

The Coordination Challenge

Urban Learning Institutions Meeting Rural Education Needs

By Andrea Collins

Most urban post-secondary institutions in Alberta must address regional and rural issues under the Campus Alberta model. The people coordinating these efforts come from the province's comprehensive community institutions that are each charged with stewardship of a wide geographic territory. Two of these colleges, Bow Valley in Calgary and NorQuest in Edmonton, offered to lead a research project on how to coordinate the challenge this presents.

"Our colleges had a unique challenge," said Andy Chicos of Bow Valley. "We are urban based, but have regional responsibilities. We need to facilitate access to education for all Albertans in our regions."

The project began with surveys, meetings and interviews to identify rural challenges and community barriers. Among the challenges were unemployment, skills shortages, need for economic growth, need to retain youth and skilled workers, literacy, immigrant integration, and workplace training. Barriers included course cost, inflexible schedules, work, personal commitments, parking, complicated admission procedures, and lack of support for cultural diversity.

The project also gauged community perspectives on post-secondary education. Surprisingly, rural residents were very open to online learning if it was supported by local resources; they wanted programs that were of local relevance and would lead to lifetime incomes so their investment in education would be recovered. They also want education providers to coordinate their efforts.

The education providers, on the other hand, said it was difficult to meet community expectations, deliver rural programs that are economically viable and deal with the differing levels of technology. "They determined there were more than the post-secondary institutions involved; the project also needed to coordinate other consortiums such as e-Campus Alberta and Alberta North," said Andy. "We also decided it was essential for the Alberta government to be involved and supportive."

Bryan Shepard of NorQuest College outlined the deliverables of the research project, which began in November 2010 and was completed in January 2011. "Our long term goals included increasing access to education, making better use of technology for delivery, increasing awareness of the options for rural learners, and better coordination of our work with the community adults learning councils."

The project revealed new opportunities for rural communities: leveraging community resources; linking to provincial government departments, initiatives, staff and resources; and closer ties to other communities. The opportunities for post-secondaries include building

relationships in rural Alberta, increasing enrolment, and extending their outreach for student work experience and internship.

“At the end of the project, we conducted a visioning exercise to imagine what successful regional stewardship could look like by the year 2020,” said Bryan. “We looked at the potential impact on communities, learners and the education system as a whole. Now that we have our initial report, we’d like to start networking to discuss the findings and possible next steps for research and implementation.