"I always knew I was going to leave": Student Retention in Lethbridge, Alberta.

Taylor Manns, Mitacs Research Intern
Parisa Boroumand, Research Intern
Sydney Whiting, Mitacs Research Intern

Supervised by:
Dr. Lars K. Hallstrom, Director, Prentice Institute
Perry Stein, RPP MCIP, Partner Services Manager, City of Lethbridge

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OVERVIEW

Supported by a **Mitacs Accelerate** grant, this year-long research project is in partnership with the City of Lethbridge and the Prentice Institute for Global Population and Economy seeking to better understand the role of work-integrated learning (WIL) programs in supporting a thriving community, highly skilled students, and stronger relationships between post-secondary institutions and the labour market.

Drawing on other case studies from Canada and around the world, this project is especially relevant to Lethbridge, communities of comparable size and demographics, and the broader Alberta community.

OBJECTIVES

1. To understand the potential role of WIL in supporting student retention and employability (with a specific focus on Southern Alberta);
2. To identify gaps in relationships between post-secondary institutions, students, communities, and the labour market;
3. To understand skills gaps and labour shortages in Southern Alberta, particularly in the public sector; and
4. To explore best practices in WIL (including measurement, service delivery, and relationship-building).

METHODS

Focus Groups
Six focus groups were conducted with WIL practitioners, public employers, and select private employers. Participants were asked to reflect on a series of 4-6 questions on WIL, post-secondary education, employability, and retention. Discussions took place online and were audio-recorded.

The use of focus groups created spaces for important dialogue that helped researchers better understand the contexts of their research questions, while also facilitating opportunities for collaborative knowledge production for researchers and participants alike to consider new ways of thinking (Cameron [11], 2021).

Survey
We sent out an 18-question survey to University of Lethbridge and Lethbridge College alumni to explore intersections between WIL and student retention. Based on alumni from the past 5 years, the total population was approximately 20,000. With a confidence interval of 95% and a margin of error of 5%, a representative sample was set at 378 respondents. The survey was open from March 28th to May 31st, 2024, and 611 total responses were recorded.

Semi-Structured Interviews and Focus Groups
Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were conducted with alumni from the Lethbridge College and University, allowing participants to lead conversations and provide more depth to understand someone's experience and how they make sense of issues and events (Bryman & Bell, 2019). Students were recruited from self-identifying survey respondents. In total, 10 individuals were interviewed.

Analysis
Audio recordings from the focus groups and interviews were transcribed verbatim and thematically coded with the NVivo software. Survey data was analyzed using SPSS. We utilized grounded theory (Bryman and Bell, 2019) and open coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) to understand the data's complexity and where it is situated to theoretical knowledge of the topic.

REFERENCES

Bryman, A. & Bell, E. (2019). Social Research Methods (5th ed.). Oxford University Press.

Cameron [11], J. (2021). Focusing on the Focus Group in I. Hay & M. Cope (Eds.), Qualitative Research Methods in Human Geography (pp. 200-221). Oxford University Press. ISBN 9780199034222.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. M. (1990). Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques. Sage Publications, Inc.

RESULTS

In our survey, we asked alumni whether they lived in Lethbridge before starting post-secondary, if they chose to stay in Lethbridge once they graduated, and what contributed to their decisions to stay or leave. In **figure 1.1**, this tabulation exemplifies that there is most-likely a relationship between the two variables—whether someone lived in Lethbridge before attending post-secondary and their likelihood to stay after graduation.

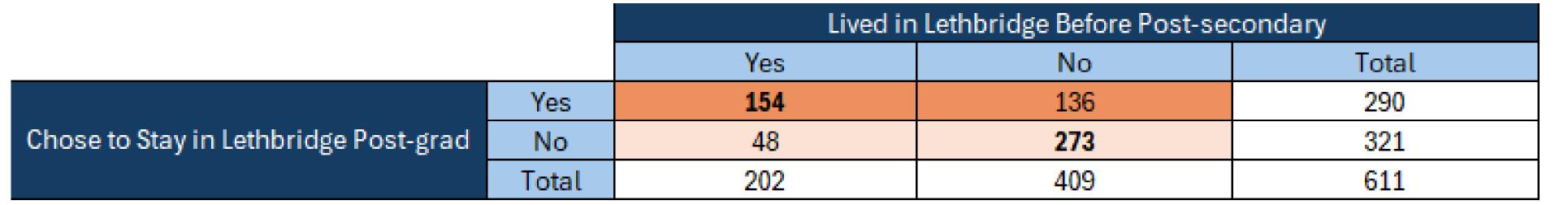|		Lived in Lethbridge Before Post-secondary		
		Yes	No	Total
Chose to Stay in Lethbridge Post-grad	Yes	154	136	290
	No	48	273	321
	Total	202	409	611

Figure 1.1 Crosstabs of variables 'lived in Lethbridge before post-grad' and 'chose to stay in Lethbridge post-grad'.
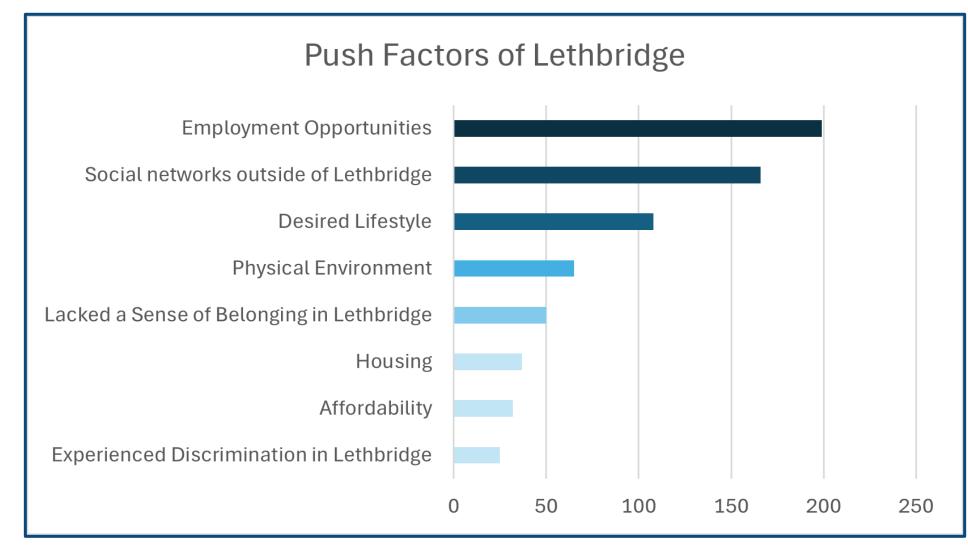

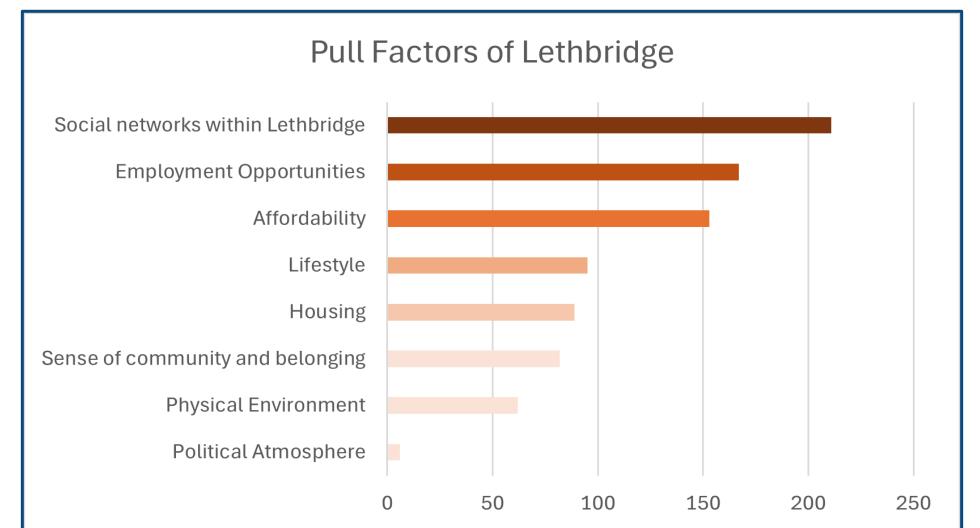Figure 1.2 Distribution of Lethbridge push factors

Figure 1.3 Distribution of Lethbridge pull factors

Figure 1.2 shows that the strongest three factors contributing to someone's choice to leave after graduation is the employment opportunities, social networks, and desired lifestyles within other municipalities.

*"From where I had lived and moving down to Lethbridge, I did...see that **there was a lot more overt racism** towards people. And just the way people would, like, talk about things...it was a bit appalling."* – **Alumni**

*"Lethbridge is just, other than the University, ... it's just **not a very vibrant place to be as a young adult**. Not only is it...one thing to be... to lack vibrancy kind of officially, but also kind of informally, right? So basically, like, anything outside of the university, there was always kind of ... an active push from anyone outside of the school. **They weren't really interested in like young people** and...young activities Downtown, right? Like, very little to do."* – **Alumni**

Figure 1.3 displays social networks, employment opportunities, and affordability to be the strongest pull factors in the decision to stay within Lethbridge upon graduation.

*"I left Lethbridge and I kind of missed it. It was like, you know, **everything was there, and it felt good**. So then when I had the opportunity to move back down again...I jumped on that and I'm happy with where I'm at now."* – **Alumni**

KEY INSIGHTS

Implications for Planning: The results from our study show that there is a desire for greater collaboration between campus and community, including aligning language around employment, critical discussions of DEI, and shared understandings of what all parties can contribute within their community. Our study highlights a greater need for **connection** between municipalities, employers, and post-secondaries to address issues of graduate retention within cities. With greater connection comes greater opportunity for:
- Economic and community development;
- Increased engagement with PSIs;
- Space for evidence-informed policy development

1. Disconnect Between Campus and Community

Disconnect was both tangible and intangible. Statements from alumni and employers outlined an experience of geographic disconnect between the campus and community (tangible), and WIL practitioners and employers desiring stronger, formalized relationships between campus and community (intangible).

2. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) and Expectations and the Changing Nature of Work

This theme discusses the intersectionality of identity factors, such as race, gender, age, disability status, citizenship, language, housing, transportation and more. Within our focus groups and interviews, conversations surrounding WIL, employment, and retention addressed the desire and challenges of implementing DEI.

3. Perspectives on Work Environments and Labour Market Changes

Includes occupational shortages, turnover, recruitment, opportunities within one's employment, and the expectations of employees and of the workplace. In this theme, it was evident that there are generational differences within the expectations of employers and job seekers.

Taylor Manns (taylor.manns@uleth.ca)
Parisa Boroumand (parisa.boroumand@uleth.ca)
Sydney Whiting (sydney.whiting@uleth.ca)

www.prenticeinstitute.ca   403.380.1814   prentice@uleth.ca
University of Lethbridge, 4401 University Drive West, Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada

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