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Alberta-North's Northern Communities Research Project: Initial Research Findings

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*Serving Aboriginal Learners in Rural and Remote Communities
College Community-based Programming and Industry Partnerships*

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Presentation agenda

- About Alberta-North
- Research project overview
- Community consultations findings
- Survey:
 - design & distribution
 - respondent demographics & results
- Literature themes
- Future: pilot project, research project



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About Alberta-North

- Offers Distance Education courses in collaboration with its partner institutions: Athabasca University, Aurora College, Grande Prairie Regional College, Keyano College, Norquest College, Northern Lakes College, Portage College
- Partners provide facilities, learning technologies and support services to over 87 community learning sites called Community Access Points (CAP sites) across Alberta and the Northwest Territories

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Core Services at CAP Sites

- Information services
- Facility services: resources & computer technology
- Learning & course support services
- Academic support
- Employment services



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Attracting, Preparing, and Retaining Learners from Under-represented Populations in Northern Communities

- Funded by Alberta Advanced Education & Technology (AE&T) Innovation Fund
- September 2008 – August 2011

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Project objective

Investigate an under-researched area, namely issues associated with

attracting under-represented learners to Alberta-North sites to pursue and further their educational goals;

empowering under-represented learners for post-secondary education, including distance education (Alberta-North programs);

retaining learners who are engaged in adult education.



Why this project

- 2006 Census data shows that while Aboriginal post-secondary enrolments are gradually increasing, they are fewer than those of non-aboriginal; especially at university level.
- AE&T 2008-2009 institutional enrolment data show that Aboriginal enrolments collectively averaged about 20% of total enrolments at Alberta-North partner institutions in Alberta, less than a quarter of total enrolments.
- AE&T policy and discussion papers have emphasized the need to increase Aboriginal and under-represented population adult education participation.

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Anticipated project outcomes

- Research evidence about supports and barriers to attracting, preparing, and retaining learners in remote northern communities
- Pilot project(s) related to research findings
- Engagement of community and post-secondary stakeholders in a conversation about attracting, preparing, retaining learners
- Reports: peer-reviewed journal article(s), reports, papers, presentations, handbooks, etc.



Research approach

- **Participatory action research:** “... engages people in a community in all aspects of the research process -- determining research questions, developing approaches to obtain information, and most importantly, deciding what the research means and how it should be used to benefit the community.”
 - Steps: 1) articulate and describe what is; 2) reflect; 3) re-plan; 4) act.



Key research activities to date

- Literature review (on-going)
- Community consultations (3)
- Written survey of current and potential learners in northern communities

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Community consultations

- Three different population size communities chosen: Fort McKay, Frog Lake, Grande Cache
- Spring 2009
- Community agency representatives invited, including FCSS, Parent-Link, HRD, CALC, Women's Shelter, Health Unit, and First Nations bands

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Community consultation recommendations

- To attract students: Solid orientation, offer support (mentors, advisors), ensure visibility and knowledge of AB-North programs, invite alumni to visit, partner with organizations
- To prepare students: Offer preparatory training (stress buster workshops, self-esteem coaching, problem-solving), maintain support and stress importance of maintaining and building relationships, offer addiction help, address grief and loss issues
- To retain students: Offer strong orientation outlining purpose and goals, offer work experience programs to create relevance between education and work, hold community honour events, infuse more culture into education, provide a bright, comfortable learning environment

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Survey design

- Survey drafted, field tested in Peavine Metis Settlement, revised
- Demographic questions – location, gender, age grouping education, children at home, self-identification as First Nation on reserve, First Nation off-reserve, Metis, Inuit, Caucasian
- Five content questions



Survey content questions

1. Training background: what training have you taken in this location; what training have you taken elsewhere; if you left the training, why did you leave?
2. Preparation: what helped prepare you for your education in this community?
3. Barriers: what hindered you, or what barriers did you have to overcome? (Multiple selection)
4. Improvements: what suggestions do you have to make local training and education easier or more successful for those who take it?
5. Alberta-North: have you heard of Alberta-North; if so, what do you know about it?



Survey distribution and returns

- Survey was provided to Alberta-North Community Access Point (CAP) Coordinators for distribution among past, current and potential students in their regional communities
- 482 surveys were returned from 45 communities
- The number of surveys received from each community varied widely from 1 survey to, in one case, 153 surveys.



Respondent demographics

- Gender:
 - Female: 58%
 - Male: 35%
- Age:
 - 18 yrs or younger: 5%
 - 19-34 years: 48%;
 - 35+ years: 47%
- Self-identification
 - First Nations, on reserve: 29%
 - Caucasian: 20%
 - Metis: 19%
 - First Nation, off reserve: 16%
 - Inuit/Dene: 5%

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Respondent demographics

- Highest level of education:
 - No high school: 8%
 - Some high school: 40%
 - High school diploma: 14%
 - Post-secondary, including trades: 35%
- Children
 - Percentage of respondents with children at home: 65%
 - Average number of children per household: 2.56

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Survey results

1. What training have you completed in this location; what training have you taken elsewhere? Main responses:

Locally:

1. High school level (including upgrading courses)
2. Certificate level courses and programs (workplace safety tickets, college certificate programs)
3. Diploma level courses and programs
4. Degree level courses and programs



Survey results

Training taken elsewhere, main responses:

1. Certificate courses and programs
2. Just mentioned name of location or institution
3. Upgrading, grade 12
4. Diploma program
5. Degree program

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Survey results

Main reasons why people left education and training they took elsewhere:

1. Personal reasons
2. Family reasons
3. No funding, no childcare

Also mentioned: No transportation, no housing; medical reasons, lost interest, went to work

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Survey results

2. What helped prepare you for your education in the community? Main responses:
 1. Support of family, friends, bands, institutional councilors
 2. Personal self-confidence, motivation, determination
 3. Preparatory courses, upgrading, career planning, part-time/evening courses

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Survey results

3. What hindered you, or what barriers did you have to overcome?

Main responses

1. Lack of funding
2. Lack of transportation
3. Lack of childcare
4. Location of course or program
5. Fear

Other responses: Time, work/job commitments, personal problems, family responsibilities, literacy issues

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Survey results

4. What suggestions do you have to make local training and education easier or more successful for those who take it? Main responses:
 1. More courses, evening options, more online, more programming
 2. More funding availability, easier access to funding, more help with application process
 3. More self-confidence, motivation
 4. More tutors, one-on-one help, face-to-face instruction

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Survey results

5. Have you heard of Alberta-North; if so, what do you know about it?

- Yes, I know about Alberta-North: 52%
- No, I do not know about Alberta-North: 48%

What do you know about it?

- Distance, Online, Education, Web, Technology or Computer

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Literature review themes

The on-going review of the literature has revealed several themes, some of which are particularly relevant to our project research:

- A. Experience of learners in remote communities with DE
- B. The role of the family for students in PSE
- C. Funding assistance systems
- D. The return on investment in Aboriginal PSE
- E. Aboriginal cultures, values, and attitudes toward learning.



Project and programming conclusions and implications

1. Reconsidering standards of “success” for aboriginal students;
 - Importance of credentials; concept of linear, uninterrupted progress to graduation.
2. Distance delivery may resolve many of the logistical barriers: transportation, childcare, costs, program location & scheduling;
3. Distance education delivery resolves the issue of course cancellation due to lack of numbers (as occurs regularly with face-to-face delivery);
 - Suggest increasing awareness of Alberta-North programming and college DE programming; offer computer and distance education introductory session.
4. First generation students may need additional supports;
 - Suggest implementing and exploring the impact of mentors as additional supports to students.
5. Research has identified that families play an important role in the student’s participation in advanced education.
 - Suggest researching ways that family supports a student; plan ways to include family in events.

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Future

Pilot project:

Mentorship Program – Providing mentor training to select number CAP Coordinator to expand role from facilitator to mentor, and matching with students who wish that level of support.

Research project:

Research – Role of the family in relation to post-secondary students – in what ways do they support students?



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Thank you

For more information please feel free to contact:

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