

Tuition Assistance Bursary (TAB) Program

An Investment in Long-Term
Community Wellbeing

Prepared by:

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

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The Tuition Assistance Bursary (TAB) Program, launched by the Town of Drayton Valley in 2019, is Canada's first municipally supported tuition assistance program. TAB enables residents to pursue post-secondary education without leaving their home community.

~ **100**

**To date, approximately
100 students have used
TAB** to study at the Town
of Drayton Valley's partner
institutions, including:

- Health Care Aide Academy
- Northern Lakes College
- University of Alberta
- University of Calgary
- Campus Alberta Central (Olds College of Agriculture & Technology and Red Deer Polytechnic).

THE CHALLENGES

TAB responds to major challenges threatening the long-term wellbeing of the Drayton Valley region.

Boom and bust



For years, Drayton Valley has been subject to the boom and bust cycles of the oil and gas industry, which lead to weakened family units, greater social disruption, and higher rates of mental health issues (*Mahdiani et al. 2020, Klasic et al. 2022*). Regions that rely heavily on oil and gas are subject to the whims of a volatile global market, a phenomenon often called the “resource curse” (*Liu et al. 2020*).

Urban-rural divide

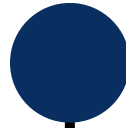


Overall, rural Canadians have lower incomes, fewer employment opportunities, less formal education, and more mental health challenges than urban Canadians (*Canadian Mental Health Association*). In today's rapidly changing world, education is increasingly necessary to access good, stable jobs in rural areas (*Wood 2023*). All levels of government recognize the importance of post-secondary education in revitalizing rural communities (*Government of Canada, Government of Alberta, Rural Municipalities of Alberta*).

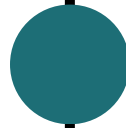
HOW TAB HELPS

TAB contributes to a stronger social fabric by connecting residents to local institutions and the regional economy.

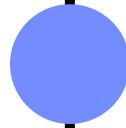
Individuals who receive TAB funding gain formal credentials, career advancement, confidence, and a sense of community belonging.



Employers gain a skilled local workforce that is committed to living in and contributing to Drayton Valley. A more skilled population is also attractive to new businesses and industries seeking to relocate.



Post-secondary institutions partnered with the Town of Drayton Valley gain more local students. As their impact on the region increases, institutions see a boost in their reputation and become valued anchors of the community.



The community as a whole gains residents who are committed to a future in Drayton Valley, contributing to local life and culture, spending money at local businesses, and raising a family.



Based on available data, we conjecture that all but three TAB recipients have remained in Drayton Valley and are actively contributing to the community.

Building a Culture of Local Education

The TAB program is a cornerstone of the Town of Drayton Valley's broader education plan, which seeks to create a place where residents can learn, work, and thrive. Historically, Drayton Valley has not diversified its economy, which has been an obstacle to residents seeking work outside the oil and gas sector (Ferdinands et al. 2024, "Identifying and Responding").



The TAB program targets factors in society that determine peoples' health and wellbeing. **Income, employment, and education** are key factors influencing physical health, wellbeing, and ability to contribute meaningfully to your community (Raphael et al. 2020).

REMOVING FINANCIAL BARRIERS

Cost, including tuition and the price of relocating for school, is the most persistent hurdle to higher education for rural residents. TAB alleviates these barriers so that residents can take advantage of local education and employment options.

In 2024, we examined the incomes students who received TAB. We found they worked an average of 29 hours/week, with a mean annual income of about \$20,000. Their average hourly wage was about \$17.60/hour, lower than the living wage in Drayton Valley, which was \$19.55/hour in 2023 (Alberta Living Wage Network). Most participants (66.7%) were not the primary income earner in their household. Recipients consistently said they would not have been able to enroll in their chosen program without support from TAB (Ferdinands et al. 2024, "Mixed Methods").

REALIZING CAREER GOALS

TAB recipients found that their education was highly relevant to their career goals. Our 2023 survey of 24 TAB recipients found that 20 (83.3%) agreed or strongly agreed that they had better employment prospects because of their TAB education. Participants who were still finishing their studies also experienced a confidence boost (Ferdinands et al. 2024, "Mixed Methods").

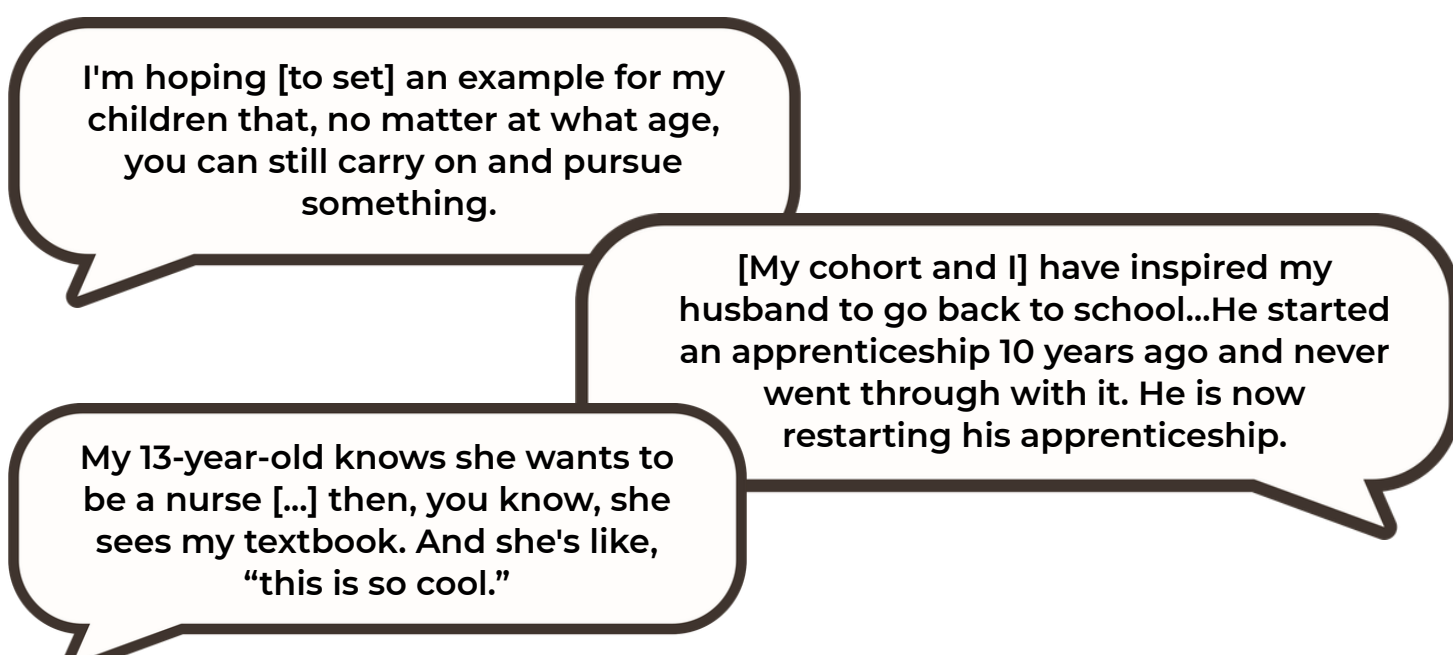
Meanwhile, two-thirds of TAB recipients had used the program to enroll in post-secondary education for the first time. While most said they had “no concrete plans” to attend a post-secondary program before hearing about TAB, many now have plans to pursue further credentials, viewing their TAB-funded program as a “stepping stone” toward long-term educational and career goals (*Ferdinands et al. 2024, “Mixed Methods”*).

PRESERVING SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

Research shows that many rural residents want to remain in their home communities, close to their friends and family. Many also wish to stay connected to their roots and maintain a sense of rural identity (*Friesen and Purc-Stephenson 2016*). Our research found that many TAB recipients, with increased confidence and income, were better positioned to stay in Drayton Valley long-term and nurture their social connections. For those wanting to stay in Drayton Valley, being close to family, including extended family, was “extremely important” (*Ferdinands et al. 2024, “Mixed Methods”*).

INSPIRING OTHERS

Many TAB recipients told us that the program gave them a new passion for education. These recipients hoped to inspire others in their lives to pursue higher education. Most (83.3%) said they would recommend TAB to someone else based on their experience, or they had already done so (*Ferdinands et al. 2024, “Mixed Methods”*).



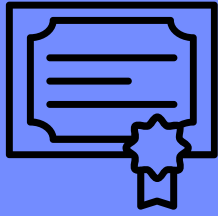
I'm hoping [to set] an example for my children that, no matter at what age, you can still carry on and pursue something.

[My cohort and I] have inspired my husband to go back to school...He started an apprenticeship 10 years ago and never went through with it. He is now restarting his apprenticeship.

My 13-year-old knows she wants to be a nurse [...] then, you know, she sees my textbook. And she's like, “this is so cool.”

- **TAB recipients** (quoted in *Ferdinands et al. 2024, “Mixed Methods”*)

Pathways for Women and Youth



Approximately 60 people who received TAB have gone on to become certified **health care aides (HCAs)** and are serving in the Drayton Valley region. Other areas of study have included **nursing, office administration,** and **early childhood education.** In 2024, Drayton Valley town council expressed an interest in using TAB to help more people enter health care and the skilled trades.

INVESTING IN WOMEN'S FUTURES

To date, around 90% of TAB recipients have been women, with ages ranging from adults in their mid-50s to youth just exiting high school. Among older women, a majority did not have the opportunity to pursue post-secondary education earlier in life (*Ferdinands et al. 2025*).

In 2022, we interviewed 16 young women in the Drayton Valley area (ages 16 to 19), finding that most have “strong career aspirations outside the oil and gas sector” and many felt uncertain about a future in Drayton Valley due to social pressures and limited opportunities (*Ferdinands et al. 2025*). TAB, and Drayton Valley’s broader education landscape, is one mechanism for creating a community where more young women want to live.

SUCCESS STORY: EARLY LEARNING AND CARE

The province projects a need for up to 9,500 additional early childhood educators (ECEs) to meet workforce demands (*Government of Alberta, “Early childhood educator certification”*). The early learning and child care (ELCC) sector is also facing a workforce imbalance, with 44% of ECEs at Level 1 and 17% at Level 2.

In Drayton Valley, TAB has proven effective in addressing this gap. Between 2022 and 2024, TAB supported 13 ECEs to complete Level 2 and Level 3 training. Local centers have directly benefited. The Early Childhood Development Centre currently employs seven staff members who have accessed TAB funding, including three Level 3 ECEs, two staff members currently enrolled in coursework, and two staff completing Level 2 training. There is also one key staff member at the Mighty Learners Daycare who received education through TAB.

Early childhood services have a “multiplier effect” in rural communities. More services means more young parents, especially mothers, can participate in the workforce and gain financial stability (*Conference Board of Canada*). Since 2019, Drayton Valley has expanded from one to six licensed early learning facilities, positioning the region as a potential provincial leader in the ELCC sector.

BUILDING A PLACE WHERE YOUTH BELONG



Statistics Canada reported that rural youth were more likely to feel a **strong sense of belonging** in their home community (59%) compared to urban youth (50%). A sense of belonging is linked to better health outcomes, life satisfaction, and a positive future outlook (*Statistics Canada*).

In Drayton Valley, like many rural areas, young residents frequently leave to pursue a “better life” in urban areas (*Sano et al. 2020*). We found that, for many TAB recipients, pursuing higher education was a significant reason contributing to their plans to leave Drayton Valley (*Ferdinands et al. 2024, “Mixed Methods”*).

At a large scale, the loss of trained workers is called “brain drain” and can severely limit a region’s ability to participate in the modern economy. As the TAB program grows, it has the potential to turn “brain drain” into “brain gain” by bolstering new industries and ways of life that appeal to young residents. By focusing on in-demand sectors like health care and skilled trades, TAB can help residents find good, stable jobs beyond oil and gas.

Rural Wealth Creation

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 and Whitecourt. Meanwhile, Edson and Hinton have all expressed interest in the TAB model as a way to help residents overcome barriers to post-secondary education.

WHAT’S NEXT?

The Town of Drayton Valley and its partners have founded a RWC Collaborative made up of local residents, elected officials, town administration, social service professionals, business leaders, and youth. 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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