

Unleashing Aurora

Increasing Accessibility for Alberta's Rural
and Northern Students

Alberta Students Executive Council

Executive Summary

Albertans from rural and northern communities are among the least likely Canadians to pursue a post-secondary education. And, despite a constellation of programs, policies and partnerships to improve post-secondary access and participation in these communities, a number of barriers still exist.

This research project aims to better understand factors contributing to Alberta's rural and northern achievement gap. Modeled after the Post-Secondary Education Participation Survey, our research asks current post-secondary students from rural and northern Alberta a battery of questions on high school achievement, attitudes towards post-secondary, parental influences, and access to information.

While the full findings of our study are explored in our results and analysis sections, highlights of our findings include:

- Most participants believe the individual and community benefits of post-secondary outweigh the costs
- Low levels of awareness of persist among government-led financial aid, non-financial resources and support programs
- A high reliance on online communications and parents to provide guidance on making decisions about post-secondary education
- Lack of information in high school delays transitions to post-secondary, creating unmet demand for information and resources for adult learners

In turn, we suggest a number of recommendations to improve outcomes for rural and northern students, including enhancing existing policy and programs, re-evaluating communications and outreach, and brokering partnerships with community, industry and education stakeholders.

Too often, resources do not reach their intended populations and continue to serve those already advantaged within the system. An evaluation of the effectiveness of these programs, and their ability to communicate with their targeted population is required.

We welcome feedback and discussion on this research. Accessibility to post-secondary education should not be an isolated, individual endeavor; it requires a collective approach, inclusive of all participating parties.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
1. Overview of Accessibility to Post-secondary Education for Canadians	1
1.1 Parental Expectations	2
1.2 Low-income	2
1.3 Savings	3
1.4 Self-reported barriers	4
2. Canadian Post-secondary education Attainment	5
2.1 Regional Differences	6
2.2 The Prairie Provinces	7
3. Overview of Accessibility in Alberta	8
4. Accessibility for rural and/or northern Albertans	8
4.1 Geography	9
4.2 Knowledge of information and resources	9
4.3 Attitudes and Beliefs about Post-secondary education	10
4.4 Demographic trends rural and/or northern Alberta	10
4.6 Effects of Alberta's Strong Economy	12
5. Initiatives to increase accessibility for rural and/or northern Albertans	13
Methodology	17
1. Participants	17
2. Instrument	17
3. Procedure	18
Results	19
Introduction (Q 1&2)	19
1. Information on learning (resources): (Q3-12)	19
2. Attitudes toward learning (Q 13-23)	20
3. High school experiences (Q 24-35)	20
4. Post-secondary Experiences (Q 36-58)	23
4.1 Distance Education (Q 59-61).....	27
5. Future Intentions (Q 62-73)	28
6. Financial Information (Q 74-82)	29
7. Socio-economic status (Q 83- 101)	31
8. Final Thoughts (Q 102-106)	34
Analysis and Recommendations	37
Analysis	37
1. Policy Factors	37
2. Economic Factors	38
3. Social Factors	41
4. Technological Factors	43
Summary of Recommendations	46
Opportunities for future research:	47
References	48

Introduction

Alberta has the lowest post-secondary education participation rate in the country, and rural and northern Albertans are significantly under-represented in post-secondary.

As Alberta continues to evolve in a global, competitive context, generating an educated, knowledgeable population becomes increasingly important. It is imperative that populations who are not participating in post-secondary education be encouraged to do so. Alberta Advanced Education and Technology states that they will “ensure all Albertans have access to high quality learning opportunities” (Advanced Education and Technology, 2011). This goal is currently not being achieved as rural and/or northern Albertans are less likely to participate in post-secondary education. Rethinking programs and policies is needed to ensure access is available to all Albertans regardless of their socio-economic status, family background or geographical location. Alberta is regarded as an international leader in the K-12 education system (OECD, 2010; Alberta Teachers’ Association, 2010), and must strive to carry this innovation and success into post-secondary education.

The challenges and barriers that rural and/or northern Alberta students encounter in their post-secondary education pursuits will be investigated in the literature and via a participatory survey completed by rural and/or northern Alberta post-secondary students.

This research project is motivated by a desire to better understand the factors that contribute to the decisions for students from rural and northern Alberta to participate or not participate in post-secondary education. An exploration of the issues impacting the participation rates will provide a foundation to inform future post-secondary education policy initiatives aimed at improving participation for rural and/or northern Albertans. In so doing, we provide a discussion of policy and program interventions, economic gaps, social and cultural barriers, career aspirations, and technological opportunities. We conclude our report by providing suggestions for future policy directions and research.

1. Overview of Accessibility to Post-secondary Education for Canadians

In 2002, Statistics Canada, in partnership with Human Resources Development Canada and the Policy Research Initiative launched the Post-secondary education Participation Survey (PEPS) to examine the various issues that Canadian youth aged 18-24 (17-24 in Quebec) may face in their pursuit of post-secondary education (Barr-Telford, Cartwright, Prasil & Shimmons, 2003, pp 5-6). The results of the PEPS survey ascertain that there is no one factor that is responsible for a youth’s decision to participate or not to participate in a post-secondary education program (Barr-Telford et al., 2003). However, the findings are able to identify the relationship of certain characteristics and factors present amongst youth who choose to pursue post-secondary education and those who do not. The

results from the PEPS indicate sex, high school grade point averages, parental expectations, and financial savings as contributing factors in post-secondary education participation. Sixty-seven percent of young women pursued post-secondary education, compared to 57% of young men. Students who reported grade point averages below 70% in their final year of high school were less likely to pursue post-secondary education (Barr-Telford et al., 2003, p 6). The correlation between grade point averages in the final year of high school and a youth's participation in a post-secondary education program can most likely be attributed to the academic requirements imposed by most post-secondary education programs. It would be interesting to find out if students are not applying because they feel that their grades are not up to par, or if they are applying and being turned down by an institution for failing to meet their requirements.

1.1 Parental Expectations

Interestingly, Barr-Telford et al. (2003) found that “young Canadians who felt that their parents expected them to go on to post-secondary education were much more likely to have done so than those who felt their parents did not expect them to go on (67% compared with 34%)” (p 6-7). This finding is crucial, evidencing that youth who feel that their parents expect them to pursue post-secondary education are almost twice as likely to do so. To increase post-secondary participation of Canadian youth, the role of parents in the educational decision process must be examined and the factors that contribute to parental expectations of their children to pursue further educational opportunities need to be determined. It is probable that parental expectations are linked to parental education levels and family socio-economic status. There are various studies linking low parental income to low post-secondary education participation rates, and asserting that it is not strictly financial reasons that are responsible for the low participation, but a combination of factors associated with being from a low-income family (Finnie, R. & Mueller, R.E., 2008; Frenette M., 2007; The Senate, University of Alberta, 2000; Lefebvre & Merrigan, 2010; Childs, Finnie & Mueller, 2010; Gupton, Castelo-Rodríguez, Martínez & Quinanar, 2009). An examination of the factors impacting the accessibility of post-secondary education for youth from low-income families requires attention to improve their post-secondary education participation rates.

1.2 Low-income

Ross Finnie & Richard E. Mueller (2008), prepared a research paper for the Measuring the Effectiveness of Student Aid (MESA) Project, which examines the factors associated with low-income Canadian students' decisions to attend or not to attend a post-secondary education program. In their paper, Finnie & Mueller report that their “findings agree with the increasingly common result found in the literature that the impact of parental income is greatly reduced once a broader set of explanatory variables are added to the model” (p 24). Undoubtedly a link exists between family income and post-secondary education

participation, however, the link is not unidirectional. There are several intervening factors that must be examined to better understand how family income is influencing post-secondary educational decisions. In their research, Finnie & Mueller found that the most important influence was parental education, in that family income became less important when the education level of a youth's parents was considered (p 24). Finnie & Mueller speculate on the role parental education contributes to post-secondary education participation by linking it across further determining factors between youth who pursue further education and those who do not. In their study, they identified the following determining factors: the score on the reading portion of the cross-country PISA test, the overall high school grade, and engagement at high school, including work habits (p 24-25). According to Finnie & Mueller "parental education appears to work through these other sets of variables (reading ability, course grades, student behaviours, etc.) to influence access to PSE" (p 25). Parental education levels are inadvertently affecting the educational attainment and achievement levels of their children.

Finnie & Mueller (2008) pose that, "it is unrealistic to expect policy to change the exigent level of parental education, although policy could influence its level for today's young people for when they themselves are parents" (p 25). It is their intention to direct policy towards youth that will attempt to remedy the barriers that they face by having parents who have not gained or who have limited post-secondary educational experience. A policy that ignores parents and their vital role in the post-secondary education decision process will fail to teach students how to be involved in their own children's educational experiences, and will not change parental expectations, which consequently will fail to change the decisions made about post-secondary education. As long as educational policy implements an individualistic approach, the family involvement and support that is lacking will not be remedied. Post-secondary educational decisions should be a family affair, whereby all families are provided with the necessary support and resource to pursue equitable post-secondary educational opportunities. Parents of adolescent children, especially those parents without post-secondary educational experiences to draw from, require additional information and resources to support their children. While the decision to pursue post-secondary education essentially belongs to the youth, they turn to the adults and peers in their life for support and guidance in making important life decisions. Perhaps by focusing educational policy on the parents and adults within the school community and educating them on their influential role in their children's decisions, as well as the benefits of post-secondary education, positive transformative practices will occur in post-secondary education participation.

1.3 Savings

Barr-Telford, Cartwright, Prasil & Shimmons (2003) report that, "a much higher percentage of those who reported savings than those without had taken some post-secondary education beyond high school, 74% compared with 50%" (p 7). While this

finding seems to indicate the importance of having savings in forming decisions to participate in post-secondary education, the rationale behind the youth's savings is not identified. Students may have been purposively saving to fulfill their intentions to attend post-secondary education or alternatively, not accumulating savings because they did not have intentions on pursuing education beyond high school. The cost of attending a post-secondary education institution is expensive, especially if a learner incurs the extra expense of relocating, thus not having any savings may impact decisions regarding the pursuit of post-secondary education, resulting in choices that may be in conflict with aspirations. Regardless, possessing some savings is an important indicator in post-secondary education participation. It is important to ensure that learners, especially young learners, are aware of the investment required for post-secondary education programs, and that they are given the resources to do so. Barr-Telford et al. note that “interestingly, youth who themselves had put aside savings were somewhat more likely to have taken post-secondary education than were youth who only had savings put aside by someone else (80% compared with 70%)” (p 7). By allocating the responsibility of saving for post-secondary education to the youth themselves, they may gain a greater feeling of responsibility and empowerment over their decisions to participate in a post-secondary education program.

1.4 Self-reported barriers

According to PEPS, “when respondents who had not yet started post-secondary education were directly asked about their barriers to post-secondary education, they raised mainly financial reasons (39%) and ‘lack of fit’ with available programs (22%)” (Barr-Telford, Cartwright, Prasil & Shimmons, 2003, p 7). The issue of financial reasons and ‘lack of fit’ may be addressed by informing learners about the benefits of post-secondary education, and by providing the necessary support to identify and search for programs that may fit their individual needs. Improving participation rates in post-secondary education will require a community effort that involves not only the youth, but their families as well. By drawing on PEPS, Barr-Telford et al. (2003) have outlined the factors that are exercising the greatest impact on participation rates, and have reported on the barriers felt by respondents in the pursuit of post-secondary education. These issues need to be considered, not in isolation, but together as a whole. The disconnect present between challenges observed in the data and the barriers identified via self-reporting by the respondents requires considerate analysis. Policy decisions must consider the academic and social gaps felt by students from low-income families in the K-12 system. Policies need to focus on enabling all students to feel a sense of success, and ensure that there is equitable access to post-secondary educational opportunities, regardless of family, social and/or cultural background. The influence of parental expectations and their levels of post-secondary education attainment must be part of the policy process. Barr-Telford et al. recommend that financial savings, where possible, should be transferred to the youth to increase participation, and to empower youth to make their own decisions (2003). Policy also needs to ensure that students are able to access the appropriate resources and support in choosing

a program to fit their needs, and if there is no such program, programs should be modified to address student needs.

Joseph Berger (2009), of the Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation found that most young Canadians pursue post-secondary education before the age of 24 (p 27). Barr-Telford, Cartwright, Prasil & Shimmons (2003) affirm that “over half of the 1.6 million 18-24 year-olds who took some post-secondary education began their studies at the age of 17 or 18 and the overwhelming majority, 86%, started before turning 20” (p 8). This trend indicates that most young Canadians are making decisions about post-secondary education while they are still in high school, which is an important fact to inform educational policy that is directed at improving higher education participation rates. Barr-Telford et al. (2003) report that eighteen months after first beginning their studies over three quarters of the students were still in school and approximately sixteen percent had left their post-secondary education program (p 10). The implementation of policies that emphasize resources, education, and support well before a student is awarded a high school diploma will undoubtedly yield positive results in accessibility to post-secondary education at both the participation and persistence level. Students need to be equipped before they exit high school with the necessary tools for equitable life opportunities. When a student decides not to attend post-secondary education, is denied access, or chooses to not complete their post-secondary education, there is a cost that is incurred not only to the individual, but also to society. Barr-Telford et al. (2003) report that, “when asked their main reason for dropping out of their most recent program, half of the youth cited reasons suggesting a lack of fit with either their programs or with post-secondary education in general” (p 10). Curiously, this response corresponds to the responses provided to the questions on barriers to accessing post-secondary education. Together these findings suggest that student needs are not being met, or that perhaps students are ill equipped for participation in post-secondary education.

2. Canadian Post-secondary education Attainment

The Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2009) reports that Canada has the highest level of post-secondary educational attainment among OECD countries. However, Berger (2009) notes that the OECD results require careful interpretation. While Canada is an international leader in post-secondary educational attainment, this success is mostly due to the vast array of colleges and programs offered in Canadian higher education, leaving our university level attainments on average in comparison (p 27). This is an important distinction in our competitive, globalized society, whereby there is an increased demand for technology, innovation, and research. Joseph Berger, Anne Motte & Andrew Parkin (2009) stress that, “in order for Canada to maintain its prosperity and quality of life, more and more Canadians need to benefit from opportunities in higher education” (p 1). This requires an increase in post-secondary education participation, which is challenged by the fact that post-secondary participation

rates in Canada are declining. Berger (2009) reports that participation rates among Canadian youths aged 18-24 were highest in 1997 at 71% and have steadily declined to a low of 57% in 2006 (p 27). He further explains this phenomena as being ‘masked’ by “an increase in enrolment driven by demographics: as the size of the youth population has grown, enrolment numbers have increased even though the proportion of youth opting for post-secondary studies has declined” (p 27). Many Canadians believe participation rates have been increasing, when the opposite is true. The illusion presented by a growing youth population has effectively ‘masked’ the actual percentage of the youth population participating in post-secondary education. Current Canadian demographic trends point to an increasing aging population and a decreasing youth population, leading to a further decline in post-secondary education participants. In fact, Joseph Berger and Andrew Parkin (2009) report: “full-time university enrolment is already declining in four provinces and is growing noticeably in only two. At the college level, enrolment growth leveled off in the early years of this decade before experiencing its first decline in over 10 years between 2004 and 2005” (p 8).

The benefits to the individual and society from pursuing post-secondary education are well documented in the literature, and the resulting implications for Canada, if trends continue to heed a declining participation rate in post-secondary education are many, especially within the context of today’s globalized society. Additionally, a further cause for concern is that, “at the same time, the gap in participation rates between wealthier and poorer Canadians has not narrowed” (Berger, 2009, p 27). It can be inferred that since the educational attainment gap between disadvantaged and advantaged groups is increasing, equitable educational opportunities are not occurring within Canada’s educational institutions. In order to increase post-secondary education participation rates, policies must be targeted at promoting educational opportunities amongst the groups who are least likely to attend, and those who encounter barriers in accessibility to post-secondary education.

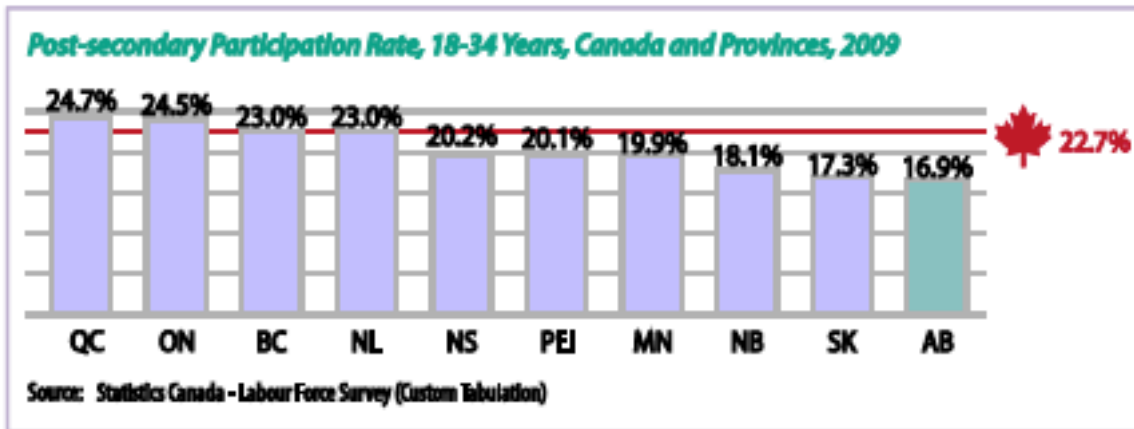
2.1 Regional Differences

Canada is a vast and diverse country, with extreme variances across the provinces and territories in terms of industry, economy, and demographics, which are important determinants for educational requirements and attainment. Post-secondary education levels, participation rates, and programming must be considered within their environmental context. Joseph Berger (2009) affirms that, “educational attainment varies considerably from province to province, both in terms of the proportion of individuals with post-secondary education and the type of education” (p 37). An understanding of the contextual variations across Canada will inform the regional differences present in post-secondary educational attainment and participation rates. While Berger (2009) has asserted that there is a decline in post-secondary education attainment, he further states that this decline is “being driven by the Western provinces” (p 42). He reports that according to Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics (SLID), which measures participation rates of youth aged

18- to 24- years old, the three Prairie Provinces, comprising of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba, have experienced a ten percent decrease in post-secondary education participation rates between 2004 and 2006. He further explains that the participation rate was at its peak in the Prairie Provinces in 1999 at 57 percent, and subsequently the lowest in 2006 at 45 percent (p 42). The strong economy in the west may have consequently provided youth with attractive employment opportunities. If youth were being drawn to employment opportunities provided by a strong economy, a decline in post-secondary education would result.

2.2 The Prairie Provinces

University participation rates in the Prairies declined to its lowest in 2006 at 22 percent, effectively dropping six percentage points below the national average of 28 percent (Berger, 2009, p 43). College participation rates in the Prairies have also declined, “despite a small increase in 2005, the college participation rate in the prairies has declined steadily from its peak of 32 percent in 1998 and 1999 to a low of 23 percent in 2006” (p 44). Comparatively, the average, national college participation rate in 2006 was 26 percent, evidencing that the Prairies also have lower college participation rates than the national average (p 44). Berger acknowledges the link between economic circumstances and declining post-secondary participation rates, and states that “it is reasonable to assume, of course, that this trend will soon reverse: that given the worsening economic conditions, participation rates will once again go up” (p 44). It is important to observe economic conditions when considering post-secondary education policy. To improve post-secondary participation rates in Canada, and especially in the Prairie Provinces, where rates are inclined to be below the national average, the long-run benefits must be made clear to youth. Berger and Parkin (2009) provide the Income and Earnings Highlight Tables from the 2006 Statistics Canada census, finding that “even in Canadian provinces where high school graduates do reasonably well in the labour market, post-secondary graduates do considerably better” (p 11). Post-secondary education needs to be envisioned as an attractive option, and further, as a more attractive option than the employment sector. Alberta continues to experience a healthy economy, but this should not be at the cost of a declining educated population. As Alberta continues to prosper in the oil and energy sector, provisions need to be put into place to ensure that Alberta may also flourish in the knowledge-based sector, and subsequently be an active participant in global society.



Campus Alberta Policy Framework (2010; p.31)

3. Overview of Accessibility in Alberta

A Learning Alberta is an Alberta Advanced Education initiative that took place in 2005/2006, to promote a strategic plan with an aim to “ensure that opportunities are available to every Albertan to advance their education – to maximize their own potential as well as to contribute to their communities and the continued prosperity of the province now and in the future” (Alberta Advanced Education, July 2005, p 1). The initiative consists of several insightful discussion documents focusing on the challenges and barriers to accessing post-secondary education encountered by some groups of Albertans. These documents were then used to inform a final report prepared by the steering committee. In this final report, the *A Learning Alberta* steering committee (2006) documents that “while Alberta has the highest workforce participation rate in Canada, it also has among the lowest participation rate in post-secondary studies” (2006, p 1). This reaffirms Berger’s (2009) finding of low participation rates in post-secondary education amongst the Western Provinces. Further, *A Learning Alberta* (2006) reports that “participation is even lower for those living in northern and remote communities, young males, First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples, persons with disabilities, Albertans with low income and education levels, and immigrants” (p 1). The lower participation rates that are evident amongst these highlighted groups of Albertans reveal the inequitable educational opportunities that are present within Alberta Advanced Education.

4. Accessibility for rural and/or northern Albertans

Alberta’s rural and northern regions differ from urban areas in terms of their geography, demography, and economy. These differences present unique challenges for the populations living in these areas when accessing post-secondary education. In *A Learning Alberta* (2005), it was noted that, “only 46% of rural Albertans complete some form of advanced education compared to 61% of urban Albertans” (p 4). There exists a significant post-secondary education attainment gap between rural and urban Albertans, as well as a

gap in secondary school attainment, whereby “rural Albertans are almost twice as likely to not receive an education beyond grade 9 (8.4%) compared to those from Edmonton and Calgary (4.7%)” (Alberta Advanced Education, June 2005, p 4). The geographic location of Albertans has a direct impact on their educational attainment, evidencing inequitable educational opportunities for rural Albertans. The type of post-secondary education attained also differs between rural and urban Albertans, as “individuals from urban centres are almost twice as likely to attain a university education (17.5%) than those from rural areas (8.1%)” (Alberta Advanced Education, June 2005, p 4). The differences between rural and urban populations related to university attainment are most likely attributed to the location of the universities, which are only located within urban centres.

4.1 Geography

The importance of physical proximity to educational institutions is further exemplified by Alberta Advanced Education’s Graduate Outcomes Survey, which states that, “over 56% of graduates from urban origins completed a university degree compared to only 39% of rural origin graduates” (Alberta Advanced Education, 2005, p 5). In contrast, “a higher percentage of rural origin graduates (39%) completed a college program compared to their urban counterparts (25%)” (Alberta Advanced Education, 2005, p 5). This is not surprising given that in most cases rural students must relocate to an urban centre to pursue a university education, whereas Alberta’s colleges provide closer proximity to rural communities with some offering distance education programs, allowing rural students to remain within their communities. It is also noted that rural Albertans are “more likely to obtain a trades certificate (14.5%) than urban Albertans (12%)” (Alberta Advanced Education, p 5). Improving university education attainment in rural communities depends promote the value of obtaining a university degree, but that also address the challenges of proximity for rural Albertans. The cost both financially and emotionally incurred by rural students obligated to relocate in order to access post-secondary education, requires attention in policy to actualize Alberta Advanced Education’s commitment to providing equitable educational opportunities to all Albertans.

4.2 Knowledge of information and resources

In *A Learning Alberta* (2005), it is noted that the “results from Alberta Advanced Education’s Accessibility Study indicate that rural students tend to have lower levels of awareness of advanced education opportunities and the supports available” (Alberta Advanced Education, June 2005, p 4-5). The lack of proximity to educational resources and institutions, in all probability affects the availability and ability to access valuable information on post-secondary opportunities. Implementation of increased supports to promote access to information and resources on post-secondary education programs are required in order to increase participation rates among rural Albertans. Importantly, the study also found that “while 82% of respondents from communities with populations over

75,000 believed the benefits of advanced education outweigh the costs, only 68% of respondents from communities with populations between 5,000 and 30,000 believed likewise” (Alberta Advanced Education, June 2005, p 5). If rural students have a lack of awareness regarding advanced education opportunities, it may be inferred that a lack of awareness towards the benefits of attaining a post-secondary education also exists. A space needs to become available to promote and discuss available post-secondary educational opportunities, available resources, and the value bestowed upon an individual and their community through the attainment of a post-secondary education.

4.3 Attitudes and Beliefs about Post-secondary education

Rural students may have less confidence in the benefits of post-secondary education due to the fact that they “are less likely than urban students to have at least one parent with a post-secondary education (37% rural versus 50% urban)” (Alberta Advanced Education, June 2005, p 5). The importance of parental expectations was highlighted earlier in the PEPS analysis provided by Barr-Telford, Cartwright, Prasil & Shimmons (2003), with a strong likelihood that parental expectations are linked to their educational levels. Finnie & Mueller’s (2008) finding was also noted earlier, asserting the low-income factors become less important when parents’ level of education is considered. In *A Learning Alberta* (2005) it is noted that, “a 2005 EKOS study confirms that Alberta parents of rural post-secondary students are less likely to provide support toward their children’s education” (Alberta Advanced Education, p 5-6). The precise justification for this finding is unclear, while “there is evidence to suggest that parents familiar with post-secondary system are more likely to pass on knowledge and awareness of opportunities to their children as well as skills to assist them in transitioning from high school to advanced education” (Alberta Advanced Education, 2005, p 5). If parents are not equipped with the skills or resources to support their children in higher education decisions, then action is required to address this factor in accessibility to post-secondary education.

4.4 Demographic trends rural and/or northern Alberta

Students from rural Alberta that pursue post-secondary education are less likely to return to their rural communities, as is evidenced by the findings in the Alberta Advanced Education’s Graduate Outcomes Survey, where “40% of all post-secondary graduates completed high school in a rural area, only 14% had remained or returned two years after graduation” (Alberta Advanced Education, 2005, p 6). This trend, often referred to as “brain drain”, removes economic and human capital from rural communities, as educated and trained rural Albertans take up residence outside their communities. Populations are also increasing at a faster rate in urban Alberta, “meaning that the proportion of Alberta’s population that resides in rural areas has been steadily decreasing over time” (Alberta Advanced Education, 2005, p 8). Statistics Canada (2009) provides a chart (see figure 1)

outlining Alberta’s urban and rural populations, which affirms an increasing trend amongst urban populations and conversely, a steady decrease amongst rural populations. A decreasing rural population undoubtedly creates challenges to the sustainability of resources already in place. Interestingly, *A Learning Alberta* (2005) found that part-time enrolments in rural colleges have been increasing at a rate incomparable to urban colleges, which is “partially related to an aging trend within the student population” (p 10). It is also noted that students over the age of 26 years old are less likely to relocate to attend a post-secondary education institute (Alberta Advanced Education, 2005, p 10). Consequently, to increase accessibility to post-secondary education in rural and northern Alberta, the needs of part-time, mature students must be considered. *A Learning Alberta* (2005) states that in rural Alberta, the features of a typical student do not apply. Rural students are more likely to be older, to have children, to be married, to have delayed entry into post-secondary education, to have work experience, and/or to require upgrading skills (p 16-17). These different circumstances require variances in programs and delivery to address the learning needs of rural students. Post-secondary education initiatives in rural and/or northern Alberta communities must consider the characteristics of the population they are serving to successfully increase access and participation.

Figure 1:

Population, urban and rural, by province and territory					
(Alberta)					
	Population	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
	number			% of total population	
Alta.					
1901	73,022	18,533	54,489	25	75
1911	374,295	137,662	236,633	37	63
1921	588,454	222,904	365,550	38	62
1931	731,605	278,508	453,097	38	62
1941	796,169	306,586	489,583	39	61
1951	939,501	449,675	489,826	48	52
1956	1,123,116	635,824	487,292	57	43
1961	1,331,944	843,211	488,733	63	37
1966	1,463,203	1,007,407	455,796	69	31
1971	1,627,875	1,196,250	431,615	73	27
1976	1,838,035	1,379,170	458,870	75	25
1981	2,237,724	1,727,545	510,179	77	23

1986	2,365,830	1,877,760	488,070	79	21
1991	2,545,553	2,030,893	514,660	80	20
1996	2,696,826	2,142,815	554,011	79	21
2001	2,974,807	2,405,160	569,647	81	19
2006	3,290,350	2,699,851	590,499	82	18

Note: The rural population for 1981 to 2006 refers to persons living outside centres with a population of 1,000 AND outside areas with 400 persons per square kilometer. Previous to 1981, the definitions differed slightly but consistently referred to populations outside centres of 1,000 population.
Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 1851 to 2006.
 Last modified: 2009-09-22.

Statistics Canada (2009). Census of Population, 1851 to 2006.

<http://www40.statcan.ca/101/cst01/demo62j-eng.htm>

Another factor of note is that the Aboriginal population is very young and steadily growing. Over 52% of the population is under 25 years of age and the school age population is expected to increase by about 26% by 2016. (Advanced Education and Technology, 2005, p 6) This young and growing population poses challenges for the learning system and highlights the need to increase Aboriginal education attainment to ensure full participation in economic and social life (p 6).

However, due to limitations in time and scope, this paper is unable to fully discuss the challenges and opportunities faced by Alberta's First Nations and Metis youth as they relate to post-secondary education.

4.5 Effects of Alberta's Strong Economy

Finally, while we tend to think of non-participation in advanced education as the result of barriers, it is also true that a strong economy and availability of employment is a strong motivator for potential learners to enter the labor market directly without first completing post-secondary training. It is becoming increasingly evident in the literature that the benefits of pursuing further education may only become more apparent later in life. This, in turn, indicates that rural students may not be sufficiently prepared or informed about career and educational decisions once leaving high school.

Moreover, as outlined by Berger and Parker (2009) the gap between the unemployment rates of young Canadians with higher and lower levels of education has grown significantly over the past 35 years and continues to expand.

Research conducted by Advanced Education and Technology suggests that while primary industries are becoming more knowledge based, younger workers prefer to work during economic booms, especially in industries with wage premiums such as the energy sector. Many young Albertans, looking at short-term opportunities, do not see the immediate value of making a long-term investment in post-secondary education. (Advanced Education and Technology, 2005, p 13).

Nevertheless, the report also suggests that post-secondary education institutions in rural and northern communities can help ensure rural Albertans have opportunities to increase education and skill levels foundational to increased economic, human and social capital (Advanced Education and Technology, 2005, p 14).

5. Initiatives to increase accessibility for rural and/or northern Albertans

- Campus Alberta movement & principles
- Transfer Alberta
- ECampus Alberta: effectiveness of distance/e-learning
- Alberta-North (Community Access Points)
- Industry developed provincial curriculum (trade/apprenticeship)
- Apply Alberta
- Alberta-North
- Alberta Rural Development

Campus Alberta is defined by Alberta Advanced Education and Technology as, “a movement that's building within Alberta for the advanced education system to focus strongly on the learner” (<http://aet.alberta.ca/postsecondary/campusalberta.aspx>). The concept was first developed in 2002 in the document, Campus Alberta: A Policy Framework. Alberta Advanced Education and Technology (2011) states that,

The aim of the framework was to define a set of principles to ensure the different learning systems across Alberta work together to deliver seamless learning opportunities. In practice, this means learning providers collaborate to deliver learning opportunities where and when Albertans need them.

(<http://aet.alberta.ca/postsecondary/policy/campusab.aspx>)

It is believed that by creating a collaborative framework throughout Alberta's publicly funded post-secondary institutions, enhanced post-secondary educational opportunities for

all Albertans will result. The unity of the system represents a corresponding unification of the goals Alberta's public post-secondary institutions hope to achieve. Campus Alberta aims to achieve the following goals:

- Accessible, affordable and quality learning opportunities for Albertans.
- Enhanced learner transitions into and movement within the advanced education system.
- Learners who have the tools they need to succeed in their chosen learning pathway.
- Lifelong participation in the advanced education system by all who have the desire and skills to succeed. (Alberta, Advanced Education and Technology, <http://aet.alberta.ca/postsecondary/campusalberta.aspx>)

The co-operation amongst Alberta's publicly funded post-secondary institutions will improve opportunities for individual learners and will actualize the learner-centered focus envisioned by Campus Alberta. Individually, Albertan learners will be better able to move between institutions and to gather informative resources with the formation of relationships and communications throughout Alberta's post-secondary education system. Campus Alberta's goals and their implementation are especially vital to Alberta's rural and/or northern learners, who experience issues relating to access, affordability, transitions, resource, and participation in relation to post-secondary education.

Campus Alberta has implemented various programs and initiatives that are outlined to accomplish the goals established in their collaborative framework. **Transfer Alberta** is a program that makes it possible to more easily transfer between programs and institutions. **eCampus Alberta** is a program that provides online learning opportunities offered by 16 institutions. **Comprehensive Community Institutions (CCI)** are colleges that serve differing regional areas throughout Alberta. Each of the eleven CCI's is responsible for stewardship to ensure they are providing the educational resource to support the communities within their defined region of Alberta. A common provincial curriculum was enacted for **technical training**, as well as a coordinated application process through **Apply Alberta**, which allows the easy transfer of transcripts across Alberta institutions. (Alberta Advanced Education, 2011, <http://aet.alberta.ca/postsecondary/campusalberta.aspx>)

Campus Alberta is more than a collaboration amongst publicly funded post-secondary institutions in Alberta, it includes partnerships with a variety of stakeholders, including "learners, parents, teachers and instructors, post-secondary institutions, school authorities, business, industry, organizations, communities and government" (Alberta Learning, 2002, p i). **Alberta-North** is a collaborative partner of Campus Alberta. Together they are committed to providing educational opportunities for learners living in northern Alberta and the Northwest Territories. Seven of Alberta's post-secondary institutions are active partners with Alberta-North, and provide "facilities, learning technologies and

support services such as on-site facilitators to over 85 online learning sites called Community Access Points (CAP sites)” (Alberta Advanced Education and Technology, <http://aet.alberta.ca/postsecondary/campusalberta/partnerships.aspx#eCA>). The CAP sites are located in northern regions across Alberta and the Northwest Territories, and serve several functions, including: general information, technology access, learning support, exam supervision, and study resources (Alberta-North, 2011, <http://www.alberta-north.ca/capsiteslibrary>).

In their 2009-2010 report, Alberta-North states, “Alberta-North partners delivered and supported 9, 354 courses” (Alberta-North, 2009-2010, p 1). Further it is noted that the majority (74%) of enrolments were located in Northern Alberta and the Northwest Territories (p 1), affirming that Alberta-North and their partners are reaching their targeted populations. A Learning Alberta (2005) reinforces the importance of collaboration in providing equitable post-secondary educational opportunities within rural communities noting that “the success of rural institutions in promoting access and participation is contingent upon their ability to build collaborative relationships within their communities, including with schools, Aboriginal communities and businesses” (p 7). The **Alberta Rural Development Network** (ARDN) is another example of a collaborative effort to improve the life of individuals and their communities in rural Alberta. ARDN is a non-profit organization with partnerships at 21 of Alberta’s public post-secondary institutions. ARDN (2010) strives to enrich rural communities by drawing “on the strengths of rural communities, post-secondary institutions, and community-based organization to assist in the development of rural Alberta through education, research, collaboration and networking” (<http://www.ardn.ca/pages.php?pid=2&sid=2>). The organizations, Alberta-North and ARDN, are committed to improving and sustaining communities in rural and/or northern Alberta and acknowledge the importance of education in their endeavors. Increasing accessibility and participation to post-secondary education is a vital component to Alberta-North and ARDN initiatives. The creation of collaborative partnerships with Alberta’s public post-secondary institutions, and perhaps going further by considering shared relationships beyond educational institutions they may become more successful in achieving their visions.

Alberta Learning Information Service (ALIS) is a provincial government partnership comprised of Alberta Employment and Immigration, Alberta Education, and Alberta Advanced Education, which provides information on post-secondary education and career planning. It is a comprehensive resource that also includes information on “educational funding, job search, labour market trends, and workplace issues” (<http://alis.alberta.ca/hm/about.html>). ALIS operates an initiative to recruit and provide resource to high school students on post-secondary education, through their “**Post-secondary Learning Clicks ambassadors**” program. This program trains current post-

secondary or apprenticing students to deliver presentations to high schools across Alberta. The vast array of resources available through ALIS and the variety of career and post-secondary education opportunities in Alberta are made available to secondary students through this initiative. This program would be especially valuable to rural and/or northern Alberta students who do not live within a close proximity to a post-secondary institution and who may find acquiring information and resource on options challenging.

The need to coordinate, and build collective impact is stated succinctly within *A Learning Alberta*, which affirms that “the success of rural institutions in promoting access and participation is contingent upon their ability to build collaborative relationships within their communities, including with schools, Aboriginal communities and businesses” (Alberta Advanced Education, 2005, p7).

Methodology

1. Participants

For this study, to answer the research question of accessibility to post-secondary education for rural and northern Alberta students, a questionnaire, entitled “ASEC’s Post-secondary Participation Survey”, was sent out via the internet to post-secondary institutions that are members of the Alberta Students’ Executive Council (ASEC). The members are comprised mostly of Alberta’s Comprehensive Community Institutions: Bow Valley College, Grand Prairie Regional College, Keyano College, Lethbridge College, Medicine Hat College, Olds College, and Red Deer College. Members also include Alberta’s two Polytechnic Institutions located in the Edmonton and Calgary region, namely the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology (NAIT) and the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT); as well as Baccalaureate and Applied Studies Institutions, Grant MacEwan University and Mount Royal University. The Alberta College of Art and Design, a specialized arts and culture institution, was also captured by the survey as a member of ASEC.

A method of nonrandom purposive sampling was used in this study by selecting institutions consisting of student populations that fit the characteristic of rural and/or northern Albertans. While ASEC’s member institutions are predominantly located within urban centres, only those students who identified themselves as being from rural and/or northern Alberta were asked to participate. There was no exclusionary question in the survey to define the context of a rural and/or northern Alberta student, however respondents were asked to enter their postcode to identify their geographical location. The respondents consisted of both male and female students, aged eighteen plus, with no age restrictions applied for participation.

The limitation of using the purposive sampling method is the ability to generalize from a sample to a population on the basis of a single study. By purposively selecting individuals attending ASEC member institutions, rural and/or northern Alberta students that are attending other institutions within Alberta and their experiences are not captured. Also, the population selected consists of students who have been successful in accessing the post-secondary education system, and does not account for rural and/or northern Albertans who were not successful in accessing post-secondary education.

2. Instrument

The questionnaire for this study included predominantly closed-ended items, requiring respondents to select a predetermined response to the question. At the end of the questionnaire there were some open-ended questions allowing the participants to provide

responses in their own words, and to add any additional comments or concerns they may have. The questionnaire consisted of 106 questions in total, with the addition of skip logic, which dictates which questions require a response based on the respondent's previous answers.

The questionnaire was constructed through the adaptation of Statistics Canada's (2003) "*Post-secondary education Participation Survey*" (PEPS) administered in 2002, Statistics Canada's (2009), "*Access and Support to Education and Training Survey*" (ASETS) administered in 2008, as well as Dale Kirby and Dennis Sharpe's (2010) study: "*An Examination of Rural Secondary Students' Post-secondary education Decisions*". The survey was organized into seven categories including: information and resources, attitudes towards learning, high school experiences, post-secondary experiences, future intentions, financial information, and socio-economic status. The categories and content are reflective of the organization of the PEPS (2003) and ASETS (2009), with some questions adapted from the study presented by Kirby, D. and Sharpe, D. (2010). The questionnaire was constructed and administered using a web-based survey tool entitled "*Survey Monkey*", (www.surveymonkey.net, 2009). Survey Monkey provides a web-link to the questionnaire that was emailed to the participants, and which they can easily access by clicking on the attached link.

3. Procedure

The survey was sent out on July 8th, 2011 via email to student populations at ASEC's participating member institutions and remained active for 2.5 weeks closing on July 27th, 2011. Participation in the survey was voluntary. Respondents accessed the link to Survey Monkey and completed the survey, which required approximately 30 minutes. An enticement of a free iPad was included to encourage participation. The survey required access to the internet for completion. After respondents completed the survey their responses were logged into Survey Monkey and available for analysis. There were 299 responses in total gathered by ASEC's Post-secondary Participation Survey.

Results

Introduction (Q 1&2)

Our survey had 299 respondents, 74% of which replied they are a resident or their home community is located in rural and/or northern Alberta, and 26% were not.

Where useful, we employed a cross-tab to sort responses between rural/north & non-rural/north respondents.

1. Information on learning (resources): (Q3-12)

In this section, we asked ten questions.

In the last 12 months, have you looked for any information concerning courses, programs, workshops, seminars or other activities you could have taken with the intention to improve your knowledge, skills or competencies?

An overwhelmingly majority of respondents (93%) found the information they were looking for; primarily through the internet (92%), second was an education or training institution at 56.7%, followed by a family member, neighbour or work colleague at 25%, career counselor at 15.3%, books at 13.1%, employer at 9.3%, tv/radio/newspaper/magazine at 7.1%.

Of these responses, 95% of respondents found the information useful.

Looking to Alberta-specific resources, programs and networks, we found that few (less than 5%) people were aware of Alberta-North Community Access Point (CAP). The respondents who accessed a CAP, did so mostly to find general information. Some respondents also accessed the CAP for learning support, exam supervision, and study resources. There were no respondents that indicated that they had accessed the CAP for technology use.

More broadly, looking specifically to rural/north respondents, we found the following level of awareness among respondents: 60% were aware of eCampus Alberta; 60% were aware of Alberta Learning Information Service (ALIS); 21% knew of Transfer Alberta; 19% heard of the Northern Alberta Development Council Bursary; 18% knew of the Alberta Opportunities Bursary; 16% had heard of the Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation; 14.5% of Alberta-North; 12% knew of the Northern Student Supplement; 5% had knowledge of the Learning Clicks Ambassadors; 5% knew of the Alberta-North Access Points; and 4% of the Alberta Rural Development Network (ARDN).

Alarming, 13% indicated that they are not aware of any of the above resources.

Only 59% know where to get information about government student loans programs, with an overwhelmingly majority (70%) unaware of approximately how much they might be eligible to receive for a government student loan. Approximately 71% of rural/northern respondents were not aware of interest relief and debt reduction programs available for government student loans.

2. Attitudes toward learning (Q 13-23)

This section of the survey focused on the value learners place on post-secondary education as it relates to their personal lives, on financial and economic well being, and on improving communities.

Nearly all respondents agreed or strongly agreed that education and training can help individuals manage their daily life better. This was parsed more finely, with 71% strongly agreeing that learning gives learners more self-confidence, and 87% agreeing or strongly agree that there is a strong relationship between education and success in life.

Exploring attitudes towards the financial investment post-secondary education, we see that two-thirds of respondents agree to some extent that individuals should be prepared to pay a portion of their adult learning. Contrary to research, while 77% of respondents believe that people who continue to learn as adults are more likely to avoid unemployment, approximately 23% of respondents are neutral or disagree to some extent with this statement.

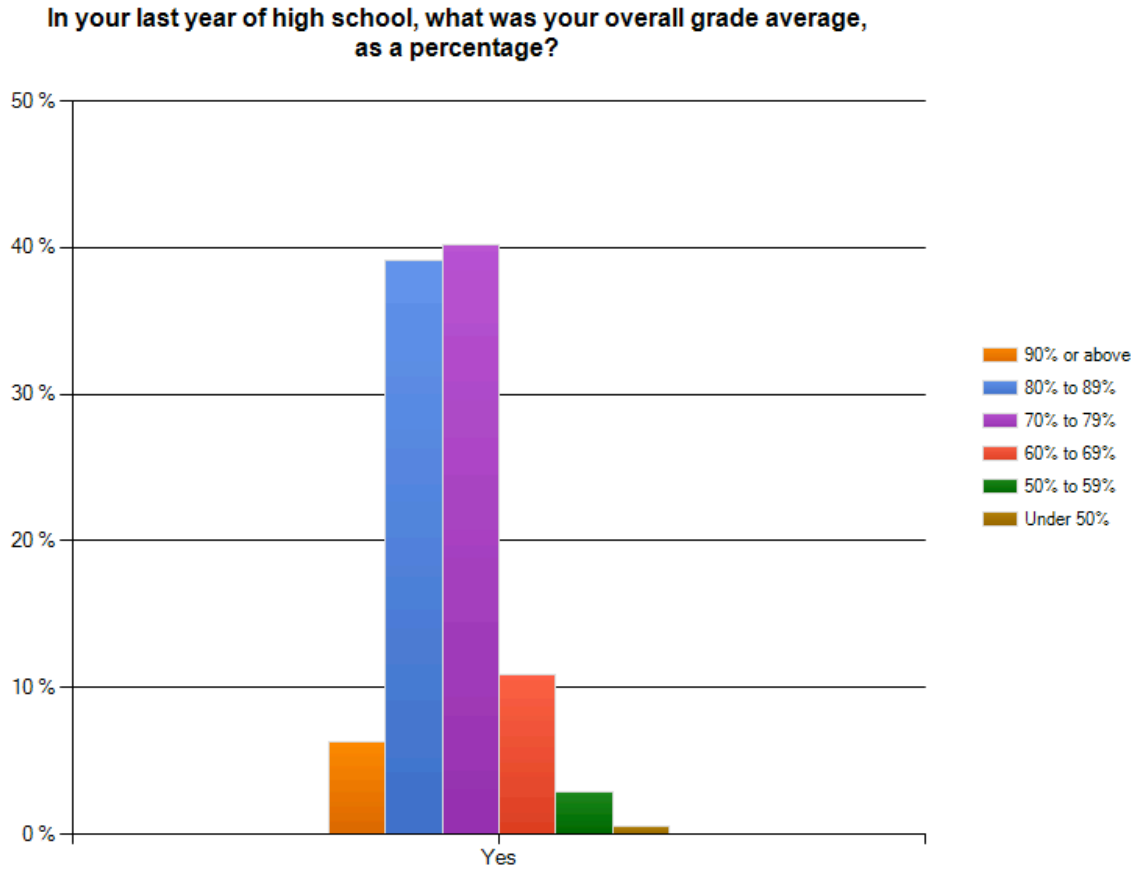
Nine in ten respondents agree or strongly agree that adult education and skills upgrading are important for community development, and eight in ten agree that investing in education is worth the financial cost.

3. High school experiences (Q 24-35)

Secondary school experiences play an important role in shaping expectations and outcomes for post-secondary studies. Nearly all – 95% – of our respondents have completed high school, demonstrating notably higher completion rates than Albertans as a whole, and significantly higher rates than those in rural areas.

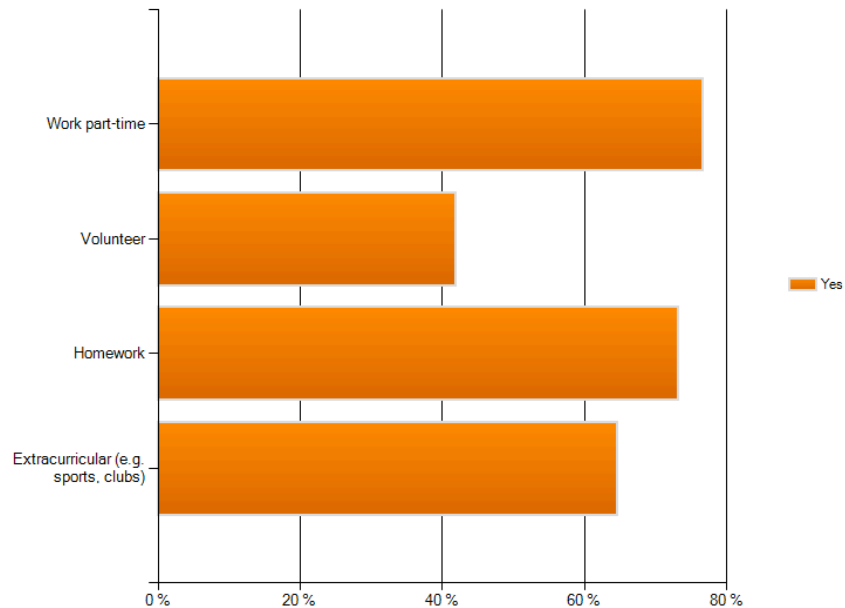
When asked about their overall grade point averages in their last year of high school, 6% of RN respondents reported a GPA of 90 percent and above, 39% reported a GPA of 80-89 percent, and the plurality of respondents (40%) reported an average between 70 and 79

percent, 11% had an average between 60 and 69 percent, and 4% had an average of 59 percent or lower.



From this, it is clear that our respondents are high achievers, successfully completing high school and earning good grades. Further evidence shows that our respondents, similar to the broader population, split their free time during high school across a number of extra-curricular activities, including part-time work, volunteering, clubs, and sports.

How have you spent your time after school and on week-ends?



Looking to decision-making on career and post-secondary options, we see that respondents used a variety of strategies. While only 4% of our rural/northern respondents had a Learning Clicks Ambassador attend their high school, 66% said they have requested or accessed information on post-secondary education from Alberta Learning Information Services (ALIS).

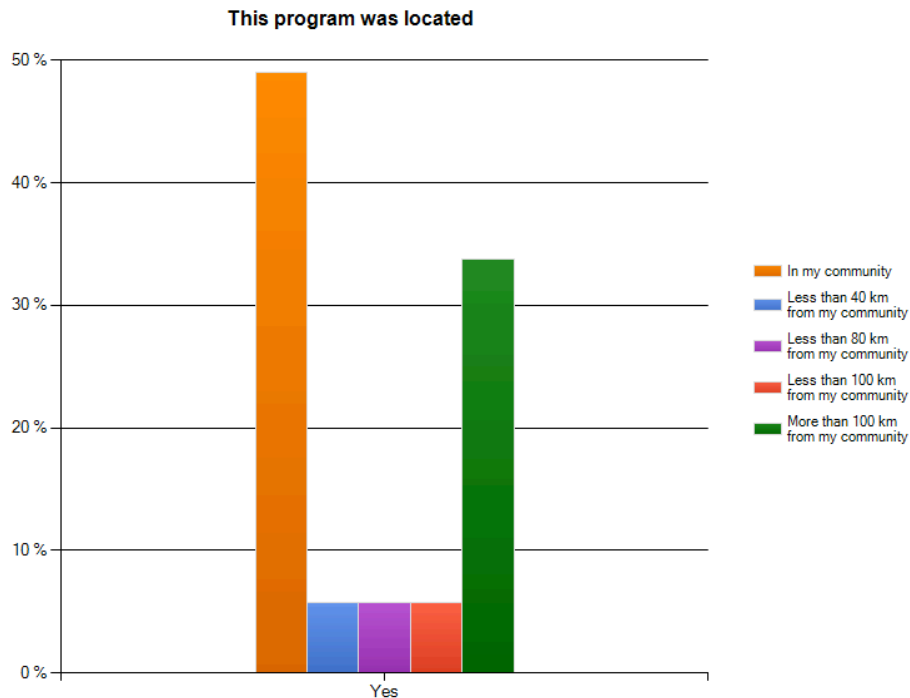
When asked to rank a list of people and sources of information that students often rely on when making decisions about post-secondary education, 31% responded that their parents and/or guardians were most important, making this the top-ranked option over high school teachers (27%), ALIS (26%), post-secondary institution web pages (26%), other college or university students (25%), promotional materials/brochures (25%), a college or university campus tour (23%), or recruitment officer (23%). Friends were most likely to be rated as the third most important source of information. Television or print advertising and recruitment officers were most likely to be ranked 5th, as ‘not that important’.

More than two-thirds of rural and northern respondents - 68% - did not feel they were provided with adequate resources and education in career development and/or post-secondary options during high school. However, 75% of respondents indicated that they feel confident in their abilities to locate information and resources on post-secondary educational opportunities. Again, it is important to keep in mind that respondents are largely current post-secondary education students that possess the skills needed to locate information easily.

Looking to other factors driving decision-making, an overwhelming majority (89%) stated that their parent(s)/guardian(s) expected them to pursue post-secondary education, and 62% agreed to some extent that the decisions they made about post-secondary education were influenced by their parent(s)/guardian(s).

4. Post-secondary Experiences (Q 36-58)

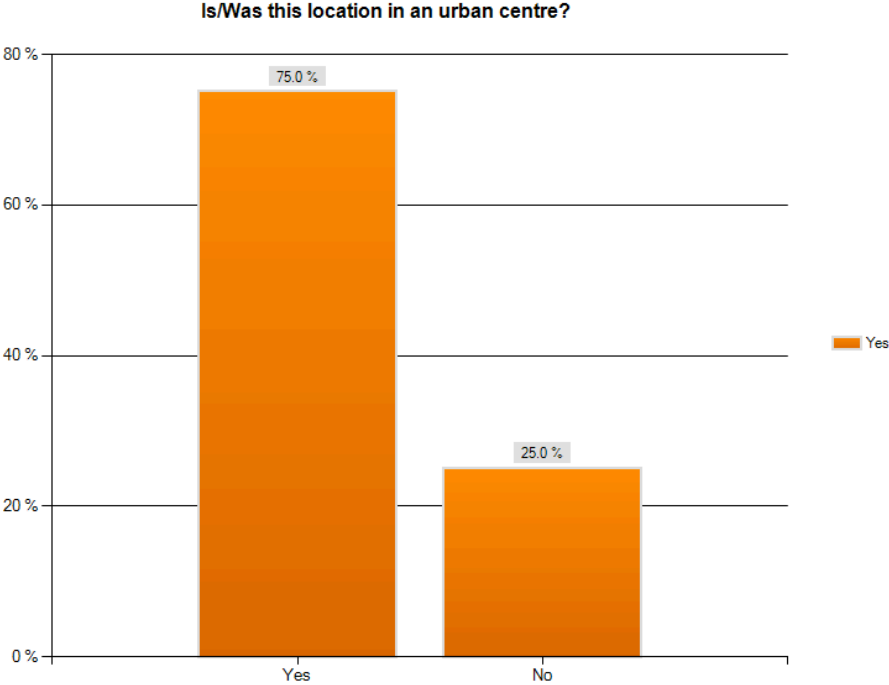
Looking forward to the post-secondary experiences of our participants, we see that slightly more than 51% took a break of more than 3 months between high school and their first post-secondary program. 79% responded that between high school and starting their first post-secondary program, they were working.



Roughly half - 49% - of rural and/or northern respondents indicated that their post-secondary education program was located within their community, while 34% stated that their program was more than 100km from their community, and 17% attended a program outside their community, but not at a distance greater than 100 km. In total, 43% indicated that they had to physically relocate to attend their program.

After graduation, 47% believe that they will remain in their community, with 54% stating that they intend to relocate to another location. These numbers correspond very closely to

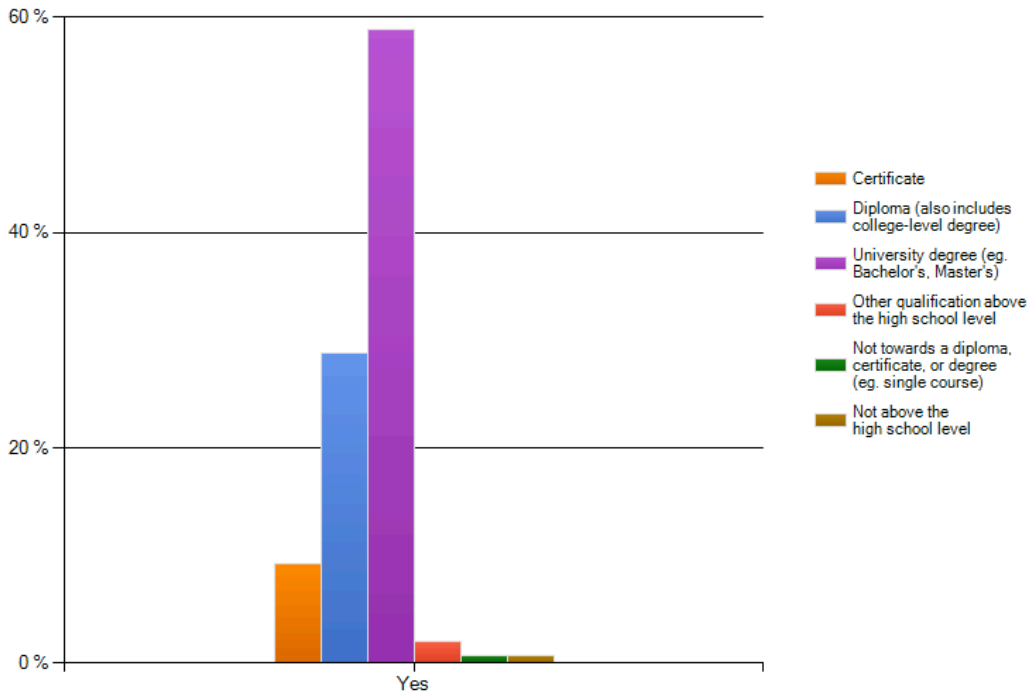
the number of respondents who are attending a post-secondary program located within their community. Respondents who are intending to relocate to another community, have overwhelmingly chosen an urban centre.



Almost half - 47% of rural/northern respondents identified a comprehensive community institution as the type of school in which they are enrolled in their current post-secondary education program, with 18% attending a comprehensive research university, 10% attending a baccalaureate institution, 7% attending an arts and culture institution, and 6% a technical institute.

Further to this, most respondents, 59%, are pursuing a post-secondary education program that upon completion will result in a university degree (Bachelor's, Master's), followed by 29% expecting to receive a diploma or college-level degree, and 9% expecting a certificate upon program completion.

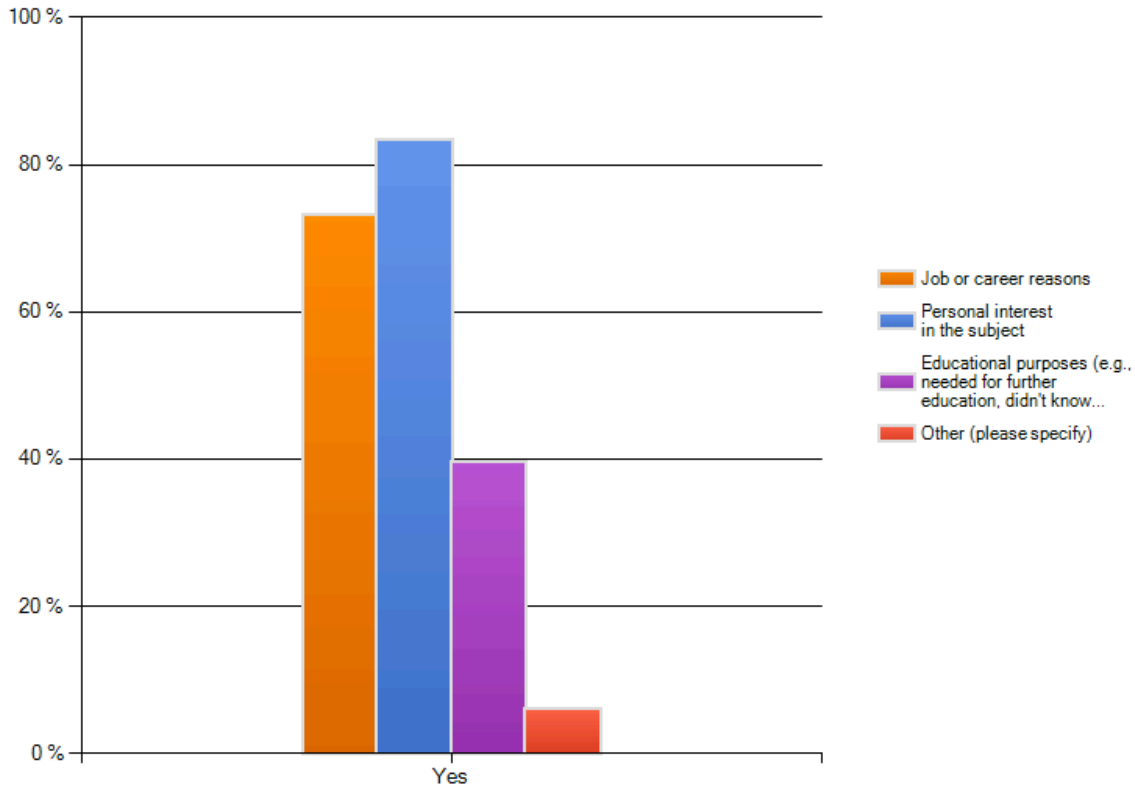
Please confirm exactly what qualifications someone receives at the end of this program. Would it be, for example, a diploma, a certificate, some other qualification...?



Rural-northern respondents were asked to provide the main field of study in their program. Disciplines in the Arts, most cited were: psychology, fine arts & design, sociology, and history. Business programs such as Bachelor of Commerce, accounting, bookkeeping, business and office administration were also popular responses. Many respondents are also enrolled in Education programs, varying roles in the health sector, and sciences (engineering, computer science, animal sciences, biology and general science programs).

Interestingly, there were almost no students reporting that they were enrolled in trades programs, environmental, and/or agriculture programs. Most respondents stated that the reason they took their program was due to a personal interest in the subject, rather than for career or educational purposes.

What are/were the reasons you took this program? Mark all that apply.



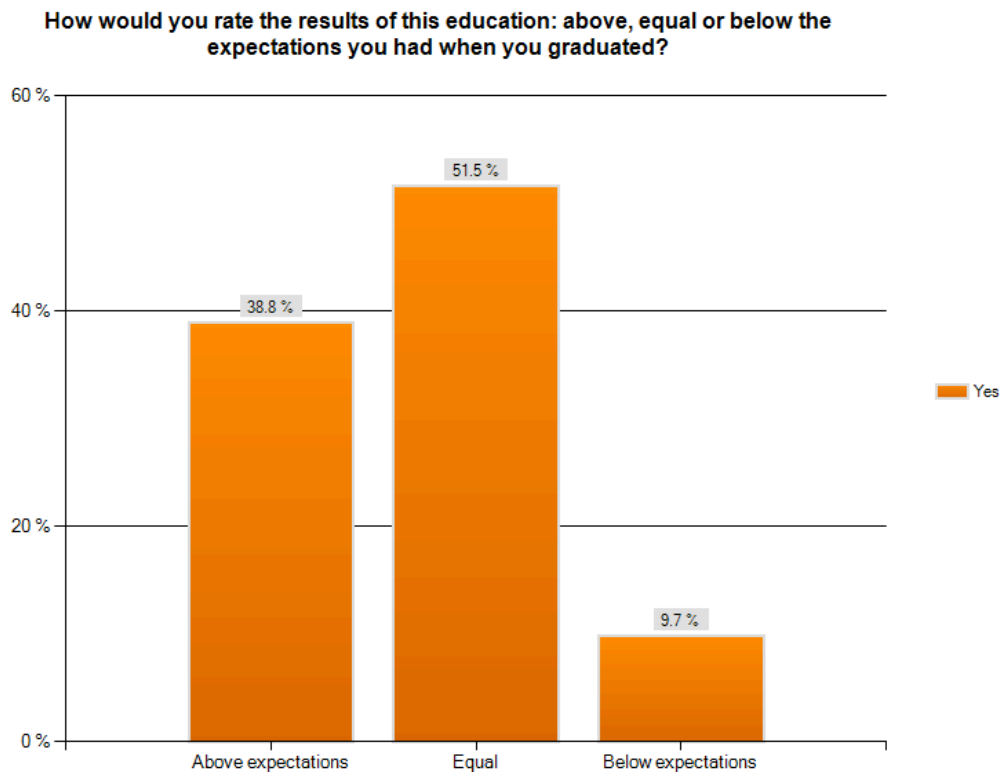
Since most respondents indicated they are pursuing university degrees, it is not surprising that the majority - 52% - are enrolled in programs that will take 4 years to less than years to complete if taken full-time. There are very few respondents - 9% - enrolled in programs that would take less than one year to complete.

Nearly all respondents are enrolled as full-time students in their program.

While nearly all respondents are currently enrolled in a post secondary education program, and plan to complete their program, there were still a few respondents who had left their program prematurely and almost each one reported that they did not have enough interest or motivation to complete their program. No respondents who left their program early identified a financial situation as their reason for not continuing in their program.

However, it is again important to note the self-selection of surveying students who have already gained access post-secondary, and therefore possessed the necessary resources to attend, nevertheless, no respondents had left their program due to a financial situation (costs too much or didn't have enough money).

This chart shows participants' satisfaction with their education. The respondents were asked to indicate whether they felt that their education was above, equal or below their expectations. Unfortunately the chart reveals that the majority, 62%, did not perceive their education to be above their expectations, with most responding that the results of their education were equal to their expectations.



When participants were asked to provide the main factors they considered in choosing their education courses and/or programs, their most prevalent responses were both personal interests and future career prospects, followed by considerations given to cost, location, program availability, convenience, facility, class size, time and personal ability.

4.1 Distance Education (Q 59-61)

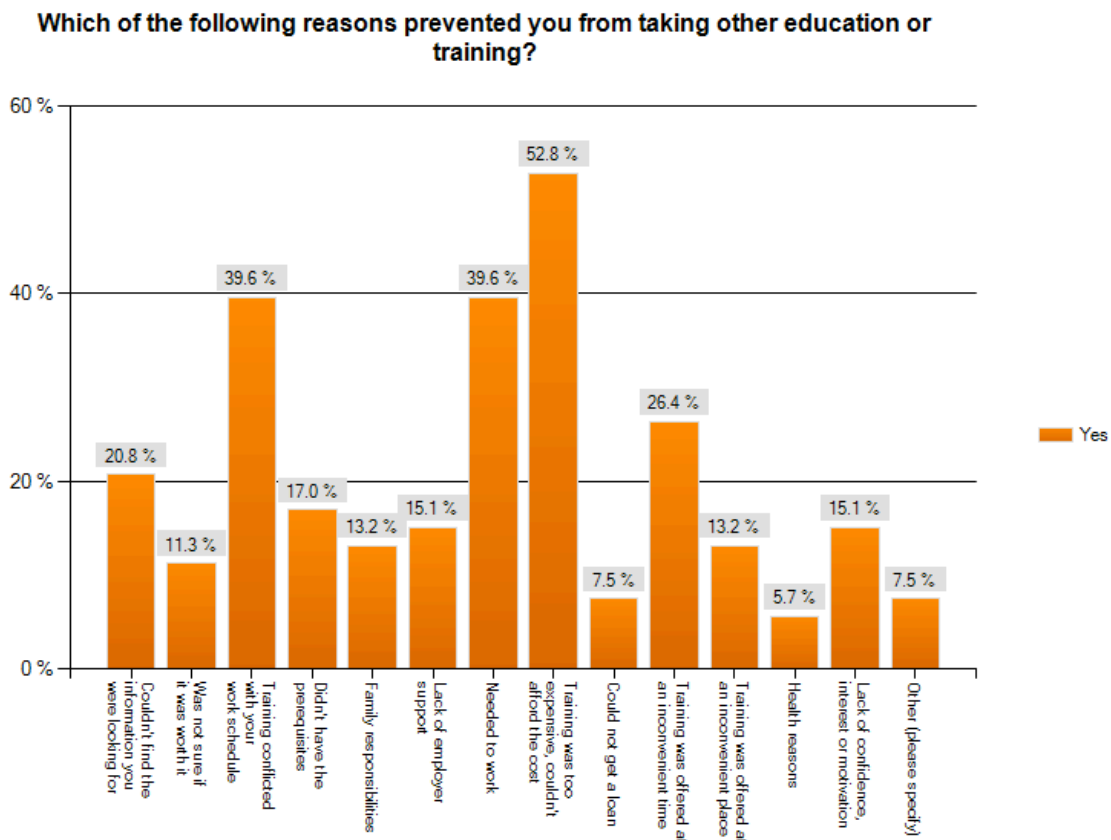
Participants were asked to indicate how much of their program was taken through correspondence or another type of distance education, including radio or television broadcasts, videotapes, video-conferencing, internet and e-mail. Nearly all respondents, 75%, reported that none of their program was taken via distance education.

Many participants agreed that distance education provides quality education opportunities in their home community, despite the fact that very few were actually utilizing some form of distance education.

5. Future Intentions (Q 62-73)

Looking ahead to future studies, 35% of rural and/or northern respondents stated that between July 2010 and June 2011 there was some education or training that they wanted to take but did not. When asked to provide the reason for not registering in their desired program, 53% reported that it was too expensive and they could not afford the costs.

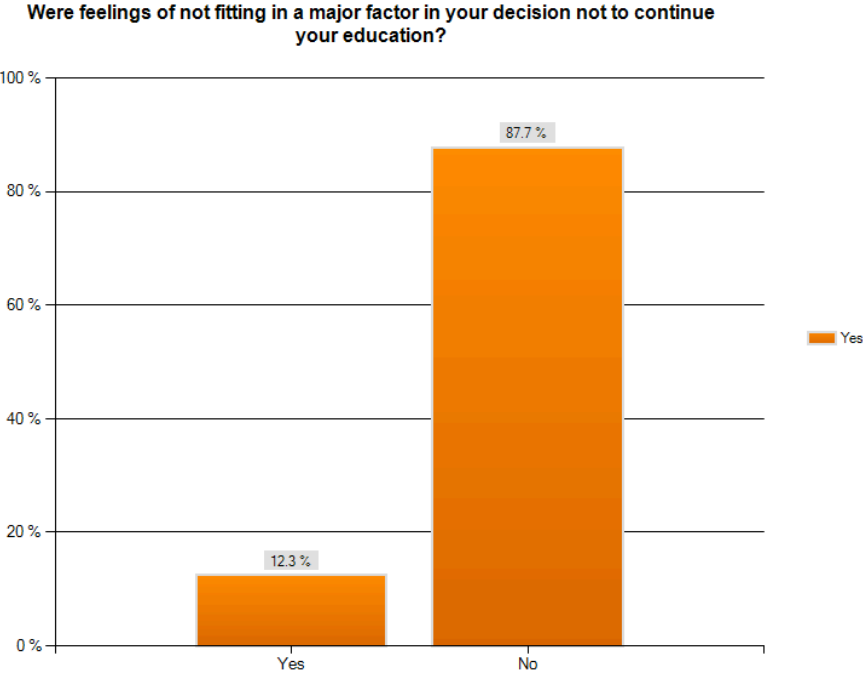
Respondents also stated that this was the most important reason in their decision-making. It is important to note that rural and/or northern respondents who wanted to enroll in some education and/or training cited inconvenient time of the program as a negating factor over location.



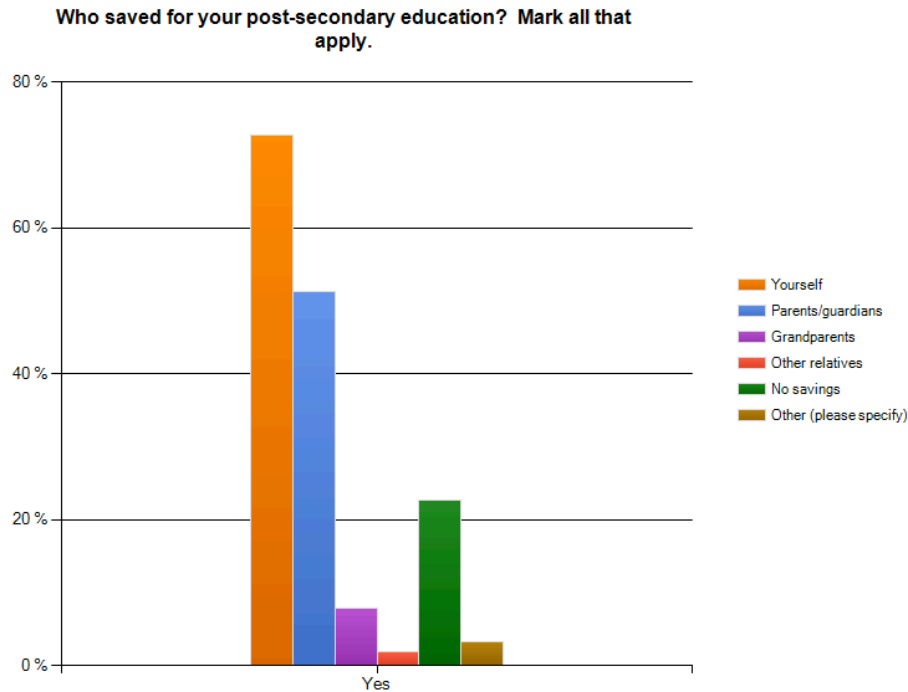
While this chart illustrates that the majority of respondents did not consider feelings of ‘not fitting in’ in their decisions not to continue their education, there is still a significant amount

of respondents that did. Based on the participants selected for this study, it may possibly be inferred that if populations in rural and/or northern Alberta that are not attending ASEC member institutions were surveyed, results may implicate feelings of not fitting in as a much larger contributing factor. This is an area to consider for further research.

When asked to explain their feelings of not fitting in, responses included: a lack of confidence in abilities to succeed, fears about moving away from family and friends, apprehensions in being a mature student, not confident programs would support learning needs, and worries about being a single mother in post-secondary education.



6. Financial Information (Q 74-82)



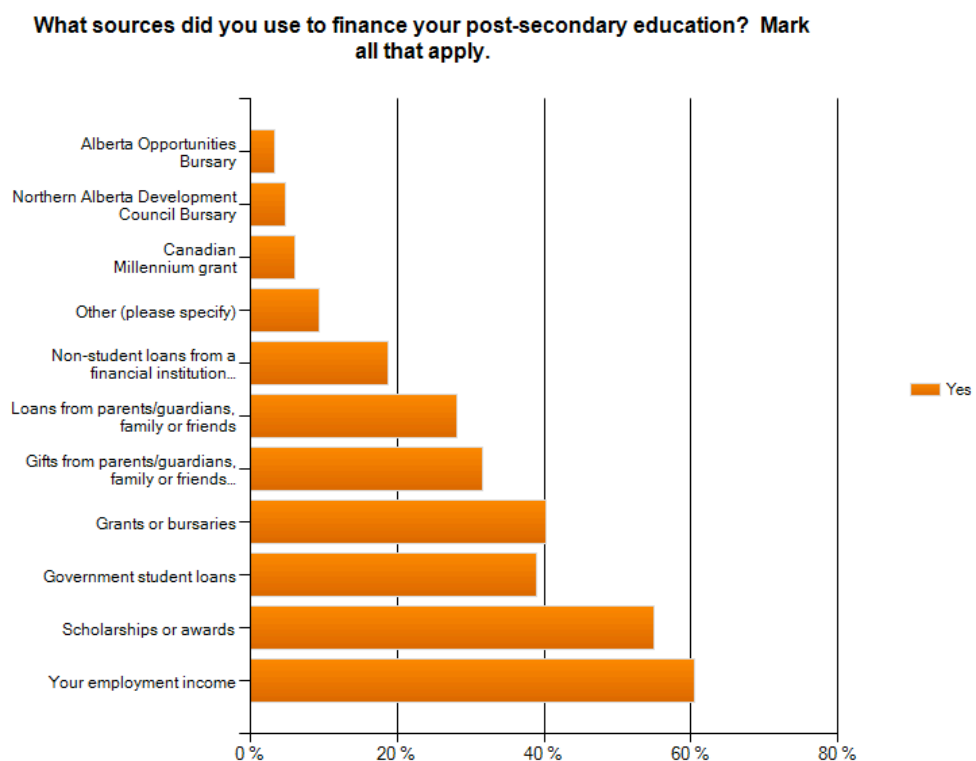
Nearly three-quarters - 73% - of respondents reported that they saved for their post-secondary education themselves, and just over half - 51% - of respondents stated that their parents/guardians saved for their post-secondary education. Roughly one in ten reported that they had grandparents and/or other relatives save for their postsecondary. Alarmingly, more than 22% reported that they had no savings for their post-secondary education. Rural and/or northern students not only have to cover the costs of tuition and supplies required for post-secondary education and training, but also must incur the associated costs of commuting and possibly relocating to attend a post-secondary institution. Financial savings and the development of an awareness of cost associated with the pursuance of post-secondary education should be provided to students.

Roughly 42% of respondents have received government student loans; conversely, 58% of respondents have not received any government student loans. Participants who received government student loans on average owe approximately \$25,000 for all their government student loans upon completion of their post-secondary education programs.

Slightly more than one in five - 22% - respondents reported that they received a loan remission, debt reduction or loan forgiveness on their government student loans. When all respondents were asked, not just the respondents who have received a student loan, to estimate the amount of money that has to be repaid such as government student loans, bank loans, lines of credit, parents, spouse or partner or others, the average amount reported was approximately \$20,000.

Most rural and/or northern respondents - 89% - reported that they did not receive a Canadian Millennium Scholarship Fund or an Alberta Opportunities Bursary with even less at 5%, reporting that they received money from the Northern Student Supplement.

AT 60%, employment income was the highest reported source used to finance participants' post-secondary participation. Second, scholarships or rewards were reported by 55% of the respondents as a financial source, which is followed by grants and bursaries as reported by 40% of participants.

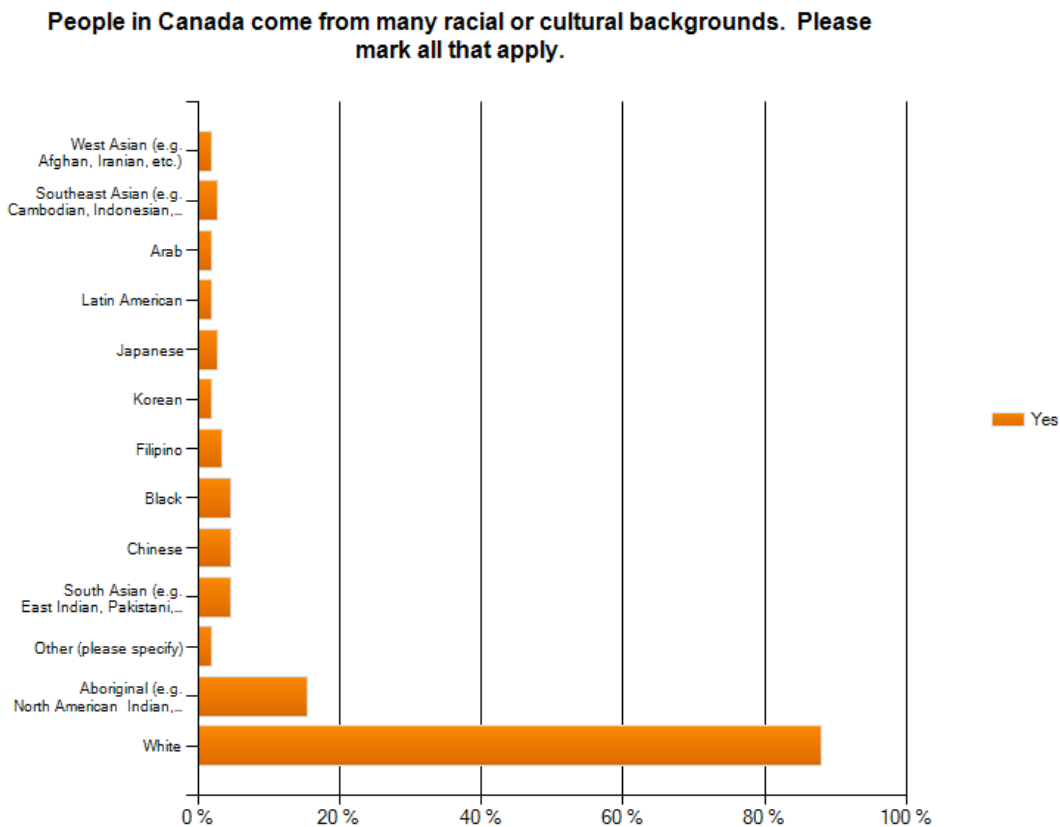


7. Socio-economic status (Q 83- 101)

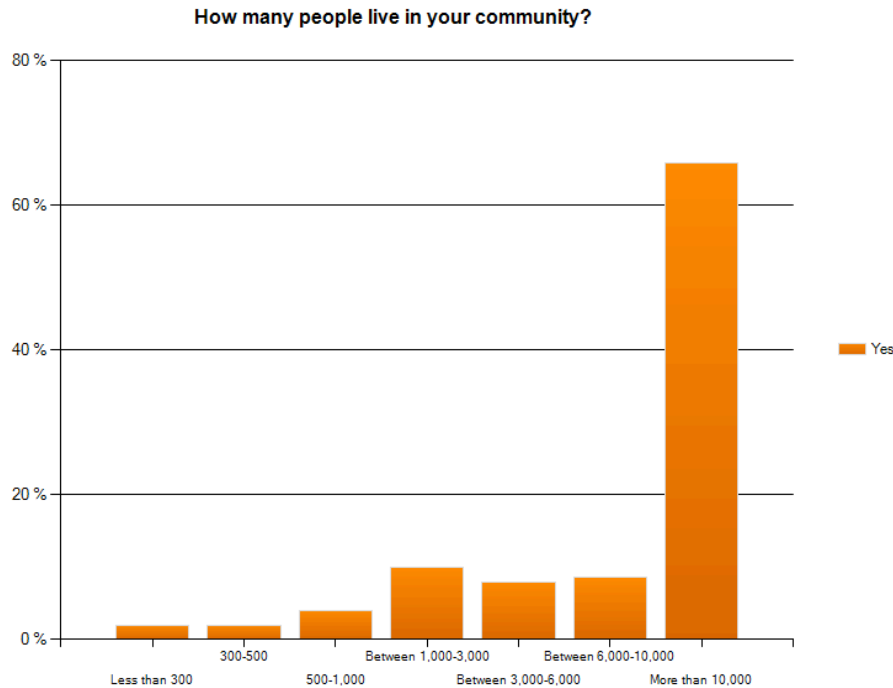
Nearly all of our respondents - 98% - reported that they were Canadian citizens, and the majority at 97.4% reported that their first language was English; 68% reported that they were between the ages of 18 and 24, with the largest participation amongst 21 – 24 year olds at 41%. Significantly, 32% or respondents are aged 25 and older.

The responses to the survey were overwhelmingly female, with 80% of respondents identifying themselves as female and conversely on 20% identifying themselves as male.

The participants represent a diverse range according to their racial and/or cultural backgrounds, yet the majority identify themselves as white at 88%, followed by 15% of respondents identifying themselves as Aboriginal (e.g. North American Indian, Métis or Inuit).



62% of respondents reported to have lived in their community for more than 10 years, with most living in communities comprised of populations greater than 10,000.

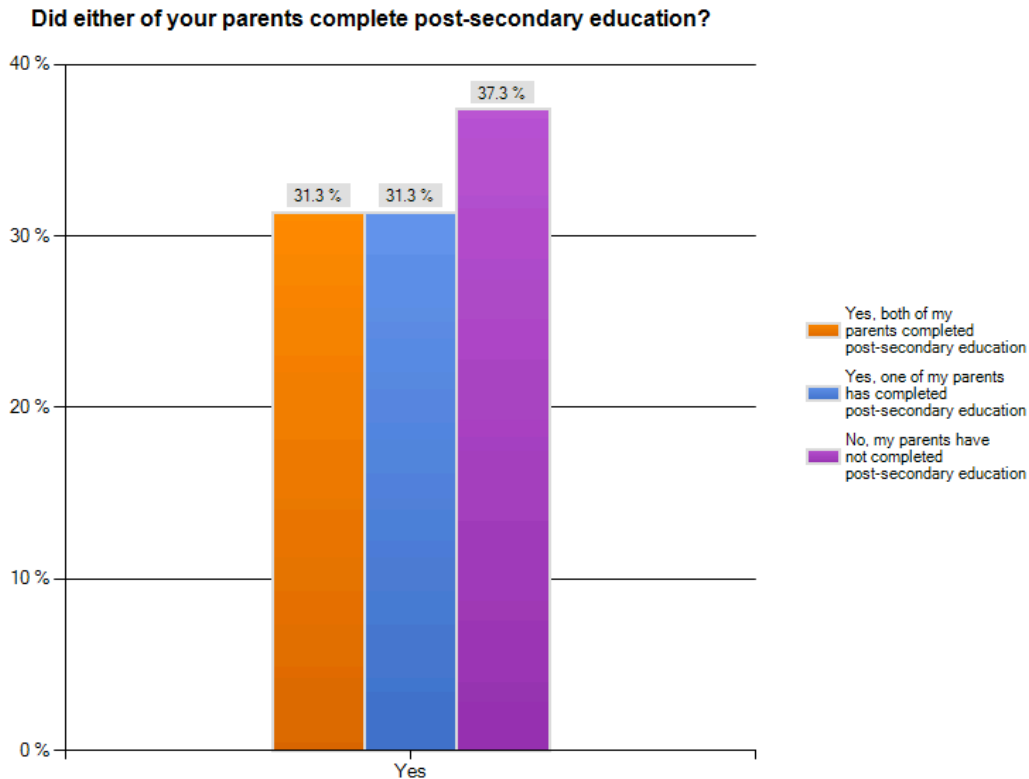


97% reported that they have access to the internet at their home, which leaves 3% without access to the internet at home.

Only 6% of respondents reported that they had been employed at some point in the energy. Most of the positions held by this group of respondents required at least some form of training or education after high school, with only one exception in which the participant was employed as part of a high school labour experience program.

The catchment area of the survey may be limited in its scope as to accurately assess the employment and training levels of rural and/or northern Albertans in the energy. However, it is worthy to note that participants are not tailoring their programs to employment opportunities linked to energy. Additionally, the survey indicates that students are not taking up employment in the energy sector during their time off from school or while attending school.

According to the results of the survey, rural and/or northern respondents were almost equally likely to have parents that had both completed post-secondary education, to have only one parent that has complete post-secondary education, or to have parents that have not completed post-secondary education.



8. Final Thoughts (Q 102-106)

We asked three concluding questions to better understand individual and community needs for post-secondary education.

In response to the first question - What are your main reasons for choosing to pursue or not pursue post-secondary education? - most respondents cited future opportunities.

Future opportunities most often referred to employment opportunities, and the ability to choose careers of interest, with respondents acknowledging the importance of education in achieving their future aspirations. Respondents also referred to future opportunities as job security, financial stability, and enjoying a healthy and happy lifestyle. A significant number of respondents stated that the pursuance of their passions and/of the enjoyment of learning were motivators in their decision to pursue post-secondary education.

For the majority of respondents who did not pursue post-secondary education or have left post-secondary education, they reported that the financial cost associated with their program was a determining factor. There was also one respondent who did not have the

required grade point average from high school to attend, and one student who felt she had to leave due to a pregnancy.

Interesting to note, one participant stated that their motivation to pursue post-secondary education was to leave their rural, northern community, while in contrast, another respondent stated that their reason for pursuing post-secondary education was to gain the necessary skills that would allow them to remain within their rural community.

Our second question asked “What are some ways to improve upon post-secondary education options/delivery in your community?”

Rural and/or Northern participants were asked to identify some ways to improve upon post-secondary education options and/or delivery in their community. The responses are predominantly reflected by one of the following three themes: more variety in offered programs and their delivery, better financial supports, and the need to provide greater awareness of post-secondary education opportunities. Respondents who believed that more program variety and delivery options were needed, expressed dissatisfaction with offered courses, which they felt were reflections of ‘popular choices’, or that not enough ‘higher’ learning opportunities were available (i.e. Bachelor & Master’s degrees). Respondents also expressed a need for more variety and availability in distance learning, and evening classes. Accessibility to increased variety in programming/courses and delivery options were the most cited improvement factors for post-secondary education by rural and/or northern respondents.

Financial support was identified as a means for improvement, with respondents suggesting that more affordable housing options be made available and more funding for relocation and transportation costs, which are unique circumstances to rural students. A few respondents noted that more opportunities for student employment, and more school-work experiences be created to alleviate their expenses. The creation of more grants, scholarships, and accessibility to financial supports were mentioned multiple times, including the desire to create community-based awards and scholarships.

Lastly, there were a number of respondents that expressed concern over the lack of awareness of post-secondary education opportunities in their communities. The respondents believed that there should be (more) communication between post-secondary education institutions and high schools. Suggestions were made that high school teachers should be better informed about post-secondary educational opportunities, so they may support their students. One-to-one discussions in high school were recommended as a means to discuss with students their individual interests and to help them identify a program that matches their interests. It was also mentioned that information should be provided to

students while they are in high school on what requirements they need to attend post-secondary education institutions.

Some respondents discussed the need for provisions that accommodate mature students in rural and/or northern Alberta. It was noted that mature students sometimes need more resource and support than younger students in finding information about post-secondary education options. It was also suggested that modifications be made in terms of upgrading for mature students, so that they may only be required to write an exam instead of taking full courses. Respondents believed that initiating reach out opportunities to target mature learners would improve post-secondary options/delivery within their community.

Our final question asked “Do you feel that the education and training programs available fit your community’s needs?”

Many respondents felt that the education and training programs available are well matched to the needs of their communities. Those who did not feel that available programs were meeting their community’s needs commented that in order to be granted degrees and/or certificates, a lot of programs required the student to relocate and finish elsewhere. The need for more professional and higher level programs was again mentioned here. Some participants also believed that the teaching quality did not meet their community’s needs.

Interestingly, some respondents felt that there were not enough trade options and trade variety available to suit their community, while at the same time some felt that the programs offered, including the trades reflected the specific industry demands and shortages. This contrast may be explained by the geographical location of the rural and/or northern Alberta respondent. It is most likely that respondents in areas such as Fort McMurray will have more trades options available to meet its community needs, compared to an area that is more remote.

Analysis and Recommendations

Analysis

1. Policy Factors

According to our results, over 94% of rural and/or northern Albertan participants have looked for information concerning courses, programs, workshops, seminars or other activities with the intention to improve their knowledge, skills or competencies. Only 5% of the participants who sought information were not able to find what they were looking for. These findings evidence that there is an existing demand for post-secondary and training opportunities among rural and/or northern Albertans. It is encouraging that the majority of participants were able to locate the information they were seeking and that nearly all (96%) found it useful. However, it must be noted that the participants for the survey were already taking part in the post-secondary system - a population that has been successful in accessing information and post-secondary opportunities. Therefore, we must not draw the conclusion that information is as readily available as the survey indicates. Further research is required into the experiences of rural and/or northern Albertans who have not accessed the system and their quest for information gathering.

The most popular source for locating information was the internet, with 92% of the participants indicating that this was their most valuable source. The next most valuable source was an education or training institution, as indicated by 60% of respondents. The results affirm the significance of maintaining and distributing resources via the internet. It is imperative that to use this medium for resource, that access is equally distributed throughout Alberta's communities.

Rural and/or northern Alberta participants were surveyed on their awareness of various programs and initiatives that have been implemented to improve their accessibility to post-secondary education. When the respondents were asked if they have ever accessed an Alberta-North Community Access Point (CAP) the response was very low with only 5% indicating that they have and those who accessed the CAP site did so for general information purposes.

These results suggest that the resources on post-secondary education opportunities are not being communicated to Alberta's rural and/or northern learners. Importantly, the population surveyed accessed students already participating in Alberta's post-secondary education system and their awareness levels as indicated in the survey are disturbingly low.

In order to ensure that Alberta is providing equitable opportunity to all Albertans, the resources and information must be made equitably accessible. Too often resources that are created do not reach their intended populations and continue to serve those already advantaged within the system. An evaluation of the effectiveness of these programs, and their ability to communicate with their targeted population(s) is required. Extra measures need to be implemented to ensure that programs are in actual fact reaching out to rural and/or northern Albertans who are unable to attain the resource on their own, in order to actualize equitable opportunity mandates.

Participants were questioned on their knowledge in accessing government student loans, with 59% agreeing that they know where to locate information on student loans. Approximately 30% were aware of how much funding they were eligible for and the same amount were aware of interest relief and debt reduction programs. Government student loans are predominantly based on factors associated with financial need, and should be providing more information on their services especially to rural and/or northern Alberta populations. These students must incur extra costs associated with commuting, or relocating if a program is not offered within their community. By informing students of the government loan programs, student participation rates may increase, as they are provided or more aware of the financial supports to assist with the cost of their desired program.

The rural and/or northern survey participants were questioned about their attitudes towards learning. Nearly all respondents agreed that education is essential for individuals and communities to prosper, and that education is worth the financial costs. Again, the self-selection bias of our sample is clear here, as it is difficult to reconcile the positive views towards the beneficial outcomes of pursuing post-secondary education with the lowest participation rate in Canada for the broader slice of rural and northern Albertans. This disconnection between participants' beliefs and the actual participation rates needs further exploration. Nevertheless, concern remains that rural and/or northern Albertans are not provided with adequate resource and equitable access to post-secondary education, especially when noting the survey results of the awareness levels of education resources and initiatives.

2. Economic Factors

Notably, fifty-one percent of rural and/or northern Alberta participants stated that they took off more than 3 months between high school and their (first) postsecondary program. This finding is consistent with the findings in the literature noted earlier, whereby Barr-Telford, Cartwright, Prasil & Shimmons (2003) found in their evaluation of the PEPS that more than half of the students began their postsecondary education after high school, with the majority transitioning before the age of 20 (p 8). While more than half of high

school students are transitioning directly into post-secondary education, a little less than half are not. When respondents were questioned about their activities between high school and their (first) postsecondary program, 79% responded that they were working. The strong economy in the west is often sought after as an explanation for Alberta's low post secondary participation rate.

When respondents were asked if they had ever been employed in the oil sands, only 6.6% of rural and/or northern respondents indicated that they have, with each position requiring some form of education or training beyond high school, with the exception of a high school work experience position. The population in the survey pursued some form of postsecondary education and the respondents were predominantly female. Further research will be required to identify any trends that may exist between Alberta's strong economy and low post-secondary participation rates, especially among males. Barr-Telford et al. (2003) reported earlier that according to PEPS there are lower participation rates among males in postsecondary education. The employment opportunities in the oil and gas industry tend to be male-oriented positions, which may be accountable for lower participation rates in post-secondary education among males. An examination that the effects of available employment opportunities have on male participation rates would be crucial to informing postsecondary education policy initiatives. If there a positive correlation is found, a space is created to encourage partnerships between local post-secondary institutions and local employers and/or businesses.

Only 4% of respondents identified themselves as part-time students. Most respondents stated that they were enrolled as full-time students and 77% of rural and/or northern Alberta respondents indicated that they work part-time while in school. Interestingly, Anne Motte, Joseph Berger and Andrew Parkin (2009) of the Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation, note that according to data from Statistics Canada's Labour Force Survey, "the employment rate between September and April among 20- to 24-year-old full-time students grew from 42 percent in 1994-95 to 48 percent in 2007-2008" (p 103). This number is vastly smaller than the 77% reported by respondents in our survey. Rural and/or northern students often must incur additional financial costs associated with relocating and commuting to their postsecondary education program. It is likely that the difference between these two numbers is a reflection that students from rural and/or northern locations must work part-time to support their studies. Accordingly, more than half of the respondents were required to commute or relocate to attend their chosen postsecondary education program. The incurred costs acquired by rural and/or northern students to access postsecondary education requires greater compensation, as well as more active engagement in raising awareness by the organizations that provide supports to this group of students.

Unfortunately, Advanced Education and Technology endured cuts to their budget in Alberta's 2010 Budget that affected financial support opportunities for postsecondary education participants. The Alberta Opportunities Bursary (AOB) and the Northern Student Supplement (NSS) were eliminated from the Alberta Scholarship and Bursary Program. In addition, Alberta Student Loan Relief Benefit was affected; limiting the amount of debt a student in Alberta may graduate with. All three programs operated as financial supports for students in financial need, as well as rural and/or northern students. In their coverage of the Budget 2010, on February 10, 2010 CTV News reported that, "the government says \$50 million will be saved by cutting grants to post-secondary students." Bursaries, grants and loan relief programs are supports that students acquire due to their financial need. The cuts to these programs will most likely result in furthering the low postsecondary participation rate evident in Alberta, especially in rural and/or northern areas of the province. Student debt and the amount students are required to repay on government student loans and other borrowing sources will certainly increase.

In the ASEC Post-Secondary Participation Survey we are not able to measure the effects of the programs that endured cuts in the 2010 Budget. However, we are able to present data on the number of rural and/or northern respondents in our survey that have received financial support from the programs that have been cut. According to our results 42% of participants have received a Canadian federal or provincial student loan. The average amount reported by respondents that they owed on their students loans at the completion of their program was \$25,270.85. The amount of students accessing government student loans reflects close to half of the respondents, indicating that rural and/or northern Alberta participants are experiencing financial need and require funding assistance in accessing their postsecondary education programs. Twenty-two percent of respondents reported that they received loan remission, debt reduction or loan forgiveness. 27% of respondents indicated that they received some funding from the Alberta Opportunities Bursary (AOB), the Canadian Millennium Grant, a federal assistance program that was cut in 2009, and/or the Northern Student Supplement (NSS).

Our findings evidence that the AOB, NSS, Canadian Millennium Grant and loan relief programs are important and being utilized by Alberta's rural and/or northern students. At present, many rural and/or northern Alberta students wishing to pursue higher educational opportunities and/or university degrees for most programs will be required to relocate to either Edmonton or Calgary – two expensive urban centres. The costs associated with attending these institutions consequently will raise the financial need of this group of students, and their need to access available resources to gain equitable postsecondary educational opportunities. We suggest reinstating the AOB and NSS with enhanced communication around these programs as a way of increasing affordability for rural and northern students.

3. Social Factors

Earlier it was noted that the awareness levels of post-secondary education resources and initiatives were well below satisfaction. The same finding is referenced in the literature review by A Learning Alberta's (2005) assertion that the Alberta Advanced Education's Accessibility Study indicates that rural students in Alberta are less likely to be aware of post-secondary educational opportunities (p 4-5). Interestingly, research also indicates that the impact of the geographical location on rural students appears to be less of a barrier to post-secondary access than the social and cultural factors associated with living in a rural area (Advanced Education and Technology, 2005).

While rural and/or northern Alberta residents are physically removed from post-secondary institutions, the availability of resources and information are presently capable of transcending boundaries. In the survey, respondents were asked to rank a list of people and resources in order of the importance they feel they exercise in informing their decisions about post-secondary education. According to the results, parents and/or guardians were the most important source, followed by post-secondary education web pages and high school teachers. Post-secondary education web pages were ranked the second most important source to inform respondents' decisions on post-secondary education, even more important than high school teachers! The majority of rural and/or northern respondents did not agree that they were provided with adequate resources and education in career development and/or post-secondary options, yet 75% stated that they were confident in their abilities to locate information and resources on post-secondary educational opportunities.

It is important to note that nearly all respondents are post-secondary students and hence possess the skillset to locate educational resources. In addition, it is important to remember the lack of awareness that they do possess. The internet is a powerful tool to provide resources to populations living in rural and/or northern Alberta, and while it appears that the respondents are accessing and using the internet as a tool to locate information, it may be inferred that post-secondary educational resources and information that would be valuable assets to these students are not being communicated. It is crucial that residents in rural and/or northern Alberta are informed of the resources that are available to them and are given the necessary tools to access them. The implementation of educational initiatives and resources must employ standards that ensure they are equitably reaching all Albertans, especially given the accessibility provided in today's information age.

The influence of parents in post-secondary education participation and access is continually affirmed in the research and literature. Finnie, R. & Mueller, R. (2008)

determined that a parents' education level was a more important determinant in post-secondary participation than their income. Parents affect participation rates through the expectations they hold for their children, with Barr-Telford, Cartwright, Prasil & Shimmons (2003) noting that students who felt their parents expected them to go to university were twice as likely to attend than those who felt their parents did not expect them to attend (p 7).

Parental expectations and their education levels will affect their ability to provide access to knowledge and resources on post-secondary education options for their children. In our survey, we noted that parents and/or guardians were reported by participants as the most important source of information for their decision making process. An overwhelming majority (89%) also stated that their parent(s)/guardian(s) expected them to pursue post-secondary education. It would be valuable to correlate this result with non-postsecondary participants in rural and/or northern Alberta. The result would most likely provide a stark contrast to the 89% result, confirming the extraordinary influence that parental expectations have in post-secondary education accessibility. Further, in the survey 62% of respondents agree that the decisions they made about post-secondary education were influenced by their parent(s)/guardian(s).

This finding demonstrates that not only are parents impacting decisions, but participants are aware of the influence their parents occupy and actively engage with their parents to seek information on post-secondary education opportunities. It is imperative that parents are equipped with the necessary resource to assist their children in making decisions regarding post-secondary education. A collaborative effort to build relationships between community, high schools, Alberta government and other organizations involved in post-secondary education will create an environment that is accessible to parents. High schools, local community centres, CAP sites, and local libraries may create excellent spaces for a conglomerate to actively reach out and educate members of their community on post-secondary education opportunities, subsequently increasing accessibility and participation in rural and/or northern Alberta.

According to the survey results, 37% of participants reported that neither of their parents had completed post-secondary education, 31% reported that one of their parents had completed post-secondary education, and the same amount indicated that both of their parents had completed post-secondary education. Advanced Education and Technology (2005) states that there is a difference between parents' education attainment levels in urban and rural areas, with urban parents being more likely to have completed post-secondary education (p 5). There is a significant achievement gap between rural and urban Albertans.

Rural Albertans are twice as likely to not achieve an education past grade 9 and experience much lower participation rates than their urban counterparts (Advanced Education and

Technology, 2005, p 4). It appears that parents are contributing to the continued achievement gap via their education attainment levels, their expectations, and their ability to transfer knowledge. These factors emerge as greater contributing factors than family income and location, and require further investigation. However, we would caution that the economic opportunities present in some geographic locations of rural and/or northern Alberta are exercising influence, rather than location as the physical distance from post-secondary institutions, which is less important. The importance of parents in post-secondary education accessibility and participation must be at the forefront in determining policy initiatives to improve participation rates. A holistic approach that involves both community and family to educate potential post-secondary students on the accessibility and the value of post-secondary education is required to improve participation rates in rural communities. The value of education is well documented as well as the effects it may bring not only to the individual, but also to their community. Accessibility to post-secondary education should not be an isolated, individual endeavor; it requires a collective approach, inclusive of all participating parties.

Age is a unique demographic that continually arises in rural post-secondary education participants. In the literature review, Alberta Advanced Education and Technology's (2005) claim that typical student characteristics do not apply to rural students are reflected in the results of the survey. Berger, J. (2009) asserted that most students pursue post-secondary education before the age of 24, and Barr-Telford, Cartwright, Prasil & Shimmons (2003) confirmed that 86% of the participants in the PEPS survey pursued post-secondary education before the age of 20. In our study, the majority of respondents (41%) stated that they were between the ages of 21-24, followed by 32% who are 25 years of age and older. The ages of the respondents are in direct contrast to the post-secondary participant ages as reported in the literature, however there is agreement found in the claim that rural students are characteristically older. The associated attributes that correspond to mature students must be considered in policy initiatives geared at raising participation and accessibility to rural and/or northern students. Further research into the late entry of rural students is required. Greater outreach that targets youth in rural communities may effectively encourage more direct transition patterns. In the case of rural and/or northern Alberta, we suggest building partnerships with local industries and employers who will work to encourage post-secondary education participation and naturally decrease employment opportunities that do not require higher education. The implementation of work experience programs that are linked with Alberta post-secondary institutions is one initiative that may be considered.

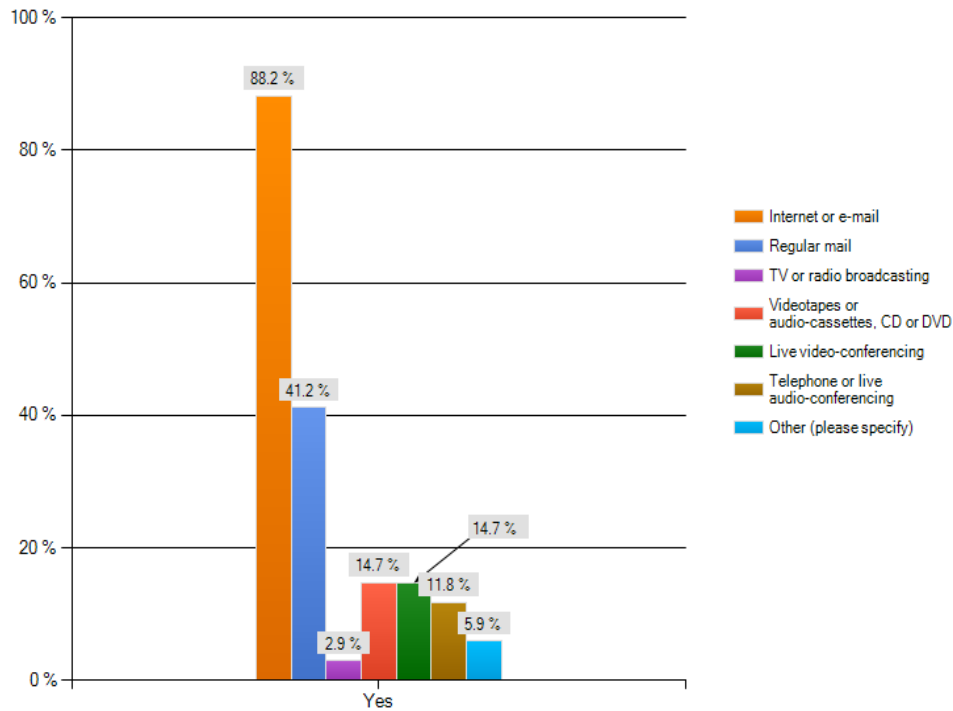
4. Technological Factors

The Internet and technology comprise a vital role in promoting accessibility and participation in post-secondary education. In our results, 92% of the respondents who were

actively searching for information on post-secondary education opportunities rated the Internet as the most valuable source. It was also noted that post-secondary web pages were rated by participants as the second most important, next to parents, in informing their post-secondary education decisions. The other categories provided to respondents included (in no particular order): friends, other family members, college or university students, high school teachers, guidance counselor, college or university campus tour, promotional materials/brochures, television or print advertising, recruitment officer from a post-secondary institution or a Learning Clicks Ambassador and Alberta Learning Information Service (ALIS).

The results affirm that the Internet is an imperative tool used by rural and/or northern Albertans to access information and educational resources, and consequently affirms the significance of maintaining and distributing resources via the Internet. This finding corroborated with the fact that awareness levels are unsatisfactory, presents an opportunity for organizations that offer post-secondary educational resources to improve upon their use of communication technology to reach rural and/or northern Albertans. At the very least, online resources must be available, and their links must be provided and accessible. The area high schools, community centres, local employment and training centres, local libraries, CAP sites, and community businesses and employers are all excellent places to present information regarding post-secondary education opportunities. It is not acceptable to simply have the information available, the staff at these locations must be confident in their ability to transfer the knowledge and to make the resources available.

What methods of distance education did you use? Mark all that apply.



Distance education has gained in popularity as a method to provide post-secondary education to populations living in rural areas. Rural and/or northern respondents affirmed their support of distance education, as 62% of respondents agreed that access to distance education provides quality education opportunities in their home communities.

Approximately 25% of rural and/or northern respondents indicated that they took at least some of their program through distance education. Distance education and/or correspondence is defined as education programming that takes place via radio or television broadcasts, videotapes, video-conferencing, Internet and e-mail. The source that was identified as being used the most by those participant that have partaken in distance education was the Internet or email (see chart below). An important consideration in using the Internet and technology is to ensure that equitable access is maintained. CAP sites provide technological access and supports for distance learning, yet awareness and use of CAP sites is low. The few respondents that have accessed a CAP site did not do so for technological purposes. There were 3% of respondents that reported that they do not have Internet access available at their home. Additionally, the respondents in the survey have successfully accessed the post-secondary education system. While the Internet is an excellent resource, it is imperative to consider the availability and accessibility of technological resources to those who have not accessed the system.

Summary of Recommendations

Strategy	Tactic	Change Agents
<i>Program enhancement</i>	Enhance access to distance learning opportunities	Post-secondary education providers
	Broaden scope of CAP sites	Post-secondary education providers
	Reinstate Alberta Opportunities Bursary and Northern Student Supplement programs	Government of Alberta
	Develop supports for 'boomerang' students who return to post-secondary from the workforce	Government of Alberta
<i>Outreach</i>	Rethink existing communications strategies to increase online and in-person knowledge transfer	Government of Alberta; post-secondary providers
	Target parents to ensure their knowledge of financial resources and post-secondary opportunities is current	Parents of post-secondary students
	Develop communications tools for a diverse audience of students, including traditional, First Nations and Metis, trades, and 'boomerang' students	Government of Alberta; post-secondary providers
<i>Partnerships</i>	Build relationships to create awareness and excitement around post-secondary education	High schools, government and community leaders
	Increase demand for skilled positions	Industry and employers

Opportunities for future research:

1. Targeting Albertans in rural and northern communities and using a similar survey instrument would provide an interesting comparison on decision-making, employment opportunities, and other key factors leading to the decision not to pursue post-secondary. This research is key to finding workable solutions to improving post-secondary participation within these areas of the province.
2. Deciphering the relationship between employment opportunities within regions, especially the effectiveness of industry- and government-led initiatives to create opportunities for educated positions in rural areas, can help bust unhelpful myths that perpetuate inequities in rural/northern access and achievement.
3. Further exploration is needed to understand the effect of parental influences on students, especially as it relates to expectations on post-secondary education attendance, family planning to address cost of education, and career-decision options. Better understanding these factors, vis-à-vis the effects of parental education levels could perhaps signal ways to improve social mobility for rural and northern students.
4. Improving low awareness of post-secondary opportunities among rural and/or northern students represents a significant challenge. We need to further investigate the persistence of trends: why is awareness lower, what factors are responsible and what steps can be taken to raise awareness?
5. Evaluation research can provide direction as to why high school students are not being properly informed of post-secondary during this key decision-making period. What are the awareness levels of high school personnel, and their preparedness to assist students and their families in getting up-to-date knowledge about post-secondary studies?

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