarily reflect on her loyalty for her country. Still, even the most expertly-crafted media release might not have gained back Canadian trust — but it could have been better than a one-sentence social media blast that Gen Z Canadians mocked through memes.

Who wins?

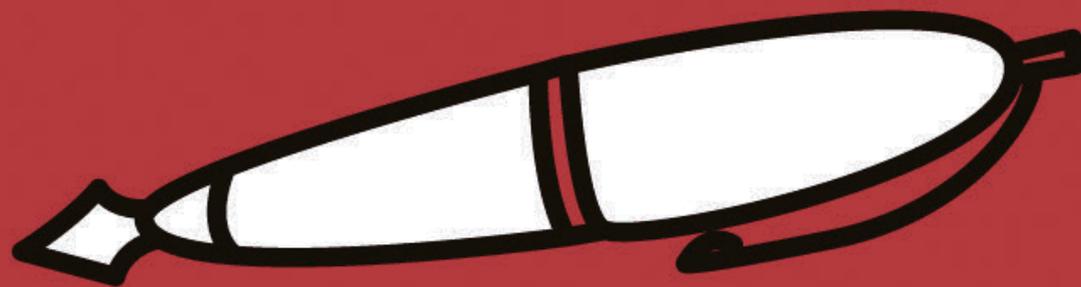
As much as this whole situation has hurt McRae’s Canadian image, it had the exact opposite effect on the USA, which scored one over Canada by having one of theirs promote American athletes. Even better for them is the fact that they are not even involved in the endorsement agreement between McRae and NBC. They scored propaganda points with zero effort on their part.

While there is some expectation on NBC’s part to be sensitive to the implications of getting a Canadian to promote US athletes, McRae is already bearing the brunt of that same insensitivity. What NBC got is an endorser who has wide appeal in the US, where their primary audience is located, to promote their services. We can only hope that the cheque they issued to McRae was big enough to make all this controversy worth it for her. Maybe she’ll spend some of it at a Calgary Flames game.



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Last season for superstar duo: Women's basketball team to 'take care of business' at nationals

By Emmett Moore, Masthead Writer

Alleah Boisvert, Senior Editor

Coach Kiera Lyons has been building the NAIT Ooks women's basketball team since 2022, and this season's roster is taking care of business.

With superstar backcourt veterans Mikah Reed and Payton Neilson taking over the Alberta Colleges Athletic Conference (ACAC), Lyons is letting the team steer the culture, and they have found major success.

"To play the team game that we do, it takes time to learn, and it takes a lot of unselfish play and a lot of ego deaths when you join this program," Lyons said.

"The sacrifice that they made early to buy into what we were trying to do for the long-term success of our program is something we're really proud of. And it's just really fun to see them have the fruits of their labour come to fruition this year."

During a team warm-up, the women laugh and joke around on the court. But once the topic of nationals comes up, Lyons and the players get serious. Going to nationals has always been the plan, and the team plays for each other.

"To play the team game that we do, it takes time to learn, and it takes a lot of unselfish play and a lot of ego deaths when you join this program."

Neilson, a Personal Fitness Trainer student from Calgary, played with the Ooks during their 2022 championship run.

Reed, a Bachelor of Business Administration student from Sherwood Park, is also a long-time Oook who won a leadership award last April.

The two dedicated Ooks have formed a friendship on and off the court.

"I've never played with someone like [Neilson], she's such an unselfish player," said Reed.

"She wants the best for me, I know I want the best for her. Being able to find that friendship, I think, more than anything underneath all of it has actually really helped us on the court."

Reed and Neilson have played together for multiple seasons, and they know each other's tendencies. "It helps if one of us isn't having the best scoring night, the other one can step up," Reed explained.

The duo match each other's energy, sometimes even coordinating words. But the entire team has unity and coordination written in its DNA, and it shows.

Whole team energy

"Our whole team, the way that we've been able to work together, the chemistry that we've all built, it's

taken a few years for sure," said Neilson.

"But now that we've finally gotten there and it's kind of coming to a pinnacle, it's really incredible to watch all of us play together and feel the energy when we're all on the court together."

"It's just a lot of fun," Neilson added, laughing cheerfully.

'We want to beat everybody'

Despite the team's focus on having fun, staying present and not looking too far ahead — or as coach Lyons puts it, just being "where your feet are" — they've still got some venom.

"We want to beat everybody," said Lyons.

The Ooks are lethal on the basketball court; top five in points scored, top five in field goal percentage, top three in three-point percentage and one of the top assist-turnover ratios in the league.

The stats confirm what the team already knows: they have what it takes to go all the way.

Neilson and Reed are both top ten in the league for points, and Reed is top five in three-point percentage.

Reed also broke the record for threes in a game in December to net her ACAC Athlete of the Week.

One last shot for three players

But 2026 is the last dance for Reed, Neilson and Makayla Rose, an open studies student from Ontario.

As they are graduating soon and leaving NAIT basketball behind, Neilson, Reed and Rose are looking to push through the playoffs and get one more championship for NAIT's rafters.

"This year we're really focused on the end goal," said Reed.

Lyons agrees. The team is "bought into the concept," she said.

"I'm just very grateful for it. I try not to think about them graduating too much because it's such a bittersweet thing ... we're just trying to enjoy it while it's here."

The 2026/27 team is quite reminiscent of the previous national title-winning team, which won the Canadian Collegiate Athletic Association Championship in 2022.

A strong mix of veteran guards and younger talent across the board, this team is built with grit, elite-level scorers and competitive defense.

And at this pace, they're possibly even a step up to 2022's Ooks.

The high stakes haven't stopped the women from having fun as they go, though.

Lyons said it best: "We know that we've just got to fall in love with the process, and I think that they really have."



Payton Neilson (below) and Mikah Reed (above) are two standout players for the Ooks.

Top via NAIT Ooks

Bottom by Nino Aguilar/The Nugget



LEFT: Makayla Rose, who is also graduating this year, plays against the Briercrest Clippers. RIGHT: Neilson and Rose shake hands on the court. Photos by Nino Aguilar/The Nugget



Lyons watches her team play from the sidelines.

Photo via NAIT Ooks

Curling program secures silver for men's team and coach of the year



The team poses with their silver medals.

Photo via NAIT Ooks

By Geono Aloisio, Sports Editor

The NAIT men's curling team is bringing a silver medal back to Edmonton after a strong showing at the 2026 Canadian Collegiate Athletic Association (CCAA) curling championships in Regina. The event was held with U SPORTS and Curling Canada.

The tournament ran from Feb. 17 to Feb. 21, and the Ooks started the five days on the right foot with an 8-5 win over SAIT on day one.

But the quick momentum came to a halt on day two when NAIT dropped a 5-2 decision against the Mohawk Mountaineers from Hamilton, Ontario. The blue and gold rebounded to end the day with a 6-5 win over the Concordia Thunder.

Day three got off to a similar start with the Ooks losing 7-4 to the Humber Hawks, another Ontario-based team. But the men's team found their stride as they won three in a row before the end of day four.

NAIT began the final day of the tournament by defeating the Gaillards du Cégep 6-4 to advance to the CCAA gold medal game later that day. However, the Ooks fell to the Humber Hawks 7-2 and ended the tournament with a silver medal. But NAIT curling head coach, Karynn Flory-Simmons, was still happy with the results.

"The boys, obviously they're a little bit disappointed that they just didn't have enough juice for that last game, but you know what? They worked hard all week. They were resilient. They got gritty. I was really proud of them," she said.

The silver medal wasn't the only achievement the Ooks received while at the tournament.

The men's team was selected to the CCAA Second Team All-Stars, and Flory-Simmons was also named CCAA Coach of the Year.

"I was so honoured," Flory-Simmons said. She said she was "a little bit shocked" and "very appreciative" to receive the coaching award, which she described as prestigious.

Flory-Simmons said the results of the weekend mean a lot for NAIT's curling program in general.

"It's big, it shows that we've been putting in a lot of work to try to get to this point, and we're really excited about the direction of the program."

The coach also expressed gratitude towards her players, who she said are willing to try different things.

"I want my players to do well, but I also want every student athlete who's out there to have fun and enjoy the experience because it's for them, it's about them, and I really just hoped that I could provide that little bit of extra fun environment for them to be in."

The silver medal is the men's team's first at nationals since 2014 and the curling program's first since 2019.

Nolan Peters, the team's only returning player next year, called the win a "pretty special" moment for the program and believes it could put NAIT "on the radar again" for curling.

"I kind of look back to last year at nationals. We were sitting as a team watching some other Alberta teams fight for medals last year, and we knew that we could be in that position," Peters said.

"We made the most out of it this year, especially with two of our teammates being in their fifth and last year. So I know it was pretty special to bring home that nationals hardware after a couple of years of trying with the team."

Despite significant personnel changes ahead for the men's team, Flory-Simmons remains optimistic about the program heading into 2026-27.

"I'm so proud of all the work and dedication that they put into this season," she said. "And I think it just helps moving forward [to] show the up-and-coming players and our future teams in the program that you gotta put in the work and you gotta be committed and dedicated to the sport."

The national recognition from a silver medal and coaching award could make future recruitment easier. "Having some success puts some eyes on the program, which really helps, and I'm feeling confident in the years ahead," said Flory-Simmons.

NAIT's curling program will need to adapt in the next couple of years, since Flory-Simmons won't have many returning players to the men's team. But she said she's already reached out to some curlers who will be at NAIT for the 2026-27 season.

"I'm really excited for what the future of NAIT curling looks like."

Badminton team seeking national gold medal after tough provincial wins

By Geono Aloisio, Sports Editor

The NAIT badminton team will send seven athletes to nationals in Saint John, N.B., after the Oaks won three silvers and a gold medal at the Alberta Colleges Athletic Conference (ACAC) championships on Feb. 21. and Feb. 22.

Samantha Tran won silver in the women's singles event, Davis Wong and Mataia Wong won silver in mixed doubles and Jenna Wong and Ella Dolan won silver in women's doubles.

Matthew Wong and Ethan Lee won NAIT's sole gold in the men's doubles event.

The Oaks walked away with one gold medal in the four championship matches they competed in, but head coach Alan Chow thinks the team should have won more.

During Saturday's team event, the team lost the semi-finals and the 3-4 seed, ending in fourth place. The team event is based on two men's singles, two women's singles, a men's doubles, a women's doubles and a mixed — a best of seven format.

The team had to win four matches to advance to semi-finals, then finals.

"So, we were in first place. Our team is very good. We're a very deep team. But anything could happen in the finals, and that's pretty much what happened," Chow said.

"Maybe it came to nerves and just the teams or the match ups we were hoping we got, but at the same time we unfortunately didn't win the games we should have won."

Chow said that the team had an idea of where they would stack, but playoffs

are "a totally different animal."

"It's just so much more pressure," he said. "Maybe you reference the men's Canada hockey team versus the US, and how much everyone has been saying that we should just win. It just changes the whole mindset."

The team ended up getting fourth and came together on Saturday to discuss the results and how they were feeling. After the team meeting, the badminton players went into the Sunday individual games stronger.

"This is probably the toughest year as far as competition ... so, it was very hard to play. But either way, we all played really well. I was really proud of my team to kind of bounce back from a tough Saturday," said Chow.

The Oaks will now focus on competing at nationals, where Chow believes some teams have a solid chance of medalling. He said the men's doubles and women's doubles are the most promising — but it all comes down to training and being able to perform under pressure.

Who the players are up against can also change everything.

"You can always say that you want to medal, or you want to get gold, but sometimes you don't know what you don't know at the beginning," said Chow.

"So what you do is just prepare as best as you can, then from that you kind of just go in with an attitude of just wanting to play well and compete."

NAIT is headed back to nationals in search of its first gold medal since 2022, when Smit Patel won gold in men's singles.

The Canadian Collegiate Athletics Association (CCAA) Badminton Championships take place from Mar. 5 to Mar. 7.



Matthew Wong (left) and Ethan Lee (right) play in their first games of the season. The pair took home the only gold medal at the ACAC championships.

Photo via NAIT Oaks

LIFE @ NAIT



Photo Credits:
TOP LEFT: NAITSA Blood Drive by Ash Wijesinghe; TOP RIGHT: Umoja Classic basketball game by Ana Kostyrko; BOTTOM LEFT: Bayanihan Karaoke event by Abraham Arrieta; BOTTOM RIGHT: Women's basketball team plays Concordia Thunder by Abraham Arrieta

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