

# Horsing around is serious business for this alum

By Laura Kriho

Liberal-arts majors everywhere tire of the age-old question, “What are you going to do with your degree?” Unlike other disciplines, such as engineering or business, the career path for a liberal arts major often doesn’t seem as clear to outsiders. Skeptics of the value of a generalized education will ask questions like, “What can you do with a history degree? What good is a philosophy diploma? How will studying political science result in a good-paying job?”

Beth Cross, who graduated from the University of Colorado Boulder in 1986 with a BA in political science, has an answer: Become an entrepreneur.

Cross is living proof that liberal arts majors can use the skills they learn in college to become successful in a line of work they enjoy.

She grew up on a thoroughbred horse farm in Pennsylvania. “I always loved horses and riding. The chance to get into the industry from a business standpoint was a wonderful opportunity,” she says.

Cross took the skills that she learned as an undergraduate at CU, combined with an MBA from the Stanford Graduate School of Business, and fulfilled her dream of becoming an entrepreneur in a field she loved.

In 1993, she co-founded Ariat International, a company that specializes in high performance equestrian footwear and apparel. At the time, traditional riding boots were not very comfortable or functional. Cross and her co-founder Pam Parker were the first to apply athletic-shoe technology to riding boots, resulting in a product that had superior performance, comfort and fit.

By combining outstanding quality with innovative design, Ariat revolutionized the industry of equestrian riding boots and quickly established a reputation as the gold standard in performance equestrian footwear.



Ariat high performance riding boots



Beth Cross

Ariat now has retail partners in more than 30 countries and has expanded its offerings to include work and outdoor footwear, along with apparel and accessories. Within each category, Ariat’s innovative technology is the foundation of the product design.

Ariat works closely with athletes around the world when designing and developing its products. The company is the official equestrian footwear and apparel supplier to the Fédération Equestre Internationale (FEI), the international governing body for equestrian sports, as well as an official footwear partner to the United States Equestrian Federation (USEF). In addition, Ariat is the official footwear sponsor of the PBR (Professional Bull Riding) and sponsors many of the best Western and English riders around the world.

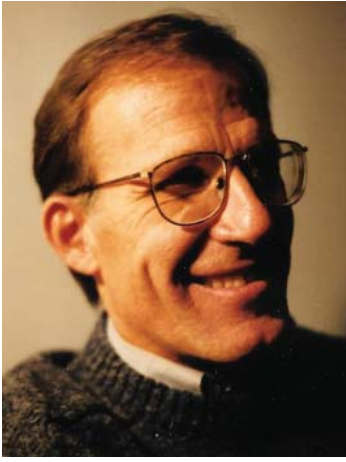
For Cross, the path to this success started at CU-Boulder in 1976. Cross had always been captivated by stories of the western United States and was determined to pursue her college education somewhere in the Rockies. She picked CU-Boulder because of its beautiful location, as well as its reputation for outstanding academics and unique culture. “Boulder was such a dynamic and innovative town when I started at CU,” Cross recalls.

After two years of study, she took a six-year break from school. She returned in 1986 with a newfound clarity on what she wanted to do. “At that point, I had been working for six years and knew I wanted to get an MBA in order to build my business skills and someday start my own business.”



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Dennis Eckart

Cross' most influential instructor at CU was Dennis Eckart, a political science professor. She took his class on critical thinking, which covered a wide variety of topics. "His philosophy was that in addition to learning the course materials, we were also expected to learn critical-thinking skills – how to look at all sides of the issues, how to break down the arguments and then build them back up."

"The most important thing I learned at CU was how to learn, and how to think," Cross says.

She also took a senior seminar with Professor Eckart, which included writing a senior thesis. "It was the most ambitious academic project that I had done at that point," she remembers. "It was a great source of learning, and I had a tremendous sense of accomplishment when I finished it."

Eckart also advised her on options for her future, including graduate school.

"I also took a class in technical writing that taught me to organize and write, with an emphasis on coherence and brevity. I use the skills I learned in that class every day when writing everything from emails to presentations."

"To have had a balanced education in critical thinking, writing and analytics has served me very well in business," Cross says.

Cross not only has the experience of how her Arts and Sciences degree has helped her in her own career, but she sees the value for new college graduates she hires to work for Ariat.

"We have 430 employees, and we often hire people right out of college," she says. "I think they are surprised when we expect to them to understand how to write, how to build a spreadsheet and how to think analytically about a business issue. There is no excuse for graduating with an arts and sciences degree and not being prepared to think critically about a variety of topics and to be able to communicate your thinking with clarity."

Cross is passionate about seeing others succeed and encourages her colleagues to develop a learning mindset. She recalls some advice from her father that has stayed with her throughout her life: "Live your life in a way that you always have more questions than answers."

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"I found him to be an extraordinary teacher and mentor to me, at a really important time, when I was thinking very seriously about my career and what I wanted to do when I graduated," she says.

Eckart, now retired, remembers Cross fondly. "I was pleased that Beth decided to take my course," he said. "Early on, I could easily discern that she had a first-rate intellect and an analytical mind. Moreover, she consistently showed a quiet self-confidence. I regarded her as both an outstanding student and a pleasant and engaging person."

For current students, Cross stresses the importance of a broad and balanced education. "The advice I would give to undergraduates is to balance the arts with the sciences, especially math," she explains. "Even though I was a political science major, I took calculus classes in order to prepare for business school. Those classes helped me start to build the foundation for analytic thinking that I would need in business."

Cross explains, "There is not a single person I meet that I don't learn something from. I work to practice a mindset of continual learning, where most answers or insights naturally lead to the next question, and to the next level of understanding."

