

**Examining the outcomes of zero-fee education in building a resilient, inclusive  
economy in rural Alberta**

**Final Research Report for**

**Future Skills Centre**

This report was produced as part of a project funded by the Future Skills Centre (FSC), with financial support from the Government of Canada's Future Skills Program.

FSC is a forward-thinking centre for research and collaboration dedicated to preparing Canadians for employment success. We believe Canadians should feel confident about the skills they have to succeed in a changing workforce. As a pan-Canadian community, we are collaborating to rigorously identify, test, measure, and share innovative approaches to assessing and developing the skills Canadians need to thrive in the days and years ahead. The Future Skills Centre was founded by a consortium whose members are Toronto Metropolitan University, Blueprint ADE, and The Conference Board of Canada

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## 1. Background and description

Drayton Valley, like many rural Alberta communities, has long been susceptible to the boom and bust cycles of oil and gas. Since 2014, the town has experienced a significant recession, with a nearly 80% increase in unemployment.<sup>1</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic added further pressure, compromising the remaining sectors that kept individuals employed and sustained in the community. Most recently, in May 2023 Drayton Valley experienced a 14 day evacuation as a result of about of control wildfire.

To build an economy less susceptible to threats and shocks, the town developed a zero-fee education initiative—a daring approach to economic transition and the only one of its kind in Canada. This strategy is one of several intended to stimulate the economy and provide hope by enabling local residents to pursue education without having to leave their community, or go into debt.

This project was needed to assess Drayton Valley’s ZFT program and policy. The innovative policy had substantial economic and social development goals. This project required a partnership research approach for effective evaluation. These goals included economic diversification, creating a local culture of education, providing affordable postsecondary tuition programming for rural residents, and creating hope for residents.<sup>2</sup>

ZFT was initially aimed at “upskilling” and “reskilling” oil and gas workers, who were looking to re-train after working in Drayton Valley’s primary industry. However, the ZFT funding was primarily taken up by women (95%, n=58), average age of 34 years, most of whom had no previous post-secondary education or training.

Through ZFT, Drayton Valley has developed partnerships with 5 postsecondary institutions - the University of Alberta Faculty of Extension, University of Calgary, Northern Lakes College, Health Care Aide Academy, and Delmar College. Through this range of partnerships, the Town of Drayton Valley has sought to provide a variety of in demand courses for residents. These include business and administrative studies (Northern Lakes College), environmental studies (University of Alberta), nursing (University of Calgary), health care aide certification (Health Care Aide Academy), and professional hairstyling (Delmar College).

## 2. Stakeholders and objectives

The research questions in this project were: 1) What are the facilitators and barriers to developing and sustaining a zero-fee educational model?; 2) How is collaboration fostered among stakeholders from industry, government, educational institutions, high schools, community agencies, service sector, surrounding communities, and local community members?; 3) What are the initial outcomes of zero-fee education?; 4) What are promising practices emerging from the introduction of zero-fee education that can be shared with other Canadian municipalities?

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<sup>1</sup> [Stats Canada, 2021](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Drayton Valley Zero Fee Tuition Program](#)

This project had a diverse range of stakeholders. These included municipal policy makers, Town of Drayton Valley administration, community members, ZFT students, and postsecondary institutions. To answer our research questions we spoke with representatives from each of these groups, using a variety of data collection methods.

Additionally, in Spring 2022 we conducted a strategic workplan workshop with Drayton Valley's Education Committee. This session helped the Education Committee to determine short, medium, and long-term objectives. The Education Committee, which worked closely with the research team throughout the project, identified 5 objectives for their work:

- I. Create educational opportunities for local residents;
- II. Establish the Clean Energy Technology Centre (a large municipally owned facility) as an education hub;
- III. Create a culture of education;
- IV. Communicate education goals and opportunities;
- V. Develop long-term financial sustainability.

The research team sat on the Education Committee for the duration of the project, working with the committee to achieve these goals.

### **3. Research Methods**

In this project we collected data from a wide range of purposively sampled groups. Data collection began in spring and summer 2021 with interviews of policy makers and administration who were involved in designing and implementing the ZFT policy and program. Throughout the project we collected data with ZFT students. In total we completed 12 individual semi-structured interviews, 5 focus groups, and 42 surveys with ZFT students. Some ZFT students completed both pre- and post-program surveys. Additionally, we conducted 32 interviews with youth (aged 14-19) living in and around Drayton Valley to understand their desires for local education and training, as well as their interest in ZFT more specifically. These data collection techniques helped the research team to continually revise research objectives to ensure community relevance.

Interviews were analyzed using different qualitative methods (e.g. thematic analysis, qualitative description, content analysis). Due to the limited sample size available, survey data was used to produce relevant descriptive statistics.

### **4. Results**

We have compiled results from two separate data sets. First, we report on data collection with program stakeholders. Second, we report on qualitative and quantitative findings from individual interviews, focus groups, and surveys with students in ZFT.

#### ***ZFT stakeholder findings***

We interviewed program stakeholders who designed, implemented, and administered ZFT in Drayton Valley. Program stakeholders included municipal staff, elected officials, and

employees at postsecondary education institutions. Findings from this data collection focussed on challenges to implementing and sustaining ZFT.

### Challenges to implementing and sustaining ZFT

We developed four main categories outlining these challenges.

1) *Lack of a local culture of education.* Stakeholders had years of experience living, working, and implementing policy in Drayton Valley. Most stakeholders felt that there was no culture of education in the town in large part due to the oil and gas industry. For decades young men had been able to instantly get a good paying job out of high school, or before finishing high school. However, some stakeholders we spoke to felt that young people would need more education opportunities to succeed and remain in the town. They saw ZFT, and the education institutions it brought to the town, as one way of developing a culture of education amongst residents. Importantly, they recognized that this would be a long-term goal, cultivated over a period of years.

2) *The need to demonstrate outcomes to diverse stakeholders.* Some stakeholders we spoke to were opposed to the use of public funds to support ZFT. Others who did support ZFT felt a need to demonstrate positive outcomes from the program to justify the expense. These stakeholders who supported ZFT felt that to sustain the program, the opponents (some council members, town administration) would need to be convinced. However, as one stakeholder noted, “education doesn’t give dividends right away. It takes time. Not only economically, but socially as well.” Therefore, convincing opponents in the short term was a key concern for proponents of ZFT.

3) *The difficulty of attracting post-secondary institutions to rural communities.* ZFT had a bumpy start, with a partnered education institution pulling out of Drayton Valley within the first year. The academic literature on rural postsecondary education has clearly documented the limited availability of postsecondary institutions in rural communities.<sup>3</sup> Stakeholders recognized these issues and were concerned that without a strong institution, ZFT might flounder.

4) *Lack of resources to sustain ZFT.* Municipal governments, especially those of rural and small towns, have increasingly strained budgets.<sup>4</sup> Many stakeholders felt that ZFT could not be sustained by the town long-term, and outside funding sources would need to be found. ZFT was started with a \$250,000 investment from the town in 2019, plus \$150,000 annually since 2020. Other funding sources have been secured from local businesses and voluntary organizations. But these funds have not been sufficient to sustain ZFT in the long-term.

### Responses to challenges

In addition to the above challenges, we also identified three responses the town has implemented to mitigate these challenges and support the sustainability of the program.

1) *Established an Education Committee made up of community members, educators, and government representatives.* The Education Committee, which two members of our research

<sup>3</sup> Zarifa, D., Seward, B., & Milian, R. P. (2019). Location, location, location: Examining the rural-urban skills gap in Canada. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 72, 252–263. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2019.10.032>

<sup>4</sup> Gibson, R., & Dale, J. (2022). Do more, with less: The realities of local government in rural Ontario. *The Canadian Geographer / Le Géographe Canadien*, 1– 12. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cag.12816>

team sat on, brought together people from within and beyond Drayton Valley to collaborate to progress education opportunities in the town. Awareness of ZFT in the town was, and still is relatively low. The Education Committee included educators in local highschools and a member of the Community Learning Association. One function of the education committee was to increase awareness of ZFT. It also sought to align goals with other education initiatives and institutions in the town.

2) *Developed partnerships with the research team and other post-secondary institutions.* Rather than relying on one postsecondary institution, Drayton Valley chose to develop partnerships with 5 institutions including the University of Calgary and the University of Alberta Faculty of Extension. This meant that if an institution pulled out, as had happened previously, there would still be other institutions for residents to study at. Additionally, having multiple institutions meant that students had a wider range of options to pursue education that they were interested in - an opportunity that has been rare for rural residents. Lastly, developing a relationship with our research team helped to provide some data that could be used to demonstrate outcomes of ZFT.

3) *Supported residents who champion ZFT.* ZFT was first championed by one staff member and later by two elected officials. However, stakeholders insisted that projects like ZFT cannot be sustained by the enthusiasm of single individuals. Rather, when discussing the program's sustainability, stakeholders highlighted the importance of engaging a broad range of community members and organizations to champion ZFT. The Town sought local and regional champions not just of education but also of business, community development, and social innovation to make connections to these varied sectors. In a small rural community, it has been important for there to be multiple staff members and officials who champion education in case they leave their positions or change roles as a result of elections. This solution was designed to improve the sustainability of ZFT long-term.

### ***ZFT student findings***

#### Qualitative findings

We also interviewed and surveyed ZFT students. In a manuscript we produced (currently under peer review to be published in *Research & Practice in Rural Education*), we sampled the first 24 students to undertake ZFT programming. We developed six themes from interviews and focus groups.

1) *Managing care work and schoolwork.* In addition to doing paid work, most participants were caregivers for their children. Some participants, were returning to paid work after many years of being stay-at-home parents. ZFT provided them a kickstart to get training and education to pursue a career they were interested in. Although a past as a stay at home parent was not the case for all participants, most agreed that this was a common life course in DV, where women stayed home with their children and their partner worked in a well-paid, but unstable, job in the oil and gas industry. Participants spoke of the challenges they experienced keeping up with unpaid care work, paid work, and school work. However, those who attended in-person education

programming also spoke of the networks of friendship they developed. Classmates became friends and helped one another to manage the challenges of daily life.

2) *Mitigating risk.* Participants consistently informed us that without the financial support from ZFT, they would not have been able to enroll in their program of study. For example, one participant who had previously considered enrolling in a post-secondary education program, stated: “I wanted to go back to school regardless. And without zero fee, I would not have been able to. ...I guess I was motivated to go back. [ZFT] just allowed me to do it.” Another student, explained how she could afford to take a post-secondary education program, but that ZFT funding still helped her and her family make the transition to full-time studies more manageable. In a socio-economic context where taking on debt is a serious risk, ZFT funding helped to avoid debt for students.

3) *Providing a steppingstone.* Many participants had plans to pursue further credentials immediately after their ZFT program, or viewed their ZFT program as a first step in their long-term educational and career goals. For example, one participant who completed a business administration program, developed the skills she needed to start her own business. Receiving the ZFT funding meant she could “work a little bit and then go to school. If it wouldn’t have been for that [she] would have had to take the two years [instead of one year to finish the program].” Other participants reported that they enjoyed the process of taking courses and learning new skills so much that they planned to do subsequent courses and certifications

4) *Creating optimism for the future.* A goal of ZFT was to create hope for residents. Participants told us that receiving ZFT funding improved their lives in many ways. Some participants’ income levels rose substantially as a result of their education and training. One participant explained that she was comfortably able to support herself with her new job. After asking her how her life is different since having completed the ZFT program, she responded:

Mostly, it's just that I have a real job. I was nannying, but I don't even think I made minimum wage. I have enough money to support myself now. I don't have to live with roommates.

Other participants who were nearing the end of their education, or had recently graduated but not yet found a job, still experienced a confidence boost. Another participant explained he was “incentivized to go out and start applying for those... jobs [he] had always been thinking about.”

5) *Taking diverse routes to ZFT.* Participants indicated three main educational routes that brought them to their ZFT program of choice. First, some participants had previously started a post-secondary education program but had not completed it. Second, eight participants had previous training or education but either did not find full-time work in the field they had trained in, or no longer wanted to continue working in that field. Third, the majority of participants previously had no concrete plans to attend a post-secondary program before hearing about ZFT. The most common reason was cost: “I wanted to go to school out of high school, I wanted to go in for [postsecondary program] anyways. But it wasn't really affordable at that moment in my life”. Aligned with the perspectives of stakeholders, other participants identified the lack of post-secondary options in DV: “There's not really much for college options in Drayton. I think

that's a barrier". Many participants identified a lack of encouragement in their lives to pursue education, especially for girls and young women attending high school.

6) *Inspiring others to pursue education.* Many participants indicated either a longstanding or a newly developed passion for education. As a result, these participants hoped to inspire or had already inspired others in their lives to pursue educational opportunities. Some encouraged their children to consider postsecondary education, while another participant explained that her husband decided to enroll in an apprenticeship program after seeing her succeed in school.

### Quantitative findings

Tables 1 and 2 provide a snapshot of participant demographics. Since participation in the research was voluntary, not all students who received ZFT funding completed a survey. In total, 36 out of 58 recipients of ZFT funding completed a survey. Sample size is different for some questions as not every participant answered every question.

Almost all participants identified as women (97%), and the average age was 33.6 years old. Additionally, participants had lived in Drayton Valley for an average of 18.2 years. This suggests that ZFT was primarily, if not exclusively, being taken up by existing residents rather than new residents in the town. The most common program of study was a health care-aide training program. This program, taught in-person in Drayton Valley, was identified as a key training need due to a shortage of certified health care-aides. All participants who completed this program found jobs in long-term care, home care, or working in a hospital. The average income of participants was \$21,143 per year. This is less than half the median income in Drayton Valley.<sup>5</sup>

<b>Indicator</b>	<b>Sample size (n)</b>	<b>Average</b>
Age	36	33.6 years
Years lived in DV	35	18.2
Income	30	\$21,143

Table 1. Participant profile.

<b>Parameter</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Sample size (n)</b>
<b>Gender</b>	Woman	35
	Man	1
<b>Program of Study</b>	Health Care Aide	24
	Business Administration	5
	Office Administration	3
	Early Learning and Childcare	1
	Social Work	1
	Residential Interiors	1
	Occupational Health & Safety	1

Table 2. Participants' program of study

<sup>5</sup> [Statistics Canada, 2021](#)



## 5. Discussion and Implications

### *Lessons for policy*

This project suggests, alongside previous research<sup>6</sup>, that accessible and affordable education can improve employment outcomes for people who have been historically unable to access PSE. However, as Bollman notes, “when you have seen one rural community, you have seen one rural community.”<sup>7</sup> The research findings presented here may be transferable in that they can provide lessons to other communities interested in a program like ZFT. But such a program will need to be shaped for the local context. For instance, a rural agricultural community may have different economic diversification needs and potential than an oil and gas community like Drayton Valley. Moreover, ZFT program design and delivery may not be optimal for the local context, as it may require some changes over time. The program, therefore, should be understood as a guide rather than a template for potential areas of policy development.

### *Lessons for service delivery*

First and foremost, students should be the priority for tuition assistance programs. The goal of such programs should be to support students to access education, feel supported during their education, and to help them achieve their goals. Service delivery was one limitation of ZFT, and we heard this from participants who received ZFT funding. In general, there was a lack of clarity around the name *Zero-fee Tuition*, despite the program providing a maximum of \$5,000. This meant some students were unclear on how much they had to pay, limiting some of the risk mitigating impacts of tuition assistance.

Moreover, Drayton Valley partnered with one education institution that failed to get its administrative documents in order to make students eligible for student loans. This meant that students had to pay their remaining fees out of pocket, which was not possible for all of them.

Mistakes such as these do not invalidate the positive aspects of ZFT. They do, however, highlight the need to prioritize students and student support when creating a tuition assistance program.

### *Partnership*

The research team acquired additional funds from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and the Killam Research Fund to study ZFT in comparison with inclusive economies initiatives in Edmonton.

The Town of Drayton Valley was not directly funded by FSC, but their ZFT program received funding from various businesses and individuals including Pembina Pipeline.

### *Expansion*

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<sup>6</sup> Ford, R., Hui, T. S.-W. and Kwakye, I. (2019). *Future to Discover: Seventh year post-secondary impacts report*. Social Research and Demonstration Corporation.

<https://www.srdc.org/media/552974/ftd-seventh-year-psi-report-en.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Bollman, R. (2023). The demographic context of rural Canada: The size of the Indigenous and visible minority populations. In C. Banack & D. Pohler, *Building Inclusive Communities in Rural Canada* (pp. 3-46). University of Alberta Press.

Following this research, we feel there is potential for similar models to be tried in other communities. This model seems to make sense for a rural community due to the compounding factors that limit access to postsecondary education - distance, lack of awareness, cost. However, other models of tuition assistance, including those supported by higher levels of government are also viable. In the United States, there are hundreds of Promise Programs which use diverse models to provide tuition assistance, mostly for students to attend community colleges.<sup>8</sup> This research, along with an existing international body of literature, may be useful to inform tuition assistance and skills training programs throughout Canada.

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<sup>8</sup> Perna, L. W. & Leigh, E. W. (2018) Understanding the Promise: A Typology of State and Local College Promise Programs. *Educational Researcher*, 47(3), 155-180. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X17742653>