

City and Post-Secondary Partnership Pathways:

Work-Integrated Learning and Retention in Lethbridge, Alberta

Executive Summary

Presentation of Results to City of Lethbridge Staff and Partners

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This project was a year-long initiative, co-funded by a Mitacs Accelerate Grant and the City of Lethbridge, to understand the role of work-integrated learning (WIL) in addressing labour market shortages and retention of skilled graduates in small and medium-sized communities like Lethbridge. The project featured extensive reviews of previous academic and applied research on these topics, original research, and multiple academic and community-oriented outputs. Over the course of this project, the following groups were engaged in different ways: interviews and focus groups with WIL practitioners at post-secondary institutions throughout Alberta (n=7), focus groups with employers in Lethbridge area (n=7)—including employers from the City of Lethbridge—follow-up interviews with alumni (n=10), and a survey with University of Lethbridge and Lethbridge College alumni (n=611).

This research has led to a series of recommendations, outputs, and an evolving conceptual model to re-envision WIL in Alberta and beyond. We hope that this work is relevant to WIL researchers, the institutional and project partners, and those interested in community development and labour attraction and retention more broadly.

From this research, the following key themes and implications emerged:

- 1. Participants experienced a real or perceived disconnect between campus and community spaces.** Students reported feeling disconnected from the Lethbridge community, whereas employers were looking for increased access and visibility on campus.
 - a. *Implication:* A strong relationship with post-secondary students, faculty, and administration could increase the City and other employers' access to Lethbridge's talent pool.
 - b. *Recommendations:*
 - i. Addressing accessibility (transportation, housing, and paid versus unpaid placements) as a barrier to student success.
 - ii. Fostering student integration into the community to nurture a sense of belonging within the community where they reside.
 - iii. Creating spaces where employers can position themselves within post-secondary institutions and connect directly with students.
- 2. There are real and perceived occupational and labour shortages, but questions of retention should include both economic and community considerations.** The reasons why people leave Lethbridge after graduation are diverse, and some points of intervention were identified.
 - a. *Implication:* Offering incoming (potential) employees a sense of embeddedness within both their workplace and community could help with the retention of talented workers.
 - b. *Recommendations:*
 - i. Continued investment in community initiatives that are targeted toward students.
 - ii. Offering long-term positions or opportunities for growth in jobs.
 - iii. Connecting with more students before graduation through WIL or campus events.
- 3. There is a lack of common language used to describe the challenges and needs of employers as they look to hire new students.** Employers often articulate their needs differently than how students articulate their skillset, leading to misconceptions and misalignment between WIL partners.
 - a. *Implication:* Identifying the necessary qualifications, experience, and knowledge, and how they align with post-secondary completion, provides clarity for graduates and students applying to jobs.

b. Recommendations:

- i. Transparency and consistency in recruitment materials and job ads (list the salary, offer entry-level positions when possible, and advertise on multiple job listing sites).
- ii. Rethinking the skills needed for the job to include a wider range of graduate experience and knowledge.
- iii. Align the job requirements (i.e., credentials) with programs that are available locally.

4. The values of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are often present, but it can be challenging to implement appropriate strategies and respond to the changing nature of work. Participants highlighted structural and social barriers in WIL and employment.

- a. *Implications:* Commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) helps to make people feel safe and comfortable, potentially increasing employee recruitment and retention; Reducing barriers for hiring newcomers (i.e., recognizing foreign credentials and experiences) could increase labour supply at the organization.

b. Recommendations:

- i. Changing organizational policies and practices to recognize newcomer credentials and experience.
- ii. Training and educating managers and employees surrounding DEI and why it is relevant in the organization.
- iii. Ensure transparency throughout DEI policy revisions with staff.

5. There are limited systems-based approaches to WIL and a lack of comprehensive measurement of successful WIL. The Government of Alberta positions WIL as a useful tool for economic development, but there continue to be programmatic differences between institutions in Alberta regarding WIL.

- a. *Implication:* Maintain consistency in program design, assessment, and delivery with the City Scholars Program at the City of Lethbridge

b. Recommendations:

- i. Set key goals and some standards for assessment in WIL offered through the City Scholars to ensure predictability for students and high-quality experiences.
- ii. Continue supporting the cohort-model of learning and Community of Practice approach in the City Scholars Program.