
Rural Tuition Assistance Policy Toolkit

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of Children, Youth, and
Families



**UNIVERSITY
OF ALBERTA**



Community-University Partnership
for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families

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Executive summary

As the cost of a post-secondary education becomes increasingly prohibitive, financial barriers prevent many people from pursuing training. Rural students who wish to attend post-secondary experience compounding stressors caused by moving away from their hometown to pursue their education, removing them from their support system and adding cost-of-living increases as they navigate and live in urban centres.

Likewise, rural communities face their own challenges; Demographic issues of aging and out-migration, combined with a decline in economic growth pose challenges to smaller cities and towns. One way to solve these twin issues is to attract new residents with relevant skills, and to upskill current residents.

Municipally-led tuition assistance programs, though uncommon, are one strategy to address the above issues. The contents of this toolkit stem from an ongoing collaboration between the *Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families* (University of Alberta) and the *Town of Drayton Valley* tracking the Town's rural tuition assistance program. The program was created in 2019 to help attract and retain residents, bolster the town's culture of education, improve economic diversification, and foster hope and opportunity in the community. The program has contributed to many of these objectives over the years, and has inspired other regions to pilot their own programs.

Key insights

In rural Alberta, a municipal tuition assistance program had the most significant impact on older women, many of whom had never pursued post-secondary in the past. The program empowered mothers to enter (or re-enter) the workforce, and contributed to individuals' ability to find fulfilling employment. Almost every participant in our tuition assistance research completed their program and obtained a better

paying job in their community, improving the overall economic health of the town.

Attempts to scale the program to other rural communities proved that some aspects of the model are critical to its success, including adequate funding for students, limiting eligible programs to those that can be accessed in community, and prioritizing courses that train students for jobs that are in local demand. Additionally, a strong buy-in to an education culture has been critical for the success of the program. If leaders in participating communities did not believe in the potential of education for long-term, widespread impact, they would not make the investment.

Introduction

The contents of this toolkit were developed from an ongoing community-based research partnership between the Town of Drayton Valley and the University of Alberta's Community-University Partnership (CUP) that began in 2020.

The Town of Drayton Valley, Alberta is a rural, resource-dependent community with a population of approximately 7,000 located 133km southwest of the nearest major metropolitan centre, Edmonton, Alberta. The town's reliance on the volatile oil and gas industry has resulted in persistent economic precarity, a transient workforce, and social issues associated with economic downturns, including addiction, depression, and domestic abuse (Höltge et al., 2021). To mitigate the negative effects of the "boom" and "bust" cycle, help diversify their workforce, and attract residents, the town made the bold decision to invest in education in 2019. This toolkit shares key takeaways, learnings, and tips from the creation, maintenance, and attempted regional scaling of a municipally-run tuition assistance program.

Significance

The issues facing Drayton Valley are mirrored in rural communities across Canada, which are struggling to stabilize their populations and attract highly skilled workers, particularly in the healthcare sector (Koebisch et al., 2020). Combined with the ongoing trends of youth outmigration from rural areas (Ryser & Halseth, 2010), and the downloading of responsibilities from provinces onto municipalities (Douglas, 2023), there are significant challenges for rural communities navigating the modern economy. Place-based education programs, run by municipalities, have the capacity to draw in new residents, retain youth who may seek education elsewhere, and improve the overall capacity of a community by increasing the number of highly skilled residents living there. Beyond this, we know that higher levels of education are linked to desirable outcomes including health, and social and economic stability (Cohen & Syme, 2013).

We hope this toolkit, and the research that fueled its creation, will help municipalities and communities interested in undertaking an education-driven approach to improving their communities.

Background

Tuition assistance programs are a common solution to the rising cost of post-secondary training in Canada; typically these programs are offered by universities or higher levels of government, not municipalities. Some examples of these programs in Canada have been implemented in Newfoundland and Labrador, New Brunswick, and Ontario (Trottier, 2019). None of these programs continue to run, despite the continued financial barriers to training.

The tuition assistance model in Drayton Valley was inspired by the small city of Invercargill, New Zealand. In the early 2000's, Invercargill was the birthplace of a 'Zero Fees' scheme at their local polytechnic school, the Southern Institute of Technology (SIT). The town was experiencing economic and population decline due, in part, to their relative remoteness at the southernmost point of New Zealand, far from the urban centres of Auckland and Wellington. To combat these issues, officials at SIT introduced the concept of free tuition at their institution for domestic students. This scheme encouraged upskilling for their local population and attracted students from other communities to relocate to Invercargill for their studies. The program has been highly successful in its mission to attract and retain residents, and has remained sustainable for over 20 years.

The Town of Drayton Valley pursued their own tuition assistance program under similar economic and demographic strains as Invercargill, but under slightly different circumstances. With no pre-existing academic institutions in town, the municipal council and staff navigated regional partnerships with several post-secondary institutions, dedicated an otherwise underutilized municipally-owned building to function as education space, and assigned committed town staff to their education plan. By doing so, the Town was able to build post-secondary infrastructure and culture where none had existed before.

Since 2020, CUP has been engaged with the Town of Drayton Valley in helping to track and evaluate the outcomes of this tuition assistance program. The contents of this toolkit are informed by years of

correspondence with those championing and maintaining the program in municipal government, the collection of 51 baseline and 31 follow-up surveys from Drayton Valley students who received funding from the program, 16 interviews with Drayton Valley tuition assistance students, and 6 surveys and interviews from students funded by Edson's tuition assistance pilot program.

Limitations and constraints

- Data based only on case studies of tuition assistance programs in small municipalities in Alberta, Canada.
- The relatively small quantitative sample size might not be sufficient to represent all target audiences.
- Preliminary data from the Edson pilot program cannot represent long-term outcomes for its students or community.

Findings

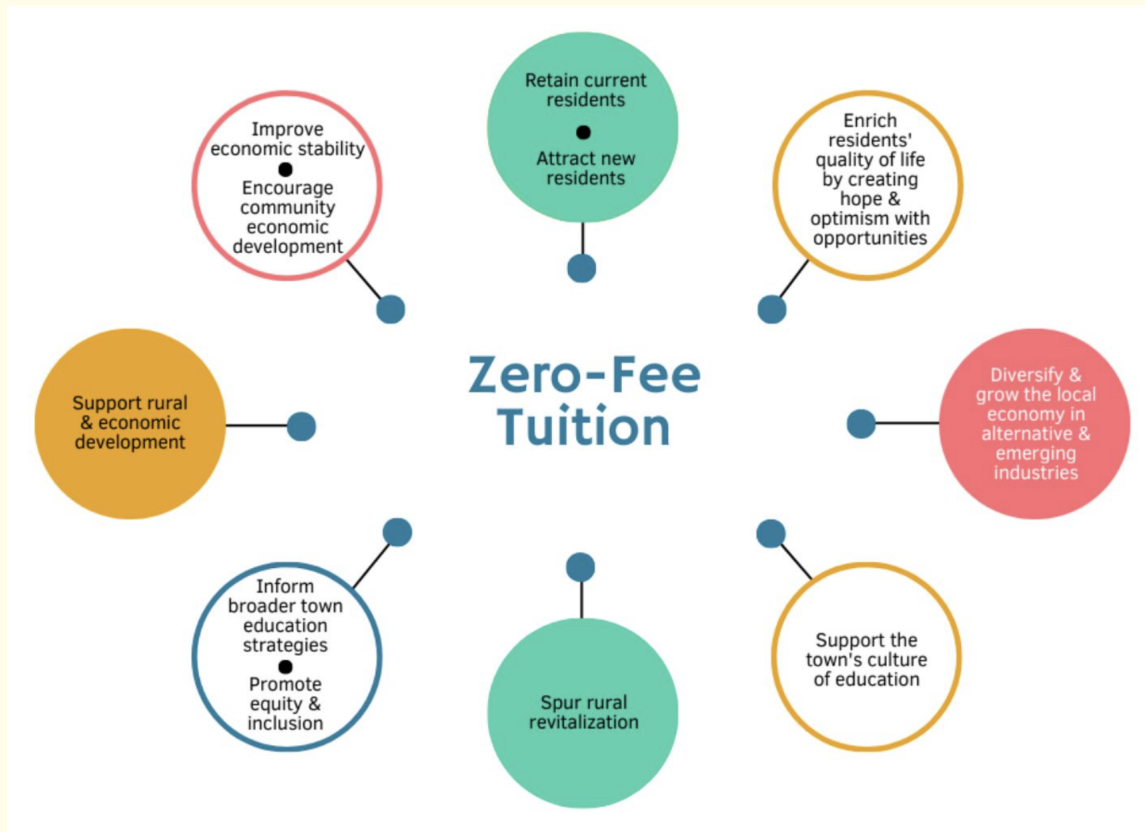
Creating a tuition assistance program

When we began our research journey with Drayton Valley on their tuition assistance program in 2020, collaborators identified numerous, at times conflicting, goals that they hoped their program would achieve. These goals included population retention, building a culture of education, improving economic stability, attracting new residents, and creating hope and optimism through opportunity in the community. Although these goals in and of themselves are all valuable, they set high expectations for a modest, focused program providing funding to a small portion of the town's population.

Communities pursuing municipal tuition programs must:

- **Set realistic and narrow goals for the program**

When pursuing the development of a municipal tuition assistance program, we recommend **setting narrow and realistic goals** to help **facilitate the development of a focused plan**. The overarching goals of a program can dictate the expectations that individuals, including policymakers and residents, have for the results of said program. Although one policy decision (such as a tuition assistance program) may affect many facets of a community, it should not be viewed as a catch-all solution to a myriad of policy and community issues.



Original goals for Drayton Valley's tuition program, 2020

● Remain flexible and adaptable

Another key component to the success of maintaining a tuition assistance policy is the **flexibility of the policymakers and administrators to adapt** to changing circumstances, partners, and local needs.

In Drayton Valley, their program underwent several changes from 2020-2025 to better suit the needs of students and the community. Some of these changes included:

- Embracing hybrid and online learning models.

- Partnering with diverse educational partners.
- Hiring a student support specialist.
- Hiring an education coordinator for the Town.
- Adjusting the program structure to target local employment gaps.
- Renaming the program to increase clarity and improve branding (from Zero-Fee Tuition to Tuition Assistance Bursary).

In-person vs. Online education

Offering in-person training in a rural community requires infrastructure, educators, support from multiple layers of government, and a dedicated team of employees to maintain the program over the years. Despite their efforts to bring this dream to fruition, the Town of Drayton Valley **could not have anticipated the effect the Covid-19 pandemic would have on permanently reshaping classrooms.** The renaissance of online and hybrid learning forced the community to shift their original program design away from attracting new residents to their in-person education hub, and towards population retention and upskilling their existing workforce through online and hybrid programming. Crucially, **hybrid programming must include on-site training within the community to ensure that education remains accessible.** In-person options are critical to ensuring the programming remains **place-based**, with the potential to attract and retain students in the community.

● Create a sustainable program design

Financial Structure

The financial structure of the Drayton Valley tuition assistance program relies fully on the approval of municipal funds to operate. As of 2025, the funds are contributed partially from the Town of Drayton Valley, and partially from the surrounding county, Brazeau County. These two taxpayer streams provide 100% of the funding for the bursaries distributed, while operating budgets pay for staff who run the program. The **sustainability of the program is reliant on**

continuous buy-in from councillors and their constituents. This structure is beneficial insofar that the municipality has full control of the program, meaning they are able to adjust it (i.e., remain flexible) as needed. Challenges associated with this structure include the threat of new municipal/county governments dissolving the program, and the persistent lack of resources available to municipal governments (especially in small communities) running such programs.

For communities with a strong education culture, including a tuition bursary to fund local education may not be a hard sell. Otherwise, it may be viewed as a risk to commit taxpayer dollars to education. Some strategies for diversifying the financial risk might include working with local businesses to sponsor students, or seeking financial backing from higher levels of government.

Last Dollar Design

The Drayton Valley Tuition Assistance Bursary (TAB) program is a 'last dollar' program, meaning it awards funding to students after they have applied for all financial aid including grants and scholarships, but not student loans (Miller-Adams, 2015). The funding is released to students after other funding options have been exhausted. In practice, these other options include community scholarships, continuing education bursaries, and provincial government bursaries for select programs. After students exhausted other funding options they could receive up to \$5,000 in funds from the municipal tuition program. This design helps to reduce the financial burden on municipalities, where there may be other avenues for funding.

Place-Based

Beyond financial sustainability, a tuition assistance program should provide benefits of economic sustainability to the broader community. Place-based programs target local economic development by providing assistance to existing residents and by trying to draw new residents to a community with the promise of tuition assistance. Anyone who lives in Drayton Valley is eligible to receive funding through their municipal TAB program. This place-based policy was shaped in large part by the challenges of offering postsecondary programming in rural areas, which inevitably have smaller pools of

prospective students than larger urban centres. There is no requirement for prior residence in the town to receive TAB funding, provided the recipient lives in Drayton Valley upon application and completion of their program. During group consultations TAB administrators reported that some students did leave Drayton Valley upon completion of their program due to a perception that they would be more successful finding work in a larger community. Despite this, **administrators still felt the program was worthwhile from a return-on-investment perspective; Even if a student leaves Drayton Valley after training, their time spent in the town during the course of their education contributes to the local economy** (e.g., paying for rent, food, gas etc.) in a capacity that far exceeds the \$5000 per student tuition investment.

Even if a student leaves Drayton Valley after training, their time spent in the town during the course of their education contributes to the local economy.

Evolving program structure and delivery

In 2025, the Drayton Valley program administrators changed the bursary structure to align with their understanding of the local labour market. This change manifested as certain in-demand programs becoming eligible for more funding than “secondary” fields.

Additionally, the program administrators decided to test the feasibility of providing funding upon completion of students programs, as opposed to up-front funding. Although we do not yet have data on the effects this funding change has had on students, the change would present financial barriers to students who require the funds to pay immediate tuition costs. This change was made to eliminate the possibility of delinquent accounts from students who fail to complete their program, however as of 2025, administrators in Drayton Valley have only encountered one instance of this. Based on anticipated challenges students may have navigating the post-graduation funding structure, **we would recommend front-end funding for any new tuition assistance programs.**

Drayton Valley’s TAB program was designed around a principle of universal eligibility. **Universal eligibility means that students qualify for funding regardless of their prior academic achievement or income.** This aspect of the design has remained stable over the years. This model has improved funding accessibility for mature students (typically, 25 and older) who may not be eligible for other grants and bursaries.

Drayton Valley tuition assistance structure

2019-2024

Non-repayable bursaries up to \$5,000 awarded to meeting the following criteria:

- Resident of Drayton Valley

- Pursuing a credentialed post-secondary program at a partner institution
- Proof of eligibility for student loan
- Proof of program completion

Administered by the Town of Drayton Valley, bursary funds were sent directly to post-secondary institutions to be applied to tuition costs prior to program commencement.

2025 onwards

Non-repayable bursaries up to:

1. \$5,000 for students pursuing ***Primary Focus Areas*** (emergency responders, health care professionals, human services, skilled trades) and
2. \$2,500 for ***Secondary Focus Areas*** (business, resource technology, parks and recreation, hospitality and tourism, and other continuing education).

Administered by the Town of Drayton Valley, **bursary funds are withheld until proof of program completion**, then disbursed to post-secondary institution accounts.

Outcomes for students

Students that we surveyed and interviewed in our research reported overwhelmingly **positive experiences** with the original Drayton Valley model of rural tuition assistance. These students were primarily women, pursuing post-secondary for the first time, and reported that the program was **instrumental** to their ability to pursue education.

Drayton Valley's tuition assistance program has funded over 100 students. Student outcomes have been positive, with all but one student successfully completing their program as of 2024.

Of the students we surveyed, 100% were women, and the majority of them were the primary caregiver for at least one child under the age of 17, or adult, in their household. By investing in a local tuition assistance program, the Town of Drayton Valley provided these women with opportunities to earn more money to support their families and find fulfillment in their careers.

The Drayton Valley Education plan was successful at:

- Empowering mothers to (re)enter the workforce
- Filling labour needs in the community
- Breaking down barriers to education

Jenna (pseudonym), a student in an Early Childhood Development program explained regarding career advancement: "I feel like without education, you can't go anywhere. You will be stuck." Jenna identified that without the tuition subsidy provided through Drayton Valley's tuition assistance program, it would have been very difficult for her to take the program, and subsequent training, while raising two young children. Her story is one among many women who, when relieved of

the financial burden associated with education, are empowered to start or advance their own careers.

The numbers tell us that the Drayton Valley tuition assistance program resulted in 13 new level two and level three (credentialed) Early Childhood Educators employed in the town. Stories from individuals like Jenna illustrate the deep impact of removing barriers to education, to getting people 'unstuck'. Tuition assistance programs have the capacity to improve outcomes for both broad labour market issues and individuals.

"I feel like without education, you can't go anywhere. You will be stuck." Jenna, Early Childhood Development student

Replicating the model

In late 2025, three additional communities in the region (west-central Alberta) launched pilot programs of their own tuition assistance programs with administrative assistance from the Town of Drayton Valley, funded by a grant from Future Skills Centre Canada.

In our early discussions with economic development staff at these municipalities, all the way to their respective program rollouts, we saw that **replicability is not easy**. To honour the unique struggles of each individual community, their staff (and council) made executive decisions regarding the **number of students** they wanted to fund, for what **dollar amount per student**, and **which (if any) post-secondary programs would be targeted**.

Despite the five-year tenure of the Drayton Valley model, and the relative similarity of each of the communities to one another, each pilot municipality offered their pilot program with a different structure. These differing structures led to differing outcomes in student uptake and outcomes of the program.

Pilot Programs

One pilot community in Edson, Alberta decided to award just \$1,000 per bursary; individuals were only eligible if they graduated from a local high school. Their program attracted recent high school graduates, most of whom had already left the community to pursue bachelors degrees at major universities elsewhere in the province. Resultantly, the students who were funded through the program, while grateful for their award, did not feel that their pursuit of post-secondary education was greatly influenced by the bursary.

In contrast and more positively, the pilot community of Whitecourt, Alberta, took the time to integrate the notion of municipally-funded tuition support within their town administration. In November, 2025, their town council voted to include their tuition assistance program in their annual budget, ensuring longer-term sustainability. Whitecourt opted to follow the Drayton Valley model more closely, providing bursaries of up to \$5,000 per student.

Edson tuition assistance structure

2025

Non-repayable bursaries up to \$1,000 awarded to applicants meeting the following criteria:

- Resident of Edson
- Proof of graduation from an Edson high school
- Pursuing a credentialed post-secondary program
- Priority given to students pursuing skilled trades or healthcare programs
- Intent to return to Edson after program completion

Administered by the Town of Drayton Valley, bursary funds were sent directly to bursary recipients via electronic funds transfer.

Key Takeaways:

- Learning opportunities must be place-based
 - Funding should cover a substantial proportion of program costs
 - Targeted programs should align with community labour needs
 - Scaling a tuition support program takes time to socialize the concept within the municipal administration (i.e., economic development), provide
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evidence for its uptake, and have it presented to town council for a favourable vote.

Conclusion and recommendations

The Drayton Valley Tuition Assistance Bursary (TAB) program has empowered many mid-career aged women to upskill and obtain good jobs. The keys to TAB's success are offering relevant, place-based learning options and providing adequate funding to meet students' needs. Beyond these initial building blocks, we have the following recommendations and considerations for those interested in expanding the TAB model to other places:

1. *Education is not (traditionally) a municipal responsibility.*
Typically, town and city governments are not involved in post-secondary education; they tend not to contribute any proportion of their tax revenue to post-secondary education. This reality makes the Drayton Valley TAB model novel—but it also makes it difficult to replicate in a short period of time. Time will be needed to present the model, debate its usefulness to the local context, and ensure everyone understands the benefits.

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- It takes time to introduce and explain municipal tuition assistance
 - Champions of the program must consider potential pushback early
 - Integrate evaluation and outcome tracking into the program to demonstrate success
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2. *Establishing place-based learning opportunities is not cheap or easy.* Many people leave their rural communities to learn because there are few options for them to pursue an education at home. We know that place-based, at home education has numerous benefits for students and their communities. There are many remote options for students to pursue learning, including exclusively online courses, but not all skills can be taught remotely. Trades training requires hands-on learning, which is only rarely offered in rural communities. Creating options for rural municipalities to host trades learning requires significant investment. Options include creating or upgrading facilities, or contracting an external mobile trades classroom. Both of these options can be very costly, especially since individual trades have unique training lab requirements. Individual municipalities can rarely support these costs on their own.

- Collaborate with higher levels of government for infrastructure upgrades or mobile training options
- Investigate regional collaborations to support the costs of learning infrastructure

3. *Integration with a broader career ecosystem is important for the success of program graduates.* The most successful students from the Drayton Valley TAB program filled local employment gaps. Their new certifications support quality healthcare and childcare. But it is important not to create an oversupply. Once an employment gap is filled, education programs should target new gaps. This means creating a responsive program, and investing in regular assessments of the labour market.

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- Dedicate personnel to the management of the bursary, its targeted programs, and its recipients
 - Conduct regular reviews of employment and labour market trends
 - Collaborate with local businesses to ensure that in-demand occupations are being targeted
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Links

Drayton Valley Tuition Assistance Bursary website:

<https://www.draytonvalley.ca/tab/>

Invercargill, NZ Zero Fees Scheme website:

<https://www.sit.ac.nz/Home/FAQs/General-FAQs/ArtMID/7314/ArticleID/680/What-is-the-Zero-Fees-Scheme>

Academic publications based on data from the Drayton Valley tuition assistance model:

Ferdinands, A., Ormandy, M., & Mayan, M. (2024). A Mixed Methods Exploration of Students' Experiences of Taking Part in a Tuition Assistance Program in Rural Alberta, Canada. *Theory & Practice in Rural Education*, 14(1), 126–155. <https://doi.org/10.3776/tpre.2024.v14n1p127-155>

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Ferdinands, A., Ormandy, M., Hodge, L., & Mayan, M. (2025). Rural health care aide training experiences in a Canadian tuition assistance program: A qualitative study. *BMC Nursing*, 24(1), 914. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12912-025-03582-z>

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<https://doi.org/10.22215/cpop.v5i0.1381>