Southwest Alberta Graduate Retention Strategy

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This project is a regional collaborative initiative. The project partners are:

Lethbridge College

University of Lethbridge

SouthGrow Regional Initiative

City of Lethbridge

Economic Development Lethbridge

Lethbridge Chamber of Commerce

Claresholm Economic Development

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Executive Summary

Southwest Alberta has a strong, diversified, and vibrant economy. Maintaining and building upon this strength requires a robust labour market and a well-educated workforce. In recent years, the region has experienced labour shortages and lower than average unemployment, which impacts organizations' ability to reach their full potential. The purpose of this project is to better understand student perceptions that influence where they choose to live following graduation. With this information, strategies are proposed to enhance the region's reputation as a desirable place for students to attend post-secondary and settle following graduation.

Both primary and secondary data was collected and analysed for this project. This included a major survey of students at both Lethbridge College and ULethbridge that was conducted in November 2022, as well as focus groups conducted in late-2023. The data was then used to identify five key themes and potential solutions that can positively impact student perceptions and decisions. They are:

- Employment
- Community safety
- Transportation
- Community activities and entertainment
- Creating a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere

Southwest Alberta Profile Summary

- Lethbridge College and ULethbridge typically enroll over 15,000 students combined each year, most of whom attend classes in-person at the institutions' main Lethbridge campuses. Well over half of these students (about 9,300 in 2022/23) resided outside Southwest Alberta at the time they applied. This number dramatically eclipses the number of students from Southwest Alberta who leave to go to school elsewhere in Alberta, which is typically about 2200 students per year. About 3000 typically complete their program per year at ULethbridge and Lethbridge College.

- Much of population growth in Southwest Alberta has been driven by the growth of the city of Lethbridge. The region's population is expected to grow by about 27% over the next 25 years.

- Population projections suggest that Census Division 2 (Lethbridge) is expecting a large increase in the number of 17-year-olds in the region between about 2022 and

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2030. This represents an opportunity to grow and retain enrolments of local students.

- Unemployment rates in Lethbridge have typically been below the Alberta average since 2015, suggesting that the region may experience labour shortages. Data from Economic Development Lethbridge indicates that access to labour is a key concern for local businesses.

- Immigration is increasingly seen as a means to counter low fertility rates in Alberta and Canada. However, immigrants are more likely to select larger centres, such as Calgary, which attracted more than twice the number of new permanent residents per capita than Lethbridge did in 2018. The challenges attracting new immigrants to the region to address labour shortages is a key motivation for the development of this strategy.

- The economy in Southwest Alberta is diversified. The top three industries for employment are "Healthcare and social services", "Retail", and "Manufacturing". "Healthcare and social services" has experienced strong job growth in recent years.

- Post-secondary attainment in Southwest Alberta, including Lethbridge, is below the Alberta average, which is in turn below the Canadian average. Attainment rates have not grown in recent years in Southwest Alberta, suggesting that the region is not retaining enough graduates to lift attainment rates.

- The rate at which high school students transition to post-secondary is lower in Southwest Alberta than the provincial average, which suggests that more work needs to be done to encourage the region's young people to attend post-secondary.

Summary of Thematic Analysis

Theme 1 – Employment

Summary

- The evidence suggests that employment is the single most important determinant when students are selecting a location to live following graduation.

- Post-secondaries are increasingly working to address the employment conundrum many students face: "I can't get a job because I have no experience, but how can I get experience if I can't get a job?" Initiatives include:

  o Focusing on core competency (i.e. soft skills) development and enhancing students' ability to validate their skills and articulate them to employers.

  o Focusing on enhancing Work Integrating Learning (WIL), which can help students transition to employment.

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- Many survey participants indicated that they believe it would be difficult to find employment in the region, particularly ULethbridge participants. Perceptions vary greatly between programs.

- Most participants who had completed a WIL placement in Southwest Alberta indicated that they would consider working at their WIL placement site after graduation, including students who responded that they are unlikely to stay in the region. This suggests that WIL is a pathway to retaining students in the region.

- Students noted that the job market in the region is highly dependent on having local connections. They suggested creating more networking opportunities to connect students with employers and other community members who may be in a position to recommend them for employment.

- Smaller businesses can find it challenging to access student talent and WIL opportunities, and/or may not have the resources needed to make the most out of a WIL placement.

- Transportation can be a barrier to employment, particularly for jobs with hours outside of normal public transit hours of operation and in rural communities.

- It was noted by a community member that the exodus of students from the region over the summer can adversely impact local businesses. Seeking ways to keep students in the region through initiatives such as co-op programs can help address this, as well as improve the students' connection to the community.

Potential Solutions

- Address potential misperceptions that students may have about their employability in the regional labour market.

- Continue working towards ensuring students have a clear understanding of how their skills are transferable to related employment, particularly their core competencies, and providing a means to validate their skills and experience.

- Facilitate greater awareness of how employers can access students/graduates, particularly with small and medium-sized businesses.

- Work with employers to reduce unnecessarily onerous job requirements and other barriers for students/graduates.

- Create more opportunities for students to network with employers and each other, including job fairs with on-the-spot interviews.

- Lethbridge College and ULethbridge could provide access to their Career Services job postings to each other's students.

- Advocate for reducing limitations on employment for international students.

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- Continue advancing the quality of WIL experiences for students, including WIL opportunities that can help keep students in the region over the summer months.

- Rural communities could develop strategies to attract and retain WIL students, including identifying high need occupations and working to reduce barriers for students (e.g. fuel subsidies, housing).

- Remove transportation barriers to employment within Lethbridge and to rural communities.

Theme 2 – Community Safety

Summary

- As recently as 2021, Lethbridge was reported as having the highest crime severity amongst CMAs in Canada. Despite recent decreases in crime, many continue to believe that Lethbridge is the most dangerous city in the country.

- Overall, students rated Community Safety as one of the most important characteristics when considering where to live following graduation, but the characteristic was below average with respect to Lethbridge's desirability.

- All demographics groups rated Community Safety high for importance on the survey, but women rated it higher than men and non-binary respondents. Men and women provided similar ratings for desirability, but non-binary respondents rated it considerably lower.

- International students rated Community Safety high for both importance and desirability. Domestic students rated it high for importance and relatively low for desirability regardless of whether they were from Lethbridge or another area of Alberta or Canada.

- Respondents who lived in Lethbridge for less than one year rated Community Safety higher for desirability than those who lived in the community for more than one year.

- Survey and focus group respondents noted the inter-relationship between crime, homelessness, poverty, and drug abuse. They suggested that crime could be addressed by addressing these root causes, and that more needs to be done to support marginalized people in the community.

Potential Solutions

- Provide current and accurate crime statistics to students and applicants to dispel the myth that Lethbridge is the most dangerous city in Canada

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- Provide opportunities for students to interact with people from different cultures and socio-economic backgrounds through activities such as volunteerism

- Increase CCTV coverage in the city – both a deterrent and means to detect crime

- Ensure students are aware of the services available to keep them safe

- Improve transit safety and reduce the need to walk long distances, particularly at night

- Draw more people to downtown – more activity downtown may increase perception of safety (e.g. Hold more classes at the ULethbridge's Penny Building facility)

Theme 3 – Transportation Summary and Potential Solutions

Summary

- Many students feel that the public transit in Lethbridge is inadequate, and it was one of the most commented upon themes in the survey and focus groups. Concerns include poor hours of operation, lack of service to residential areas, unreliable service, inadequate facilities (e.g. bus shelters), and long commute times.

- Participants noted that the quality of service seems to have decreased since Lethbridge Transit implemented the CityLINK system.

- Some noted that snow and ice removal is inadequate on city streets, and that Whoop-up Drive can feel unsafe in the winter.

- A lack of regional transportation options can make accessing rural areas difficult for both recreation and employment, including rural WIL placements.

- More can be done to educate and inform students about how to use the transit system, changes to the transit system, and service interruptions and delays.

- International students noted that information on how to get to Lethbridge and commute within the city could be helpful.

Potential Solutions

- Create a regional student transportation workgroup and strategy that explores improvements in regional transportation (including transportation to WIL placements), public transit within Lethbridge, and alternative transportation options. Ensure that students have representation on the workgroup.

  o Deploy a dedicated transportation survey at LC and ULethbridge to inform transportation strategies.

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- Create a handbook for new students – particularly international students and student from outside the region – on how to get to the Lethbridge and commute within the city and region.

- Explore ride-share and co-op options to make it easier for students to access vehicles on an ad hoc basis.

- Consider ways to allow Neuron e-bikes and e-scooters to access LC and ULethbridge campuses.

- Increase collaboration between LC, ULethbridge, and Lethbridge Transit on communications to ensure students are well informed of any service changes or disruptions.

Theme 4 – Community Activities, Entertainment, & Shopping

Summary

- While not as important as characteristics such as employment opportunities and community safety, having a good variety of things to do and places to shop can impact the overall student experience during their time in the community.

- Many students feel disengaged with the broader community and have not attended community events, particularly domestic students from outside the region.

- It was acknowledged in the focus groups that there is indeed a variety of things to do in Lethbridge, but students are often unaware of them. Community events apps geared towards young people could help generate awareness.

- It was noted that the post-secondary institutions and other community stakeholders could collaborate to increase the number of activities and the accessibility of those activities, including ensuring that public transit is available to make events more accessible.

- The natural beauty and outdoor recreation opportunities the region has to offer are both important and desirable characteristics of the region, and should be emphasized when marketing the region to prospective students and graduates.

Potential Solutions

- Create an app that serves as a central hub for activities and events in Lethbridge
    - Should not be limited to a specific post-secondary
- Invite university students to college events (e.g. Coulee Fest) and vice versa
- Create more events where students can bring their families

- o Create incentives for families to visit students, such as discounted hotel and restaurant rates

- Identify more student discount opportunities and student nights at local establishments

- Support student volunteer opportunities to plan and execute events

  - o Could be potential WIL opportunities

- Increase the ease with which students can access the outdoors and mountains (e.g. organized mountain excursions and coulee walks)

  - o Create more clubs and excursions for students with common interests

- Acknowledge that students have a variety of interests (i.e. not everyone wants to go to the bar for fun

Theme 5 – Welcoming and Inclusive Community

Summary

- Clashing worldviews and societal polarization may contribute to feelings of exclusion and negative perceptions of the community atmosphere.

- About two-thirds of the survey respondent indicated that they either somewhat or strongly agree that they feel welcome in Lethbridge. About 13% strongly or somewhat disagreed.

- Some demographic groups, such as Indigenous and non-binary students, were less likely to feel welcome. International students were more likely to feel welcome than domestic students.

- Domestic students born in Lethbridge were no more likely to feel welcome than domestic students born outside of Lethbridge.

- ULethbridge participants were less likely than Lethbridge College participants to respond that they feel a sense of belonging to the community. Particularly those who identify that they belong to specific demographic groups like international and Indigenous.

Potential Solutions

- Support the creation of clubs and activities (e.g. festivals) that can help students from diverse backgrounds connect with each other and the broader community

  - o These could include initiatives that bring ULethbridge and Lethbridge College students together

- Continue exploring ways to integrate Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) education into activities such as New Student Orientation and other learning

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environments, and do so in a non-threatening way that meets students where they are at

- Utilize student volunteers from diversity groups to support community initiatives that create an inclusive atmosphere in Lethbridge and the region (potential WIL projects)
- Better understand the root cause of why many local students also feel unwelcome in the community
- Work with civic leaders to address damaging perceptions of intolerance in the region

Next Steps

CSR recommends the creation of a **committee of regional stakeholders** with the following goals:

- Prioritize regional initiatives to attract students and retain graduates
- Improve the student experience in the community
- Facilitate connections between employers and students/graduates
- Create a unified strategy to promote Lethbridge and Southwest Alberta as a destination for students
- Seek funding to support regional initiatives to attract students and retain graduates

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Table of Contents

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Southwest Alberta has a strong, diversified, and vibrant economy. Maintaining and building upon this strength requires a robust labour market and a well-educated workforce. In recent years, the region has experienced labour shortages and lower than average unemployment, which impacts organizations' ability to reach their full potential.

In Canada, immigration is often seen as a way to address labour shortages, particularly as domestic birthrates decrease over time. However, the distribution of immigrants across the country is uneven, with immigrant typically favouring larger centres. For example, despite having 2.29% of Alberta's population, Lethbridge only attracted 1.54% of new permanent residents in 2018, compared to Calgary, which attracted 45% of new permanent residents despite having only 31% of the province's population (Government of Alberta, 2018). The region's smaller rural communities have an even greater challenge attracting newcomers.

While southwestern Alberta has challenges attracting a sufficient number of immigrants to keep pace with labour market needs, the region does have a relatively plentiful source newcomers – post-secondary students. With two large post-secondary institutions in Lethbridge – Lethbridge College (LC) and the University of Lethbridge (ULethbridge) – the city punches above its weight in higher education.

In addition to attracting a large portion of local post-secondary bound students, these two well respected institutions attract a significant number of students from outside the region, and this number has grown considerably in recent years. The two institutions typically enroll over 15,000 students each year, most of whom attend classes at their main Lethbridge campuses. Well over half of these students (about 9,300 in 2022/23), resided outside Southwest Alberta at the time they applied. This number has grown steadily over time, and dramatically eclipses the number of students from the region who leave to go to school elsewhere in Alberta, which is typically about 2200 students per year.[1]

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[1] The enrolment and completion figures presented in this section were sourced from Alberta Advanced Education's Learner Enrolment & Reporting System (LERS) and used by permission (Government of Alberta, 2023a). Please note, these numbers include all post-secondary students (apprentice students are not included) who attend Lethbridge College and ULethbridge regardless of where they are located. While the vast majority of the institutions' students attend in-person at the institutions' main campuses in Lethbridge, the numbers include students who do not live in Southwest Alberta. For example, ULethbridge has a large campus in Calgary and Lethbridge College has a large online student base, and many of these students do not live in Lethbridge. Additionally, students leaving the Lethbridge service area to attend institutions outside of Alberta are not trackable in LERS. As a result, the total number of students who attend the institutions is likely an over-estimation of the number who physically attend in Lethbridge at the main campuses, while the number leaving the region is likely an underestimation. Therefore, these figures should be viewed as a general indication of the scope of the opportunity, and not a precise estimation of the net flow of students to the Lethbridge service area.

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About 3000 typically complete their program per year at ULethbridge and Lethbridge College, graduating from a broad range of program areas, including healthcare, education, criminal justice, agriculture, trades, and many others subjects critical to the local economy and community. Additionally, some students choose to withdraw from their programs before completing. While this is a less desirable outcome, these students are still exposed to living in Lethbridge and have the potential to stay in the region and meaningfully contribute to the economy.

While many graduates undoubtedly stay in the region after they graduate, there is likely more that can be done to keep these skilled graduates in Southwestern Alberta. As will be shown, post-secondary attainment rates in the region are below the national and provincial averages, and well below larger centres such as Calgary. The fact that these rates have not increased in the past ten years – despite having large inflows of students – suggests that a strategy is needed to keep valuable graduates in the region.

The purpose of this project is to develop a strategy that takes a regional and collaborative approach to identifying ways to keep the region's post secondary graduates in our communities. This includes retaining more domestic and international newcomers to the region, and also includes retaining graduates originally from Southwest Alberta who may otherwise leave the region to explore opportunities in other regions, provinces, or countries.

To establish a good foundation for action, the study explores the following themes:

- How is southwestern Alberta perceived by graduates? What aspects of the region are attractive and not attractive when deciding where to settle following graduation?

- Is there anything that could be done to encourage graduates to settle in the region?

- Is there an opportunity to attract graduates to the rural communities outside of the City of Lethbridge?

- Can Work Integrated Learning (WIL) be used to further introduce students to employers and to working in the region? Can we increase local WIL opportunities for students?

- Is there more we can do as a community to connect graduates with local employers?

- Are there differences in demographic groups in their perceptions of Southwest Alberta and their willingness to settle in the community?

Curve Strategic Research (CSR) is confident that this study has answered these questions, as well as provided the post-secondary institutions and other community stakeholders with valuable insights into how to enhance the student experience in Lethbridge, which will help attract more students in the region. This study is based on the assumption that if students enjoy their educational experience Lethbridge, are engaged in

the community, and have good employment options – both during their education and when they complete – they will be more likely to consider Southwest Alberta as a viable and desirable place to settle.

1.2 Methodology

CSR utilized a number of data sources to inform the work of this project, including:

Literature and secondary data review

> A literature review was conducted, which identified studies related to graduate and labour retention in a variety of contexts. A standalone literature review was not prepared for this paper. Instead, references to the literature can be found throughout. In particular, Section 3.4 ties findings from the literature to the five key themes identified in the paper.

> In addition to the literature, a number of secondary data sources were utilized, including data that is publicly available online, such as data from the Government of Alberta and Statistics Canada, and data that is not publicly available online, such as data from Alberta Advanced Education's Learner Enrolment and Reporting System (LERS) and internal enrolment data from Lethbridge College and ULethbridge. This data was used by permission and reviewed and validated by the appropriate staff.

Surveys of Lethbridge College and University of Lethbridge students

> An all-student survey was conducted in November 2022 at both Lethbridge College and ULethbridge. The survey questionnaire was designed by CSR with the support of the institutions. It was deployed independently at the respective institutions, with only minor differences in the questionnaire. The two datasets were then merged by CSR for analysis. Detailed information about the survey can be found in Section 3.1.

> The decision was made to survey current students, as opposed to recent graduates, for a number of reasons. Surveys of students are easier to deploy, the response rate is more predictable, and they utilize institutional email addresses rather than personal email addresses. Surveying alumni can be challenging due to the fact that contact information can be unreliable once the graduate leaves the institution, and there can be a grey area around whether personal contact details can be used for purposes outside the scope of Alumni relations.

> Another key benefit of surveying students is the usefulness of the data for secondary purposes, like better understanding the student experience, which provides information applicable beyond graduate retention.

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Students in post-secondaries typically receive numerous surveys annually, and survey fatigue is a genuine concern. Therefore, institutions try to limit the number of all-students surveys conducted. It cannot be understated how challenging it is to both schedule and deploy an all-student survey, and CSR would like to thank both institutions for their hard work and commitment to successfully deploying the survey for this project.

Focus groups with post-secondary students, employers, and other regional stakeholders

Four focus groups were conducted for this project, including one each for: students from Southwest Alberta, domestic students from outside Southwest Alberta, international students, and community stakeholders. The focus groups were facilitated by Dr. Jaclyn Doherty of Dodo Studios (also a Lethbridge College employee). Dr. Doherty's summary report can be found in Appendix 4.

The five focus themes for this study were identified using the survey data, while the subsequent focus group sessions were designed to develop a deeper qualitative understanding of themes – in particular, the generation of potential solutions to address challenges and opportunities. Many of the solutions outlined in this paper can be directly attributed to student feedback from both the survey and focus groups.

An interview process was also planned as part of this project, but was not carried out. This is because the quantity and quality of the data from the survey and focus groups was greater than expected. For example, the original plan was to survey only students in their final year, but both institutions felt it was important to hear the opinions of all students. Therefore, the amount of data collected was much greater than expected, including the collection and analysis of thousands of survey comments. CSR is confident that the quality of the study was not diminished by the absence of interview data. Indeed, the overall quality of the data exceeded CSR's expectations.

The following sections of this paper begin with a profile of the Southwest Alberta region as it pertains to the labour market, post-secondary education, and graduate retention. It is then followed by the presentation of the findings from the study and the rationale behind the selection of the five key themes identified. The paper then continues with an in-depth analysis of data related to the five themes. Finally, the paper concludes with potential next steps to implement the solutions identified in the paper.

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2. Southwestern Alberta Profile

As public institutions, Post-Secondary Institutions (PSIs) in Alberta exist to ensure residents of Alberta have access to quality post-secondary education that supports social and economic prosperity – particularly within the regions they operate. To this end, the province is divided into regions knowns as "service areas" or "regional stewardship areas", which are defined by Alberta Advanced Education. The service area that Lethbridge College and ULethbridge operate in is within the "Lethbridge service area", which is shown in green on the map in *Figure 1* (including urban areas shown in grey and red within the green region).

Much if the enrolment information presented in this study is based in this region, and throughout this paper we refer to this region as "Southwest Alberta".

Figure 1

Because the Lethbridge service region is defined by Alberta Advanced Education, it may not align with other definitions of the region. In particular, some data used in this study is based on census divisions (CD) and subdivisions. Census Divisions 2 (Lethbridge) and 3 (Claresholm) combined roughly aligns with the Lethbridge service area. For convenience, we have presented data from CD's 2 and 3 as loosely representing Southwestern Alberta, however we acknowledge that this is an imprecise reflection of the Lethbridge service area and may exclude areas traditionally considered part of Southwest Alberta.
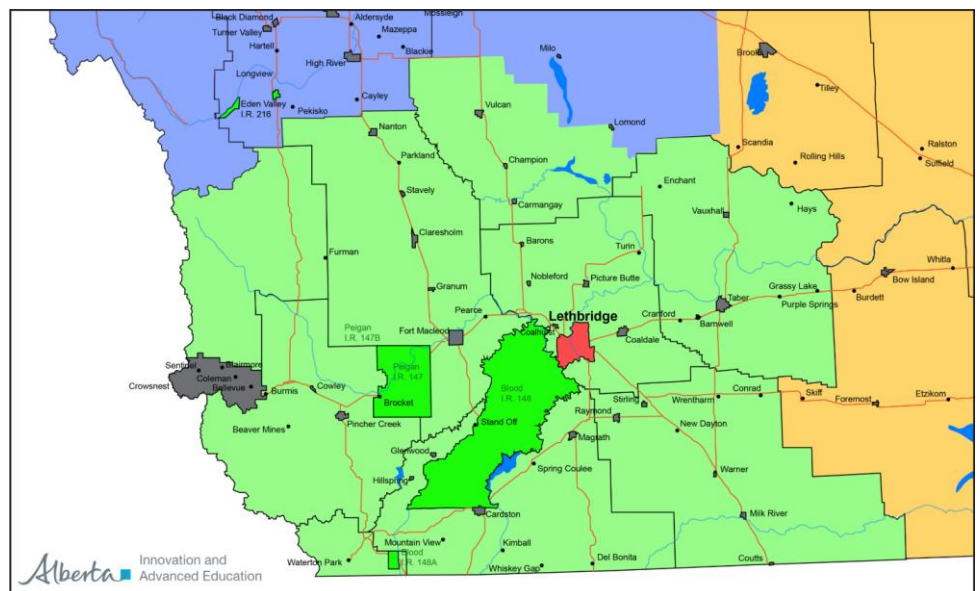
2.1 General Population Growth Trends

The total combined population of CDs 2 and 3 in 2023 is approximately 230,000. As shown in *Figure 2*, the region's population has grown steadily since 1996, with virtually all of that growth occurring in CD 2. The growth in CD 2 has primarily been driven by growth in Lethbridge and the communities immediately surrounding it. According to Government of Alberta projections (medium growth scenario), the population of CDs 2 and 3 combined is expected to grow by about 27% over current levels by 2046. (Government of Alberta, 2021a)

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Of great interest from a graduate retention perspective, *Figure 3* shows the number of 17-year-olds in the region (Government of Alberta, 2021a). This is the age when high school students are preparing to enter post-secondary. In recent years this number has been relatively flat, which coincides with the rather lacklustre growth in regional enrolments at Lethbridge College and ULethbridge in recent years.

If the data behind *Figure 3* is true, the slow growth in the number of 17-year-olds is expected to change dramatically in coming years. This data suggests that the number of 17-year-olds in the region is expected to increase from 2,855 in 2022 to 3,440 in 2030 – an astounding 17% increase. This is a significant opportunity for the region and its post-secondaries to grow local enrolments and then keep them in Southwest Alberta after they graduate.

This projected increase is also significant in light of Fiore, et al.'s study that is discussed in more detail in Section 3.4. They found that that post-secondary students in Iowa consider a "younger median age of community members" to be a relatively desirable community feature, ranking 12 out of 37 features (Fiore, et al., 2015). The average (mean) age of the population of CD 2 and 3 has increased steadily since the 1990s but is expected to

Figure 2

Population of Southwestern Alberta
GoA projections for Census Divisions (CD) 2 and 3;
Medium Growth Scenario; Updated July, 2022

Figure 3

Number of 17 year olds living in Southwestern Alberta
GoA projections for Census Divisions (CD) 2 and 3;
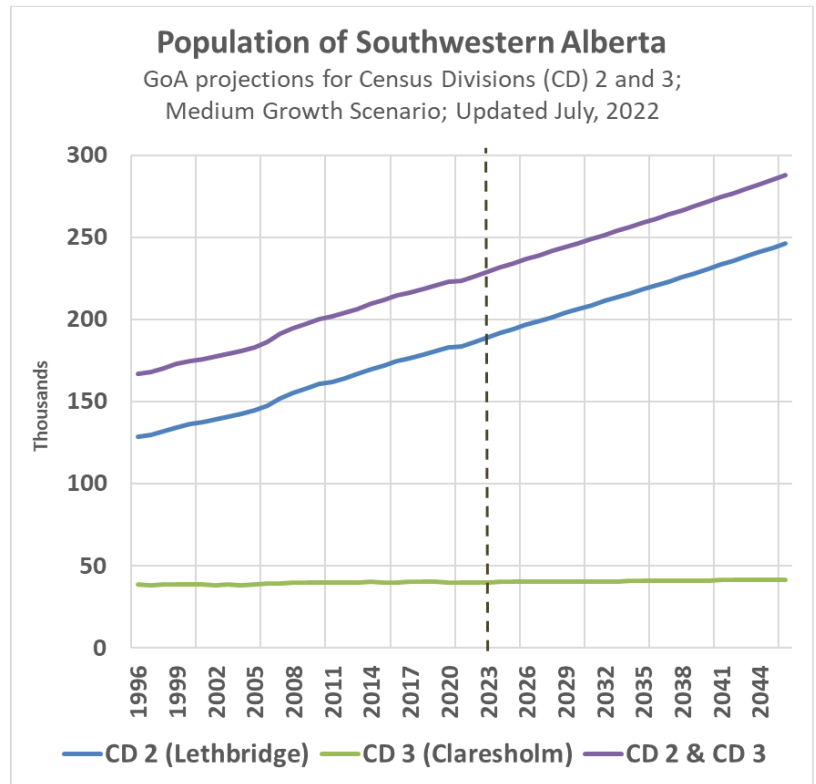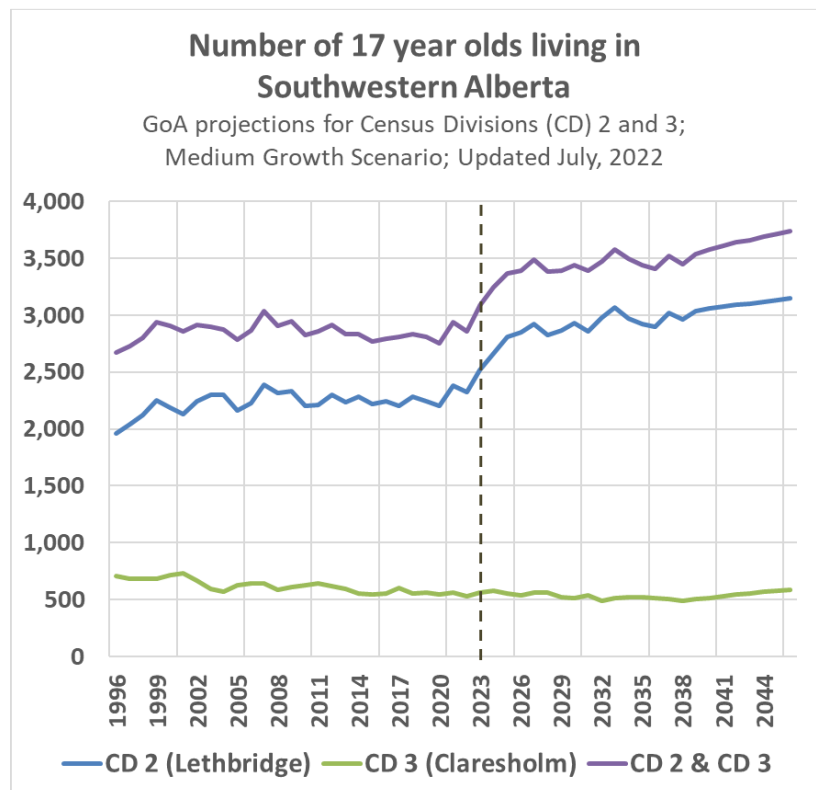Medium Growth Scenario; Updated July, 2022

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level off in the 2030s, which coincides with when 17-year-olds associated with the increase in *Figure 3* reach an age when they begin to have families. Contrary to popular belief, the Lethbridge region does not have an excessively high percentage of older citizens. In 2020, CD 2 did indeed have a slightly higher percentage of its population aged 65 and over than the provincial average of 14%, by 2046 it's elderly population will be slightly below average, and lower than CD 6 - Calgary (Government of Alberta, 2021b).

2.2 International Immigration

As with most developed countries, Canada has experienced a decades long decline in fertility rates, which are now well below the population replacement rate. While Alberta's fertility rates are slightly higher than the national average, they have dropped to only 1.45 children per woman in 2022 (Statistics Canada, 2023a), which is well below the 2.1 needed to replace the population in a developed country.

Clearly, without international immigration the population of Canada would be shrinking rapidly, an outcome that would have dire economic consequences. In the past, Alberta could rely on consistently high inbound inter-provincial migration, but in recent years net interprovincial migration has been negative (Government of Alberta, 2022). This makes international immigration all the more important to keep Alberta's population growing.

Unfortunately, international immigration is not distributed evenly across Alberta. For a variety of reasons, immigrants tend to prefer larger cities, such as Calgary and Edmonton. For example, Calgary received 9,910 new permanent residents in 2018 (45% of the total arriving in Alberta), compared to Lethbridge at 340 (Government of Alberta, 2018). This means that Calgary received 7.56 new permanent residents per 1000 population in 2018, which was over twice as high as Lethbridge at 3.46/1000. The percentage of newcomers choosing Calgary (CD 6) has declined over time, falling from over 60% in the early 2000s to under 50% in the 2020s, however the Lethbridge census division (CD 2) has not seen its percentage share increase significantly over that period (although the total number has increased). CD 3 has seen some increase, but the overall number of immigrants to CD 3 is negligible (Statistics Canada, 2023).

The challenge associated with attracting and retaining immigrants to rural areas such as Southwest Alberta is one of the key rationales for conducting this study. Fortunately, ULethbridge and Lethbridge College draw a significant number of domestic and international students from outside the region, and therefore provide access to a different type of newcomer – students. Focusing on retaining students could also indirectly support immigrant attraction and retention, since education is an important immigration pathway in Canada.

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2.3 Economic and Labour Indicators

A comprehensive Economic and labour market analysis is beyond the scope of this project, but a general understanding is useful when understanding student perceptions of their employment prospects and the need for skilled labour in important regional industries.

GDP figures by industry were unavailable at the regional level, but 2022 GDP figures for Alberta are noted in Appendix 1. Energy production and resource extraction continue to be the largest industry in Alberta in 2022, but overall, the table shows that services-producing industries are larger than goods-producing industries by a wide margin (Statistics Canada, 2023c). This is likely also the case in Southwestern Alberta, particularly in Lethbridge.

A key rationale for this study is to address the traditionally tight labour market in Southwestern Alberta. As shown in *Figure 4*, the unemployment rate in Lethbridge in recent years has typically been lower than the provincial average, as well as the rates for both Calgary and Edmonton (Government of Alberta, 2023b).

This tightness in the labour market creates challenges for regional employers. This assertion is reinforced by data from Economic Development Lethbridge's Brighter Together Survey, which found that "Workforce Availability" was a top concern for local businesses. (Economic Development Lethbridge, 2022)

Figure 4

Unemployment Rates in Alberta
Source: Government of Alberta, 2023
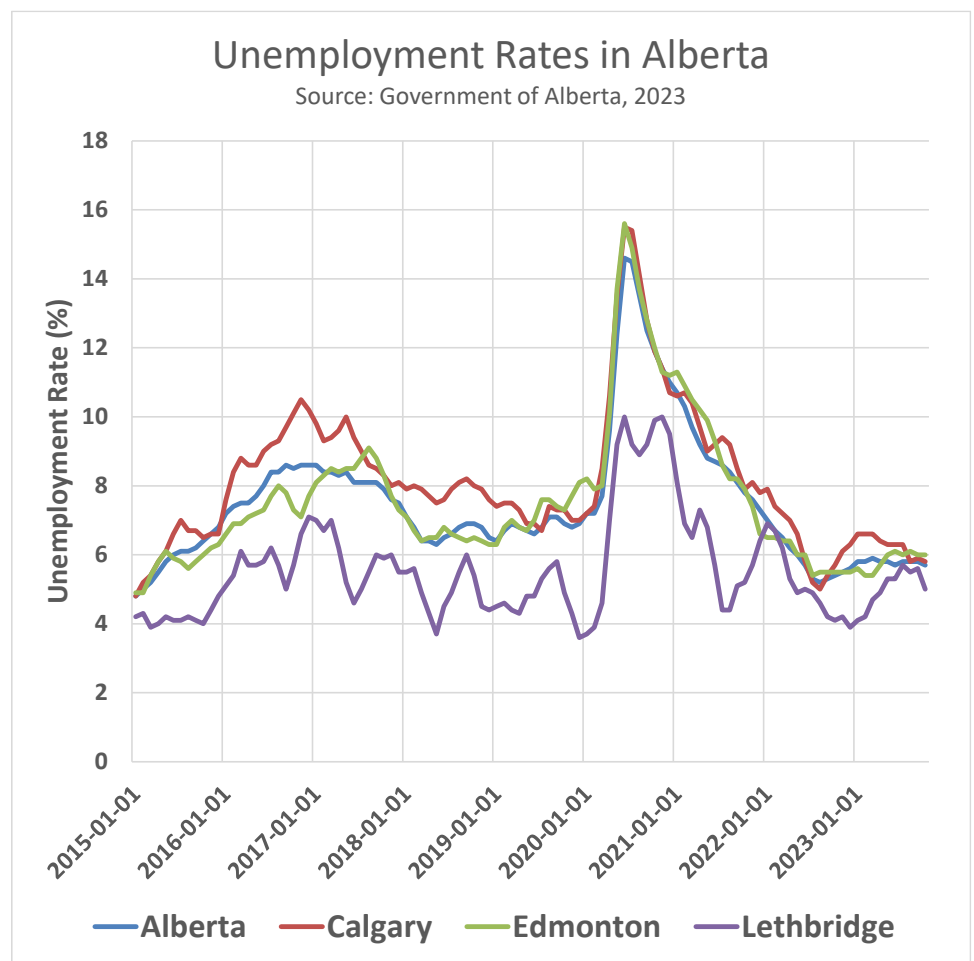
Lethbridge and the surrounding region has a relatively diversified economy compared to many parts of the province that rely on energy production, which helps to insulate it from energy market volatility and results in diverse labour market needs. Emsi's Lightcast labour market information tool, which was used for this paper by permission from Lethbridge College, was used to create *Figure 5* and provide the labour market information

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below (Lightcast, 2023). The diagram reinforces the diversified nature of the industries and labour market in the region.

In 2012, the top three industries by employment were Health Care and Social Assistance, Retail Trade, and Manufacturing, which all had a relatively comparable number of jobs in the region, ranging from about 10,000 and 12,000 each. By 2022, Health Care and Social Assistance was the largest employer by a wide margin, growing by 35% between 2012 and 2022. This was the highest growth rate of any industry, except the much smaller "Unclassified" industry group. Construction, Professional,

Figure 5

Employment in Southwest Alberta by Industry, 2022
CD 2 (Lethbridge) & CD 3 (Claresholm)
Total Jobs: 108,417; Source: Emsi Lightcast

scientific and technical services, Transportation and Warehousing, and Wholesale Trade also had high labour growth, with each growing over 10%. Educational Services, which was the fourth largest employer in 2022 also had notable growth at 9%.

Virtually all of this regional labour growth occurred in Lethbridge, particularly the growth in Educational Services, which grew by almost 18%, Transportation and Warehousing, which grew by 26%, and Professional, scientific and technical services, which grew by nearly 16% in Lethbridge. Excluding Lethbridge, which saw its labour force grow by nearly 8%, the number of jobs in CD 2 declined in by nearly 10% between 2012 and 2022. CD 3 saw its jobs grow by only 1.4% over the period.

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Agriculture is an important industry in Southwest Alberta – both culturally and economically. As an export-oriented sector, it provides valuable income for the region. However, it may come as a surprise to many that primary agriculture is not the region's largest employer, ranking seventh in total jobs in 2022 – less than half the size of Healthcare and Social Assistance. The fourth largest employer in 2012, jobs in agriculture saw large decreases from 2012 to 2022, particularly in rural areas. This is likely due to the increasing size of farms and the adoption of labour saving technologies, and may also be impacted by alternative labour market practices on farms under the ownership of groups like Mennonites. Lightcast predicts that jobs in this industry will continue to decline for the foreseeable future.

This section has provided a general overview of the economy and labour market in Southwestern Alberta, but of paramount interest is understanding whether students and graduates perceive there to be relevant jobs available in the region, and how that compares to reality. This topic will be explored further in Section 4.1.

2.4 Educational Attainment & High School Transitions

While it is tempting to focus attention on the attraction and retention of graduates from outside the region, the retention of graduates who are from the local area is just as important. Producing local graduates that can then be retained starts with supporting high post-secondary transition and attainment rates within the region. Looking at post-secondary attainment across the local population can also provide clues as to whether the region is successfully retaining graduates. Strong graduate retention should lead to higher overall post-secondary attainment rates in the region, particularly in a city like Lethbridge that has a large surplus of students.

By international standards, Alberta has a high rate of post-secondary attainment, even compared to other developed countries (ATB Economics, 2021). However, the province's post-secondary attainment rate tends to be below the Canadian average (*Table 1*). The reasons for the lower attainment rates in Alberta are complex, but a primary factor is likely that wages in Alberta have in recent decades been much higher than in other provinces for all education levels.

For example, median earnings in 2015 for residents of Alberta whose highest level of education is a high school diploma was $51,169 for women and $69,774 for men, compared with the national average of $43,254 and $55,774 for women and men respectively. In 2015, the median income for a woman in Alberta with a high school diploma was higher than college diploma holders all other provinces in Canada, except Saskatchewan and the northern territories (Statistics Canada, 2017). High wages for high-school graduates in past years suggests that a post-secondary education was not always

necessarily to live a comfortable lifestyle in Alberta, however this may change in the future as the province's economy transitions away from resource dependence.

Table 1

Educational Attainment (%)						
2021 Census Source: Statistics Canada		25 to 64 years		25 to 34 years		
Geography	Geographic area type	High School or less	Post-secondary	High School or less	Post-secondary	
Canada	Country	32.9	67.2	28.8	71.1	
Alberta	Province	35.2	64.7	34.4	65.7	
CD No. 2 (Lethbridge)	Census Div	44.9	55.1	44.0	56.0	
CD No. 3 (Claresholm)	Census Div	44.6	55.4	48.6	51.2	
MD of Taber	MD	70.2	29.5	67.9	31.2	
Taber	Town	61.3	38.8	65.8	33.8	
Lethbridge	City	38.2	61.9	37.6	62.5	
Calgary	City	29.0	71.0	27.3	72.8	
Edmonton	City	33.4	66.5	31.9	68.2	

Within Alberta, education attainment varies considerably between urban and rural areas. As shown in *Table 1*, Lethbridge's post-secondary attainment rate was a respectable 62% in 2021, however this is below the rates of both Calgary and Edmonton by a wide margin. The numbers drop further when rural areas of the region are included, with both CD 2 and CD 3 registering post-secondary attainment rates of about 55% - well below the provincial average (Statistics Canada, 2022a).

Considering that Lethbridge makes up a sizable portion of the population of CD 2, how could it be that attainment rates are so low in CD 2? The reason is that there are some areas of CD 2 with exceptionally low attainment rates. As shown in *Table 1*, both the Town of Taber and the Municipal District (MD) of Taber have very low rates. Anecdotally, it is believed that these rates – which are some of the lowest in Canada – may be due to the high populations of Mennonites in this area. In the MD of Taber, nearly half of the population does not even hold a high school diploma.

Post-secondary attainment rates do not appear to be increasing in the region, suggesting that graduates are not being retained at a high enough rate to lift attainment figures. In Lethbridge, post-secondary attainment rates amongst 25 to 34 year olds was actually slightly higher in 2011 than in 2021 (62.2% vs. 61.5%). This is also the case in the 25 to 64 age groups. This decrease is driven by men, who have lower attainment rates overall and who saw a decrease in post-secondary attainment from 56% to 54% between 2011 and

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2021, compared to women who had a slight increase over the same timeframe (Statistics Canada, 2022b).

Table 1 illustrates that there is work to do to increase post-secondary (and even high school) participation in many parts of the region. To further illustrate this need, *Figure 6* shows the rate at which high school students transition to post-secondary in the Lethbridge service region. This diagram suggests that transitions are lower than the Alberta average and much lower than the average for larger centres such as Calgary. The dip in transitions in 2020/21 may be due to the Covid-19 pandemic, however the Alberta average did not experience a similar dip, which would be expected if Covid-19

Figure 6

High School Transitions
% Transitioning to an Alberta PSI within Six Years of entering Grade 10

was the primary driver of the dip. These figures should be monitored in the future to ensure the rates return to previous levels. Nevertheless, the diagram suggests there is work to be done to encourage young people to attend post-secondary in the region.

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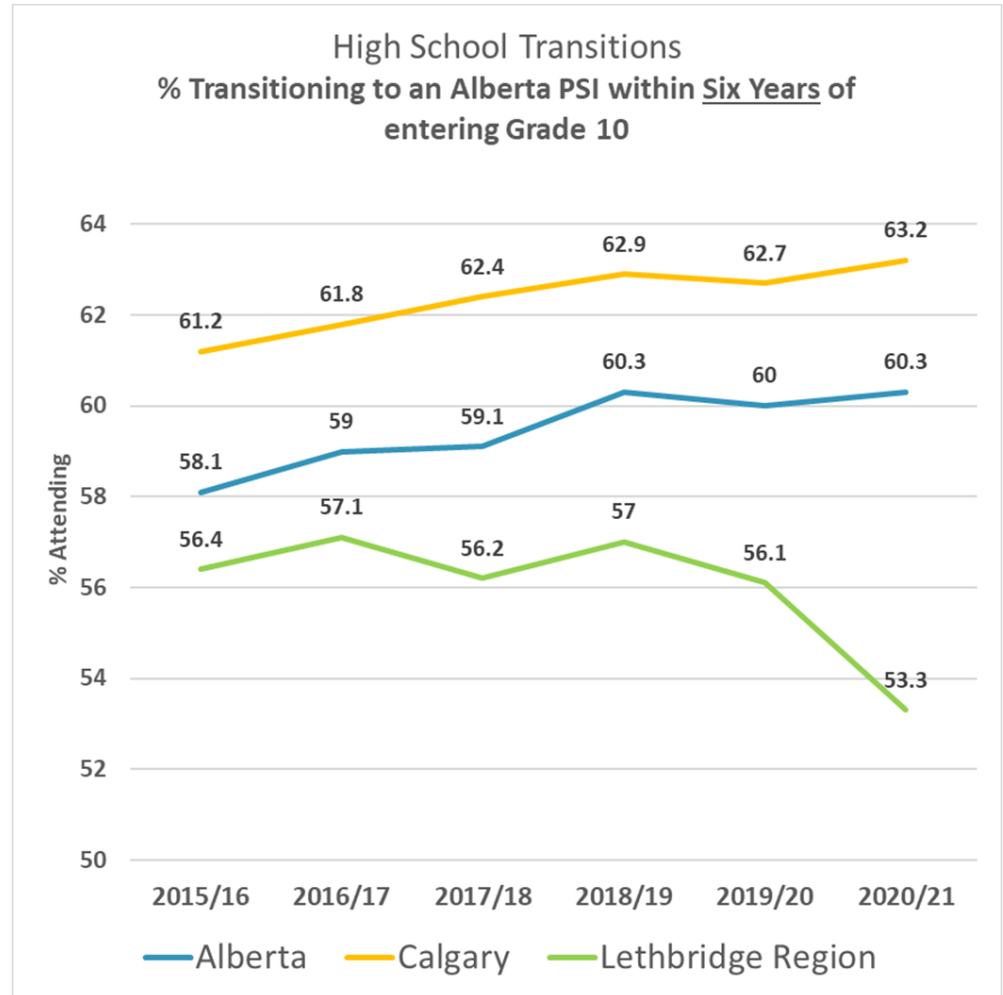
2.5 Regional Profile Summary

- Lethbridge College and ULethbridge typically enroll over 15,000 students combined each year, most of whom attend classes in-person at the institutions' main Lethbridge campuses. Well over half of these students (about 9,300 in 2022/23) resided outside Southwest Alberta at the time they applied. This number dramatically eclipses the number of students from Southwest Alberta who leave to go to school elsewhere in Alberta, which is typically about 2200 students per year. About 3000 typically complete their program per year at ULethbridge and Lethbridge College.

- Much of population growth in Southwest Alberta has been driven by the growth of the city of Lethbridge. The region's population is expected to grow by about 27% over the next 25 years.

- Population projections suggest that Census Division 2 (Lethbridge) is expecting a large increase in the number of 17-year-olds in the region between about 2022 and 2030. This represents an opportunity to grow and retain enrolments of local students.

- Unemployment rates in Lethbridge have typically been below the Alberta average since 2015, suggesting that the region may experience labour shortages. Data from Economic Development Lethbridge indicates that access to labour is a key concern for local businesses.

- Immigration is increasingly seen as a means to counter low fertility rates in Alberta and Canada. However, immigrants are more likely to select larger centres, such as Calgary, which attracted more than twice the number of new permanent residents per 1000 population than Lethbridge did in 2018. The challenges attracting new immigrants to the region to address labour shortages is a key motivation for the development of this strategy.

- The economy in Southwest Alberta is diversified. The top three industries for employment are "Healthcare and social services", "Retail", and "Manufacturing", with "Healthcare and social services" experiencing strong growth in recent years.

- Post-secondary attainment in Southwest Alberta, including Lethbridge, is below the Alberta average, which is in turn below the Canadian average. Attainment rates have not grown in recent years in Southwest Alberta, suggesting that the region is not retaining enough graduates to lift attainment rates.

- The rate at which high school students transition to post-secondary is lower in Southwest Alberta than the provincial average, which suggests that more work needs to be done to encourage the region's young people to attend post-secondary.

3. Findings

3.1 Southwest Alberta Perceptions Survey Overview

In November 2022, Curve Strategic Research led a major survey initiative called the Southwest Alberta Perceptions Survey, with the intention of collecting data relevant to the development of this strategy. The survey was conducted at both the University of Lethbridge and Lethbridge College, and all students were invited to participate. CSR would like to thank both institutions for allowing their students to be surveyed for this initiative. In particular, CSR would like to thank the Institutional Research (IR)[2] departments at both institutions, which provided invaluable support during the planning, design, and deployment of the project.

CSR consulted with the Research Ethics Boards (REB) of both institutions and it was determined that REB approval was not needed, since the research is primarily for the purposes of quality improvement and there was no intention of using the results for academic research and publication in an academic journal. The survey was communicated as a "confidential" survey. Although there is no intention of identifying specific students, the survey was not communicated as "anonymous" due to the large number of demographics questions asked, which, technically, may make some students identifiable.

The survey included a random prize draw for one $500 grand prize and five $100 secondary prizes. These cash prizes were contributed by the University of Lethbridge. Additional prizes included gift cards to the Enmax Centre (contributed by the City of Lethbridge) and tickets to Lethbridge Hurricanes hockey games (contributed by the Lethbridge College Student Association).

The survey was distributed online by the institutions' IR departments using their respective survey platforms (Survey Monkey at Lethbridge College and Qualtrics at the University of Lethbridge). The two datasets were then combined by CSR for analysis with the permission of both institutions.

With a few small exceptions, such as the exclusion of dual-credit high school students, all students – not just students in their graduating year – were invited to participate. This was done because the survey itself serves a broader purpose than graduate retention. It is also useful data to understand student perceptions of the region in general, making it applicable for other purposes, such as marketing, recruitment, and enhancing the student experience.

The timing of the survey, which was conducted in November 2022, is an important factor when considering the data for the following reasons:

- The University of Lethbridge Faculty Association was on strike for 40 days beginning in February of 2022, which resulted in a disruption of classes (Dorozio,

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[2] The IR department at Lethbridge College is called Institutional Planning & Reporting. The IR department at the University of Lethbridge is called Institutional Analysis.

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2022). The strike was contentious and impacted student, faculty, and staff morale. Although the survey was conducted several months after the strike, it is possible that there were lingering impacts on student perceptions as a result of this major event.

- In the summer of 2022, a homeless encampment emerged in a central location in Lethbridge (Lethbridge News Now, 2022). The encampment and its removal created divisions in the community and may be a factor in the prevalence of comments in the survey related to crime, homelessness, discrimination, and poverty. Additionally, the closure of Lethbridge's safe consumption site in 2020 may also have impacted student perceptions of the city's commitment to harm reduction for vulnerable populations.

- While all remaining public health restrictions related to the Covid-19 pandemic were lifted by June 2022 (Government of Alberta, 2023c), the student experience during the pandemic may have impacted student perceptions and their survey responses.

Table 2 details some descriptive statistics and demographics from the survey. The *Table 2* demographics were selected due to the fact that they are comparable to known demographics available in administrative data. As a result, the survey demographics can be compared with the institutions' actual demographics for these variables, which can help establish whether the survey sample is representative of the actual student population.

In total, 12,732 students were invited to participate and 2422 responded. Of those, 2199 completed the survey. Only completed surveys were used in the analysis. The combined response rate (based on completed surveys divided by invitations) was 17.3%. A completion rate of over 90% was achieved, which is quite high considering the length of the survey, which included 50 questions. CSR and the institutions were thrilled with both the response rate and completion rate and feel that it provides a solid and reliable foundation for understanding student preferences. By comparison, a similar survey of graduating seniors in Iowa, which has been used for comparison purposes in the following sections, received a response rate of 11.6% (Fiore, et al, 2015).

As noted in *Table 2*, 66% of the survey respondents identified as "Women", which is higher than the population actuals. This result reflects a common challenge in post-secondary surveys, and surveying in general – women are generally more likely to complete surveys than men. The Iowa survey noted above also had a much higher percentage of female respondents than males, at 69.3% (Fiore, et al, 2015). While expected, the high number of women respondents to our survey may skew the results for some questions where there are significant differences in way men and women responded, and we have endeavoured to identify when this may be a possibility.

The other demographics in *Table 2* are more closely aligned with the actual student population averages, suggesting that, apart from the gender breakdown, the sample is a reasonably good reflection of the student population.

Please note, the questionnaire design and methodology is the intellectual property of CSR and we ask that you contact us if you would like to use all or part of the questionnaire.

Table 2

Southwest Alberta Perceptions Survey					
Demographics					
	Lethbridge College		University of Lethbridge		Combined
	Survey	Actual	Survey	Actual	Survey
Response Rate					
Total Invitations	4712	N/A	8020	N/A	12732
Total Responses	901	N/A	1521	N/A	2422
Completions	842	N/A	1357	N/A	2199
Response rate based on completions (completions / invitations)	17.9%	N/A	16.9%	N/A	17.3%
Completion Rate (completions / responses)	93.5%	N/A	89.2%	N/A	90.8%
Gender					
Woman	67.0%	51.2%*	65.4%	60.3%	66.0%
Man	30.4%	47.3%*	29.8%	39.5%	30.0%
Other	2.4%	1.5%*	4.1%	0.2%	3.4%
Prefer not to answer	1.1%	1.06%*	2.1%		1.7%
Indigenous					
First Nations, Metis, or Inuit	9.2%	7.8%*	6.5%	6.3%	
Age					
19 and under	26.7%	22.3%	23.9%	20.6%	25.0%
20 to 24	35.8%	42.0%	46.0%	51.2%	42.1%
25 to 29	14.6%	13.6%	13.3%	13.4%	13.8%
30 to 39	13.1%	14.4%	11.0%	9.7%	11.8%
40 or over	9.8%	7.6%	5.8%	5.1%	7.3%
Citizenship Status					
Canadian citizen	82.8%	77.3%	86.1%	85.5%	84.8%
Permanent resident	4.4%	9.0%	3.8%	5.2%	4.0%
Study permit/visa	11.3%	11.9%	9.1%	9.3%	10.0%
Other visas and statuses	1.4%	1.9%	1.0%	0.1%	1.2%

Please note, the survey demographics are self-reported and based on completed surveys. Respondents were given the option to "select all that apply" when asked for their gender identity, resulting in a summation greater than 100% for this demographic.

*Lethbridge College Gender and Indigenous actuals are based on full-year enrolments reported by Lethbridge College. All other actuals are based on the demographics of the students invited to participate in the survey.

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The following are results from some of the key overarching survey questions. Results for questions relevant to the five themes identified in the study can be found in Section 4. The Southwest Alberta Perceptions Survey was comprehensive in nature and included 50 questions. Not all questions are presented in this report. We encourage you to contact CSR for more information about the survey, questionnaire, and/or results.

3.2 What's the bottom line?

Before diving into the specific factors impacting student perceptions of Lethbridge and what can be done to keep them in the region when they graduate, we will first consider an overarching question – would they consider living in the region?

Survey participants were explicitly asked this question in the survey. Overall, nearly half of respondents answered that they are either "somewhat likely" or "very likely" to consider Lethbridge as a place to settle. Immediately apparent when viewing *Figure 7* is the large difference between the results for Lethbridge College and ULethbridge. This is likely due to a number of reasons, many of which will be discussed in Section 4, however negative sentiments that lingered in the aftermath of the strike noted above may also have been a

Figure 7

Southwest Alberta Perceptions Survey
Q23 - How likely or unlikely are you to consider the city of Lethbridge as a place to live after you complete your education?

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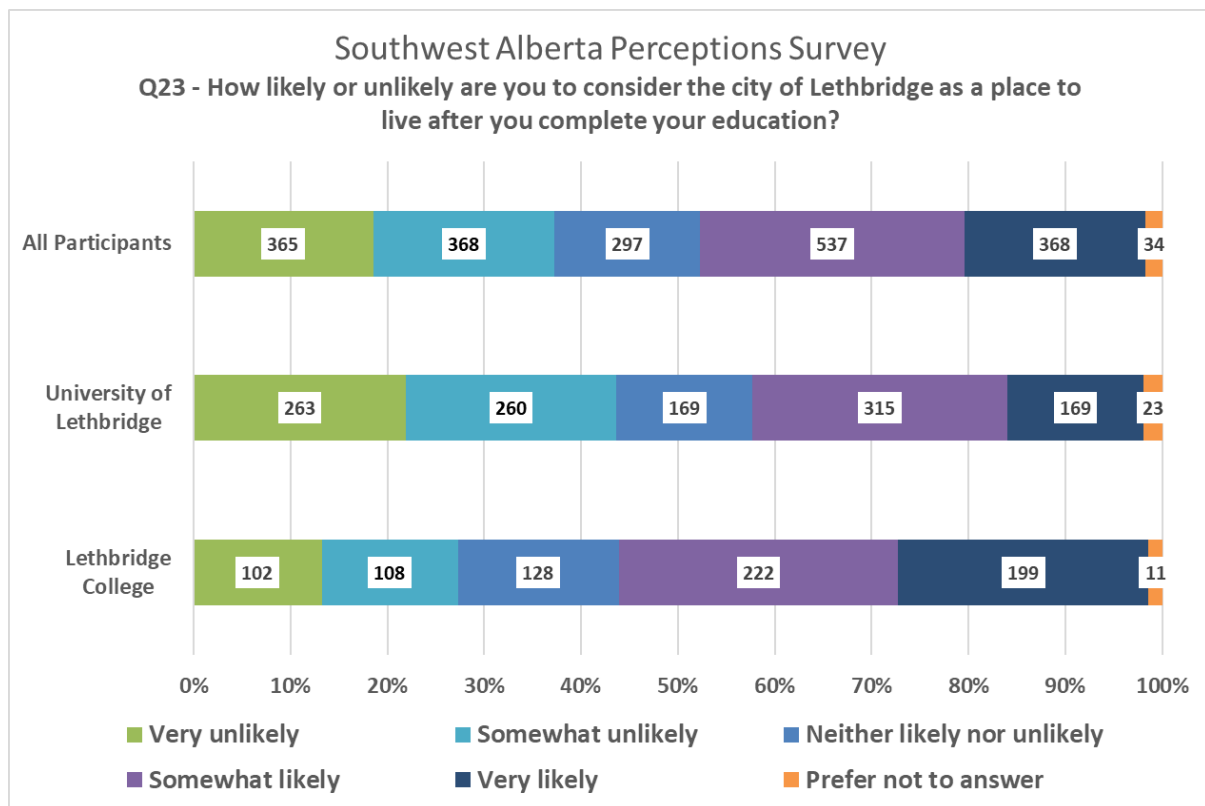
factor. Throughout the survey, ULethbridge participants were generally more pessimistic about Lethbridge than respondents from Lethbridge College.

Table 3[3] shows the results broken down by demographic group. A bright spot in this table is the positive results for the international student group. In general, international students responded positively throughout the survey. In the focus groups, these students also expressed a keen desire to stay in Lethbridge if possible (on condition that meaningful work is available).

Of particular note is the relatively low percentage of domestic students from outside the

Table 3

Southwest Alberta Perceptions Survey			
Q23 - How likely or unlikely are you to consider the city of Lethbridge as a place to live after you complete your education?			
% Responding "Somewhat likely" or "Very likely"			
	Lethbridge College	**University of Lethbridge**	**All Participants**
All Participants*	**55.5%**	**41.2%**	**46.8%**
Lived in Lethbridge at least one year	**55.2%**	**42.6%**	**47.1%**
Lived in Lethbridge at least three years	**56.6%**	**46.3%**	**50.1%**
Domestic Students (Canadian Citizens or Perm Resedents)			
Lived in City of Lethbridge at time of application	**58.5%**	**52.9%**	**55.4%**
Lived in Lethbridge at least one year	**57.9%**	**53.1%**	**55.3%**
Lived in locations in SW Alberta outside of the City of Lethbridge at time of application	**54.7%**	**44.8%**	**48.6%**
Lived in Lethbridge at least one year	**44.8%**	**52.7%**	**50.0%**
Lived in locations outside of SW Alberta at time of application (excludes International visa students)	**41.2%**	**28.0%**	**31.7%**
Lived in Lethbridge at least one year	**39.8%**	**30.1%**	**32.2%**
International Student Visa			
International student visa	**73.3%**	**55.3%**	**65.1%**
Lived in Lethbridge at least one year	**76.9%**	**55.8%**	**65.9%**
Indigenous Status			
Indigenous	**61.1%**	**34.9%**	**47.0%**
First Nations & Inuit	**67.6%**	**26.9%**	**50.0%**
Gender			
Women	**57.0%**	**41.7%**	**47.4%**
Men	**51.2%**	**36.7%**	**42.5%**
Other gender identities	**52.9%**	**22.7%**	**31.1%**
Age			
24 years and under	**50.1%**	**35.0%**	**40.3%**
25 years of age and over	**63.9%**	**52.3%**	**57.5%**
Please note:			
- *All figures based on participants who indicated that they currently live in Lethbridge except the "All Participants*" total			
- "Prefer not to answer" responses have been removed from the calculation			

region who answered "somewhat likely" or "very likely". Lower numbers for this group should be expected, since they are less likely than local students to have roots in the region that may keep them in Lethbridge, however there is a substantial difference

[3] The green colour coding shows differenced greater than 5% above the All Participant average and the red colour coding shows a difference greater than 5% below the average.

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between the results for Lethbridge College and the University of Lethbridge for this group. This is a critically important group for both the college and the university, but particularly for the university, which draws over half its students from areas of Alberta and Canada outside of the Lethbridge region. Potential causes for these lower values are discussed in Section 4.

Indigenous respondents at ULethbridge, respondents who were under the age of 25, men, and those identifying with another gender identities were all less likely to consider Lethbridge as a place to live – particularly respondents from the university. With respect to younger students, this is not unexpected, since these participants may be less likely to be rooted to the community by factors such as children attending school and/or partners who are employed in Lethbridge.

Survey participants were also asked if they would consider living in a rural community in Southwest Alberta (*Figure 8*). This question was asked as a simple Yes/No/Maybe question. CSR considers the results for this question to be positive for rural communities, with nearly 40% answering "Yes" and about two-thirds responding either "Yes" or "Not sure".

Figure 8

Southwest Alberta Perceptions Survey
Q35 - Would you consider living in a rural community in Southwest Alberta after you complete your education (not including Lethbridge)?

Group	Yes	No	Not sure	Prefer not to answer
All Participants	756	663	535	8
University of Lethbridge	384	469	339	7
Lethbridge College	372	194	196	8
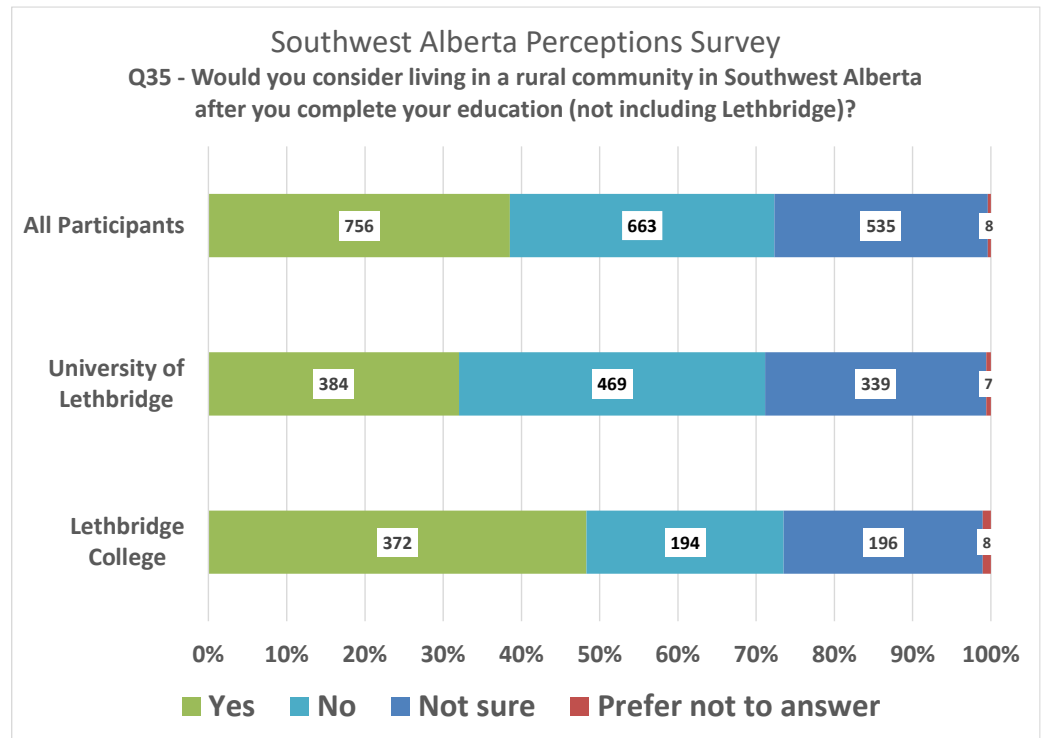
Surprisingly, the results for this question are nearly as positive when filtering for just those who lived outside Southwest Alberta at the time they applied. For this group, only 36.6% responded "No", compared to the all-participant average of 33.7%. In fact, this group was slightly more likely to respond "Yes" than students who lived in the city of Lethbridge at the time they applied. While the number of those studying on an international student visa who responded "No" was comparable to the percentage of domestic students from outside the region who responded "No", they were much more likely to respond "Not sure", suggesting that there is more that could be done to introduce international students to rural communities and educate then on the benefits of living there.

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3.3 So what do graduates really want, anyways?

A central objective of this project is to get a clear understanding of what graduates are looking for in a community to settle in, and whether Lethbridge has those characteristics. These questions were put to U of L and LC students in the survey and focus group work.

In the survey, participants were asked to rate the importance of a list of community characteristics on a three-point scale, as well as select their five most important characteristics. Participants were then asked to rate whether Lethbridge is desirable or not

Figure 9

Southwest Alberta Perceptions Survey
Community Characteristics
Lethbridge's desirability vs. Importance of characteristics
Lived in Lethbridge at time of application
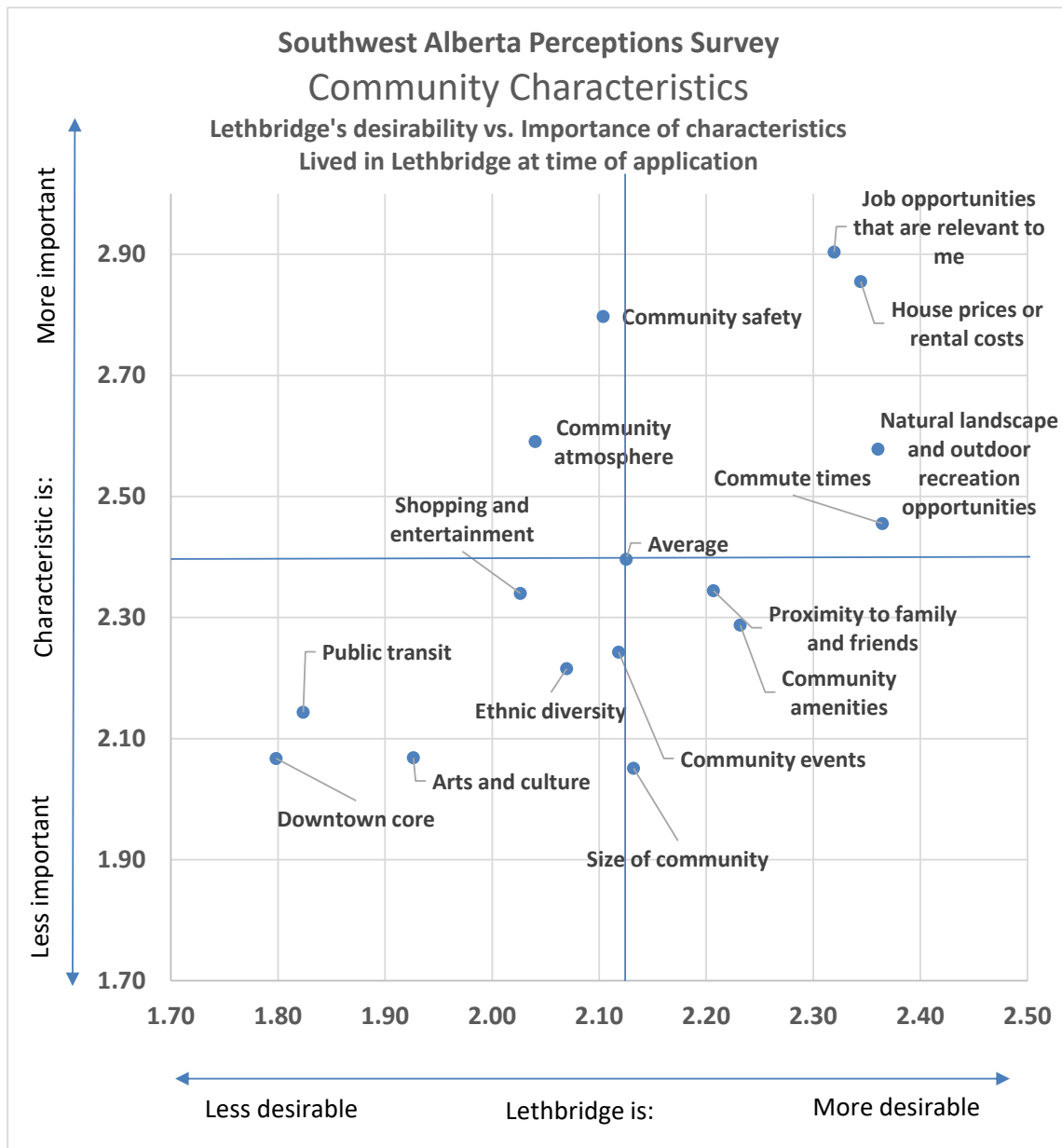
desirable in these characteristics on a three-point scale. A scatter plot was then created to show the results (*Figure 9*).

Figure 9 shows the overall results for students who lived in Lethbridge at the time the survey was conducted. Additional scatter plots are provided in Appendix 2, which are filtered for specific demographics groups. As can be seen in the appendix, there are many differences between demographics groups in how they view the characteristics. This is important, since it can help Lethbridge College, ULethbridge, and others to target resources and marketing to specific groups. For example, domestic students rated access to "Natural Landscapes and Outdoor Recreation Activities" relatively high for both importance and desirability (Appendix 2c). Clearly, this is an important characteristic for these students, which can then be emphasized in marketing. On the other hand, International students (Appendix 2g) rated "House prices or rental costs" and "Community safety" particularly high for both importance and desirability, which can then be emphasized in marketing for that group.

Figure 9 suggests there is much to be optimistic about in the finding. In particular, it can be seen in the diagram that many of the more important items are also higher in desirability, and many of the items that have below average desirability are of lesser importance. For this reason, in general the results in *Figure 9* can be considered positive, however there are also other important factors to consider.

For example, "Job opportunities that are relevant to me" was universally identified as an important characteristic, and, fortunately, also rated fairly high on desirability. However, it is clear that the desirability is dependant on a number of factors, such as the participant's program. As will be shown in Section 4.1, some expect to find employment with relative ease, while others expect it to be quite difficult, suggesting that additional attention and supports for employment may be needed for specific groups.

On the flip side, "Public Transit" rated relatively low for both importance and desirability. This is somewhat misleading though, since it was evident from the open-ended comments and the focus group feedback that this is a major concern for many students. This characteristic had greater polarization in responses, with many saying that it was not important and many saying that it was very important, and relatively few identifying it as somewhat important. The high number of saying that it is not important (likely those with personal vehicles) dragged the average down, even though for many it is considered a critical drawback of the city that greatly impacts their student experience.

The three-point scale used in the questions on importance and desirability was used for simplicity and to prevent the matrix rating scale from appearing too daunting (complex matrices can cause participants to drop out of a survey). The trade-off is that it can be somewhat imprecise. That is why we also asked participants to select the five most important characteristics, which forces the participant to prioritize the characteristics that are important. These results can be seen in Appendix 3. There are many similarities

between the order of the average ratings on the rating scale (Q21) and "five most important" list (Q22), which helps validate the findings from rating scale questions.

In addition to this important quantitative data, the survey comments were critical in determining the five focus themes discussed in Section 4. There were a number of open-ended questions, and students provided extensive comments. The open-ended responses were coded by CSR and the results for one of the open-ended questions can be seen in *Figure 10*.

Figure 10

The large number of comments related to "Crime, Poverty, and Homelessness" and "Transportation and Public Transit" was a surprise finding. Not only were there a large number of comments on these thopics, but many were also lengthy. The number and quality of the comments suggests that the participants viewed the survey in general as an important avenue to communicate their experiences and concerns with living in Lethbridge.

Using the insights gleaned from both the quantitative and qualitative feedback provided in the survey, CSR landed on the following five themes to be explored in more depth in Section 4. They are:

Southwest Alberta Perceptions Survey
If there is one thing you would like to see improved to encourage you to live in Lethbridge after you complete your education, what would it be?
Themes from open-ended responses
All respondents; Total comments = 954

- Employment
- Community safety
- Transportation
- Community activities and entertainment
- Creating a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere

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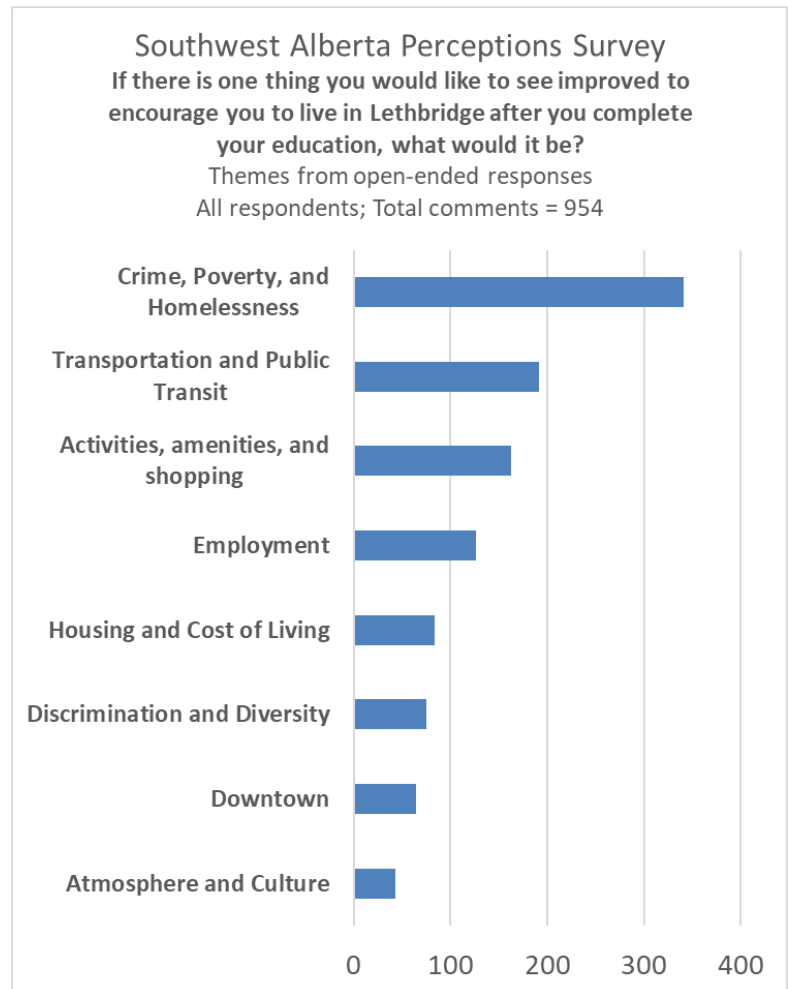
3.4 What does the literature have to say?

The survey data above provided important insights into what our own students are looking for in a community; however, it is important to bear in mind that these students have already selected Lethbridge as a place to attend post-secondary. Most are likely to have at least some level of acceptance of what Lethbridge is and is not, otherwise they would not have chosen to go to school in Lethbridge to begin with. In other words, there is likely to be some self-selection bias inherent in the data collected, because those who find Lethbridge unappealing as a city may be less likely to go to school there.

This means that Lethbridge may be missing out on attracting students with different preferences. For example, our survey found that characteristics such as "arts and culture" and the "vibrancy of the downtown core" were of relatively lesser importance when considering where to live after graduation. Had the same survey been conducted at an institution such as the Alberta University for the Arts, these factors may have been much more important, and these students may not consider Lethbridge to be an appealing place to go to school (and as a result did not go there).

While it is important for Lethbridge and Southwest Alberta to leverage its strengths, it is also important to understand what the region may be missing, and this can be done by casting the net wider than simply collecting data from our own students. This is where the literature on this topic can be useful. Fortunately, there is a significant literature on what characteristics are important when selecting a place to settle, including studies about post-secondary graduates. Additionally, in our survey we endeavoured to avoid creating excessively long lists of community features to prevent participants from dropping out of the survey. In many cases the studies within the academic literature included more features. This allows us to get insights into community characteristics we did not include in our survey.

One particularly useful example from the literature is Fiore, et al's 2015 study titled "Will They Stay or Will They Go?". The authors conducted a multicampus survey of university students in Iowa. The survey was conducted at three universities that are based in three separate communities in Iowa. At the time the paper was written, the institutions ranged in size between about 13,000 and 29,000, and were located in cities with populations between about 40,000 and 75,000. While there are some differences between Iowa and Southern Alberta, and the nature of the institutions surveyed, there are also many similarities, which makes the study a useful comparator to help validate our findings and further expand our understanding.[4]

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[4] The Iowa survey asked participants to select the ten items that were most important out of a list of 37 items, whereas our survey asked participants to select five from a list of 15 items. While the question methodology and answer selections differed from our survey, an informal mapping of the characteristics found some similarities and some differences between the Iowa list and ours.

The following describes our rational for selecting the five focus areas within the context of the literature – particularly the Iowa study.

Employment and cost of living

While much is made in the literature about the importance of social capital and lifestyle factors when it comes to attracting and retaining talent, the empirical studies reviewed for this paper found that economic factors – particularly employment factors – are key in the decision-making process for graduates (Fiore, et. al., 2015, Darchen & Tremblay, 2010). This is also the case in our survey findings. In the Iowa study, "Overall cost of living" and "Strong local economy" were the top two desired community features, while "job opportunities that are relevant to me" and "Affordable house prices or rental costs" were the top two most important characteristics in our survey.

Indeed, without employment, the existence of other community characteristics and lifestyle factors are a moot point for many graduates. The challenges that graduates face getting their first job related to their studies – even in a robust labour market – is perhaps what sets graduates apart from other labour market participants who have job experience. While someone with experience may have the luxury of being more discerning about selecting a location that aligns with their social, lifestyle, and cultural preferences, a recent graduate with little experience is likely more willing to sacrifice these luxuries to launch their careers with employment related to their studies.

This assumption is supported by the findings of a study by Darchen and Tremblay published in 2010. In this study, the authors aimed to better understand the factors that attract and retain knowledge workers. Due to the challenges associated with recruiting survey participants who are already working, the authors of this study elected to substitute actual workers with students from various institutions in Ottawa and Montreal who will soon seek employment in science and technology fields, making it a useful comparator for our study.

In contradiction to some of the conventional talent attraction and retention theory, Darchen and Trembley concluded that "…the criteria related to the quality of place do not have a major impact on the attraction and retention of graduating students when compared to employment opportunities. However this statement could change once the students have found a place to work and have established a more solid base regarding their career." (Darchen & Tremblay, 2010) This finding is particularly noteworthy given that the study's participants were in knowledge industries, such as engineering and computer programming, which presumably have comparatively positive employment outlooks.

This sentiment was reinforced in our focus groups – particularly the focus group of international students. During the session this group was asked if they would choose to stay in Lethbridge if employment was available. All participants except one raised their hand. Many were enthusiastic about the prospect of living in Lethbridge, but were not

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confident in the region's employment prospects. While this was an informal "show of hands", it suggests a willingness to stay in the region contingent on employment.

While "Job opportunities that are relevant to me" ranked reasonably high on the list of the most desirable attributes of Lethbridge and the rural communities that surround it, a deeper look at the data finds that there are specific groups that show concern about their employment prospects in the region. The high level of importance of economic factors and the concern many have about employment are reasons why Employment is one of the five focus areas.

Community Safety

Another similarity between the Iowa study and ours is the high ranking that community safety received on both surveys. In this case, there are some differences between Iowa and Lethbridge that are of note. In the Iowa study, Fiore, et al. cites a 2011 paper that found that "Iowa ranks sixth in the safest neighbourhoods in the United States". By comparison, Lethbridge is seen by many – including many of the students who completed the survey – as relatively unsafe. In fact, in our survey community safety was the community characteristic that was most commented on in the open-ended responses. Regardless of whether student perceptions of community safety in Lethbridge are true, false, or somewhere in between, community safety is a key concern for students in Lethbridge.

Considering Lethbridge's reputation amongst some as an unsafe city, it is unsurprising that safety ranked high for importance, but relatively low for desirability. However, the Iowa study suggests that community safety is of high importance even in a community that is considered relatively safe, which further emphasizes the importance of this community characteristic and a reason why it was selected as a focus area.

Community Activities, Entertainment, & Shopping

Following economic and community safety factors, are factors related to recreation, shopping, entertainment, and community amenities, which appeared midway down our list for importance. This was also the case in the Iowa study, however the authors noted the high ranking of "Access to basic consumer goods (grocery, convenience stores, gas stations)" (ranked 4th) as a surprising finding. When discussing the results for these characteristics the authors noted that, "While these factors may not be the primary reasons to relocate, our findings suggest that the presence (versus absence) of these features may, in aggregate, create a tipping point that affects the migration decisions of graduating seniors…" (Fiore, et. al., 2015). We agree, and believe this assumption is validated by the relatively high number of comments related to this topic in our survey. As a result, we have included the theme of "Community activities and entertainment" as a focus area in Section 4.

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Transportation and Public Transit

Transportation factors, such as "Length of commute to work, (ranked 9th), "Highway access" (ranked 14) and "Public transportation" (ranked 18th) were also mid-ranking in the Iowa study (Fiore, et. al., 2015). "Good public transit" and "Short commute times" were lower-middle ranked factors on our list, however this is only part of the story. When our participants were asked to rate the factors on a rating scale, we found that there was more polarization on this question than most of the others. Many responded that it was "Not important" and many said that it was "Very important", with comparatively few "Somewhat important" responses. This indicates that for some (likely those with personal vehicles) public transit is unimportant. But for those who rely on public transit it is a major issue. The second highest number of comments found in *Figure 10* were related to "Transportation and public transit", and most of those were concerns were about public transit. This is why this theme has been identified as a focus area.

Addressing discrimination and creating a welcoming atmosphere

The Iowa study did not include items relating to the importance of a friendly and welcoming community atmosphere, but it was a mid-ranking characteristic on our survey list. The Iowa study did however include items such as "Racial diversity of the community" (Ranked 27) and "Gay and lesbian population of community" (Ranked 37) (Fiore, et. al., 2015). These items were rather low on the Iowa study's list, which they noted was in contrast to the importance given to these factors in some of the literature. In alignment with the Iowa findings, our study also found "Ethnic diversity" to be rather low on the list of important characteristics.

The relatively high ranking of "Community atmosphere" compared to "Ethnic diversity" may reflect a belief that the community's approach to diverse minority groups and people from outside the community is as important – if not more important – than diversity itself. While less numerous than comments about crime and transportation, there were a significant number of comments related to perceptions of discrimination and an unwelcoming community atmosphere in Lethbridge and the surrounding communities. We believe these perceptions to be particularly toxic to the community's reputation. The importance of a friendly and welcoming atmosphere is fundamental to building the relationships, networks, and support systems that ultimately result in person's sense of belonging and rootedness in a community, and we have therefore included this as a focus theme.

Other important characteristics that were not selected as themes

Social capital factors such as "proximity to friends and family" and "I want to live where someone I am in a committed relationship with lives" ranked fairly high on our survey list. While the Iowa study did not list similar characteristics, they did have selections such as "Younger median age of community members" (ranked 12) and "Residents are committed to the future of this community" (ranked 21). (Fiore, et. al., 2015)

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Despite their relatively high ranking, we did not identify social capital attributes such as friends, family, and relationships as an explicit focus area. This was partly due to the fact that relatively few students commented on this theme when asked what could be changed about Lethbridge to encourage them to live there. For example, it is our belief that students from outside the region did not consider the idea of their friends and family moving to Lethbridge as realistic, whereas dealing with crime, homelessness, or public transit is, in their eyes, something that could be done at a community level through public policy. While it is not an explicit theme, the concept of social capital is imbedded throughout this study.

Amongst the other characteristics that were not included in our five themes, healthcare is of note. The item "Access to health facilities" was ranked number five on the Iowa list of 37 items, and the researchers noted that this was unexpected and surprising (Fiore, et. al., 2015). While there are clearly many differences between the healthcare systems in the United States and Canada, this finding is still has relevance for our study. While we did not ask about healthcare directly, there were a number of comments in the open-end questions about healthcare – particularly concerns about the family doctor shortage in Lethbridge.

Although doctor shortages are an issue in many communities in Canada – particularly rural communities – and resolving them is a complex issue, this finding suggests that access to healthcare can be an important decision factor for graduating students. If this study is done again in the future, we recommend adding healthcare as a characteristic to study.

Also of note in the Iowa study is the rankings of education related factors. The "Education level of residents" (Ranked 6th), "Proximity to Higher Education" (Ranked 9th), and "Quality of K-12 education" (ranked 11th) all ranked fairly high (Fiore, et. al., 2015). As with healthcare, we did not include education related factors on our list, however there were a handful of responses to the open-ended questions that identified education as an important characteristic.

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4. Thematic Analysis

4.1 Employment

As noted in Section 3.3, the literature and our primary data collection suggests that employment is the single most important determinant when students are selecting a location to live following graduation. Finding that first job after graduation can be a challenge, even in a strong labour market. Graduates continue to face the age-old conundrum of, "I can't get a job because I have no experience, but how can I get experience if I can't get a job?"

Fortunately, post-secondary has changed dramatically in recent years to help students address this conundrum. In addition to providing traditional career services supports to help connect graduates with employers, post-secondaries are increasingly seeking ways to help students and graduates develop skills and competencies that are appealing to employers, then to validate those skills and competencies and provide the means to communicate them to employers.

This includes a greater focus on what have traditionally been called "soft skills", which are now often referred to as "core competencies", which include skills such as problem solving, teamwork, and communication skills. While hard, technical skills will always be important, employers also covet effective core competencies, which can be harder to validate. An excellent description of Lethbridge College's take on student core competencies can be found on their website (Lethbridge College, n.d.)

Another important shift in post-secondary is greater focus on Work Integrated Learning (WIL), which involves student work experiences imbedded in programs, including internships, practicums, and co-ops. While WIL has long been an important component of many post-secondary programs, there is now a greater expectation that all programs have a WIL component, including programs that did not traditionally have WIL. There is now such a great emphasis on WIL that base funding for post-secondaries in Alberta is tied to WIL, and virtually all new programs approved by Alberta Advanced Education now have a WIL component.

Having a means to effectively communicate and validated experiential learning, including WIL and core competency development, is important for students and graduates to stand out when seeking employment, which is why post-secondaries are increasingly offering transcripts that communicate these skills and experiences. For example, the ULethbridge now has its MyExperience Transcript (MET), that students and graduates can use in conjunction with their academic transcript to provide "a comprehensive picture of [their] knowledge, strengths and experience to future employers, researchers, professional associations and more." (University of Lethbridge, n.d.)

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Before looking more closely at the potential for WIL as a means to retain graduates, first we will review data from the survey regarding student perceptions of the region's labour market. Specifically, how easy or difficult they believe it would be to find employment in the region.

Figure 11 shows the results for this question as it relates to Lethbridge, while *Figure 12* shows the results related to rural areas of Southwest Alberta outside of Lethbridge. In both cases students from Lethbridge College were more likely to suggest that it would be easy to find employment. Also of note is the relatively high number of "Don't know" responses to this question. "Don't know" responses are important, since they indicate that there is an opportunity to build awareness of the opportunities in the region. Perhaps understandably, there is a slightly larger proportion of "Don't know" responses in *Figure 12*, which is likely due to a general lack of familiarity with the rural areas compared to Lethbridge. Despite the slightly higher proportion of "Don't know" responses, rural Southwest Alberta should view these results with optimism – particularly the results from Lethbridge College.

Figure 11

Southwest Alberta Perceptions Survey
Q25 - How easy or difficult do you think it would be to find employment in <u>Lethbridge</u> in your area of study?

Figure 12

Southwest Alberta Perceptions Survey
Q34 - How easy or difficult do you think it would be to find employment in <u>rural Southwest Alberta communities</u> in your area of study?

All Participants: Very difficult 320, Somewhat difficult 506, Neither easy nor difficult 269, Somewhat easy 415, Very easy 201, Don't know 251

University of Lethbridge: Very difficult 254, Somewhat difficult 316, Neither easy nor difficult 155, Somewhat easy 237, Very easy 85, Don't know 150

Lethbridge College: Very difficult 66, Somewhat difficult 190, Neither easy nor difficult 114, Somewhat easy 178, Very easy 116, Don't know 101

Legend: Very difficult; Somewhat difficult; Neither easy nor difficult; Somewhat easy; Very easy; Don't know; Prefer not to answer

Clearly, ULethbridge participants were less optimistic about there job prospects in the region compared to Lethbridge College participants. This may be due to the types of programs offered at the institutions. Lethbridge College has more vocational training, and students in these programs may see a clearer path to employment (and have a clearer understanding of what that employment might be) than university students enrolled in liberal arts programs. Unfortunately, we did not ask students in general terms how difficult they think it would be to find employment, so it is impossible to know whether they think it would be more or less difficult to find employment in Southwest Alberta than anywhere else.

As expected, the results for these questions varied dramatically between programs. *Tables 4 and 5* show the results for Q25 for Lethbridge College and ULethbridge by program. Many of the programs listed are expected, but there are also some surprises. For example, health related programs at both institutions are high on the list of programs whose participants indicated that it would be "Somewhat easy" or "Very easy". This is

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unsurprising considering the strong labour market figures for this industry noted in Section 2.3.

On the other hand, it is somewhat surprising to see participants enrolled in computer-related programs at both institutions indicate that they believe it would be "somewhat difficult" or "very difficult" to find employment in Lethbridge. With this program area and others, there remains the question of whether this pessimism is based on reality, or if it is simply perception. We encourage both institutions to do further research on this by mapping the programs to labour market data. For those programs with good regional job

Table 4

SW Alberta Perceptions Survey					
Perceptions of ability to find employment in Lethbridge (Top 12)					
<u>Lethbridge College</u>; Programs with 10 or more responses					
% Responding "Somewhat easy" or "Very easy"		% Responding "Somewhat difficult" or "Very difficult"		% Responding "Don't know"	
Agriculture Sciences	100%	Computer Information Technology	58%	Engineering Design Technology	40%
Health Care Aide	93%	Natural Resource Compliance	56%	Business Administration - Business Operations	23%
Massage Therapy	78%	Environmental Assessment &	56%	Business Administration - Management	18%
Practical Nurse	75%	Ecosystem Management	53%	Unit Clerk	18%
Nursing	75%	Academic Upgrading	50%	Interior Design Technology	18%
Engineering Design Technology	67%	Interior Design Technology	50%	General Arts and Science	15%
Child and Youth Care	63%	General Arts and Science - Psychology	47%	Justice Studies	13%
Renewable Resource Management	56%	Unit Clerk	44%	Nursing	13%
Unit Clerk	56%	Therapeutic Recreation - Gerontology	42%	General Arts and Science - Psychology	12%
Criminal Justice - Policing	56%	General Arts and Science	38%	Criminal Justice - Policing	12%
Justice Studies	55%	Business Administration - Business Operations	35%	Ecosystem Management	12%
Early Childhood Education	55%	Justice Studies	30%	Practical Nurse	10%
Average	**54%**	**Average**	**28%**	**Average**	**11%**

prosects, we suggest that extra efforts are made to educate students on the opportunities that exist in the region.

This is particularly the case for rural communities. CSR encourages rural communities to systematically identify industries and occupations that are in demand in their communities, then utilize the data from this study to determine whether there are misperceptions regarding employment prospects. If misperceptions exist, extra emphasis can be given to educating students on the opportunities and identifying WIL placements in high need occupations.

Table 5

SW Alberta Perceptions Survey					
Perceptions of ability to find employment in Lethbridge (Top 12)					
University of Lethbridge; Programs with 15 or more responses					
% Responding "Somewhat easy" or "Very easy"		% Responding "Somewhat difficult" or "Very difficult"		% Responding "Don't know"	
Area, ethnic, cultural, gender, and group studies	80%	Philosophy and religious studies	73%	Mathematics and statistics	21%
Health professions and related programs	56%	Visual and performing arts	61%	History	18%
Education	45%	Psychology	50%	English/French language	15%
Business	38%	Social Sciences	50%	Physical Sciences	14%
Lib arts and sciences, general studies and	38%	Computer Science	49%	Education	14%
Mathematics and statistics	36%	Biological and biomedical sciences	46%	Business	13%
English/French language	32%	Physical Sciences	45%	Lib arts and sciences, general studies and	13%
History	32%	History	42%	Computer Science	12%
Physical Sciences	31%	Natural resources and conservation	41%	Kinesiology	10%
Psychology	30%	Kinesiology	41%	Biological and biomedical sciences	10%
Computer Science	28%	Lib arts and sciences, general studies and	41%	Psychology	9%
Biological and biomedical sciences	28%	Business	31%	Social Sciences	8%
Average	**39%**	**Average**	**44%**	**Average**	**10%**

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Work Integrated Learning

WIL is very consequential when considering ways to retain talent in the region. Evidence suggests that WIL can have positive effects on employment outcomes for graduates, including increasing employment rates and the likelihood that the graduate's first job is related to their field of study (Wyonch & Seward, 2023). In the context of this study, we would suggest that WIL is an excellent means to introduce students to local employers, which may lead to long-term employment opportunities and ultimately the retention of graduates in the region.

This may be particularly consequential for rural communities that may otherwise have a difficult time generating awareness of job opportunities. WIL also provides students with an opportunity to spend time in a community they may otherwise not have considered or even visited, and make potentially lasting connections in that community. For employers, it allows them to have an opportunity to test out potential new employees and see if they are a good fit, before making a long term commitment.

Figure 13

Southwest Alberta Perceptions Survey
Q19 - If you have the opportunity to continue working at one of your WIL placement sites in Southwestern Alberta after you complete your education, would you consider working there?
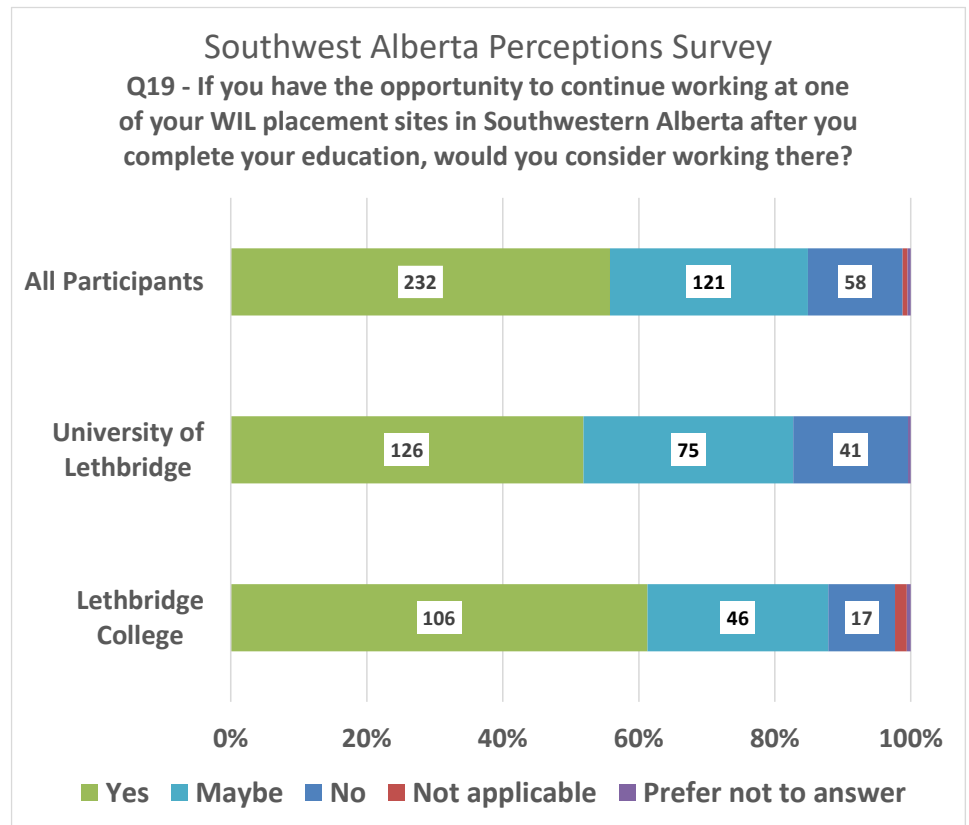
Utilizing WIL to keep graduates in the region makes sense in theory, but what does the data tell us about whether this could indeed be a good strategy? Survey participants who had completed a WIL experience at a placement site in Southwest Alberta were asked whether they would consider working there after they complete their education (*Figure 13*). The results were very favourable, with well over half answering "Yes", and an additional 30% answering "Maybe".

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Filtering this questions so that only those who applied from a location outside Southwest Alberta are included yielded similarly favourable results (*Figure 14*). Surprisingly, when this question was filtered for those who answered that they are "somewhat unlikely" or "very unlikely" to consider Lethbridge as a place to live after they graduate, nearly 70% answered either "Yes" or "Maybe" to Q19 (*Figure 15*). To ensure that those answering "Yes" or "Maybe" are not simply those who wish to live in a rural community (as opposed to Lethbridge), the question was further filtered to only include those who also answered "No" or "Not sure" when asked if they would live in a rural Southwest Alberta community, and the results were similar to *Figure 15*.

This is an astonishing result, which suggests that WIL is indeed a means of potentially keeping graduates in the region even if they are not otherwise keen to stay. CSR hopes these results add further evidence that investments in WIL are

Figure 14

Southwest Alberta Perceptions Survey
Q19 - If you have the opportunity to continue working at one of your WIL placement sites in Southwestern Alberta after you complete your education, would you consider working there?

From locations outside SW Alberta

Figure 15

Southwest Alberta Perceptions Survey
Q19 - If you have the opportunity to continue working...

Respondents who indicated that they are "somewhat unlikely" or "very unlikely" to consider Lethbridge as a place to live following graduation
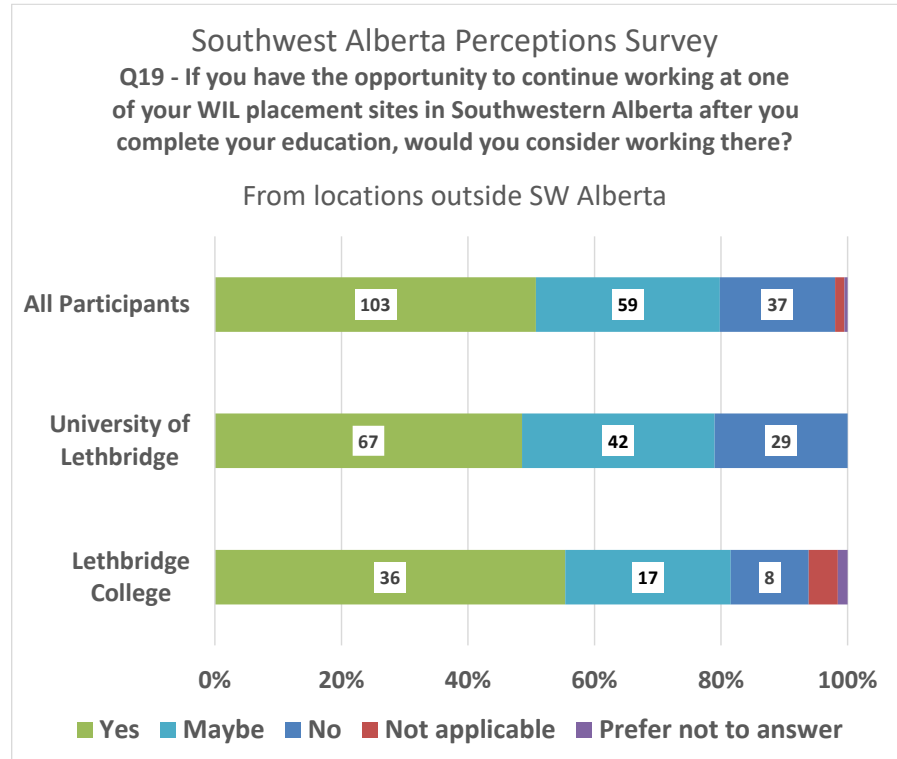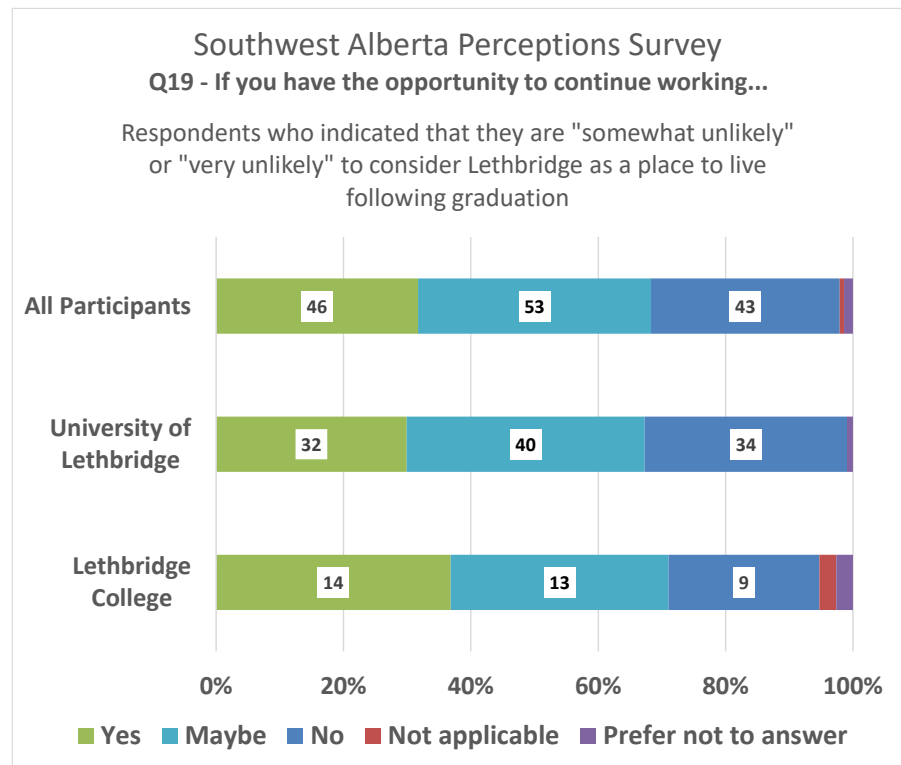
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not only beneficial for students, but for communities in the region who wish to attract and retain graduates. We recommend that communities in the region – particularly rural communities – develop community strategies to leverage WIL in support of labour market development. This may include initiatives like providing transportation bursaries and subsidized housing for students engaged in WIL placements away from home.

Qualitative findings

Anecdotally, CSR heard accounts of the difficulty organizations have finding skilled and unskilled workers – particularly small and medium sized businesses. This aligns with the findings from Section 2.3, which indicates that the region typically has a tight labour market and low unemployment.

On the other hand, many of the students who participated in the survey and focus groups suggested that it was difficult to find employment in Lethbridge. Could both perceptions be true?

> *"I would definitely continue living here if I could find a good job"*
>
> Survey Participant

The answer to that question is, yes. It is likely that many smaller businesses do not have extensive human resources departments and may lack the ability to systematically recruit new employees. Also, because they are smaller in size, they need employees who can be productive with limited training and investment in skills development.

The focus group participants noted that much of the hiring that happens in the region happens informally and is based on connections, rather than conventional recruitment activities such as job postings. Without a strong network, finding employment in the region likely is a challenge for many who do not have a pre-existing network.

There are a number of ways that this can be addressed, including connecting students and employers though WIL. However, many smaller businesses are either unaware of how to access WIL students or are reluctant to do so because WIL students can require time consuming oversight. The limited time frame of most WIL placements also means that the students often leave just as they are becoming productive members of the team.

While these can be unavoidable realities of WIL, there may be more that can be done to educate employers on how to access WIL students and get the most out of them during their placement. Additionally, moderating expectations and shifting employers' goals for WIL from simply viewing it as a source of inexpensive labour to a longer-term workforce development strategy could be helpful.

Given the importance of having connections when seeking employment, improving networking opportunities could also be beneficial. Focus groups participants suggested that there needs to be more student engagement with the community in general and

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employers in particular. Participants suggested having more job fairs and encouraging employers to do on-the-spot interviews at those job fairs. Additionally, they suggested creating more networking opportunities between students, since students often find jobs by learning about them from other students.

Transportation is also a factor in student employability. Students noted that limited public transit hours and a lack of transit to surrounding rural communities limits their ability to work as students, which in turn impacts their ability to gain experience and make the connections needed to find work pre or post-graduation.

Finally, it was noted by a community member that the loss of students during the summer months can have adverse effects on local businesses – particularly those that serve students. Seeking ways to keep more students in the region through summer co-op and other WIL placements, as well as employment opportunities outside of formal WIL, can not only help support local business but can expose more students to the joys of living in the region over the summer months. The region has a plethora of activities to offer in the summer, such as community events, festivals, hiking, etc. This could help to root students in the region and enhance its appeal as a place to settle.

Employment Summary and Potential Solutions

Summary

- The evidence suggests that employment is the single most important determinant when students are selecting a location to live following graduation.

- Post-secondaries are increasingly working to address the employment conundrum many students face: "I can't get a job because I have no experience, but how can I get experience if I can't get a job?" Initiatives include:
  - o Focusing on core competency (i.e. soft skills) development and enhancing students' ability to validate their skills and articulate them to employers.
  - o Focusing on enhancing Work Integrating Learning (WIL), which can help students transition to employment.

- Many survey participants indicated that they believe it would be difficult to find employment in the region, particularly ULethbridge participants. Perceptions vary greatly between programs.

- Most participants who had completed a WIL placement in Southwest Alberta indicated that they would consider working at their WIL placement site after graduation, including students who responded that they are unlikely to stay in the region. This suggests that WIL is a pathway to retaining students in the region.

- Students noted that the job market in the region is highly dependent on having local connections. They suggested creating more networking opportunities to connect

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students with employers and other community members who may be in a position to recommend them for employment.

- Smaller businesses can find it challenging to access student talent and WIL opportunities, and/or may not have the resources needed to make the most out of a WIL placement.

- Transportation can be a barrier to employment, particularly for jobs with hours outside of normal public transit hours of operation and in rural communities.

- It was noted by a community member that the exodus of students from the region over the summer can adversely impact local businesses. Seeking ways to keep students in the region through initiatives such as co-op programs can help address this, as well as improve the students' connection to the community.

Potential Solutions

- Address potential misperceptions that students may have about their employability in the regional labour market.

- Continue working towards ensuring students have a clear understanding of how their skills are transferable to related employment, particularly their core competencies, and providing a means to validate their skills and experience.

- Facilitate greater awareness of how employers can access students/graduates, particularly with small and medium-sized businesses.

- Work with employers to reduce unnecessarily onerous job requirements and other barriers for students/graduates.

- Create more opportunities for students to network with employers and each other, including job fairs with on-the-spot interviews.

- Lethbridge College and ULethbridge could provide access to their Career Services job postings to each other's students.

- Advocate for reducing limitations on employment for international students.

- Continue advancing the quality of WIL experiences for students, including WIL opportunities that can help keep students in the region over the summer months.

- Rural communities could develop strategies to attract and retain WIL students, including identifying high need occupations and working to reduce barriers for students (e.g. fuel subsidies, housing)

- Remove transportation barriers to employment within Lethbridge and to rural communities

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4.2 Community Safety

The theme of community safety was one of the surprise findings from the study. It was one of the most commented on themes in the survey, and participants also rated it as an important community characteristic.

Like many mid-sized Canadian cities, Lethbridge has a crime problem – much of which is connected to drug use. While crime is a challenge for the city, and has been for some time, there is likely some misalignment between perceptions and reality.

In 2019 and 2020, Lethbridge received significant negative press about crime, and the city was reported as having the worst crime severity in Canada. In the open-ended comments, several participants referred to Lethbridge as the most dangerous city in Canada, and particularly commented on crime in the downtown core.

"I would like to feel safe walking downtown at night"

Survey Participant

While there are many small cities in Canada with far worse crime challenges, Lethbridge had the unfortunate distinction of having the worst crime severity amongst census metropolitan areas (CMAs) in Canada for three years in a row (2019, 2020, and 2021). Much of this crime was related to drug use, including possession and trafficking, as well as associated offenses such as theft and burglary. In 2021, Lethbridge ranked first amongst CMAs for opioid-related offences. In a news report, the chief of the Lethbridge City Police suggested that part of the city's high crime severity ranking was due to enforcement of drug related offenses such as possession, which increased Lethbridge's numbers (Therien, 2022).

Fortunately, crime has been on the decline in Lethbridge in recent years. While crime is still a major issue, Lethbridge now ranks significantly below some other mid-sized cities in Alberta on the crime severity index, such as Red Deer and Grande Prairie, and other parts of Canada, like Kelowna and Victoria (Canada Crime Index, 2022). One news report from 2022 even suggested that Lethbridge is one of Canada's safest cities. This report was based on findings from Rentola.ca that utilized a methodology that ranked community safety on four criteria, which, in addition to crime severity, included crime-solving rate and how many police offers there are per capita. Surprisingly, this report ranked Lethbridge as safer than both Calgary and Edmonton. Calgary typically has a lower crime severity index score than Lethbridge (Kucey, 2023).

In the survey, participants identified community safety as one of the most important characteristics when considering where to live after graduation, but gave Lethbridge a relatively lower score for desirability (see *Figure 9*). The combination of high importance and lower desirability makes community safety a key theme to address.

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Table 6 suggests that community safety is important across demographics group, but there are some differences. In particular, women were more likely to rate Community Safety as important than men and a higher percentage selected it as one of the five most important characteristics. This is important to bear in mind when considering the overall score of Community Safety in relation to the other attributes, since two-thirds of the survey respondents self-identified as women, which is higher than the student population average. This has the effect of increasing the average ratings for items that women rate higher than men.

While women rated the importance of community safety higher than men, there was little difference between women and men with respect to their assessment of Lethbridge's desirability regarding safety. Somewhat surprisingly, those identifying as having a non-binary gender identity rated community safety slightly lower than men for importance. However, they also rated Lethbridge lower for desirability than any of the other groups listed in *Table 6*, suggesting that non-binary students feel that there is a safety issue in Lethbridge.

International students rated community safety somewhat higher than domestic students for importance, and it was the third most selected item when asked to select their five most important characteristics, just behind job opportunities and housing prices. International students also rated community safety much higher than average for desirability. This

Table 6

Southwest Alberta Perceptions Survey		
Average Ratings for Community Safety		
	Average Desirability	Average Importance
All respondents	2.11	2.80
Respondents who currently live in Lethbridge	2.10	2.80
Lived in Lethbridge for less than one year	2.21	2.77
Lived in Lethbridge there for at least one year	2.06	2.79
Lived in Lethbridge for at least three years	2.02	2.80
Institution		
Lethbridge College	2.23	2.82
University of Lethbridge	2.03	2.79
Location		
Applied from Lethbridge (domestic students only)	2.07	2.81
Applied from a location outside Southwest Alberta (domestic students only)	2.06	2.77
Identified as international students	2.55	2.91
Identified as being under 25 years of age	2.04	2.77
Gender		
Identify as a woman	2.11	2.86
Identify as a man	2.13	2.69
Identify as having another gender identity	1.80	2.65
Identify as Indigenous	2.14	2.74
Identify as First Nations or Inuit	2.25	2.82
Respondents who answered that community safety is a "very important" community charachteristic when considering where to live after graduation	2.17	
Please note: Filtered for those who responded that they currently live in Lethbridge, except the "All respondents" rating		

important characteristics, just behind job opportunities and housing prices. International students also rated community safety much higher than average for desirability. This

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aligns with comments made during the international student focus group. Some (but not all) of these focus group participants indicated that crime is a reality everywhere and that Lethbridge doesn't feel less safe than other places. Some noted that they feel safer in Lethbridge than the country where they came from. In the focus group, it was noted that there seems to be a lack of CCTV coverage in the city, and that additional CCTV could help deter crime as well as catch criminals.

Those who lived in Lethbridge for less than one year were, on average, more likely to give Lethbridge a favourable desirability rating. There are a number of potential reasons for this. First, international students are more likely to have been a student for less than one year than domestic students, and they rated Lethbridge higher for desirability. Removing international students from the calculation suggests that this accounts for much, but not all, of the difference. Another factor may be that students who have lived in Lethbridge for longer have had more first-hand experience with crime. And finally, students who have lived in the city longer may be more likely to base their perceptions on statistics from past years, when it was reported that Lethbridge was one of the most dangerous cities in Canada.

> *"Community safety with special attention to helping (not hiding) those who struggle with homelessness and addiction in the city"*
>
> Survey Participant

Domestic students from Lethbridge and other parts of Alberta and Canada were more likely to give Lethbridge low desirability marks for community safety. Some from Lethbridge commented in the open-ended questions about how the city is less safe than when they grew up. Those from outside the city may be comparing Lethbridge to the community where they came from. For example, many students who attend post-secondaries in Lethbridge come from Calgary, which generally has lower crime severity. Particular attention should be given to addressing misperceptions amongst domestic students about crime in the community, with emphasis on the recent decrease in crime statistics. Lethbridge is no longer the most dangerous CMA in Canada, and that myth should be dispelled.

Many of the comments related to crime also referred to drugs, homelessness, and poverty in the city. For many, these topics are inter-related and the product of the marginalization of vulnerable people in society. There was considerable concern about marginalized people in Lethbridge, and many showed deep empathy and compassion. While it is important not to underplay the interrelation between these factors, it is also important for students to understand that the presence of marginalized people, particularly downtown, is likely not as dangerous as it may appear. This was noted in the focus groups, and it was suggested that the city do more to connect students to marginalized groups by activities

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such as volunteerism, and that providing such opportunities to students may help generate more empathy and less fear of marginalized people.

Community Safety Summary and Potential Solutions

Summary

- As recently as 2021, Lethbridge was reported as having the highest crime severity amongst CMAs in Canada. Despite recent decreases in crime, many continue to believe that Lethbridge is the most dangerous city in the country.

- Overall, students rated Community Safety as one of the most important characteristics when considering where to live following graduation, but the characteristic was below average with respect to Lethbridge's desirability.

- All demographics groups rated Community Safety high for importance on the survey, but women rated it higher than men and non-binary respondents. Men and women provided similar ratings for desirability, but non-binary respondents rated it considerably lower.

- International students rated Community Safety high for both importance and desirability. Domestic students rated it high for importance and relatively low for desirability regardless of whether they were from Lethbridge or another area of Alberta or Canada.

- Respondents who lived in Lethbridge for less than one year rated Community Safety higher for desirability than those who lived in the community for more than one year.

- Survey and focus group respondents noted the inter-relationship between crime, homelessness, poverty, and drug abuse. They suggested that crime could be addressed by addressing these root causes, and that more needs to be done to support marginalized people in the community.

Potential Solutions

- Provide current and accurate crime statistics to students and applicants to dispel the myth that Lethbridge is the most dangerous city in Canada

- Provide opportunities for students to interact with people from different cultures and socio-economic backgrounds through activities such as volunteerism

- Increase CCTV coverage in the city – both a deterrent and means to detect crime

- Ensure students are aware of the services available to keep them safe

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- Improve transit safety and reduce the need to walk long distances, particularly at night

- Draw more people to downtown – more activity downtown may increase perception of safety (e.g. Hold more classes at the ULethbridge's Penny Building facility)

4.3 Transportation and Public Transit

Public Transit

Transportation emerged as one of the surprise themes during the data collection process, particularly with respect to public transit. As was shown in *Figure 10*, transportation was the second most commented upon theme when respondents were asked what could be done to encourage them to live in Lethbridge following graduation.

The strong opinions participants had towards transportation challenges was unknown when the survey was designed and therefore there are few transportation-related questions on it. However, public transit was an item on the list of characteristics participants were asked to rate for importance and desirability. The results are shown in *Figure 9* and suggest that it was lower than average on both importance and desirability. However, this is only part of the story.

Responses to this item had more

> ### *CityLINK… what is it and how does it impact students?*
>
> In 2021, Lethbridge Transit made a major change to bus services by introducing the cityLINK network model. The goal of this change was to improve the transit experience for riders and increase the system's efficiency by providing higher frequency service on busy routes along major arteries, called High Frequency Lines. This includes routes linking downtown to the university and college. (Campbell, 2021)
>
> Routes with lower ridership, such as those servicing residential areas, were reduced or replaced with a ride-on-demand (ROD) service. The ROD service allows users to request a pick-up from their location, and they are then taken to a High Frequency Line. (City of Lethbridge, 2023)
>
> Feedback from students suggested that many believe the cityLINK system is inferior to the level of service they experienced prior to 2021. In particular, many who live distant to one of the High Frequency Lines find the system inconvenient, as it often requires a significant walk to reach a bus stop.
>
> It was noted in the stakeholder focus group that the timing of the survey, which was conducted in November 2022, may have contributed to the discontent related to public transit, since there were some initial growing pains related to cityLINK. It was also suggested that funding would need to be increased for cityLINK to reach its full potential.

polarization than many of the other items, with many selecting either "not important" and "very important", and relatively few selecting "somewhat important". This suggests that for many it is a non-issue, and these respondents may be more likely to have other means of transportation. But for many it is a major issue, and it is the item with the most "not desirable" responses on the list of characteristics.

Perhaps surprisingly, it was found that those who responded that Public Transit is a "very important" community characteristic rated Lethbridge's desirability somewhat higher than the average for this item. Given the strong negative feelings that many transit users

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expressed in the focus groups and open-ended survey responses, this result was unexpected, but may be due to a couple of factors.

First, regular transit users may be more familiar with the transit system than casual users, and therefore may have less challenges using it due to greater familiarity. Second, some who suggested that public transit isn't important may have selected "Not desirable" because the item does not impact them and therefore does not have an impact on Lethbridge's desirability. This may have affected the results for ULethbridge more so, since the "Don't know" option was not included in the version of the survey distributed to ULethbridge students. In light of this, the results of this question should be used with caution.

> *"The bus system right now is not acceptable on the west side, as it cuts off many of the outer neighbourhoods to the main bus route."*
>
> Survey Participant

Respondents under 25 years of age rated the item slightly lower than average for desirability, as did those with lower levels of engagement in the community. The latter was included in the filtering to see if challenges with transit may impact willingness to engage with the community. The result is suggestive of this but is not conclusive since numerous other factors may also impact engagement.

Both the focus group feedback and the open-ended comments were unambiguous regarding public transit – many students are unsatisfied with the level of service. Poor hours of operation, lack of service to residential areas, and long commute times were all common themes in the qualitative data.

Many comments were made about inadequate hours of operation – particularly the lack of evening and nighttime service – that do not align well with the needs of students. This particularly impacts those who study on-campus in the evenings, take evening classes, and/or work in the evenings.

Lack of service to certain areas of the city, particularly residential areas, was noted by many. It was suggested that any gains in efficiency on major corridors related to the change to the CityLINK system are nullified by the need to walk longer distances to reach bus stops. The need to walk further was also noted as a safety concern for some, particularly when walking at night or in cold weather.

University students living on the West Side in particular noted challenges when using the transit system to reach the North and South Sides of the city, which limits their ability to participate in the city's nightlife and activities. Some university students noted with frustration that they are required to purchase a U-pass even though the level of service is so poor that they are unlikely to use it.

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Some also noted that the bus shelters are inadequate for the climate of Lethbridge, and that it is not uncommon for buses and shelters to be overcrowded. Additionally, it was noted that, in some cases, buses fail to stop for people waiting at bus stops (presumably due to overcrowding).

Clearly, many students have strong feelings of discontent towards the public transit system. This is a complex issue and Lethbridge Transit is, undoubtedly, in a challenging position. No public transit system is perfect, and budgets are often determined by ridership. A conundrum often exists: without high utilization transit budgets will be constrained, but inadequate services leads to lower utilization. Lethbridge is notoriously (and anecdotally) a car-centric city, and if the general public is not using transit along with students it becomes more difficult to justify increased resources.

"Public transit!! Please!"

Survey Participant

That said, challenges with public transit do appear to have a significant impact on the student experience in Lethbridge for many, and it likely impacts the other themes presented in this paper. For example, if a student is unable to work certain shifts due to a lack of transportation, they may find it difficult to secure and/or retain employment as a student, which then could impact their ability to obtain employment after graduation.

It was noted that Lethbridge Transit could do a better job educating students about how to use the system and informing them of changes made to the system. Additionally, service interruptions and bus delays could be better communicated. For example, some felt that the change in the location of the bus stop at Lethbridge College wasn't well communicated. In a focus group it was noted that the Lethbridge Transit app once showed where the busses were on their routes, which helped students time when to arrive at the bus stop, but this feature was removed from the app to the disappointment of the students who used it.

Other transportation themes

Other themes related to transportation were noted in the qualitative data. Including:

- Snow and ice removal from city streets in Lethbridge is inadequate

- Whoop-up Drive can feel both dangerous and intimidating under winter driving conditions

- The ULethbridge campus and West Side feels isolated from the rest of the city

- Lethbridge is generally an affordable city, but the need for a personal vehicle is cuts into this benefit

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- The introduction of the Neuron e-scooters and e-bikes in Lethbridge is a positive development, however the inability to use them on campus is a limitation

- There is a lack of transportation services connecting Lethbridge to rural communities. More regional transportation links could encourage greater interaction with rural areas and help students get to WIL opportunities and other employment in rural areas

- Some students – particularly international students – have challenges getting to and from Lethbridge from major airports and transportation hubs. It was suggested that additional information on how to get to Lethbridge would be helpful

- Direct flights from Lethbridge to Vancouver would help international students connect to international destinations

While many of these challenges are difficult to resolve and involve a broader regional transportation strategy, we hope that this study sheds further light on the needs of students and that they are actively engaged and consulted in future transportation planning. In particular, it is our hope that the feedback of students provides further impetus to fund the CityLINK system appropriately to enhance services to post-secondary students and other residents who prefer public transit and/or are unable to afford alternative transportation.

Transportation Summary and Potential Solutions

Summary

- Many students feel that the public transit in Lethbridge is inadequate, and it was one of the most commented upon themes in the survey and focus groups. Concerns include poor hours of operation, lack of service to residential areas, unreliable service, inadequate facilities (e.g. bus shelters), and long commute times.

- Participants noted that the quality of service seems to have decreased since Lethbridge Transit implemented the CityLINK system.

- Some noted that snow and ice removal is inadequate on city streets, and that Whoop-up Drive can feel unsafe in the winter.

- A lack of regional transportation options can make accessing rural areas difficult for both recreation and employment, including rural WIL placements.

- More can be done to educate and inform students about how to use the transit system, changes to the transit system, and service interruptions and delays.

- International students noted that information on how to get to Lethbridge and commute within the city could be helpful.

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Potential Solutions

- Create a regional student transportation workgroup and strategy that explores improvements in regional transportation (including transportation to WIL placements), public transit within Lethbridge, and alternative transportation options. Ensure that students have representation on the workgroup.

   o Deploy a dedicated transportation survey at LC and ULethbridge to inform transportation strategies.

- Create a handbook for new students – particularly international students and student from outside the region – on how to get to the Lethbridge and commute within the city and region.

- Explore ride-share and co-op options to make it easier for students to access vehicles on an ad hoc basis.

- Consider ways to allow Neuron e-bikes and e-scooters to access LC and ULethbridge campuses.

- Increase collaboration between LC, ULethbridge, and Lethbridge Transit on communications to ensure students are well informed of any service changes or disruptions.

4.4 Community Activities, Entertainment, & Shopping

As noted in Section 3.4, access to activities and shopping is not as critical to the decision-making process as factors such as job opportunities and community safety, however it is an important component to the overall student experience and connection to the community. It was noted in both the survey comments and focus groups that many students consider ULethbridge and LC to be great institutions to go to school and get an education, but that their activities are mainly confined to campus. This was a particularly common sentiment amongst some ULethbridge students, who feel somewhat isolated from the rest of the city due to the campus's location on the West Side. One of the main objectives of this project is to seek ways to generate a sense of belonging to the community – not just to the post-secondary institution.

The survey included a number of questions related to community engagement, including the overall engagement question noted in *Figure 16*. As with much of the data in this study, it is impossible to determine whether the results are typical since there is no external benchmark to compare against. However, the results indicate that there is considerable room for improvement.

For example, at ULethbridge nearly 40% of participants indicated that they were either "not engaged at all" or "not very engaged" even though

Figure 16

Southwest Alberta Perceptions Survey
Q13 - Overall, to what extent would you say you have been engaged in the community where you currently live?
Lived in Lethbridge for at least one year

	Not engaged at all	Not very engaged	Somewhat engaged	Engaged	Very engaged	Prefer not to answer
All Participants	136	291	410	244	123	
University of Lethbridge	100	190	242	163	78	
Lethbridge College	36	101	168	81	45	

they have lived in Lethbridge for at least one year. Only about 30% indicated that they were either "engaged" or "very engaged". This supports the notion that many students are focused on their studies and campus life, and are somewhat indifferent to engaging with the broader community.
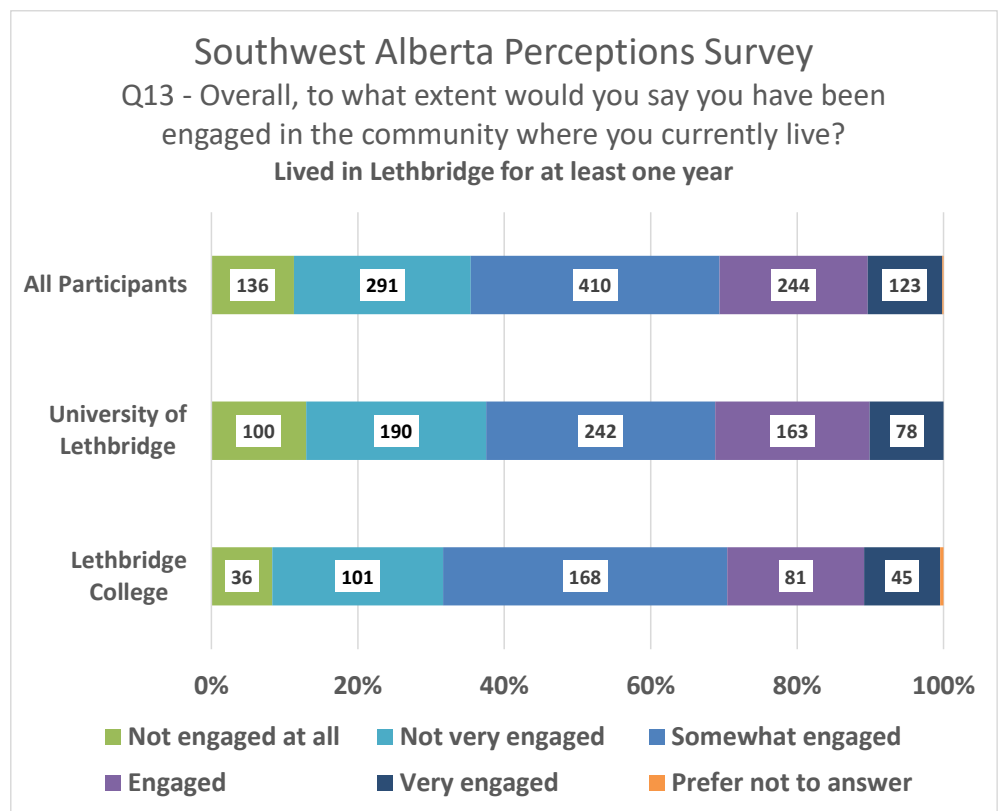
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Table 7

Southwest Alberta Perceptions Survey			
Q13 - Overall, to what extent would you say you have been engaged in the community where you currently live?			
% Responding "Engaged" or "Very Engaged"			
	Lethbridge College	**University of Lethbridge**	**All Participants**
All Participants*	**31.1%**	**28.8%**	**29.7%**
Lived in Lethbridge at least one year	**29.2%**	**31.2%**	**30.5%**
Lived in Lethbridge at least three years	**31.4%**	**36.3%**	**34.5%**
Domestic Students (Canadian Citizens or Perm Resedents)			
Lived in City of Lethbridge at time of application	**31.0%**	**40.2%**	**36.1%**
Lived in Lethbridge at least one year	**31.0%**	**40.3%**	**36.1%**
Lived in locations in SW Alberta outside of the City of Lethbridge at time of application	**24.5%**	**22.5%**	**23.2%**
Lived in Lethbridge at least one year	**20.7%**	**21.1%**	**20.9%**
Lived in locations outside of SW Alberta at time of application (excludes International visa students)	**23.4%**	**20.7%**	**21.5%**
Lived in Lethbridge at least one year	**23.2%**	**24.4%**	**24.2%**
International Student Visa			
International student visa	**33.0%**	**33.3%**	**33.1%**
Lived in Lethbridge at least one year	**32.5%**	**32.6%**	**32.5%**
Indigenous Status			
Indigenous	**31.5%**	**28.6%**	**29.9%**
First Nations & Inuit	**29.4%**	**23.1%**	**26.7%**
Gender			
Women	**26.8%**	**27.0%**	**26.9%**
Men	**31.8%**	**31.9%**	**31.8%**
Other gender identities	**35.3%**	**17.4%**	**22.2%**
Age			
24 years and under	**28.0%**	**24.7%**	**25.8%**
25 years of age and over	**28.9%**	**37.9%**	**33.9%**
Please note: - *All figures based on participants who indicated that they currently live in Lethbridge except the "All Participants*" total - "Prefer not to answer" responses have been removed from the calculation			

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As *Table 7* indicates, domestic students from outside of Southwest Alberta are less likely to feel engaged than those from Lethbridge. The numbers are particularly low for ULethbridge students who have lived in Lethbridge for less than one year, suggesting that more could be done to integrate new students into the community. These findings go hand-in-hand with findings to be presented in Section 4.5, which find that domestic students from outside Southwest Alberta are also less likely to feel welcome in the community.

As with other findings from this study, the perceptions of international students are a bright light. They are nearly as likely to feel "engaged" or "very engaged" as participants from Lethbridge, which is quite remarkable considering that many are coming from cultures that are vastly different than Southwest Alberta. This aligns with findings from the focus group, where international student participants expressed a strong desire to stay in Lethbridge if work is available. As noted in Section 3.2, they were also much more likely than domestic students (including local students) to indicate that they would consider Lethbridge as a place to live after completing.

> *"More entertainment options for young people. One of the reasons why the University of Lethbridge is considered a party school is because that is one of the few things available for students to entertain themselves with."*
>
> Survey Participant

The ambition to continue living in Lethbridge may drive international students to become more engaged with the community, whereas domestic students from outside the region may be more likely to see Lethbridge as a temporary location. These students may consider it a pointless exercise to become invested in a community that they are likely to leave at the first available opportunity.

When asked if they have attended local events that are not hosted by the institutions' respective student unions, a surprising number responded that they had not. As shown in *Figure 17*, about 40% of respondents from outside the region who have lived in the city for at least one year had not attended any events, such as Whoop-up Day, festivals, or farmers markets.

This seems like a rather high number even in light of the fact that the Covid-19 pandemic had only recently ended. It is also important to note though that many events in Lethbridge occur over the summer months, when students may have left Lethbridge to return to their home communities. Nevertheless, the findings indicate that there are many students who do not appear to engage in the activities and entertainment the city has to offer.

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In the focus groups, students acknowledged that there are indeed things to do and events to attend in Lethbridge, but many are unaware of them. It was noted that the city lacks a central events portal or app that could build this awareness. The participants also suggested that such an app should be hosted by a third-party (not by the post-secondary institutions), since college students may not be comfortable accessing a university app, and vice versa.

The participants also suggested that more could also be done by the institutions to welcome each other's students to events organized on each other's campuses. For example, one university student said that she would have appreciated getting an invitation to Coulee Fest (organized by Lethbridge College). This suggestion aligns with the overarching sentiment that the institutions (and other stakeholders) could do more to work together to enhance the community experience for students. This includes ensuring that public transit is available to make events more accessible.

Figure 17

Southwest Alberta Perceptions Survey
Q16 - In the past year, have you attended events in this community that aren't hosted by the U of L and/or the ULSU
Lived in Lethbridge for at least one year; Excludes respondents from City of Lethbridge

Finally, the community characteristic of "Natural landscapes and outdoor recreation opportunities" was identified as both an important and desirable characteristic of Lethbridge in the survey. This was also true when participants were asked which characteristics are most desirable about the rural community they could see themselves living in most, placing first amongst all characteristics. Focus group participants reinforced this sentiment, expressing a great appreciation for the beauty of the landscape and plentiful outdoor recreation opportunities.

Southwest Alberta has close proximity to world class mountains and unique landscapes such as the coulees (i.e. river valleys). Outdoor recreation is clearly a draw for students, and a key characteristic to emphasize when marketing the region as a great place to go to school and settle in.

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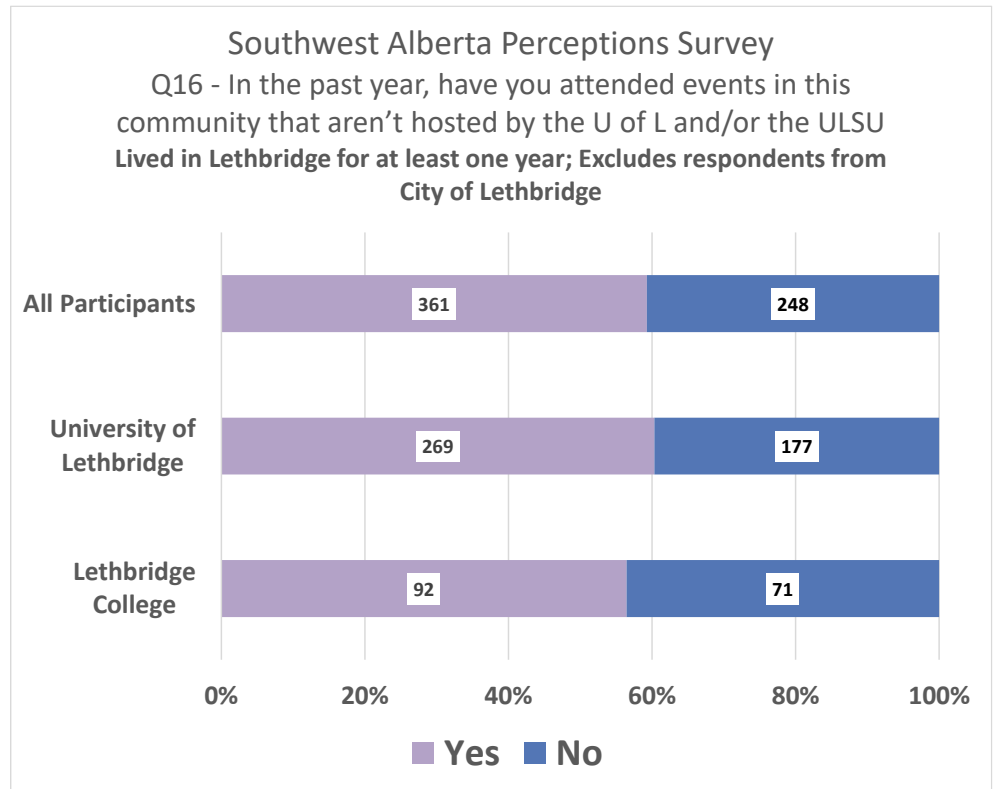
Community Activities, Entertainment, & Shopping Summary and Potential Solutions

Summary

- While not as important as characteristics such as employment opportunities and community safety, having a good variety of things to do and places to shop can impact the overall student experience during their time in the community.

- Many students feel disengaged with the broader community and have not attended community events, particularly domestic students from outside the region.

- It was acknowledged in the focus groups that there is indeed a variety of things to do in Lethbridge, but students are often unaware of them. Community events apps geared towards young people could help generate awareness.

- It was noted that the post-secondary institutions and other community stakeholders could collaborate to increase the number of activities and the accessibility of those activities, including ensuring that public transit is available to make events more accessible.

- The natural beauty and outdoor recreation opportunities the region has to offer are both important and desirable characteristics of the region, and should be emphasized when marketing the region to prospective students and graduates.

Potential Solutions

- Create an app that serves as a central hub for activities and events in Lethbridge
  - Should not be limited to a specific post-secondary
- Invite university students to college events (e.g. Coulee Fest) and vice versa
- Create more events where students can bring their families
  - Create incentives for families to visit students, such as discounted hotel and restaurant rates
- Identify more student discount opportunities and student nights at local establishments
- Support student volunteer opportunities to plan and execute events
  - Could be potential WIL opportunities
- Increase the ease with which students can access the outdoors and mountains (e.g. organized mountain excursions and coulee walks)
  - Create more clubs and excursions for students with common interests
  - Acknowledge that students have a variety of interests (i.e. not everyone wants to go to the bar for fun)

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4.5 Welcoming and Inclusive Community

Like every region of Canada, Southwest Alberta has a distinct culture and characteristics that make it unique. Anecdotally, many outside and within Southwest Alberta characterize the region as conservative, religious, and rural. This is, of course, an oversimplification of what is a diverse region that is home to people with a broad range of beliefs and perspectives.

While the region is likely more complex and diverse than the stereotype often associated with it, it is also important to acknowledge the fact that some (perhaps many) students feel a lack of acceptance in the region based on cultural, political, religious, and other beliefs. This is not only true for students from outside the region, but also students from Southwest Alberta.

In today's highly charged political and culture wars, these feelings are not unique to Southwest Alberta, and people from both ends of the political and cultural spectrum can

Figure 18

Southwest Alberta Perceptions Survey
Q14 - To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the community you currently live in?
I feel welcome in this community
Participants responding that they currently live in Lethbridge

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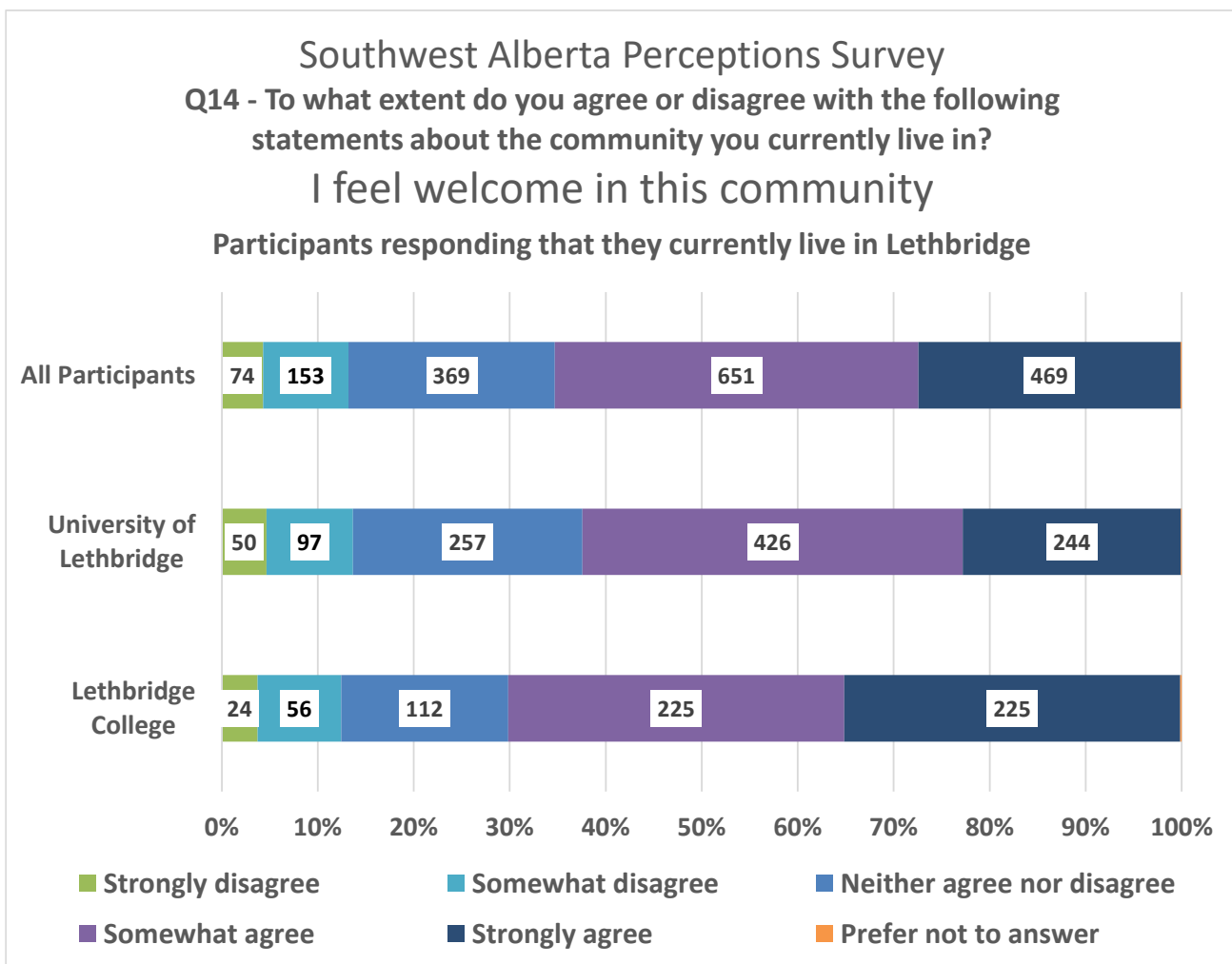
feel equally alienated in today's society. The purpose of this section is not to judge belief systems, but to seek ways to support tolerance of different opinions and ensure students feel welcome and included as citizens of Lethbridge and Southwest Alberta.

The survey and focus group data provides both reason for optimism and areas for improvement. In the survey, participants were asked whether they feel welcome in the community and the overall results are shown in *Figure 18*.

Overall, we consider the results shown in *Figure 18* to be positive. About 65% of the respondents indicated that they feel at least somewhat welcome in the community, and only about 13% feel somewhat or very unwelcome. That said, we believe that all the stakeholders associated with this project would agree that 13% is too many, and that the bar should be set high for this question.

Table 8 shows the results from Question 14 filtered on various demographics group and other variables. Some key findings from *Table 8* include:

- At Lethbridge College, those who lived in Lethbridge longer tended to feel less welcome. This may be because there are less international students in this group than those who arrived more recently.

- Those who responded that they are either somewhat or very unlikely to settle in Lethbridge after graduation are much less likely to indicate that they feel welcome.

- Those who indicate that they were living in Lethbridge at the time that they applied are no more likely to feel welcome than those from outside Lethbridge.

- Indigenous students are much less likely to feel welcome – particularly First Nations and Inuit participants from ULethbridge.

- Those studying on an international student visa are overall much more likely to feel welcome, however this perception diminishes for those who have lived in Lethbridge more than one year.

- Those identifying as having a non-binary gender identity are much less likely to feel welcome.

Perhaps one of the most surprising findings from *Table 8* is that respondents who lived in Lethbridge at the time they applied for their program were not much more likely to feel welcome in Lethbridge than average. When further filtering to include only those who were born in Lethbridge, the numbers were even lower. Only 61% of ULethbridge participants who were both born in Lethbridge and applied from Lethbridge feel either somewhat or very welcome. This is an unexpected finding that should be explored further.

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Table 8

Southwest Alberta Perceptions Survey			
Q14 - To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the community you currently live in? **I feel welcome in this community** **% Responding "Somewhat Agree" or "Strongly Agree"**			
	Lethbridge College	**University of Lethbridge**	**All Participants**
All Participants*	**70.5%**	**62.9%**	**65.9%**
Lived in Lethbridge at least one year	**68.6%**	**62.5%**	**64.7%**
Lived in Lethbridge at least three years	**65.9%**	**63.5%**	**64.4%**
Domestic Students (Canadian Citizens or Perm Resedents)			
Lived in City of Lethbridge at time of application	**68.0%**	**64.6%**	**66.1%**
Lived in Lethbridge at least one year	**67.2%**	**64.4%**	**65.7%**
Lived in locations in SW Alberta outside of the City of Lethbridge at time of application	**71.2%**	**61.8%**	**65.2%**
Lived in Lethbridge at least one year	**60.7%**	**63.2%**	**62.4%**
Lived in locations outside of SW Alberta at time of application (excludes International visa students)	**68.2%**	**60.2%**	**62.4%**
Lived in Lethbridge at least one year	**72.4%**	**60.9%**	**63.5%**
International Student Visa			
International student visa	**78.0%**	**71.8%**	**75.1%**
Lived in Lethbridge at least one year	**72.5%**	**62.8%**	**67.5%**
Indigenous Status			
Indigenous	**59.3%**	**52.4%**	**55.6%**
First Nations & Inuit	**58.8%**	**38.5%**	**50.0%**
Gender			
Women	**72.7%**	**64.2%**	**67.4%**
Men	**68.1%**	**65.6%**	**66.6%**
Other gender identities	**35.3%**	**32.6%**	**33.3%**
Age			
24 years and under	**71.1%**	**63.1%**	**65.9%**
25 years of age and over	**68.1%**	**61.3%**	**64.3%**
Please note: - *All figures based on participants who indicated that they currently live in Lethbridge except the "All Participants*" total - "Prefer not to answer" responses have been removed from the calculation			

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Table 9

Southwest Alberta Perceptions Survey			
Q12 - In the previous question you noted that you currently live in Lethbridge or another community in Southwest Alberta. How would you describe your **sense of belonging** to the community where you currently live?			
% Responding "Somewhat strong" or "Very strong"			
	Lethbridge College	**University of Lethbridge**	**All Participants**
All Participants*	**55.1%**	**41.2%**	**46.7%**
Lived in Lethbridge at least one year	**65.0%**	**45.0%**	**45.8%**
Lived in Lethbridge at least three years	**53.4%**	**44.7%**	**47.9%**
Domestic Students (Canadian Citizens or Perm Resedents)			
Lived in City of Lethbridge at time of application	**54.8%**	**51.7%**	**53.1%**
Lived in Lethbridge at least one year	**53.7%**	**51.7%**	**52.6%**
Lived in locations in SW Alberta outside of the City of Lethbridge at time of application	**52.8%**	**39.3%**	**44.4%**
Lived in Lethbridge at least one year	**48.3%**	**40.4%**	**43.0%**
Lived in locations outside of SW Alberta at time of application (excludes International visa students)	**45.4%**	**33.4%**	**36.8%**
Lived in Lethbridge at least one year	**52.5%**	**32.5%**	**36.9%**
International Student Visa			
International student visa	**62.6%**	**35.1%**	**50.0%**
Lived in Lethbridge at least one year	**62.5%**	**35.7%**	**48.8%**
Indigenous Status			
Indigenous	**57.4%**	**38.1%**	**47.0%**
First Nations & Inuit	**52.9%**	**30.8%**	**43.3%**
Gender			
Women	**54.2%**	**41.0%**	**46.0%**
Men	**51.9%**	**41.9%**	**45.9%**
Other gender identities	**41.2%**	**15.2%**	**22.2%**
Age			
24 years and under	**52.8%**	**38.5%**	**43.5%**
25 years of age and over	**52.6%**	**44.1%**	**47.9%**
Please note: - *All figures based on participants who indicated that they currently live in Lethbridge except the "All Participants*" total - "Prefer not to answer" responses have been removed from the calculation			

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Also somewhat surprising is the high number of international students who feel welcome in the community. This is a very positive finding, particularly in light of the fact that a large number of these participants belong to racial and ethnic minority groups, and may have language barriers. However, the numbers are lower for those who have been in the city at least one year, suggesting that there is a honeymoon period when they first arrive. This may be the result of experiences of either implicit or explicit intolerance that they experience over the course of the first few months of their time in Lethbridge, which may dampen their enthusiasm about the city as a welcoming community. Further work may need to be done to ensure international students are successfully integrating into the community and having positive experiences into their second year and beyond.

"I would love to see more empathy, community strength and wholeness. We seem to be very NIMBY when it comes to our understanding or acceptance of things we don't understand"

"Treatment of Indigenous peoples, people experiencing poverty, and homeless people could be VASTLY improved."

Survey Participants

Table 8 indicates that both Indigenous participants and participants who have a non-binary gender identity feel much less welcome than average. This is a concerning finding, although not unexpected. These finding should further highlight the challenges faced by students from these equity-deserving groups and spur action to address discrimination and intolerance.

Table 9 shows Q12, which is related to the participants' sense of belonging to the community. Perhaps unsurprisingly, those lived in Lethbridge at the time of application had a greater sense of belonging that those who did not. Of note is the rather large difference between the institutions for some groups. Participants from ULethbridge who were less likely to have a somewhat or very strong sense of belonging include those who were under 25 years of age, international, Indigenous, domestic students from outside Southwest Alberta, and those who have a non-binary gender identity. ULethbridge may wish to do further research to determine if these results suggest an area of concern.

While discrimination wasn't a common theme in the qualitative data in comparison to topics such as employment, transportation, and community safety, there were some accounts of discrimination and general feelings that the community is intolerant towards certain demographics groups and worldviews. It is our belief that these experiences and perceptions are not only troubling for those impacted, but are damaging to the reputation of Lethbridge and the region, which is why it was identified as a theme to explore.

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When considering intolerance related to worldviews, politics, and religion, there were a number of comments about Lethbridge as a being very conservative, religious, and racially homogenous, with ingrained and systemic racism towards minority groups – particularly Indigenous people. However, it must also be acknowledged that many also feel discriminated against for their conservative and religious beliefs. The desire for religious freedom and tolerance was evident amongst some of the comments.

"Start treating people well. That's it. That's the thing. Fix that, and I would buy a home here and stay."

"Better ways of connecting with the community and outreach in order to make connections other than through school."

Survey Participants

A bright spot in the qualitative data was the perceptions of international students. While many had experienced some discrimination, there was an overall attitude from some that Lethbridge is no worse than many places. That said, some also noted that discrimination can be worse in Lethbridge than in larger cities, such as Calgary, that have large and well-established ethnic populations and a longer history of diversity. They suggested that more could be done to integrate immigrants into the community and expose the local population to diverse cultures, and that promoting activities like festivals that celebrate different cultures can serve as a bridge between newcomers and the local population.

Interestingly, much focus was given to the topic of discrimination and community atmosphere in our focus group for domestic students who were from outside of Southwest Alberta. The positive and engaging discussion this group had on the topic yielded many ideas. In particular, they acknowledged the need to battle systemic racism and unconscious bias in the community that can be a root cause of many societal challenges, such as poverty, homelessness, drug use, and crime.

In addition to suggesting that the city adopt more harm reduction measures, they suggested that the college and university could implement a course about discrimination and racism similar to the Gender-based and Sexual Violence course that students are required to take at ULethbridge. However, the group was also keenly aware that mandatory Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) training can also result in backlash and can, potentially, make the problem worse if it is not implemented correctly.

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Welcoming and Inclusive Community Summary and Potential Solutions

Summary

- Clashing worldviews and societal polarization may contribute to feelings of exclusion and negative perceptions of the community atmosphere.

- About two-thirds of the survey respondent indicated that they either somewhat or strongly agree that they feel welcome in Lethbridge. About 13% strongly or somewhat disagreed.

- Some demographic groups, such as Indigenous and non-binary students, were less likely to feel welcome. International students were more likely to feel welcome than domestic students.

- Domestic students born in Lethbridge were no more likely to feel welcome than domestic students born outside of Lethbridge.

- ULethbridge participants were more less likely than Lethbridge College participants to respond that they feel a sense of belonging to the community. Particularly those who identify that they belong to specific demographic groups like international and Indigenous.

Potential Solutions

- Support the creation of clubs and activities (e.g. festivals) that can help students from diverse backgrounds connect with each other and the broader community

    o These could include initiatives that bring ULethbridge and Lethbridge College students together

- Continue exploring ways to integrate Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) education into activities such as New Student Orientation and other learning environments, and do so in a non-threatening way that meets students where they are at

- Utilize student volunteers from diversity groups to support community initiatives that create an inclusive atmosphere in Lethbridge and the region (potential WIL projects)

- Better understand the root cause of why many local students also feel unwelcome in the community

- Work with civic leaders to address damaging perceptions of intolerance in the region

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5. Conclusions and Next Steps

The findings and solutions identified in this study will likely be no surprise to many. There are many dedicated people in the community – including employees at Lethbridge College, ULethbridge, and other stakeholders – who already work passionately to make Lethbridge a great place to live and learn. CSR hopes that this paper helps validate and support the work that is already underway, as well as provide new insights that can lead to a better understanding of the perceptions, needs, and desires of students. This was a student-centric project with student derived solutions, and CSR hopes that we have represented students well and effectively communicated their feedback to community leaders.

The stakeholders involved in this project clearly expressed the opinion that this topic is important for the community, and that they would like to see proactive and concrete actions resulting from it. To that end, **CSR recommends the creation of a committee of regional stakeholders with the following goals:**

- **Prioritize regional initiatives to attract students and retain graduates**

  Many potential solutions have been provided in this study, which should be prioritized based on resource availability and expected impact.

- **Improve the student experience in the community**

  Utilize the findings from this study and others to seek ways to make the student experience in the region the best it can be. A positive student experience will not only make the likelihood of retaining graduates higher but will enhance the region's reputation as an exceptional place to go to school.

- **Facilitate connections between employers and students/graduates**

  Further support efforts to bridge the gap between employers who desperately need workers, and students who have the skills and ambition to positively contribute to their success.

- **Create a unified strategy to promote Lethbridge and Southwest Alberta as a destination for students**

  Utilize the findings from this study to build a strong value proposition for the community and reinforce its position as a destination for students. This is distinct from the institutional specific marketing that Lethbridge College and ULethbridge already engage in and involves the collaboration of many regional stakeholders. Everyone wins when the region's reputation is elevated, and it is seen as a desirable destination for students.

- **Seek funding to support regional initiatives to attract students and retain graduates**

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Armed with the data and findings from this study, seek funding to implement initiatives with a high probability of success.

In conclusion, CSR would like to thank the many passionate students and community stakeholders who participated in this study. Their insight and dedication to the advancement of the region is both commendable and reason for great optimism.

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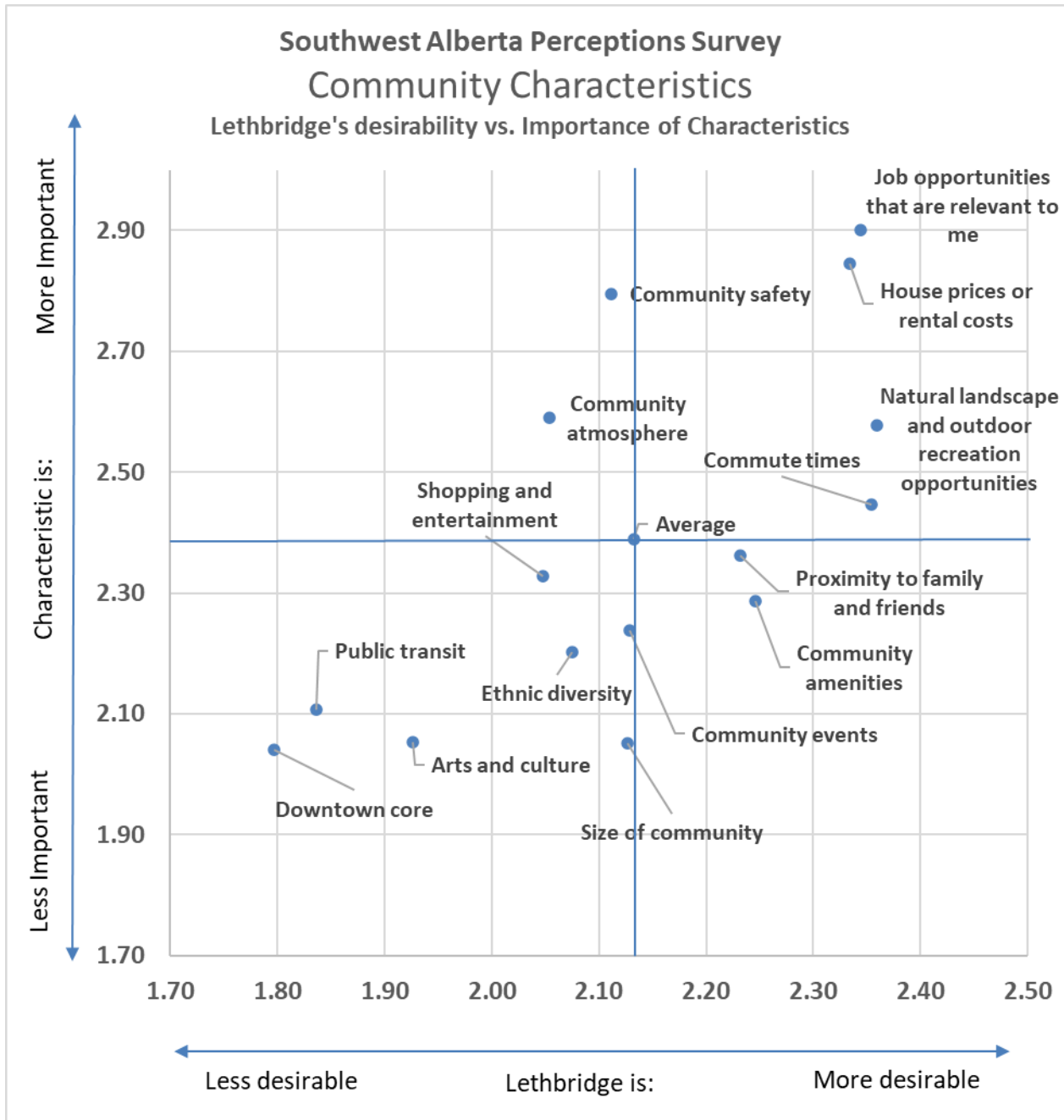Wyonch, R., & Seward, B. (2023). From Class to Career: How Work Integrated Learning Benefits Graduates Looking for Jobs. *C.D. Howe Institute*. https://www.cdhowe.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/For%20release%20Commentary_642.pdf
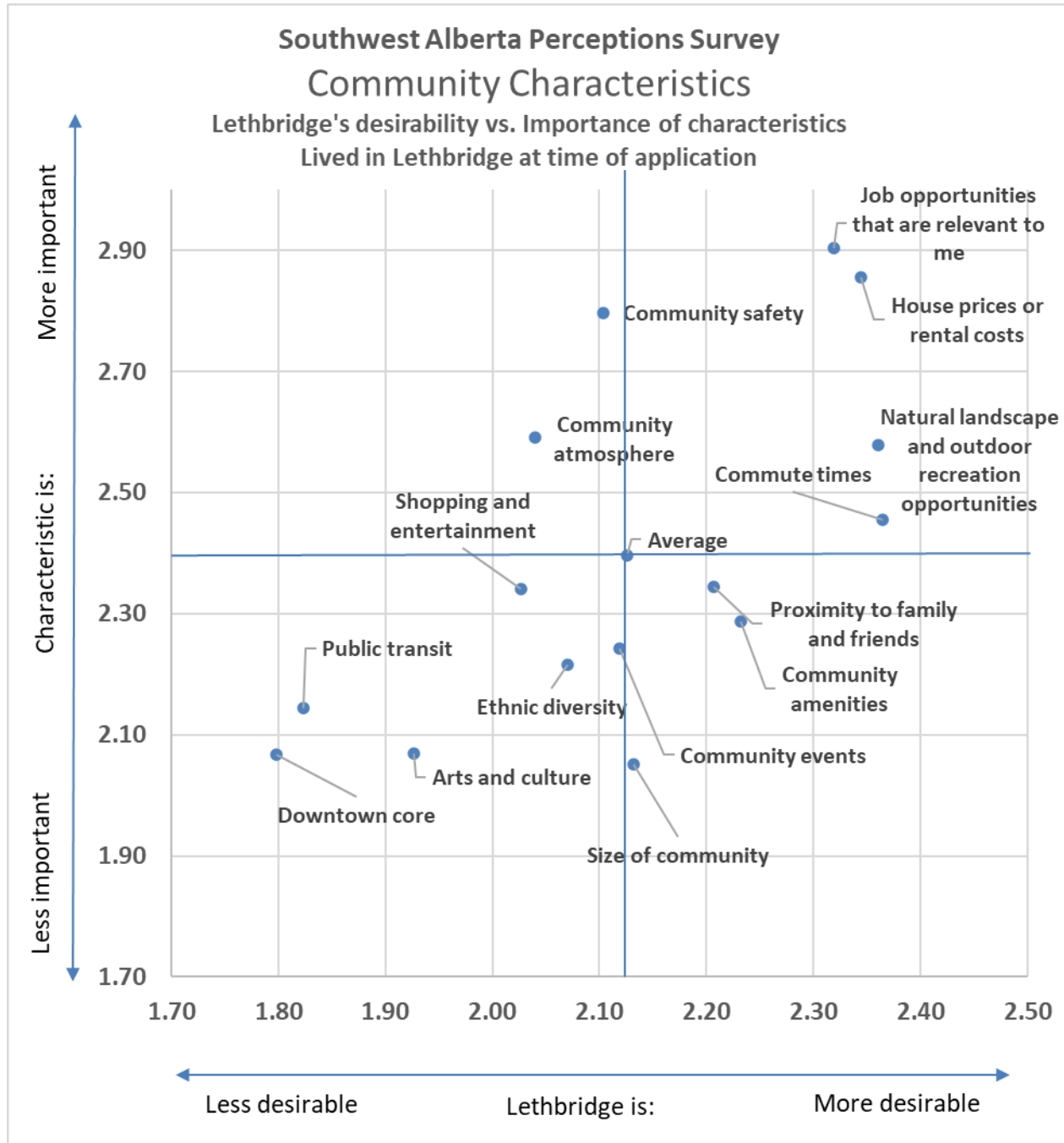
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Appendix 1 – Alberta GDP (2022)

Alberta GDP by Industries and Sectors
2022; Chained 2017 Dollars; Millions ($)
Source: Statistics Canada

GDP Total	
All industries [T001] 11	331,489
Goods vs. Services	
Service-producing industries [T003] 13	202,376
Goods-producing industries [T002] 12	128,894
Sectors	
Industrial production [T010] 14	94,353
Energy sector [T016] 18	76,389
Public sector [T018] 19	52,855
Non-durable manufacturing industries [T011] 15	16,295
Retail trade (except cannabis) [4AA] 23	14,495
Information and communication technology sector [T013] 17	10,524
Durable manufacturing industries [T012] 16	9,035
Cannabis sector [T021] 21	689
Industries (2-digit NAICS)	
Mining, quarrying, and oil and gas extraction [21]	63,259
Real estate and rental and leasing [53]	40,139
Construction [23]	28,462
Manufacturing [31-33]	25,258
Health care and social assistance [62]	21,997
Professional, scientific and technical services [54]	17,555
Public administration [91]	17,504
Wholesale trade [41]	16,297
Transportation and warehousing [48-49]	16,176
Finance and insurance [52]	14,724
Retail trade [44-45]	14,716
Educational services [61]	13,344
Administrative and support, waste management and remediation services [56]	7,606
Agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting [11]	7,435
Information and cultural industries [51]	7,414
Accommodation and food services [72]	6,717
Other services (except public administration) [81]	6,595
Utilities [22]	4,694
Arts, entertainment and recreation [71]	1,478
Management of companies and enterprises [55]	321

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Appendix 2 – Scatter Plots

Scatter Plot A – All participants

Southwest Alberta Perceptions Survey
Community Characteristics
Lethbridge's desirability vs. Importance of Characteristics

Scatter Plot B – Currently live in Lethbridge (at time of survey)

Southwest Alberta Perceptions Survey
Community Characteristics
Lethbridge's desirability vs. Importance of characteristics
Lived in Lethbridge at time of application

Scatter Plot C – Currently live in Lethbridge (at time of survey); Domestic students

Southwest Alberta Perceptions Survey
Community Characteristics
Lethbridge's desirability vs. Importance of Characteristics
Live in Lethbridge; Domestic
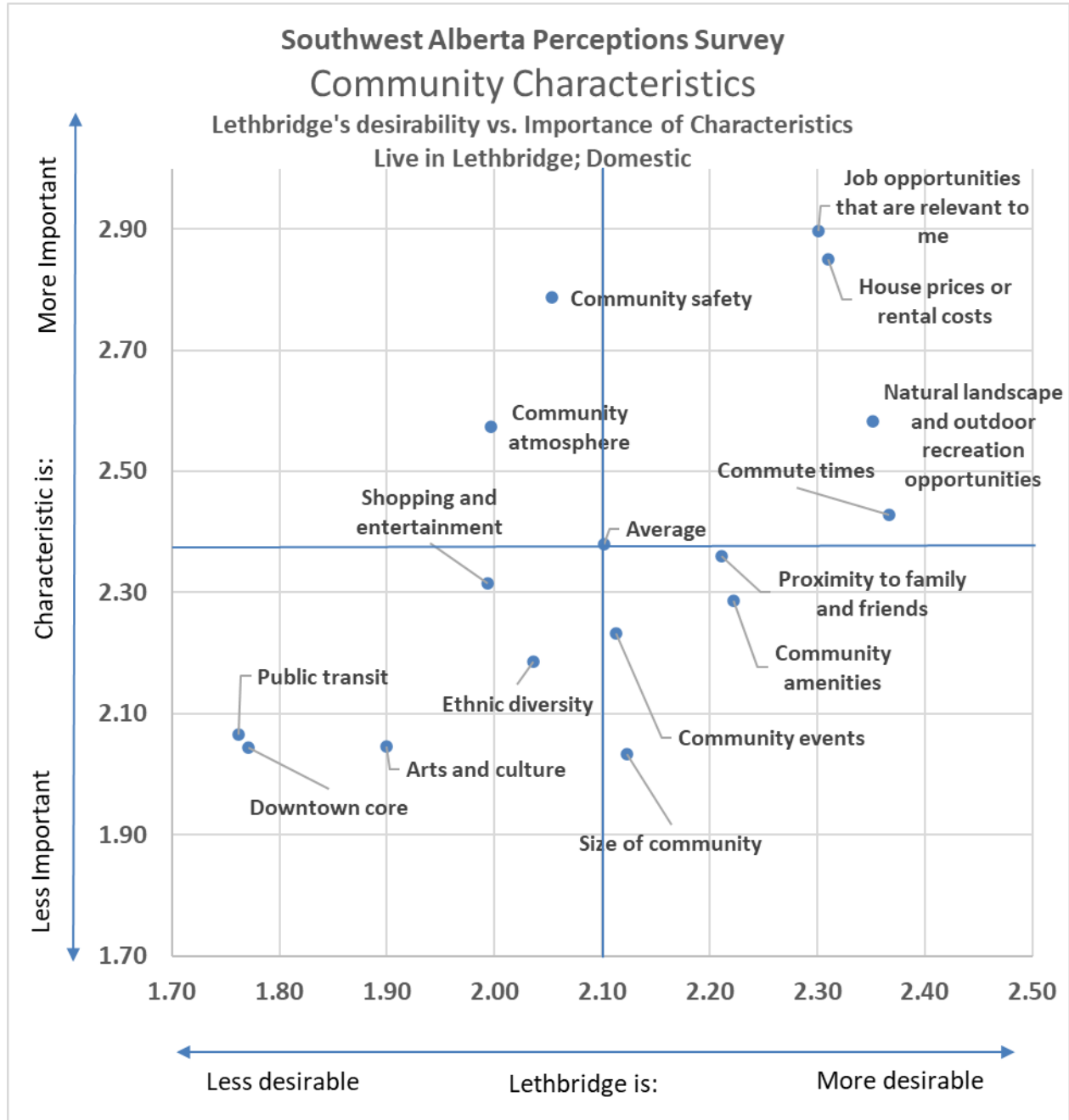
Scatter Plot D – Currently live in Lethbridge (at time of survey); Lived in Lethbridge at the time of application; Domestic students

Southwest Alberta Perceptions Survey
Community Characteristics
Lethbridge's desirability vs. Importance of Characteristics
Live in Lethbridge; Applied from Lethbridge; Domestic
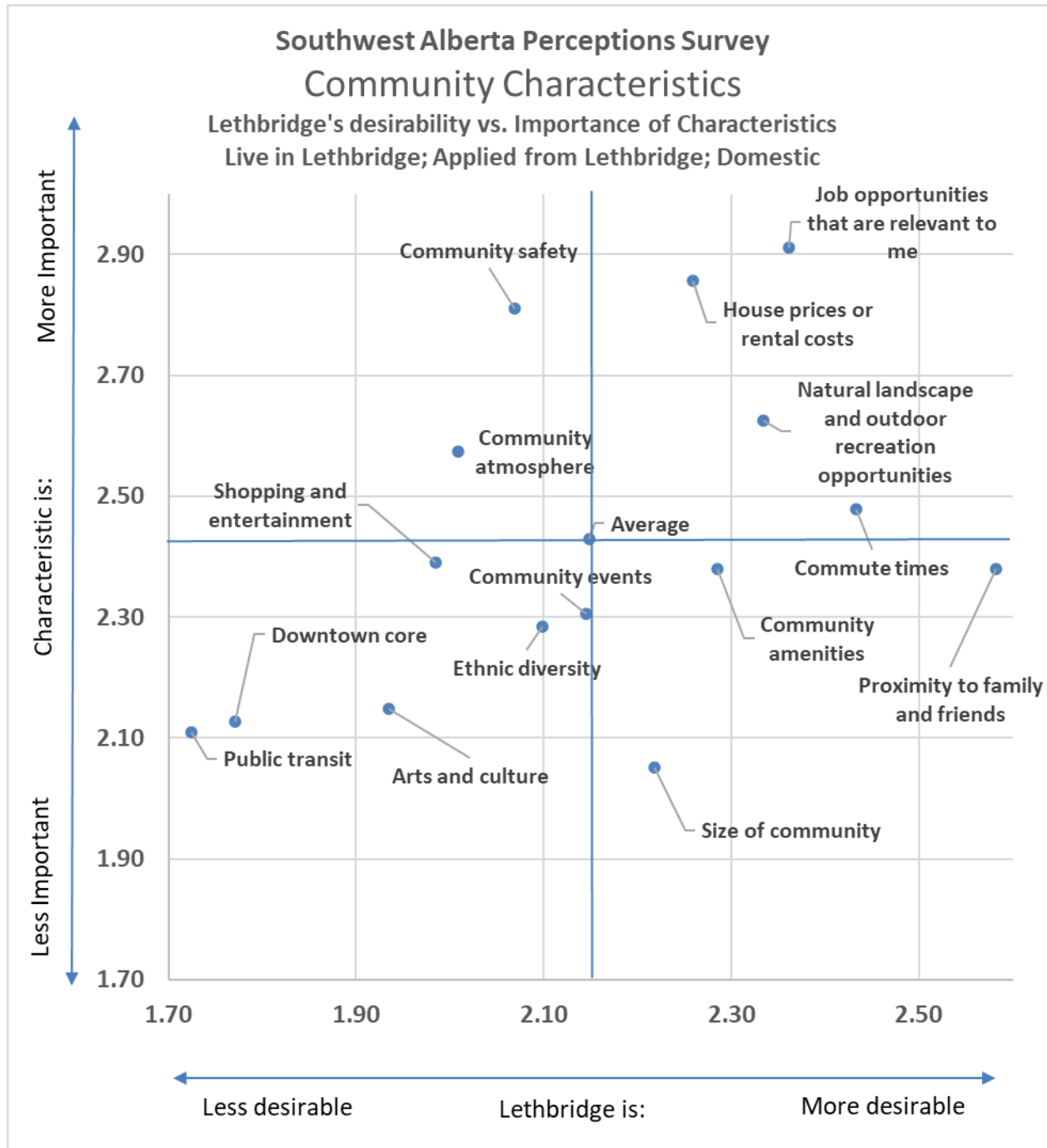
Scatter Plot E – Currently live in Lethbridge (at time of survey); Lived outside of Southwest Alberta at the time of application; Domestic students

Southwest Alberta Perceptions Survey
Community Characteristics
Lethbridge's desirability vs. Importance of Characteristics
Live in Lethbridge; Applied from Outside SW Alberta; Domestic
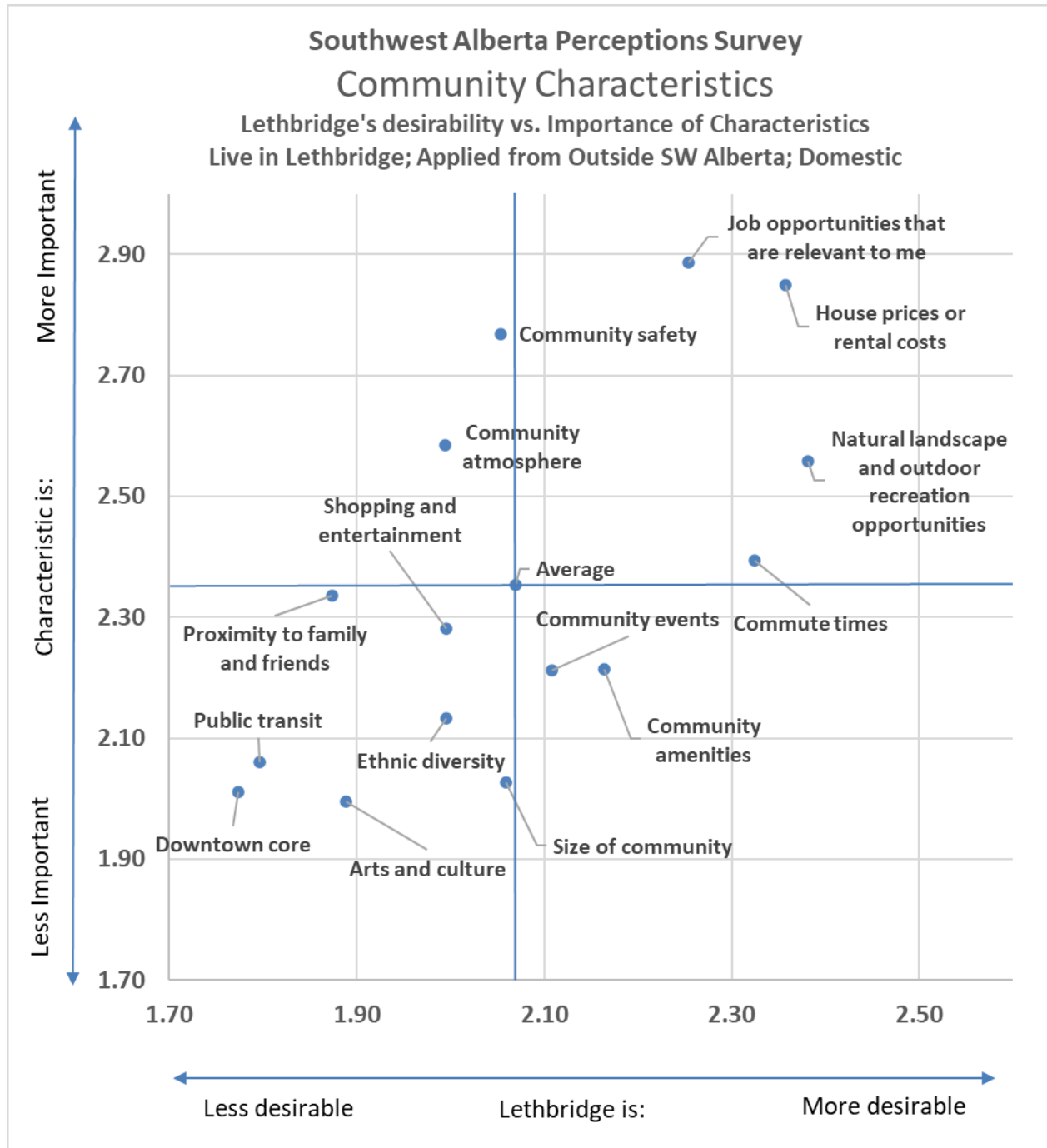
Scatter Plot F – Currently live in Lethbridge (at time of survey); Lived in Lethbridge at the time of application; Lived in Lethbridge six or more years; Domestic students

Southwest Alberta Perceptions Survey
Community Characteristics
Lethbridge's desirability vs. Importance of Characteristics
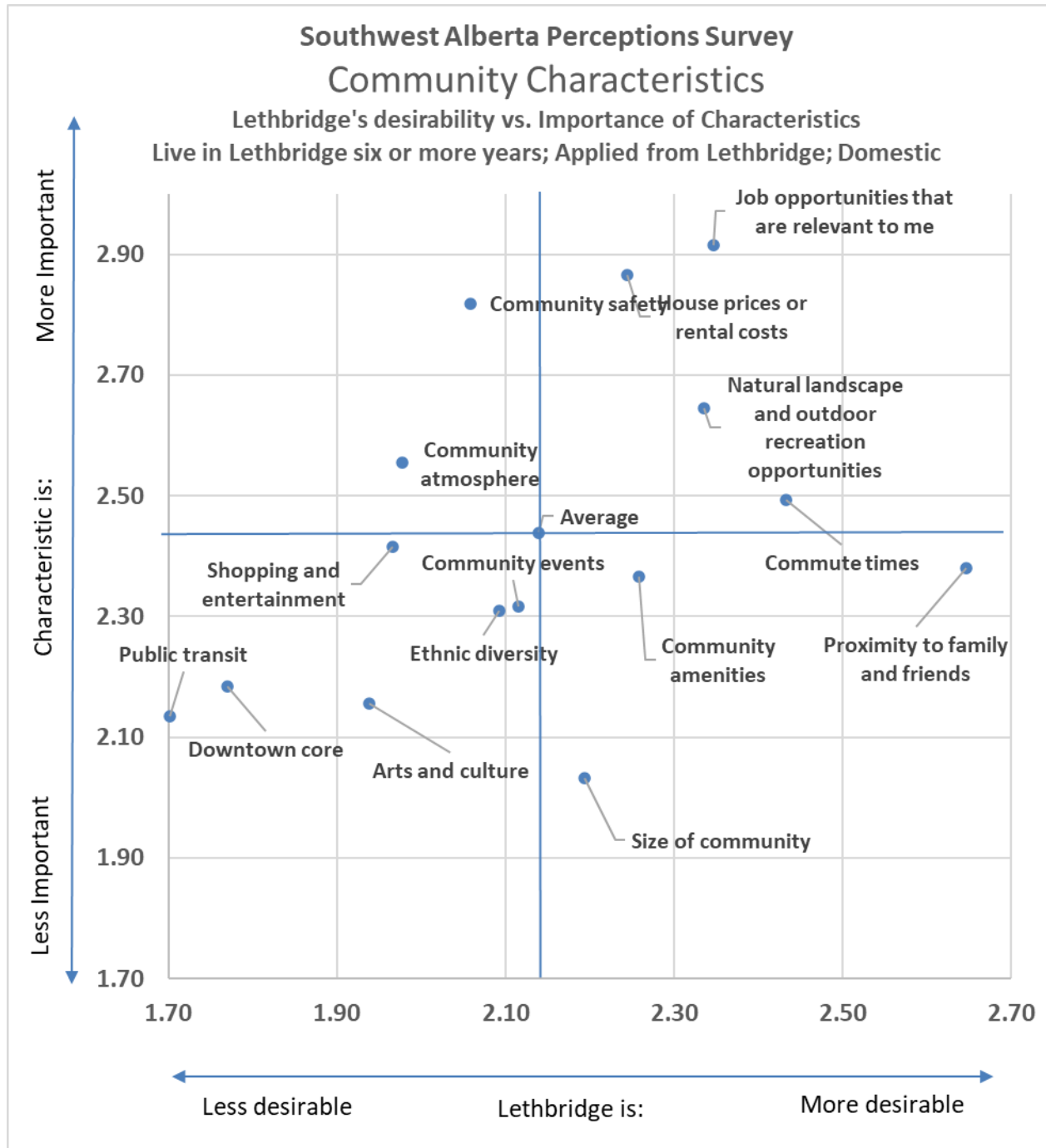**Live in Lethbridge six or more years; Applied from Lethbridge; Domestic**

Scatter Plot G – Currently live in Lethbridge (at time of survey); International students (student visa)

Southwest Alberta Perceptions Survey
Community Characteristics
Lethbridge's desirability vs. Importance of Characteristics
Live in Lethbridge; International
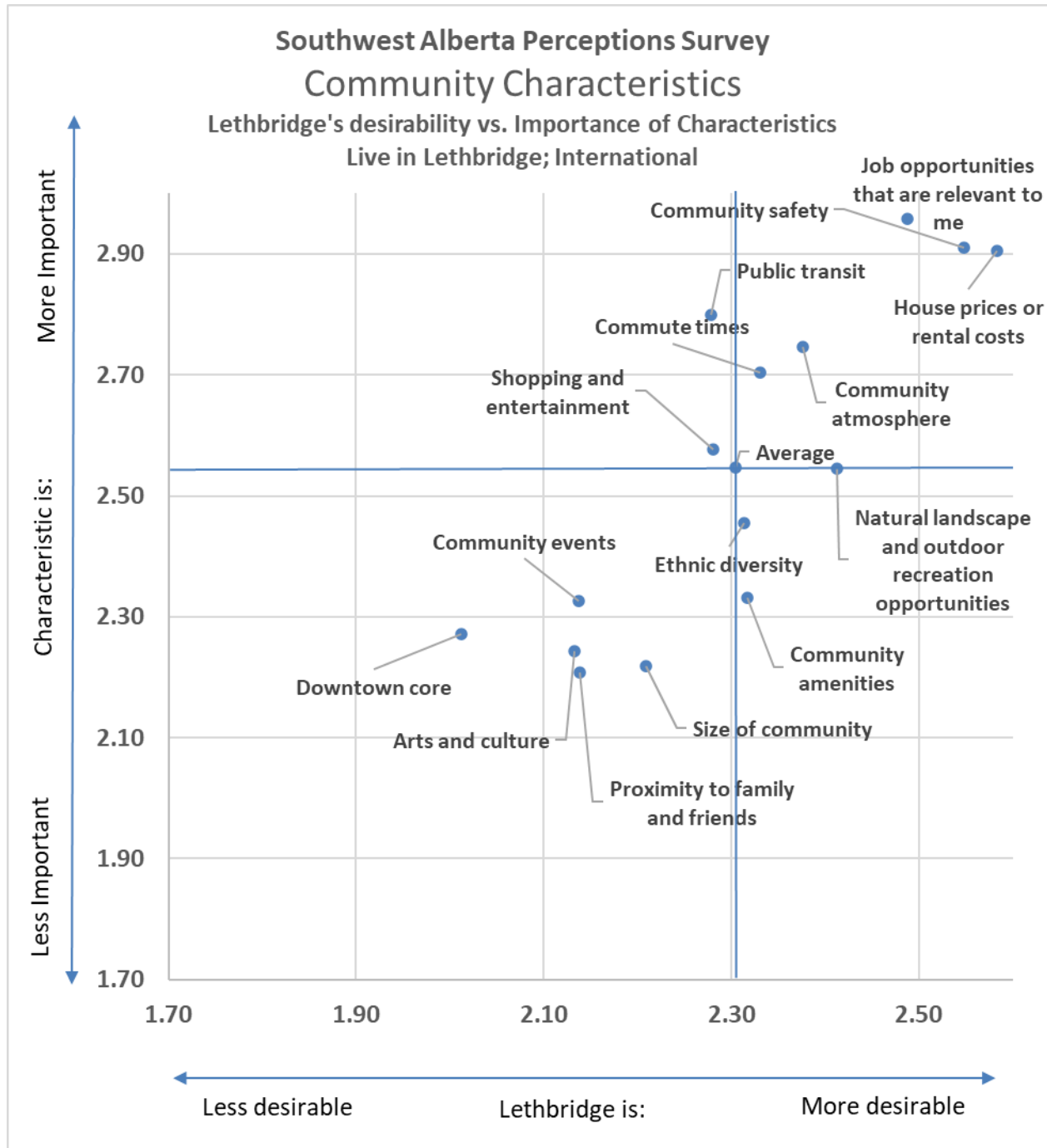
Appendix 3 – Top 5 Important

Southwest Alberta Perceptions Survey
Q22 - What are the <u>five most important</u> characteristics to you when thinking about where you want to live? (Select up to 5)

Characteristic	Value
Job opportunities that are relevant to me	1456
Affordable house prices or rental costs	1405
Close proximity to family and friends	996
Community safety	963
I want to live where someone I am in a long-term/committed relationship with lives	823
Natural landscape and outdoor recreation opportunities	817
Community atmosphere	606
Good shopping and entertainment	381
Community amenities (e.g. parks, skating rinks, swimming pools)	351
Community events (e.g. festivals, concerts, fairs, farmers' markets)	343
Good public transit	340
Short commute times	287
Ethnic diversity	242
Size of community	219
Arts and cultural vibrancy	203
Vibrant downtown core	154
Other (please specify)	46
Prefer not to answer	5

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Appendix 4 – Focus Group Summary

Focus Group Summary Report

Prepared by:

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