

Southwest Alberta Perceptions Focus Group Report



SOUTHWEST ALBERTA PERCEPTIONS FOCUS GROUP REPORT

A sociological examination of graduate retention in Southwest Alberta, combining academic, community, and economic perspectives.

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Report Background

Context: Economic and Employment Landscape in the Lethbridge Region

The economic and employment landscape in the Lethbridge region, post-Covid-19, presents a mixed bag of challenges and opportunities. While the region is gradually recovering from the pandemic's impact, there are persistent concerns about economic growth, job creation, and the retention of skilled graduates. The area, known for its educational institutions and agricultural base, faces the dual challenge of evolving its economic infrastructure and ensuring that its graduates find compelling reasons to build their careers and lives in the region.

Project Purpose

This report represents a key component of a collaborative initiative led by Curve Strategic Research (CSR), supported by various regional partners, and funded by a Labour Market Partnership grant, which is administered by Alberta Jobs, Economy and Trade. The primary goal is to identify and address factors influencing the decision of graduates to stay in or leave the Lethbridge region. By understanding these dynamics, the project seeks to propose effective strategies that encourage graduates to contribute to the local economy and community life.

Project Partners:

The project is a collaborative effort involving several key stakeholders committed to the socio-economic well-being of the Lethbridge region. The main partners include:

Curve Strategic Research: Leading the research and strategy development process.

Lethbridge College: Providing insights into the needs and aspirations of college students.

University of Lethbridge: Offering a university perspective on graduate retention issues.

Community Organizations: Various local organizations contributing their understanding of the regional socio-economic landscape.

Local Employers: Offering a practical perspective on employment opportunities and challenges in the area.

Government Entities: Providing policy and infrastructural support for the initiative.

This diverse coalition aims to create a multi-dimensional approach to graduate retention, combining academic, community, and economic perspectives.

Introduction

Overview of the Challenge

The Lethbridge region, known for its vibrant academic community and diverse economic sectors, faces significant challenges in employment, community engagement, and graduate retention. Post-Covid-19, the regional job market has shown signs of strain, with the perception of limited job opportunities failing to match the skill sets of recent graduates. This mismatch has led to a concerning trend of talent migration, where skilled individuals relocate in search of better prospects. Moreover, the region grapples with fostering a sense of community belonging and engagement, particularly among new graduates who often feel disconnected from local cultural and social activities. These challenges are pivotal in understanding why graduates may choose to leave the area, thereby impacting the region's socio-economic growth and diversity.

Survey Summary

Prior to the focus group discussions, an extensive survey was conducted by Curve Strategic Research among college and university students in the Lethbridge region. This initial survey served as a foundational tool for gathering preliminary data, crucial for understanding the perspectives and experiences of the student population in the area.

The survey targeted a diverse group of students, encompassing both domestic and international attendees at local educational institutions, including the University of Lethbridge and Lethbridge College. The questionnaire was designed to capture a wide range of information, including demographic details, academic backgrounds, and personal aspirations of the students.

Key areas of inquiry in the survey included:

- **Employment Prospects and Challenges:** Students were asked about their perceptions of job availability in the region, the alignment of their skills with market demands, and their experiences with job searches.
- **Community Engagement and Involvement:** The survey explored students' levels of engagement with the local community, including participation in local events, cultural activities, and community initiatives.
- **Graduate Retention Factors:** Students provided insights into factors that would influence their decision to stay in or leave the Lethbridge region after graduation. This included aspects like employment opportunities, quality of life, and community support systems.
- **Transportation and Accessibility:** Questions were also posed about the effectiveness and reliability of local transportation options and how this impacted their daily lives and potential long-term residency decisions.

Over 2000 people completed the survey. The responses formed a critical baseline of information, highlighting areas of strength and aspects needing improvement in the Lethbridge region from a student's perspective. These insights were instrumental in shaping the subsequent focus group discussions, allowing for a deeper exploration of

themes and issues identified in the survey. The survey summary provided a quantitative backdrop for the qualitative focus group dialogues and ensured that the discussions were grounded in the real-life experiences and opinions of the student body.

Focus Groups: Detailed Examination and Methodology

This report specifically covers the focus group component of the study, conducted to explore the multifaceted aspects affecting graduate retention and employment in the Lethbridge region. These focus groups, facilitated by Dr. Jaclyn Doherty from Dodo Studios, were carefully designed to uncover deep insights into various themes that play a crucial role in shaping the experiences of students and community members in the Lethbridge area. Charles McArthur from Curve Strategic Research was also present at each session, recording notes of the proceedings for accuracy and completeness.

Objective and Approach

The focus groups aimed to engage participants in meaningful, solution-oriented dialogues. The goal was to uncover nuanced perspectives on several critical issues impacting the community and its graduates.

Methodology

The focus group discussion topics were designed to thoroughly explore a range of sociological questions relevant to graduate retention and employment in the Lethbridge region. Key to this was understanding the region's economy not just as a financial entity but as a social construct shaped by various cultural and societal factors. This approach allowed for a deeper exploration of how these social dynamics influence and are influenced by economic strategies and outcomes.

Selection and Execution of Focus Groups

To ensure a comprehensive view of the region, four groups were selected for this study, each reflecting different perspectives within the Lethbridge region. These included students from Southwest Alberta, international students, students from outside Southern Alberta, and community stakeholders. The focus groups' composition was carefully crafted to adhere to the standards of research ethics and effectiveness, covering themes such as:

- employment opportunities,
- community safety,
- discrimination and community atmosphere, and
- activities for young people and families.

Data Collection and Analysis:

All focus group discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. This meticulous approach ensured that no detail was lost in the analysis process.

Discussion

The focus group discussions unearthed several key themes, painting a nuanced picture of life in Lethbridge, particularly for students and recent graduates.

These themes span various aspects, including employment opportunities, perceptions of safety, community engagement, transportation, and discrimination, transportation.

1. **Employment Opportunities:**
A prevailing concern highlighted was the scarcity of full-time positions and meaningful career advancement opportunities in Lethbridge. This concern resonates with the initial survey results, indicating a general apprehension about post-graduation job prospects. Notably, the high expectations set in job postings for even entry-level positions were emphasized, suggesting that qualifications attained might not adequately align with job market demands.

2 **Perception of Safety:**
While the survey suggested a moderate concern about safety, focus group discussions brought to light more specific safety concerns, particularly in downtown areas. This discrepancy highlights the importance of context and specificity in understanding perceptions of safety within the city.

3. **Awareness and Engagement in Community Activities:**
Both the survey and focus groups acknowledged a lack of awareness about local events and activities. However, focus group participants pointed out barriers to accessing and participating in these events, suggesting that improving awareness is only part of the solution.

4. **Transportation Accessibility:**
Survey and focus group findings reveal transportation as a key concern, especially for students dependent on public transit. Challenges include unreliable services and limited routes, affecting commutes and access to events. Enhancing transportation is crucial for improving students' and graduates' experiences in Lethbridge, potentially influencing their decision to remain in the region.

5. **Discrimination and Inclusivity:**
The focus group discussions highlighted experiences and concerns about discrimination, especially among international students and marginalized communities. This aspect is crucial for understanding the broader context of community atmosphere and inclusivity in Lethbridge, impacting the overall goal of graduate retention and engagement in the city.

Detailed Findings

This section explores the nuanced perspectives and experiences gathered from the focus groups. The purpose of these discussions was to understand the challenges faced by students and community stakeholders but also to explore potential solutions.

Initially, the report outlines the perceptions provided by the three student groups, followed by insights from the community stakeholder groups. The focus groups were conducted in diverse settings and offered rich, multi-dimensional insights.

These findings paint a comprehensive picture of the current situation in the Lethbridge region, shedding light on the areas of employment, community safety, discrimination, transportation, and activities for young people and families. The narratives that emerged from these discussions, reinforced by the survey data, revealing both the shared and unique experiences of different groups within the community.

By presenting these findings, supported by direct quotes from participants, this report aims to give voice to the lived experiences of those most affected by the challenges at hand. It also highlights the creative and practical solutions proposed by the participants, reflecting a community-driven approach to addressing the issues. This synthesis of views and ideas is instrumental in shaping a more effective and inclusive Regional Graduate Retention Strategy for Lethbridge and its surrounding areas.

Student Focus Groups

Employment Opportunities and Challenges

This segment explored participants' experiences and perceptions of the job market in the Lethbridge region. Key questions focused on identifying prevalent employment challenges for graduates, the visibility of job opportunities and career paths to students and recent graduates, and the barriers to connecting with potential employers.

Recurring Themes:

The struggle to find appropriate employment opportunities was a pervasive concern across all focus groups. This was particularly pronounced among SW Alberta students and International students. The survey corroborated these findings, indicating a general sentiment of employment insecurity among graduates.

The **SW Alberta Student cohort** emphasized the need for more job shadowing and work-integrated learning (WIL) opportunities. Issues like lower wages in Lethbridge, lack of full-time employment, and job security were highlighted. The group also noted that special needs students require equal access to WIL opportunities.

“We need more job shadowing and real-world experiences. It's tough finding full-time work here”

SW Alberta Student

The challenges for **international students** revolved around finding employment niches, especially in tech and professional sectors. Credential recognition and the emphasis on trades in Alberta were also discussed as barriers. There was a desire for job banks, job fairs with on-spot interviews, and better employer engagement.

The **Domestic Students from Outside SW Alberta** highlighted the harsh job market and the difficulty in finding local employment, especially in niche fields. The need for better integration between employers and career services was emphasized, as well as the challenges in arranging internships and co-ops.

Solutions: Job-shadowing and Work Integrated Learning (WIL) opportunities; job Fairs with on the spot interviews; more realistic and attainable job postings; practicum banks; better integration between employers and career services

Community Safety

This topic focused on gauging participants' sense of safety within the community. The questions aimed to uncover feelings about the safety of different areas in the city and the surrounding region, and to discuss any experiences or perceptions that might influence their sense of security.

Recurring Themes:

Among the **SW Alberta students**, Safety concerns varied across different areas of the city, with downtown and mall areas feeling less safe. There was a consensus that the city needs to do more for people in need. Suggestions included converting empty stores into housing and organizing events to foster understanding across different cultures and socioeconomic backgrounds.

The **international student group**, generally felt safe. However, experiences with public disturbances and drug abuse were concerning. The need for more surveillance videos and transparent crime statistics was suggested.

"Even with education and experience, drawing a blank in job searches is disheartening," .

International Student

"Sometimes it feels like our degrees don't match the job market realities," .

Student from Outside SW Alberta

"Once you get to know people personally, they become less scary"

SW Alberta Student

"Seeing fights on the streets can be very disturbing"

International Student

For **students from outside SW Alberta**, safety in Lethbridge was a concern, especially downtown. The closure of ARCHES and the perceived increase in crime were discussed. Solutions proposed included mandatory courses on discrimination and racism, more harm reduction programs, and initiatives to bridge the gap between privileged and disadvantaged groups.

Solutions: More video surveillance and transparent crime statistics; converting empty stores into housing; organizing events to foster understanding across different cultures and socioeconomic backgrounds; mandatory courses on discrimination and racism; more harm reduction programs; and initiatives to bridge the gap between privileged and disadvantaged groups.

Transportation

This part of the discussion examined the effectiveness and accessibility of transportation options in Lethbridge. Key questions were: How do students and community members perceive the public transit system? What challenges are associated with transportation, and what improvements in transportation would enhance your experience in the region?

Recurring Themes:

Among the **SW Alberta students**, criticisms were aimed at the bus system, with suggestions for direct buses to post-secondary institutions, more evening transit services, and more reliable schedules. The lack of walkability and the need for shuttles to smaller communities were also highlighted.

The **International student group**, expressed that although the bus system was deemed good in some parts of the city, coverage was poor in residential areas and the lack of weekend service was criticized. Suggestions included better updates on route changes and the reintroduction of the Ride on Demand service.

For **students from outside SW Alberta** the need for quicker bus routes, more reliable services, and extended operational hours for events was emphasized. There was frustration with the changes to the bus system post-2021, calling for a return to the previous system's reliability.

All groups expressed that the scooter and e-bikes recently introduced to the city were a positive aspect, however, many felt that the cost was too expensive.

“Direct buses to post-secondary institutions and better evening services are needed”

SW Alberta Student

Solutions: Direct buses to PSIs, updates on route changes, reintroduction of convenient services like Ride on Demand, more reliable schedules, extended hours to accommodate later schedules.

Discrimination and Community Atmosphere

Here, the conversation centered on experiences and perceptions of inclusivity within Lethbridge. Questions included: Have participants witnessed or experienced discrimination? What are their thoughts on the cultural and social atmosphere of the region? How inclusive does the community feel to diverse groups?

Recurring Themes:

Experiences of discrimination and the need for a more inclusive atmosphere were highlighted. The survey responses confirmed these issues, particularly among international and minority students.

Among **SW Alberta Students**, implicit discrimination, particularly in employment, was a concern.

“There's a need for more awareness and education around discrimination in our community”

SW Alberta Student

International students felt that there was more discrimination in Lethbridge and surrounding communities compared to some of the bigger cities, and also suggested that this is due to a lack of policy and activities for the international population.

Among **domestic students from outside Lethbridge**, there was a general sense that some of the rural communities outside Lethbridge can be hostile, particularly in public health. They also expressed that safety was an issue within the city. This group shared that there can be a large misperception about the indigenous and homeless population, stating that there needs to be more done to help those in need.

Solutions: More activities to help integrate immigrants into the city, awareness and education.

Activities for Young People & Families

The focus here was on the availability and accessibility of activities suitable for students, young professionals, and families. The group discussed: What kinds of activities and events are sought after by younger demographics? Are these activities readily accessible and appealing? What improvements could be made to enhance leisure and recreational opportunities in the region?

Recurring Themes:

Across the board, there was a desire for a more diverse range of activities that cater to different interests and age groups. This included suggestions for more family-oriented events, activities for young adults, and specific cultural or community events. The need for more indoor activities, especially during the winter months, was highlighted. Participants felt that options were limited during colder seasons and desired more indoor recreational facilities or events.

The **SW Alberta Student** group called for more student-involved events and family-oriented activities. For those with families, the need for family-friendly activities and support structures, like affordable childcare or family discounts at recreational facilities, was a key concern.

“Lethbridge has so much to offer, but we need to spread the word more effectively”

SW Alberta Student

International students expressed a need for more activities during evenings and nights. The lack of such options was seen as a barrier to fully experiencing local culture and socializing opportunities. The group emphasized the importance of inclusivity in community events. It was noted that events should cater to diverse backgrounds, ensuring that everyone feels welcome and represented. Students discussed the potential of more local festivals, such as the Indian and Nigerian festivals that were held in Nicholas Sheran Park, as opportunities for cultural exchange and community bonding. These festivals were seen as vital platforms for showcasing and celebrating the rich cultural diversity within Lethbridge, and could significantly enhance the experience of international students by providing a taste of home and an opportunity to share their heritage with others.

The domestic students from outside

Lethbridge, who valued the region's outdoor recreation opportunities, expressed a need for more activities tailored to their demographic. They suggested the creation of social groups or clubs for young people, an independent social media hub to centralize information about local activities, and special student nights at events. This group observed that most activities and venues, such as restaurants and markets, are concentrated on the south side of the city, posing accessibility challenges for those residing elsewhere, particularly on the west side.

Solutions: Enhanced promotion of events; more inclusive and diverse events, student-run family programs (Implementing child activity programs run by students as practicums was proposed); discounts for students and families; building more indoor facilities, such as sports domes, to accommodate activities during colder months; cross-Institutional event invitations: accessible, reliable, and affordable public transport to and from events or local attractions; visiting friend and family incentives to come visit and explore the city and it's local attractions.

Many students mentioned frequently leaving Lethbridge on weekends due to roommate living situations, making it costly for friends and family to visit. They suggested discounts at local hotels and restaurants for students' guests could encourage these visitors to stay in Lethbridge, allowing them to build stronger connections and enjoy the city's amenities. This could boost local businesses, make the city more appealing, and foster a more inclusive and engaging community experience, possibly influencing students to stay after graduation.

Community Stakeholders Focus Group

The Community Stakeholder focus group, comprising various local leaders and professionals, discussed strategies to enhance employment opportunities, community safety, transportation, and cultural inclusivity in Lethbridge. Their insights resonated with the recurring themes identified by student groups, offering a comprehensive view of the challenges and potential solutions.

Employment Opportunities

Skills and Opportunity Mismatch: The group discussed the disconnect between students' academic achievements and available job opportunities. Emphasizing the need for real-world experience, they highlighted how students often possess theoretical knowledge without practical application.

Lack of Real-World Experience: There was a consensus on the need for more work-integrated learning opportunities like internships and co-op programs, which provide valuable on-the-job experience.

Employer-Education Institution Collaboration: The importance of stronger ties between employers and educational institutions was highlighted to ensure curriculum relevance and improve job market preparedness.

“Students are looking for sustainable careers to help start life outside of university”
Community Stakeholder Group

Solutions:

Encouraging more internships and co-op programs to bridge the gap between education and practical job skills;
Building stronger connections between employers and educational institutions to tailor curricula to market needs;
Promoting skill-based rather than credential-based hiring to value the diverse skills students acquire.

Community Safety

Perception vs. Reality of Safety: Discussions revealed a gap between the perceived and actual safety of the city, influenced by lack of community engagement and misinformation.

Need for Visible Community Initiatives: Emphasis was placed on initiatives that increase community presence in key areas, like downtown, to enhance the feeling of safety.

Inclusive Community Development: The group suggested that inclusive community development, involving various stakeholders, could address underlying issues contributing to safety concerns.

Solutions:

Increasing community policing efforts and engaging residents in safety initiatives; enhancing public spaces to be more welcoming and safe, particularly in downtown areas; implementing programs that bring together diverse community groups, fostering mutual understanding and safety.

Transportation

Public Transport Inefficiencies: Concerns were raised about the unreliability and inefficiency of the current public transport system, which fails to adequately serve the growing population.

Accessibility and Coverage Issues: The limited coverage of bus routes, especially in residential areas and during off-peak hours, was identified as a major barrier to mobility.

Innovative Transportation Solutions: Proposals included exploring alternative transportation options like dedicated student shuttles, ride-sharing, and expanding existing transit services to underserved areas.

Activities for Young People and Families

Disconnect between the city's identity and its actual demographic: The group identified a disconnect between the city's identity and its actual demographic composition, which includes a significant student population. It suggests a need for greater acknowledgment and integration of the student community into the broader city life.

Need for Inclusivity in Event Planning:

It was noted that events should cater to a diverse range of interests and cultural backgrounds to ensure inclusivity.

Lack of Awareness and Promotion of Events:

Stakeholders observed that while numerous activities and events are available in Lethbridge, students often are unaware of them due to inadequate promotion and information dissemination. The group identified a need for better communication and centralized information channels that inform not just students but the broader

Solutions:

The reliability and coverage of the public transit system; establishing student-specific transportation services for better connectivity; promoting bike-sharing, scooters, and other forms of transport to increase mobility options.

“I think Lethbridge is the only university and college town that I know that doesn't realize that it's a college town”

Community Stakeholder Group

community about events and activities happening in and around Lethbridge. This could involve a central hub or platform that aggregates information about cultural events, community activities, and opportunities for social engagement. This aligns with student perceptions, who also expressed, that while many programs exist, they are either not well-advertised or are too scattered across different communication channels, making it difficult to keep track of available opportunities.

Solutions:

Student-Focused Urban Development: Plan and develop urban spaces with student needs in mind. This includes creating affordable housing options close to downtown, enhancing public transportation routes between the university, college, and key city areas, and developing social and cultural hubs that cater to student and young adult interests.

Enhanced Awareness and Promotion of Events: Participants felt that by improving awareness and promotion of events, graduates are more likely to participate in local activities, fostering a deeper connection to the community. This sense of belonging and engagement could be a significant factor in their decision to stay in the area post-graduation.

Celebrate Diversity: Organize multicultural events and festivals that celebrate the diversity within Lethbridge, promoting a sense of community and belonging among all residents, including students.

Opportunity and Potential

Graduate Retention in Lethbridge: A Multifaceted Approach

The focus group findings underscore the complexity of graduate retention in Lethbridge. However, the solution focused insights paint a picture of opportunity and potential for the region, highlighting areas where thoughtful action can make a meaningful difference in retaining graduates:

Encouraging Employment Opportunities:

Exploring the alignment of job opportunities with graduate qualifications and experience in Lethbridge.

- 1 Alignment with Graduate Potential:** Opportunities can be created by aligning the job market with the unique perspectives and skills of recent graduates. This includes developing entry-level positions that offer career advancement and practical application of academic learning.
- 2 Valuing Academic Achievement:** Emphasizing the value of academic qualifications and the innovative ideas of new graduates can lead to more inclusive employment practices, ensuring graduates feel their education is respected and utilized.
- 3 Diversifying Job Landscape:** Broadening the range of job sectors in Lethbridge to include technology, arts, and sustainable industries, catering to the diverse interests and skills of graduates, thus making the city an attractive career hub.

Cultivating Safety and Inclusivity:

Community-led initiatives and a celebration of diversity can contribute to creating a safe and inclusive environment.

- 1 Community-Led Safety Initiatives:** Enhancing safety in key city areas through community-led initiatives can create a sense of shared responsibility and care.
- 2 Celebrating Diversity:** Fostering events and programs that highlight Lethbridge's cultural diversity, such as festivals and workshops, not only enriches community life but also ensures every graduate feels welcomed.
- 3 Inclusive Policies and Practices:** Developing and implementing inclusive policies in workplaces and social spaces to actively combat discrimination and promote equality.

Nurturing Community Engagement:

The essence of a vibrant city lies in its community spirit. This can be achieved by fostering graduate engagement with the city through accessible and appealing events and activities.

- 1 Promoting and Facilitating Access:** Increasing awareness of local events through centralized information hubs and providing transportation options can make events more accessible and appealing to graduates.
- 2 Inclusive and Engaging Activities:** Designing events and activities that cater to a wide range of interests, with a focus on young adult preferences, encourages a sense of community belonging.
- 3 Student and Graduate Involvement:** Encouraging active participation of students and graduates in planning and executing city events, ensures their voices are heard and reflected in community activities.

Collaboration for a Unified Vision:

A cohesive approach towards graduate retention requires collaboration across various sectors.

- 1 Partnerships for Progress:** Building bridges between educational institutions, local businesses, and community groups can foster a cohesive approach to graduate retention.
- 2 Responsive and Adaptive Strategies:** Regularly engaging with the graduate community for feedback and adapting strategies accordingly ensures relevance and effectiveness.
- 3 Cross-Sector Initiatives:** Launching initiatives that bring together different sectors, such as tech startups, arts communities, and social enterprises, to create new opportunities and enhance city appeal for graduates.

Lethbridge has the potential to become a standout location for young professionals by adopting a comprehensive strategy that recognizes their contributions, guarantees their safety, embraces their diverse backgrounds, and involves them actively in the city's dynamic community. This approach can turn Lethbridge into a supportive environment for new graduates, providing a solid foundation for their ambitions and goals to grow and succeed.

Next Steps

Looking Forward - Where do you go from here?

The following STEEP analysis, though not exhaustive, serves as a foundational tool for strategic discussions on graduate retention in Southwest Alberta. It examines Socio-cultural, Technological, Economic, Environmental, and Political factors influencing graduate retention. By linking these broader external influences with the specific challenges and opportunities identified in the focus group findings, this analysis can guide the development of effective and comprehensive strategies for the region.

| Socio-Cultural | Technological | Economical | Environmental | Political |
|---|--|---|--|---|
| <p>Cultural Diversity and Inclusion: Recognizing and embracing the growing diversity among students, including international students, and promoting inclusive activities and events.</p> <p>Community Engagement: The need for more community-driven initiatives that engage graduates, encouraging participation in local events and cultural activities.</p> <p>Social Connectivity: Addressing the sense of isolation some graduates feel, especially those from outside the region, by fostering social networks and community bonds.</p> | <p>Digital Connectivity and Remote Work Opportunities: Leveraging technological advancements to offer remote or hybrid work opportunities, which can be particularly appealing to the younger workforce.</p> <p>Educational Technology Integration: Enhancing the use of technology in education and career development, providing graduates with up-to-date skills that meet current market demands.</p> <p>Online Platforms for Community Building: Developing digital hubs for event information and networking opportunities to better connect graduates with the community and each other.</p> | <p>Job Market Alignment: Aligning the job market with graduates' skills and qualifications, particularly in emerging industries and sectors.</p> <p>Industry Diversification: Diversifying Lethbridge's economic base can broaden employment opportunities, matching graduates' diverse skills and interests. This enhances economic resilience and attractiveness for graduates seeking stable, varied careers.</p> <p>Cost of Living and Affordability: Considering the impact of living costs on graduates' decisions to stay in the region, including housing, transportation, and general expenses.</p> | <p>Geographic Advantage: Lethbridge's location near natural landscapes encourages a work-life balance with easy access to outdoor activities, appealing to graduates.</p> <p>Green Space Accessibility: The region's abundant green spaces offer outdoor leisure opportunities, enhancing the living experience for graduates.</p> <p>Transportation to Recreation: Improved transportation links between urban areas and natural landscapes can make Lethbridge more attractive for graduates seeking active lifestyles.</p> | <p>Education and Employment Policies: Policies on education funding, student loans, and graduate employment can sway graduates' decisions.</p> <p>Regional Development Initiatives: Prioritizing Southwest Alberta's development, including tech, infrastructure, and cultural investments, can attract young professionals.</p> <p>Government Support: Government initiatives like grants, subsidies, or tax incentives for employing local graduates can boost graduate retention.</p> |

Future Scenarios

Growth, Constraint, Collapse, Transform

This section of the report explores future scenarios for graduate retention in Southwest Alberta. Its purpose is to analyze signals and change drivers that could potentially shape the region's ability to keep graduates locally post-education. These elements range from economic conditions to social and political policies.

Four diverse scenarios are represented: Growth, Constraint, Collapse, and Transformation, each offering a different outlook on graduate retention based on current and potential developments. This analysis aims to aid stakeholders in strategic planning for a future where Southwest Alberta not only educates its youth but also retains them as integral parts of the community.

| Scenario | Description | Impact |
|-------------------|---|---|
| GROWTH | This scenario envisions a robust and diverse job market in Southwest Alberta, where economic expansion aligns with the skills and aspirations of graduates. Key industries thrive, and new sectors emerge, offering a broad spectrum of career opportunities. | With increased employment prospects, graduates find compelling reasons to stay. The region's economic vitality makes it an attractive hub for young professionals seeking career growth and stability. |
| CONSTRAINT | Here, the region faces economic stagnation and limited job growth. Industries struggle to evolve, and new sectors fail to materialize, leading to a constrained job market with few opportunities for graduates. | Graduates find it challenging to secure relevant and fulfilling employment in the region, leading to increased migration to other areas with more dynamic job markets. |
| COLLAPSE | This scenario represents a significant downturn in the regional economy, possibly due to external factors like global market crashes or internal issues such as policy failures. Job opportunities dwindle, and existing industries shrink or disappear. | The region experiences a severe brain drain, with graduates leaving en masse for better opportunities elsewhere. This exodus exacerbates the economic decline, creating a vicious cycle of depopulation and diminishing economic prospects. |
| TRANSFORM | Southwest Alberta rebrands as a college-centric community, emphasizing academic vibrancy and student-community collaboration. | This shift enhances graduate retention by aligning the region with the needs and potential of its academic community, offering collaborative opportunities, and fostering a student-focused cultural and professional environment. |

Signals & Change Drivers

Growth



Signals of growth can include:

- Increasing job offerings in diverse sectors aligning with graduate skills.
- Rise in local start-ups and entrepreneurial ventures aimed meeting the needs and interests of the different graduate demographics.
- Expansion in graduate-specific community engagement programs.
- Increased investment in local amenities and infrastructure.
- Growing collaboration between academic institutions and industries.



Underpinning change drivers of growth often include:

- Innovation and creativity in product, service, and program development.
- Adoption of new technologies, educational, or business models.
- Effective marketing and branding strategies.
- Strong leadership and organizational culture.
- Investment in human resources and talent management.
- Access to financial resources and capital investment.
- Effective partnerships and collaborations with other organizations or stakeholders.

Constraint



Signals of constraint can include:

- Stagnation in job market diversification.
- Limited growth in start-ups and new business ventures that cater to the needs and interests of new graduates and their families.
- Reduced funding for community engagement initiatives.
- Slow progress in infrastructural development affecting quality of life.
- Weakening of collaborative efforts between academia and industry.



Underpinning change drivers of constraint often include

- Economic challenges limiting new job creation.
- Insufficient support and resources for entrepreneurial activities.
- Budget cuts impacting community and social programs.
- Lag in infrastructural improvements impacting living standards.
- Reduced emphasis on academic-industry partnerships.

Collapse



Signals of collapse can include:

- Sharp decline in employment opportunities in key sectors.
- Increase in graduate migration to other regions.
- Significant cuts in funding for higher education and student support.
- Deterioration of community safety and living conditions.
- Notable decrease in cultural and recreational activities for young adults.
- Marked decrease in quality of life and public services.



Underpinning change drivers of collapse often include

- Prolonged economic downturn impacting all sectors.
- Lack of support and unsustainable business environment for new ventures.
- Breakdown in community cohesion and support networks.
- Drastic reductions in funding for education and workforce development.
- Neglect of public infrastructure and essential services.

Transform



Signals of transformation can include:

- A surge in job openings that specifically cater to the skills and interests of graduates, emphasizing creativity and innovation.
- A noticeable increase in initiatives led by local communities that encourage social interaction, cultural activities, and civic engagement among graduates.
- Recognition of Lethbridge as a college-centric city with a distinctive and appealing identity that resonates with young professionals.
- Enhanced cooperation between universities, businesses, and government, leading to practical projects and initiatives that benefit graduates.
- Noticeable advancements in the city's infrastructure and amenities, making it more conducive to graduate lifestyles.



Underpinning change drivers of transformation often include

- A focused campaign to reposition Lethbridge as a dynamic, youthful college town, attracting and retaining graduates.
- Policy frameworks that support start-ups and entrepreneurial ventures, particularly those by or for recent graduates
- Planning and development initiatives that heavily involve community inputs, particularly from younger demographics, ensuring a city that grows with its graduate population.
- Strengthened partnerships among educational institutions, local businesses, and government entities to create opportunities tailored to graduate needs.
- Allocation of resources towards improving public services and facilities, such as parks, cultural centers, and transportation, enhancing the overall living experience in Lethbridge.

Strategic Scenario Analysis: Question-Based Approach

To effectively navigate towards desirable outcomes in graduate retention in Southwest Alberta, stakeholders can consider the following questions for each scenario:

GROWTH

For Desirable Outcomes:

What actions can we take to foster diversified economic growth and community-driven initiatives?

To Avoid Undesirable Outcomes:

How can we balance growth with sustainable practices and equitable development?

CONSTRAINT

For Desirable Outcomes: How can we strengthen existing industries while improving current systems and infrastructure?

To Avoid Undesirable Outcomes:

What creative solutions can we implement within existing frameworks to prevent stagnation?

COLLAPSE

For Desirable Outcomes: What crisis management strategies and resilience-building measures can we plan?

To Avoid Undesirable Outcomes:

How can we regularly assess and mitigate risks to prevent the loss of resources and talent?

TRANSFORM

For Desirable Outcomes: How can we embrace strategic rebranding, investment in public infrastructure, and foster partnerships across different sectors?

To Avoid Undesirable Outcomes:

What preparations can we make for transitional challenges and ensuring inclusive decision-making?

Conclusion

The focus group report, enriched by the perspectives of students and community stakeholders in Southwest Alberta, provides a valuable roadmap for enhancing graduate retention in the Lethbridge area. The findings, harmonizing with survey data and report, have spotlighted critical areas like employment opportunities, community safety, discrimination, transportation, and youth and family activities as key determinants in the graduates' decision to stay in the region.

Looking ahead, the report not only offers immediate recommendations but also lays the groundwork for future scenarios in graduate retention. These scenarios, ranging from growth and transformation to constraint and collapse, present a spectrum of possibilities that Lethbridge might encounter. Each scenario is shaped by distinct signals and change drivers, highlighting the dynamic nature of the challenge at hand.

For Lethbridge to thrive and retain its graduates, a vigilant approach towards monitoring these signals and trends is essential. The city must be adaptable, ready to pivot strategies in response to emerging socio-cultural, technological, economic, environmental, and political changes. By staying attuned to these factors and fostering a spirit of innovation and collaboration, Lethbridge can transform into a hub that not only draws in graduates but inspires them to build their futures here.

About



Dr. Jaclyn Doherty is a senior leader in higher education and the founder of Dodo Studios, a strategic design consulting firm. With a doctoral degree in Educational Leadership from Western University, her work centers on helping organizations navigate change, fostering creativity, promoting collaboration within teams, and engaging communities for meaningful impact.

Jaclyn works with diverse organizations, from small businesses to educational institutions, offering practical and actionable solutions. Her interdisciplinary, collaborative approach and experience make her a reliable consultant in strategic development and community engagement.



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