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Identifying and Responding to the Challenges Of Sustaining a Tuition Support Program In a Rural Setting

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Abstract

Rural Canadian towns with resource-dependent economies face several challenges that adversely affect economic stability (e.g., boom and bust cycles, low educational attainment rates). Responding to these challenges, the Town of Drayton Valley (DV) introduced a tuition assistance program, Zero Fee Tuition (ZFT), which provides up to \$5,000 in grants to residents enrolled in select post-secondary education and training programs. In this community-based participatory research study, we conducted 11 interviews with stakeholders including Town of Drayton Valley staff, elected officials, and other people involved in planning and administering ZFT. We also observed five group stakeholder consultations and reviewed relevant Town documents. Qualitative data were used to identify challenges facing Drayton Valley and responses the Town took to sustain ZFT. Challenges threatening the sustainability of ZFT include the (a) lack of a culture of education, (b) need to demonstrate outcomes, (c) difficulty of attracting post-secondary institutions, and (d) lack of resources. Mitigating these challenges, the Town has (a) established an Education Committee, (b) developed partnerships with our research team and other post-secondary institutions, and (c) supported residents who champion ZFT. This study contributes to a limited body of research on tuition assistance programs in Canada. Findings may have implications for other rural communities interested in using tuition assistance programs as a tool for promoting economic diversification and rural development.

Keywords: tuition assistance, rural development, Canada, community-based participatory research, post-secondary education

Identifier et répondre aux défis du maintien d'un programme de soutien aux frais de scolarité en milieu rural

Résumé

Les villes rurales canadiennes dont l'économie dépend des ressources sont confrontées à plusieurs défis qui nuisent à la stabilité économique (p. ex. cycles d'expansion et de récession, faibles taux de scolarité). En réponse à ces défis, la ville de Drayton Valley (DV) a lancé un programme d'aide aux frais de scolarité, Zero Fee Tuition (ZFT), qui offre jusqu'à 5 000 \$ en subventions aux résidents inscrits dans certains programmes d'éducation et de formation postsecondaires. Dans cette étude de recherche participative communautaire, nous avons mené 11 entretiens avec des parties prenantes, notamment le personnel de la ville de Drayton Valley, des élus et d'autres personnes impliquées dans la planification et l'administration du ZFT. Nous avons également observé cinq consultations de groupe avec des parties prenantes et examiné les documents pertinents de la ville. Des données qualitatives ont été utilisées pour identifier les défis auxquels Drayton Valley est confrontée et les réponses prises par la ville pour soutenir le ZFT. Les défis qui menacent la durabilité du ZFT comprennent (a) le manque de culture éducative, (b) la nécessité de démontrer les résultats, (c) la difficulté d'attirer les établissements postsecondaires et (d) le manque de ressources. Pour atténuer ces défis, la ville a (a) établi un comité d'éducation, (b) développé des partenariats avec notre équipe de recherche et d'autres établissements postsecondaires, et (c) soutenu les résidents qui défendent le ZFT. Cette étude contribue à un corpus limité de recherches sur les programmes d'aide aux frais de scolarité au Canada. Les résultats pourraient avoir des implications pour d'autres communautés rurales intéressées à utiliser les programmes d'aide aux frais de scolarité comme outil de promotion de la diversification économique et du développement rural.

Mots-clés : aide aux frais de scolarité, développement rural, Canada, recherche participative communautaire, éducation postsecondaire

1.0 Introduction

Rural, resource-dependent towns in Canada are vulnerable to boom-and-bust cycles that challenge their economic stability in various ways. Such challenges include population retention and young people migrating to urban centres, providing services for a large transitory workforce, the decline of major resource extraction industries, and barriers to providing high-quality post-secondary education (Foster & Main, 2018; Høltge et al., 2021; Twum-Antwi et al., 2020). Scholars exploring these challenges have called for all levels of government to prioritize economic diversification in resource-dependent communities to help stabilize their local economies and foster sustainability (Corbett & Forsey, 2017; Liu et al., 2020; Ryser et al., 2018). Prioritizing economic diversification can include investing in education and training to help residents find employment beyond single-resource industries (Hussey, 2023; Van Assche et al., 2016).

The Town of Drayton Valley, located in the western Canadian province of Alberta, has a population of approximately 7,000 (Statistics Canada, 2021). DV residents have relied on oil and gas extraction as the foundation of their economy for almost 70 years. Unfortunately, the oil and gas sector is volatile and has consistently led to waves of unemployment and economic hardship, resulting in extraordinary stress for DV residents. To help shock-proof the local economy from the boom-and-bust cycles of oil and gas, training and reskilling residents for the future of work is essential.

The most recent economic bust in DV began in 2014 and lasted several years. In response, elected officials and town administration identified post-secondary education as a key pillar for local economic development (Drayton Valley, 2018). They sought to diversify their local economy by boldly investing in education and training—specifically, by introducing a tuition assistance initiative called Zero-Fee Tuition (ZFT) in 2019. ZFT provides people living in DV up to \$5,000 towards tuition for select post-secondary education and training programs (Drayton Valley, 2022a). ZFT was introduced to reduce or remove financial barriers to post-secondary education and training for current residents and to attract and retain new residents, with the aim of diversifying the economy and bringing hope and prosperity to the region (Zero Fee Tuition, 2021). Initially, ZFT was intended to reskill and upskill oil and gas workers who were unemployed during an economic downturn. However, most students receiving ZFT funding to date have been women who have not worked in oil and gas and who have no previous post-secondary education experience.

ZFT seeks to directly address some of the challenges described above, including the outmigration of youth and the lack of post-secondary education in the community. ZFT was inspired by a successful tuition assistance initiative in Invercargill, New Zealand, which experienced similar economic challenges in the early 2000s. The Town of DV has partnered with five post-secondary institutions (PSIs) in the province to deliver a range of programs, such as business administration, health care aide, and various professional certifications (Drayton Valley, 2022a). Students enrolling in programs with partnering PSIs can apply for funding through ZFT. Eligible programs are determined by DV elected officials and Town administration. Often these decisions are made in the context of addressing local job skills gaps. For example, DV policymakers had identified health care aide certification as a valuable program, given the plethora of local job opportunities with few trained candidates to fill them. ZFT is primarily municipally funded, with additional funding support from community organizations and local industries. The Town of DV provided \$250,000 to kickstart ZFT in 2019 and has since contributed \$150,000 each year. The DV Rotary Club donated \$25,000 in 2021, and five local businesses have contributed sums ranging from \$1,000 up to \$50,000.

The purpose of this paper is to identify the challenges faced by the Town and responses the Town took to sustain its tuition assistance program as a mechanism for rural development. We acknowledge there are multiple ways of understanding rural development. Here we understand rural development as the place-based policies and practices communities enact to respond to the unique challenges they face. In the following section, we review the literature on the role of education in economic diversification and rural development and the potential of tuition assistance programs to bridge these gaps. Next, we summarize the methods used and present findings from our conversations with ZFT stakeholders. We conclude by discussing the implications of these findings for rural communities in other jurisdictions interested in promoting education as a means of rural development.

2.0 Background

2.1 The Need for Economic Diversification in Alberta

Many economists have long encouraged Alberta governments to reduce reliance on revenue from a single commodity (i.e., oil and gas) and called for longer-term planning to create more stable economies less susceptible to boom and bust cycles (Emery & Kneebone, 2013). Scholars and environmental activists have also called for federal and provincial government divestments from fossil fuels (Katz-Rosene, 2020). However, the province has thus far developed policies based on financial projections that rely on continuous economic growth from resource revenues, with adverse social implications when growth abruptly, albeit inevitably, halts (Ryan, 2013). The economic volatility that results, combined with growth-dependent policies rooted in the logics of free market economics and individualism, is considered unsustainable because of its tendency to generate vast income inequalities (Emery & Kneebone, 2013; Pilling, 2018). Rural communities in Alberta have been working to develop economic diversification strategies and other rural development solutions during bust periods largely without assistance from higher levels of government (Halseth et al., 2017).

2.2 Education: A Tool for Economic Diversification and Rural Development

Educational attainment is correlated with important community-level outcomes like population health and social and economic stability (Cohen & Syme, 2013). Long-term labour market outcomes (e.g., employment rates, wages) are better for Albertans with a post-secondary certificate, diploma, or degree (Government of Alberta, 2017). Education and training are key to both finding ‘good jobs’—that is, jobs that pay a living wage and provide benefits, paid medical leave, and paid vacation—and addressing mismatches between worker skills and available jobs in the region.

A lack of financial resources is a major obstacle facing both urban and rural residents looking to upgrade their skills (Finnie et al., 2015). Many additional factors can influence rural residents’ decisions in particular to pursue post-secondary education or training. These factors relate to accessibility (e.g., distance), personal values and beliefs (e.g., fear of the unfamiliar, desire to maintain a rural identity), familial influences (e.g., parental education), and socio-cultural norms (e.g., gender role expectations; Sano et al., 2020; Zarifa et al., 2019). When rural residents do pursue post-secondary opportunities, a common concern is that they will leave and not return, favouring the social and economic opportunities available in urban centres (Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016). There are six public universities in Alberta, but only one (Athabasca University, which provides online distance education) is not located in a city. The ZFT program aims to retain educated and skilled workers in DV by offering financial support to residents studying in their home community.

2.3 Tuition Assistance Programs

The ZFT program falls into a broader category of tuition assistance programs. Various terms have been used to describe post-secondary tuition assistance programs, such as grants, scholarships, free college, and promise programs. These diverse programs are intended to reduce or remove the financial barriers to accessing post-secondary education or training (Davidson et. al., 2020). Literature on tuition

assistance programs is dominated by American models (Custer & Akaeze, 2021; Gahagan et al., 2023; Perna & Leigh, 2018). One instance of Canadian research comes from Ford et al. (2019) who report that tuition assistance programs can increase post-secondary education enrollment and retention of historically underrepresented populations. In New Brunswick, the Future to Discover program, which provided students up to \$8,000 in tuition grants, resulted in higher enrollment and graduation rates for students with historically lower post-secondary education attainment (e.g., first-generation, low-income, and Francophone students; Ford et al., 2019). One concern with these programs, however, is that while tuition assistance programs provide financial support, they often lack the wraparound services and supports that improve student success (Billings et al., 2021).

In Canada, there are a few ongoing tuition assistance programs. For example, Saskatchewan has a tuition rebate program which provides up to \$20,000 in tuition rebates for residents who file a tax return in Saskatchewan after graduating with an undergraduate degree, certificate, or diploma (Government of Saskatchewan, n. d.). Another example includes the Post-Care Tuition Waiver Program, which waives tuition and mandatory fees for those who have lived in foster care. This program was piloted in 2020 at Mount Saint Vincent University in Nova Scotia and has been taken up by other colleges and universities in the province (Chisholm, 2022). Similarly, a few universities have implemented ‘promise programs’ that offer financial aid and wraparound supports to Black and Indigenous students, or to first generation students (Queens University, n. d.). Other programs do not provide direct funding for post-secondary education but instead promise graduates will get a meaningful job. For example, King’s University College in London, Ontario offers graduates “one addition[al] year of courses and campus-based support, tuition free” if they do not gain a meaningful job within six months (King’s University College, n.d., para. 1). While there are diverse program designs across institutions in Canada, Gahagan et al. (2023) highlight the general “absence of peer-reviewed literature on Canadian tuition waiver programs” (p. 5).

2.4 Linking Tuition Assistance Programs and Rural Development in Canada

The lack of literature is particularly stark in terms of how tuition assistance programs may function as a rural development strategy in Canada. Practical knowledge about how these programs can be introduced and taken up will be valuable for other rural communities who may be similarly interested in creative approaches to rural development. Therefore, the overarching purpose of this research was to examine the challenges of implementing and sustaining a tuition assistance program (ZFT) in the Town of DV.

3.0 Methods

This study used a community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach. All phases of this research were guided by central tenets of CBPR, including valuing multiple kinds of knowledges, building local research capacity, establishing a sense of mutual reciprocity and trust between researchers and participants, and inviting community stakeholders to participate in all aspects of the research process (Cargo & Mercer, 2008; Israel et al., 1998; Minkler, 2004; Wallerstein & Duran, 2006). We strove to incorporate our community partners’ (Town of DV staff and elected

officials) understanding of how ZFT works and their experiential knowledge of DV’s social and cultural context.

3.1 Data Collection

Our primary data collection method was individual semi-structured interviews with 11 ZFT stakeholders. Recruitment began after we received institutional ethics approval and was facilitated through our partnership with the Town. Individuals involved in or knowledgeable about ZFT were identified by Town partners, and a research assistant sent email invitations. See Table 1 for a list of participants’ pseudonyms and roles within the community. To protect their anonymity, demographic details are not included.

Table 1. *Participant Pseudonyms and Roles*

Pseudonym	ZFT Role
Orson	Elected Official
Kathryn	Elected Official
Sarah	Municipal Employee
Sierra	Municipal Employee
James	Elected Official
Patricia	Elected Official
Kendal	Elected Official
Larry	Municipal Employee
Casey	Invercargill Representative
Robert	PSI Employee
Rory	Community Member

Interview questions were guided by the Town’s desire to create a sustainable ZFT model in DV and to improve the implementation process and program outcomes. Questions were tailored to participants’ roles and involvement in ZFT. Example questions included the following: ‘starting from the beginning of your involvement with ZFT, can you walk me through the evolution of this work?’; ‘what are some of the greatest challenges the program has faced or that you anticipate facing?’; and ‘what challenges have you encountered in building partnerships with different stakeholders?’

In addition, we held five consultation meetings with stakeholders between February 2021 and January 2022 on topics such as how ZFT fit into municipal strategic education planning (see Table 2). We recorded field notes at these meetings. We also identified relevant Town documents, such as Town Council meeting minutes and Town strategic education and economic development plans. All data analyzed in this study were collected between February 2021 and October 2022.

Table 2. *Group Consultation Meetings*

Group consultation (GC) dates (n=4)	Attendees	Purpose
GC 1: February 2021	DV–4 Research team–3	Establish initial partnership and identify preliminary logistical steps in formalizing the research partnership.
GC 2: July 2021	DV–4 Research Team–5	Understand the development of the ZFT program and the state of the program. Identify stakeholders, partnerships, potential relationships. Plan data collection.
GC 3: September 2021	DV–14 Research Team–5	Build and foster partnerships for ZFT program. Plan next steps.
GC 4: January 2022	DV–4 Research team–6	Review roles, responsibilities, and ways of working together.

3.2 Data Analysis

We inductively coded interview transcripts, field notes, and documents using qualitative content analysis (Mayan, 2023). Two research team members coded all interview data, and one team member coded field notes and documents. Codes were synthesized to generate preliminary categories (Mayan, 2023). Multiple team members wrote and rewrote our preliminary analyses, iteratively engaging with raw data, existing codes, and previous iterations of this paper (Mitchell & Clark, 2021). All authors met to discuss preliminary categories before refining the final categories, and two community partners reviewed manuscript drafts. Weekly team meetings and in-person and virtual analysis meetings further served to generate rich findings verifiable within the data.

3.3 Rigour

Researchers achieved rigour by using multiple verification strategies (Morse et al., 2002). We regularly consulted with community partners through formal and informal communications (e.g., emails, texts, telephone check-ins, in-person conversations). Purposive sampling helped to secure an adequate sample. We learned from participants with in-depth knowledge of the topic. Methodological triangulation was ensured by using semi-structured interviews alongside document review and participant observation. Concurrent data collection and analysis, shaped by frequent consultation with community partners and regular team meetings, helped us align our research with community partners’ interests and needs. Our

analysis benefitted from our team members' diverse backgrounds, who have professional experience in community economic development, business development, public health, poverty elimination, and public policy.

4.0 Findings

Our findings are presented in two main sections. First, we discuss challenges to implementing and sustaining ZFT. We developed four categories outlining these challenges: (a) lack of a culture of education, (b) the need to demonstrate outcomes, (c) the difficulty of attracting PSIs, and (d) lack of resources. We then outline three responses the town has implemented to mitigate these challenges and support program sustainability: (a) established an Education Committee, (b) developed partnerships with the research team and other PSIs, and (c) supported residents who champion ZFT. Results are integrated with a discussion of relevant literature.

4.1 Challenges

Lack of a Culture of education. Participants identified the lack of an education culture in DV. This, stakeholders suggested, was partially due to the community being built upon the cyclic prosperity of the oil and gas industry. As a result, DV is “not known at all as an education town,” said Larry, one municipal employee. The local cultures of education and employment were shaped by the abundance of high-paying jobs in the oil and gas industry that did not require post-secondary education or training. As Larry explained, “in the good days, everybody could leave grade 12 and go earn \$100,000, and own a truck tomorrow and purchase all the toys...so the mentality of DV...was one of, you don't need education.” Participants believed DV residents historically had not prioritized pursuing an education. For ZFT to be sustainable, many interviewees felt this would have to change.

Participants hoped they could cultivate an education culture in DV to respond to the increasing need for credentials to secure employment and create opportunities in diverse industries beyond oil and gas (Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016). Sarah, another municipal employee, explained a vision for ZFT that frames post-secondary education as a possibility for anyone:

There [are] different programs for everyone...we need to change the mentality of what we mean by education and post-secondary education. It doesn't mean you have to get a four-year degree or a six-year degree and go sit in an office.... [We need to] just change the culture of what post-secondary education can do for individuals and create opportunities for them and their families, whatever age they are. You're never too young to learn and have that benefit for yourself and your community.

Stakeholders acknowledged that the lack of an education culture presented challenges to generating ZFT program support. Larry explained:

Those that made the money in the oil boom time, for them it's that I worked with my hands and I made money. So they still have a very standoffish

approach when it comes to, why should the Town Council be even spending money on this?

Stakeholders understood that a shift in the culture of education and greater educational attainment in the community was one way to create economic stability. Sarah explained, “we’ve been through the booms and busts and they are not stopping...if you can get the Town to change their mentality, that educating our young, or anyone really...it’s only going to benefit the town.”

Stakeholders identified this cultural shift would not take place overnight, however. “Creating a culture of education” (p. 5) is one of the long-term goals set by DV’s Education Committee in its strategic planning (Drayton Valley, 2022b). Additionally, in group consultations, stakeholders recognized that creating this culture, as well as other goals such as economic diversification, would have to be long-term aims despite the desire for those changes to come about quickly. Many of these goals went beyond direct connections to post-secondary education in the community, and had overlaps with economic development, recreation, and quality-of-life initiatives also undertaken by the Town.

The need to demonstrate outcomes. Stakeholders invested in ZFT felt a sense of urgency to demonstrate the program’s benefits to the community in order to remain accountable to taxpaying residents and in hopes of supporting its sustainability. Larry explained, “there’s the risk of patience running out. More money or public dollars being thrown at it will be a public concern.” The fragility of ZFT was on many participants’ minds. This urgency was often tied to the short-term nature of four-year municipal election cycles and the possible loss of education champions. Larry said his “biggest concern [was] if the council changes and the relationship with the county doesn’t improve, and the residents don’t feel this is the best place for our money because we haven’t seen anything.” He suggested the program “could fall on its face.” The council elected in autumn 2021 continued to support ZFT, but sustainability concerns continue. From the perspective of James, an elected official:

The municipality can continue to put funding into [ZFT]...and every four years, it’ll come up to an election, and if people are supportive of what you’re doing, they’ll re-elect you. And if not, then they won’t. Or you look for outside institutions that want to partner and see the vision of it. And so, one of the biggest challenges is making sure that everyone says, it’s a good idea when [students] don’t have to pay for something. But as soon as they [partners and taxpayers] have to pay for it, they still think it’s a good idea, but it just comes with more controversy related to it.

James described the need for “getting everyone to...see the vision. And it just has to start small, unfortunately. So if you can show those small successes, then it’ll be a little bit easier to get everyone on board”.

The challenges of proving the value of ZFT were further described by Orson, another elected official: “education doesn’t give dividends right away. It takes time. Not only economically, but socially as well.” Orson’s comments echo one of the key tensions that can hamper economic diversification and community development

projects in rural communities that deal with boom-and-bust cycles, namely the challenge of implementing and sustaining economic diversification initiatives in boom times (Sullivan et al., 2014). Since the beginning of 2022, another oil boom has begun. As a result, there is an increase in available jobs in DV, and there may be less of a perceived need for initiatives like ZFT. This latest boom may challenge the sustainability of ZFT in the long term.

Difficulty attracting post-secondary institutions. In detailing the history of ZFT, Larry described how he first learned about Invercargill’s zero-fee program from a family member in Invercargill who had received funding from the program. Larry was struck by the potential of zero-fee as an economic development initiative and sought to implement a similar program in DV. Casey, a key figure in implementing Invercargill’s zero-fee program, pointed out that their city’s goal was to revitalize the established local polytechnic. The spillover effects, including a growing population, increased employment opportunities, and construction of new housing, were intended to bring economic prosperity to the city of Invercargill. Invercargill’s zero-fee program was estimated to have resulted in \$28.8 million (NZD; \$23.4 million CAD) increased economic activity in the city in the program’s first year (Infometrics Consulting, 2002). In 2001, Invercargill’s population was approximately 50,000 (Statistics New Zealand, 2006), more than seven times the size of DV. A similar sized return on investment would not be expected from DV’s ZFT program, but the economic successes of Invercargill’s initiative was one of the key measures that made it attractive to stakeholders in DV.

However, DV has never had a permanent local PSI. An established partnership with a PSI’s satellite campus fell apart shortly after ZFT was implemented. Sierra, a municipal employee, explained that this was not necessarily a bad development because “it didn’t seem like [PSIs] were listening to what actually was needed here.” As a result of the broken-down partnership, the progress of ZFT temporarily stalled. James explained that it “slowed down the process...had [PSI] stayed here, I think we would be a lot further along than we are now...but we’ve had to take a bit of a step back and build from the ground up again.”

PSIs, municipalities, and prospective students all suffer the consequences of the challenges to bringing post-secondary education to rural communities (Zarifa et al., 2019). Patricia, an elected official, identified how this issue financially burdens students and their families and limits opportunities to complete post-secondary education in their home community:

There are lots of families who might not be able to afford taking a program in the city versus here. Even if they had to pay something here, they still would end up saving money because they could stay at home.

Stakeholders spoke about the challenge of reaching minimum enrollment numbers for education and training programs due to the lack of what James called a “critical mass [of students].” Low enrollment numbers have been an ongoing obstacle for ZFT.

Indeed, when the original PSI partner pulled out of DV, they cited low enrollment numbers as a key reason for this decision. Describing their PSI’s presence in rural communities, Robert, a PSI employee, explained:

The costs to deliver [post-secondary programming] where we were invested in infrastructure, over time, they just got too heavy to burden...when you looked at the cost versus enrollment, and the [return on investment], it became greater and greater....The lease costs were increasing, and just everything seemed to be increasing...so it made it less and less viable, combined with the fact that the demand wasn't there....No matter what we did as an institute and who we partnered with, the demand wasn't there.

Robert's explanation illustrates the challenges in filling class sizes in rural communities, especially as public PSIs are increasingly working with reduced government funding and experiencing greater pressure to produce returns on their investment in communities (Lawrence & Rezai-Rashti, 2022).

Despite the challenges that followed the loss of one PSI partner, the Town of DV remains committed to ZFT, which is evidenced by the subsequent partnerships they developed and the continued enrolment of DV students in post-secondary education programming. We discuss these partnerships later.

Lack of resources. In rural communities, limited resources can be a barrier to sustaining innovative development initiatives (Halseth et al., 2017). Rural development literature has documented how rural development initiatives may fail as a result of these resource limitations (Gibson & Dale, 2023; Ryser et al., 2018). Small municipalities are further constrained by the 'downloading' of responsibilities by higher levels of government (Gibson & Dale, 2023). The period between DV Town Council's conceptualization and adoption of ZFT was relatively brief. The initiative was first discussed at an economic development committee meeting in October 2018, and the following month the idea was brought to council and adopted (Drayton Valley, 2018; Drayton Valley, 2019). Town Council committed initial funding of \$250,000. By January 2019, three months after the first formal discussion, the Town hosted an open house to promote ZFT and gauge interest among prospective students. ZFT had a swift adoption period, though there were implementation challenges that required more deliberation. For instance, stakeholders attended multiple meetings with the province's Ministry of Advanced Education to ensure ZFT's implementation was in line with numerous provincial policies.

Many stakeholders expressed a view that implementation might have been smoother with more preliminary planning. Ideas put forth by stakeholders to improve implementation included developing more streamlined student recruitment and clearer identification of post-secondary programs that would attract a large student base. Municipal employee Sarah noted a lack of resources may be a reason these steps were not taken:

I think we don't always have the resources in smaller communities. And we have to rely on bigger communities and bigger institutions who have the resources to assist with some of the things that we're trying to do because we just don't have all the resources that we need.

The provincial government funds public PSIs but provides very little support to DV and other municipalities to support post-secondary education at a local level. Higher levels of government, therefore, were not key supporters of ZFT. As municipal elected official James explained, DV hoped to get “the province on board, [but that] has been a challenge for the most part.” DV required other partnerships. For example, stakeholders spoke about the role a community organization may play in administering ZFT. Sarah explained that ZFT:

Should [have] a partnership with [a community foundation]. Administratively speaking, I feel like because they already have that foundation in place, [ZFT] would be a good fit for them to administer at some point....They already have a board of volunteers...they already know what other funds are out there. I think that would really help with just streamlining it better.

Scholars have proposed that philanthropic organizations, like the community foundation DV hopes to partner with, could offer alternative revenue streams to “take on service provision responsibilities in their communities to ensure access to programs and sustain a high quality of life, often after governments have discontinued their support” (Gibson & Barrett, 2018, p. 109). Such organizations may be able to provide administrative and financial support to help resource-strapped municipalities implement programs like ZFT. Multiple stakeholders felt establishing a partnership with such an organization would be a key to the long-term sustainability of ZFT.

4.2 Responses

To mitigate the four challenges detailed in the previous section, the Town of DV has responded in a few key ways. The Town has (a) established an education committee, (b) developed partnerships with the research team and other PSIs, and (c) supported residents who champion ZFT.

Established an education committee. A single program like ZFT cannot solve all the Town’s social and economic issues, and that was never its intent. The Town framed ZFT as one policy within their broader rural development goals. Situating ZFT was difficult, however, when the Town’s vision for the program was not yet defined.

Town Council recognized that infrastructure was required for designing and administering ZFT. They created an education committee for this purpose. While this committee began as just two Town Councillors and an education coordinator, it has since expanded to 17 members including elected officials, local high school principals, municipal and provincial government employees, community organization representatives, and members of our research team. The stated objectives of this committee are “to advise Council on post-secondary programming and service needs, as well as assist in the development of Council’s vision and strategic plan for advanced education” (Drayton Valley, 2022b, p. 2). Its vision is “to establish DV as the advanced education and training hub of choice for the west-central Alberta region through the development of a consortium model that creates opportunities for and encourages attraction and retention of local citizens and

industry” (Drayton Valley, 2022b, p. 2). Creating an education and training hub, committee members hoped, would result in filling classrooms with students.

This committee helps to contextualize ZFT within broader Town strategies. While ZFT is not this committee’s entire portfolio, it is a large part of it. The Education Coordinator chairs this committee in addition to their other roles administering the ZFT program, supporting students in applying for scholarships and other funding, and working to establish partnerships between the Town and PSIs. In June 2022, a community economic development consultant from our research team was requested by the Town to facilitate strategic education planning. At this strategic planning session, diverse and at-times conflicting visions for ZFT were apparent.

Some Education Committee members saw ZFT as potentially promoting the establishment of a college town. Others saw it as a hub for training students in various trades. Some members of the committee emphasized the potential for ZFT to catalyze a shift in DV’s education culture, resulting in more demand and opportunities for post-secondary education and training. The Education Committee determined that, with time, ZFT can eventually advance all these goals, but creating short-, medium-, and long-term goals is helpful for teasing apart what is feasible. Short-term goals included aligning training needs in DV with students’ interests and program offerings. Medium- and long-term goals focussed on program sustainability and developing a culture of education in the Town. Such recommendations were incorporated into a report for Council.

Research team members attend all Education Committee meetings and have done so since September 2021. Through these meetings, we have observed the Town forging new connections with the aim of sustaining ZFT. Partnerships will be vital to the longevity of ZFT, as they are with other rural development initiatives (Lee et al., 2015).

Developed partnerships with the research team and other post-secondary institutions. Forging strong relationships with PSIs was crucial for ZFT, given that no PSI exists in DV. Municipal employee Larry emphasized that, in the long term:

You can't have the Town drive it [ZFT] because we don't have the dollars to do that....We have to leave it to those that do it best, like the educational institutions. They know their work. They know their craft. Whereas we are just facilitators and enablers as municipalities.

Building trusting and committed connections with PSI partners was important to stakeholders. Kathryn, an elected official, described her experiences of an effective partner as “somebody that saw our vision and believed in us and supported us and said, no matter what obstacles, we’re going to get through them. If we don’t have an answer, we’re going to figure it out.”

Since 2020, DV has established partnerships with five different PSIs. These include the two largest universities in the province (University of Alberta and University of Calgary), a smaller public institution providing primarily online education (Northern Lakes College), and two niche private institutions (Delmar College and Health Care Aide Academy). This gives DV residents access to a wide range of credentials in diverse fields. To date, students have enrolled in 10 different programs. Not only does having strong relationships with multiple PSIs provide prospects for economic diversification, partnering with five PSIs also supports the sustainability of ZFT.

Should one institution pull out, as happened in 2020, there is less of a threat to the existence of post-secondary education in the town. Further, ZFT's range of partnerships allows residents of DV and the surrounding area to have access to programs they are interested in without having to relocate to a city. For example, Northern Lakes College's University Studies program, delivered remotely, provides DV residents with the opportunity to work towards a degree while remaining in their community.

Creating a partnership with the University of Alberta led to a connection with our research team. Kathryn explained:

One of the most amazing partnerships we have is the University of Alberta because right from the beginning, you guys were so inspired, and you just got it.... That first day when you guys came down, and you just couldn't believe what we were doing. You just seemed to see our vision and be as excited as we were.

Additionally, the partnership with the research team has helped DV tackle some of their challenges associated with a lack of resources. Evaluating ZFT with empirical evidence was beyond the Town's ability and helped demonstrate the effectiveness of the program and inform decision making. The research team also mobilized resources to support the marketing of ZFT to increase awareness of the program within the town.

DV's partnerships with PSIs and researchers rippled outward. Following a suggestion from the research team and a commitment of membership funds for three years, the Town joined the Alberta Living Wage Network, a network of "community organizations and municipalities with the goal of advancing a coordinated living wage movement in Alberta" (Alberta Living Wage Network, n. d.). DV's living wage (the hourly wage required to cover living expenses while living in DV) is calculated through this network, and the Town encourages and supports local employers to pay all employees a living wage. Our CBPR partnership has supported the normalization of businesses paying a living wage in DV. It is hoped that this goal may be achieved, in part, as more DV residents receive education and training through ZFT.

Supported residents who champion ZFT. Champions of ZFT have jumpstarted and sustained the program since its inception in 2019. ZFT was first championed by one staff member and later by two elected officials. However, interview participants insisted that projects like ZFT cannot be sustained by the enthusiasm of single individuals. Rather, when discussing the program's sustainability, participants highlighted the importance of engaging a broad range of community members and organizations to champion ZFT. The Town sought local and regional champions not just of education but also of business, community development, and social innovation to make connections to these varied sectors. In a small rural community, it has been important for there to be multiple staff members and officials who champion education in case they leave their positions or change roles as a result of elections.

Kathryn explained the need to develop relationships with local industries and organizations. "We needed to create a sustainability model," she said. "So that [meant] going out to the industries and organizations saying, how can you be a partner in this? How can you support this?" Sarah echoed the importance of having strong partners who could champion ZFT:

Someone who can advocate to the rest of the community, [get] involved in fundraising or just stakeholder engagement in general, and just being a champion in the community. I think that that's what a partner is. Someone who has a shared vision and tries to move those initiatives forward for you in the community.

Currently, the Town has established partnerships with two local trades-focused businesses which have provided financial support to ZFT, in addition to \$25,000 in ZFT funding from a local voluntary organization.

In June 2023, elected officials, Town staff, and local businesses also collaborated to hold a gala, which raised \$52,000 for ZFT—enough to fund ten students to enroll in post-secondary education programming through ZFT. This event provided funds and increased awareness, which stakeholders hoped would increase the long-term sustainability of ZFT.

5.0 Concluding Thoughts

This CBPR study showed how a rural community in Canada negotiated early challenges in developing, implementing, and sustaining a tuition assistance program. Grounded in the practice-based knowledge of key stakeholders in DV, our findings emphasize the need for a long-term vision in implementing ZFT. Such a vision is necessary to accurately gauge the program's potential as a tool for economic diversification and rural development.

These results build on a limited body of research on tuition assistance programs in Canada (Gahagan et al., 2023). Findings are specific to the context of DV and the ZFT program. However, other rural communities may draw lessons from the challenges described above and the responses taken by DV to ensure the sustainability of ZFT. Findings from this study complement existing research in rural communities, which has demonstrated the challenges of sustaining innovative development projects over a long period of time (Halseth, 2017; Peters et al., 2018; Ryser, 2018).

This research also augments literature exploring the varied approaches to tuition assistance programs (Custer & Akaeze, 2021; Perna & Leigh, 2018). Different jurisdictions (e.g., provincial governments, state governments, school districts) have tried different tuition assistance models. Many programs run by state governments in the United States require recipients of tuition assistance to remain and work in a state for a given number of years. Other programs operated by school districts allocate funding based on how many years an individual was a student within the district (Miller-Adams, 2015). Such programs often partner with one or more community colleges. Similarly, community colleges often employ different models than large research universities. Some programs at community colleges focus on workforce development and only provide tuition assistance for specific programs (Davidson et al., 2010). ZFT is somewhat distinct in that it is primarily municipally driven, although it does share several characteristics with tuition assistance programs used elsewhere. These similarities include the option to enroll at different institutions with a wide range of programming, and a place-based component that requires funding recipients to live in DV during their education.

More research is needed to document the impacts of ZFT. For example, having buy-in from key community partners like high school staff—who serve on the Education Committee—increases the likelihood that the word will be spread about the ZFT program amongst students and parents. Future research may explore questions such as, what are the long-term employment and mobility outcomes for ZFT program participants? And, do these differ for young versus mature learners? Can ZFT augment the culture of education in DV as hoped by stakeholders in this study? If deemed successful, the ZFT program model in DV may function as a proof of concept. Findings from ZFT may be useful to other communities looking to implement tuition assistance programs of their own.

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