



Tuition Assistance Bursary (TAB) Program

A Pathway to Economic Resilience for the Drayton Valley Region

Prepared by:  **Community-University Partnership**
CUP for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families

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The Tuition Assistance Bursary (TAB) Program is Canada's first municipal tuition assistance program. Launched by the Town of Drayton Valley in 2019, the program directly aims to support economic stability in the region.

The TAB program “helps grow and retain a skilled local workforce; supports our valued industry sectors; diversifies the local economy; and helps our region break free of the boom/bust cycle.”

- Town of Drayton Valley, TAB FAQ

For years, Drayton Valley and surrounding communities have experienced economic ups and downs due to reliance on the volatile oil and gas industry. This has led to periods of high unemployment and job insecurity, with ripple effects on physical, mental, and community wellbeing.



“Alberta’s labour market no longer moves in lockstep with oil and gas [...] Demand for energy workers has stabilized and employment remains in line with 2019 levels, while other industries have driven new employment growth.”

- Business Council of Alberta, *Who's Hiring in Alberta?*

“[Participation] in post-secondary education is critical to the long-term viability and prosperity of Alberta’s rural communities, enabling individuals to contribute meaningfully to economic development, community leadership, and innovation.”

- Rural Municipalities of Alberta, *Resolution 15-25S (Preamble)*

The TAB program is a **strategic municipal intervention designed to diversify the regional workforce**, which is expected to see significant labour shortages in areas such as health-related occupations (e.g. health care aides, nurses) and the trades, which together accounted for 32% of all job postings in Alberta in 2023 (Business Council of Alberta, *Who's Hiring?*).

TAB Focus Areas

The TAB program contributes to a skilled and committed local workforce. The program not only helps residents overcome barriers to education and in-demand jobs, but sees them remain in and contribute to their community.

~ **100**

To date, approximately 100 students have been funded by TAB. These individuals have accessed education at the Town of Drayton Valley's partner institutions, including the Health Care Aide Academy, Northern Lakes College, the University of Alberta, the University of Calgary, and Campus Alberta Central (Olds College of Agriculture & Technology and Red Deer Polytechnic)

TOWN PRIORITIES

In 2024, Drayton Valley council expressed a desire for the Town's education portfolio to focus on **health care (e.g. health care aides, nurses)** and **trades**. In addition, TAB funding has helped residents access certification in **early learning and child care**, which is key to a thriving local economy. So far, other areas of study pursued by TAB recipients have included social work, addictions counselling, business administration, and occupational health and safety.



Health care
(e.g. health care aides, nurses)



Skilled trades



Early childhood educators

Health care



“Thirty-four out of 43 occupations under *health occupations* [are] classified as notable or mild shortages [...] *Nurse aides, orderlies, patient service associates, registered nurses and registered psychiatric nurses* are expected to face significant and persistent negative imbalances in the short term.”

- Alberta's short-term employment forecast (2024-2026)

Health care aides (HCAs) are frontline health workers, often working in hospitals, care centres, or community, who provide direct care to sick, elderly, and disabled patients. Demand for HCAs will continue to rise as Alberta's proportion of residents over age 65 increases in coming years (Government of Canada Job Bank). The province plans to make HCAs a regulated profession starting February 2026.

~ **60**

To date, approximately 60 students have received TAB funding to become HCAs and are actively working in the local community.



In 2021, the Town of Drayton Valley formally partnered with the **Health Care Aide Academy (HCAA)**, based in Red Deer. The HCAA offers hands-on instruction at its Drayton Valley campus, located at the **Community Education & Training Centre (CETC)**. Students can access training and practicums at regional care facilities, including the Drayton Valley Hospital and Care Centre.



Drayton Valley residents can pursue a **Bachelor of Nursing degree** without leaving their home community, thanks to a partnership between the Town of Drayton Valley, Alberta Health Services, and the University of Calgary's Faculty of Nursing. Students can access **in-person labs and clinical placements** in the Drayton Valley region through the U of C's Rural Community Route.

Skilled trades



“Forty-one out of 53 occupations under *technical trades and transportation officers and controllers* are expected to be in a notable or mild shortage [...] Four out of nine occupations under *helpers and labourers, and other transport drivers, operators and labourers* are projected to experience notable shortages.”

- Alberta's short-term employment forecast (2024-2026)

The demand for trades occupations is rising nationally, with Alberta seeing especially strong need for trades workers. In 2023, nearly 19% of all job postings in Alberta were for trades-related jobs, greater than any other large labour market in Canada (Business Council of Alberta, *Who's Hiring?*). Trades certification can pave the way for sustainable careers and greater earning potential than university degrees, making it an excellent choice for young residents (Business Council of Alberta, *Laying the Foundation*).



Many Drayton Valley residents see their future in the trades but face significant barriers to accessing training, such as financial limitations, family responsibilities, or difficulty relocating.

BRINGING TRADES TRAINING TO DRAYTON VALLEY

In 2025, Mayor Nancy Dodds sent a letter to the Premier requesting to discuss the potential purchase of a **mobile trade unit** for the region. This idea has been proven successful in Canada: in 2023-2024, the Ontario government rolled out three “Trades and Tech” trucks that aim to promote interest in the skilled trades to young people across the province (Government of Ontario). In her letter, Dodds noted that the TAB program has already expanded post-secondary education in sectors such as health care, and the community is eager to continue this momentum through investment in trades education.



Image from Skills Ontario

Early childhood educators (ECEs)



“There is strong demand for early childhood educators and assistants in Alberta, particularly in rural Alberta, due to labour shortages and a lack of access to childcare centres.”

- Government of Canada Job Bank (2024-2026 forecast)

Investment in early childhood educators (ECEs) has many compounding benefits, particularly in rural areas. More ECEs and ECE programming allows for greater labour for participation among young parents, especially women. Children who access enriching early learning experiences are also more likely to succeed in their schooling and careers (Conference Board of Canada, *Ready for Life*).



From 2022 to 2024, 13 students funded by TAB successfully graduated from early childhood programs, including ELCC Certificates and ELCC Diplomas through Northern Lakes College.

The Alberta government says the province needs 7,000 to 9,500 more ECEs over coming years to fill vacancies and new positions. In addition, the province aims to staff 68,700 new licensed child care centres by 2026 (Government of Alberta: ECE certification).

A HEALTHY EARLY LEARNING AND CARE SECTOR

Drayton Valley now has **6 early learning and care facilities, compared to only one in 2019**. Thanks to TAB, the region has a relatively high number of Level 2 and Level 3 ECEs, while most of the province is seeing a shortage of Level 2s, in particular. The success of TAB has positioned Drayton Valley as a frontrunner for early learning and care. The Town is working with partners to explore ways to scale up tuition support programs for ECEs across the province.

A Replicable Model for Rural Wealth

The TAB model is an important part of a broader **Rural Wealth Creation (RWC) strategy** for the Drayton Valley region. Broadly, RWC is about promoting long-term economic resilience by keeping wealth in the community and maintaining local control of assets.

A REPLICABLE MODEL

The TAB model has already been adopted by Brazeau County.

Meanwhile, Edson, Hinton, and Whitecourt have all expressed interest in the TAB model as a way to help residents overcome barriers to post-secondary education. The long-term success of TAB depends on securing diverse funding streams, marketing, and raising awareness about how education contributes to local economic resilience.

WHAT'S NEXT?

The Town of Drayton Valley and its partners are currently working to finalize a RWC Plan and establish a **RWC Collaborative** made up of local residents, officials, social service professionals, business leaders, and youth.

JOIN

Please contact Geraldine Cahill at [**gcahill@upsocial.ca**](mailto:gcahill@upsocial.ca) if you are interested in joining the RWC Collaborative.



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