



April 2024

# Co-creating Best Practices

## Implementing WIL Programs Across Canada

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



Labour Education  
Applied Research North



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RURAL COMMUNITIES

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# INTRODUCTION

## Problem Statement

Over the past few years, the level of interest in work-integrated learning (WIL) from post-secondary institutions (PSIs) and businesses across the globe has been increasing. However, there seems to be a lack of consensus on the varieties and descriptions of WIL. This divergence of opinions creates resources that are flooded with definitions, causing confusion and overwhelming businesses, organizations, and PSIs. Different classifications of WIL contribute to a lack of understanding between educators, students, and community partners (employers). For the purposes of this white paper, WIL is defined as a combination of course theory and classroom learning with practical experience (Rural Development Network [RDN], n.d.). Due to a lack of time and/or complicated resources, employers and educational institutions struggle to create internship roles or organize projects and thus are often disinclined to adopt, construct, and implement WIL programs.

Defining quality WIL, identifying methods for presenting impactful recruitment, and mapping appropriate implementation strategies have been difficult. Although no strict guidelines can define quality WIL, the deliverables/outcomes of the projects or placements can demonstrate how well it is structured. Thus, without a clear definition of quality, this research sets out to present a list of recommendations that can lead to quality WIL.

As gathered from previous research and Rural Roots' own experience, employers often struggle to find and hire qualified people.

If employees are found, employers may struggle to retain them, often seeing a constant turnover. This is especially present in small or rural communities. WIL can be an opportunity for students to expand and practice their skills, gain long-term employment and better integrate into the region, thus acting as an incentive to stay in these communities long-term. Further, the community can compete in the job market, attract quality employees, and grow its population and economy. WIL gives small businesses the potential to thrive as it offers them a needed temporary expert in the field (e.g., branding, advertising, communications, etc.). Although an abundance of resources and information about WIL exists, there is a lack of emphasis placed on the rural perspective and the implementation in these communities. Standard approaches are imperative to ensure quality WIL and assure transferability to rural communities. Consistent WIL guidelines can be tailored to rural and remote areas, promoting quality WIL Alberta-wide.

## **Objectives and Significance of This Study**

The Rural Development Network (RDN) has collaborated with Dr. Clark Banack from the University of Alberta - Alberta Centre for Sustainable Rural Communities and Labour Education Applied Research North (LEARN) to uncover optimal methods for implementing WIL programs at PSIs. Focus will be placed on PSIs that serve smaller urban centres and rural and remote communities, particularly those that identify a lack of resources to implement meaningful and successful WIL. The aim is to understand trends, barriers, gaps, and opportunities. The findings will be combined into a document of standard approaches to aid PSIs and organizations that either do not have WIL programs or are looking to enhance their existing programs. The overarching goal is to reduce the disparity between rural and urban communities by increasing access to relevant WIL opportunities and strengthening collaborative partnerships between PSIs, students, and rural and remote employers.

Canada has a highly educated workforce, but enhanced talent pipelines are needed to bolster workforce development and attract talent to areas outside of the country's major urban centres for successful economic recovery. Employers, government, and PSIs agree that WIL is a way to teach students practical skills and increase their employment readiness. As evidenced in the *Alberta Jobs 2030 Strategy*, there is an increased focus on creating pathways for work-integrated learning, creating employment ready graduates, supporting employees with (re)skilling, and strengthening relationships between employers and PSIs.

In creating this resource, we hope to raise awareness of the opportunities and benefits of WIL, simplify the process for WIL programs, and increase the number of placements available in the long term. We aim to define and create quality, with an emphasis on standard approaches that all communities can follow.

## **About the Rural Development Network**

Rural Development Network (RDN) is a non-profit organization dedicated to supporting rural communities in Canada and helping them thrive. Founded in 2009, the RDN began as a partnership between Alberta's publicly funded post-secondary institutions.

As RDN continued to evolve and grow, it maintained close ties to post-secondary networks and rural communities to help address complex social and economic challenges and build local capacity. The organization collaborates to identify and bring focus to rural issues, build local capacity, and find innovative, rural-based solutions to unique issues. RDN's work encompasses creating tools, resources, and training opportunities for capacity building, providing capacity and expertise to implement projects, facilitating access to capital and project funding, and engaging in advocacy work to amplify the rural voice.

## About the Rural Roots Program

RDN, with funding from the Business + Higher Education Roundtable, developed and managed the Rural Roots Initiative from September 2021 to August 2023, which connected rural-based employers with undergraduate student talent through WIL experiences. Through these placements, students gained valuable experience and employers built capacity to complete projects and/or implement innovative solutions. As more workplaces explore hybrid or remote models, there is a unique opportunity to build relationships between students, rural businesses, and PSIs.

Rural Roots created opportunities for students and job seekers to gain relevant experience, learn more about the rural context, and better understand or identify the benefits of working, living, and contributing to rural community development.

The project focused on the benefits of working and living in rural communities. The core purpose of the Rural Roots initiative was to strengthen the relationship between PSIs, students, and rural employers for a resilient workforce and economy through structured projects and WIL placements. Rural Roots built capacity in rural and remote communities and created supportive, system-level strategies to produce employment-ready graduates. RDN acted as a community catalyst creating a bridge between employers, students, and PSIs to stimulate workforce development, economic growth, and investment in rural and remote communities. Together, partners created opportunities for students to access placements and strengthen their future career goals, support strategic knowledge exchange (student to local business) and create meaningful, long-term relationships.

For more information about RDN's work, including Rural Roots, please visit: <https://www.ruraldevelopment.ca/initiatives/work-integrated-learning>.



## About the Alberta Centre for Sustainable Rural Communities

The Alberta Centre for Sustainable Rural Communities (ACSRC), located at the Augustana Campus of the University of Alberta in Camrose, has, since its founding in 2009, assisted rural communities in meeting diverse challenges across many areas of public policy through fostering constructive dialogue, promoting interdisciplinary and collaborative research, and developing partnerships. The Centre's mission is to link the research, outreach and educational capacity of the University of Alberta with students, researchers, rural communities, rural community organizations and policy makers at the provincial, national, and international level. The overall goal is to support the improved sustainability of rural communities and populations.

Recently, the ACSRC has been engaged in rural-focused projects related to sustainable economic development opportunities, community mental health, the delivery of social services, enhancing inclusivity, advancing the transition to renewable energy, aiding municipal collaboration, and better understanding rural public opinion and rural-based populism. To read more, visit: [uab.ca/acsrc](http://uab.ca/acsrc).

## About the Labour Education Applied Research North Consortium

Labour Education Applied Research North (LEARN) is a consortium of four northern Alberta PSIs. Established in 1995, the group is currently comprised of representatives from Keyano College, Northern Lakes College, Northwestern Polytechnic, and Portage College. Since its inception, LEARN has funded 128 Northern-Alberta-specific research reports focusing on community and post-secondary-related topics such as skill shortages, information technology, student recruitment and innovation.

All reports are available on the LEARN homepage and each partner institution's website: <https://www.portagecollege.ca/About/Partners-and-Collaborators/LEARN>.

# REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Employers want work-ready graduates, but education alone may not always equip students with sufficient skill or expertise (Wyonch, 2020; Maertz et al., 2014). As an additional and beneficial component of education, WIL can be effective and valuable at providing the hands-on, work-related experience students often lack. As stated before, the inconsistent resources that institutions and employers turn to generate confusion, making WIL less attractive to its potential users. A literature review was undertaken on said resources to highlight the types of WIL and explore the benefits and costs for each stakeholder group.

## Types of WIL

As stated previously, WIL is variously defined, and the many definitions and classifications have brought about a sense of frustration. For the purpose of the Rural Roots project, WIL is defined as a combination of course theory and classroom learning with practical experience (Rural Development Network, n.d.). Featured below is a list of the most popular types of WIL inspired by the “What is Work-Integrated Learning?” document (see: Rural Development Network. (n.d.). Rural Roots Resources: Getting Started with Work-Integrated Learning). A more detailed list can be found on the Business + Higher Education Roundtable (BHER) (Business + Higher Education Roundtable [BHER], n.d.) or Co-operative Education and Work-Integrated Learning (CEWIL) Canada websites (Co-operative Education and Work-Integrated Learning [CEWIL], 2021).

# Common Types of WIL

- **Applied research projects:** workplace-based research project.
- **Apprenticeships:** paid work experience to learn a specific skill, a mix of classroom and on the job training.
- **Co-operatives:** alternating study and paid work terms.
- **Entrepreneurship:** opportunity for a student to be supported while starting their own business.
- **Field placement:** short-term experience in a student's field of study.
- **Internships:** longer term opportunity during or following course completion.
- **Professional practicum/clinical placements:** supporting an existing workload under the supervision of a licensed or registered professional.
- **Community service learning:** meaningful community service integrated into classroom instruction. Short-term and voluntary but evaluated by a professor.
- **Work experience:** flexible, allowing meaningful and self-directed learning. Typically embedded within pre-existing course work.

# Emerging types of WIL

- **Micro-placements:** individual or group, short term (days), seasonal to support surges.
- **Online projects/placements:** remote placements.
- **Incubators/start-ups:** supervised development or support existing start-up.
- **Shared apprenticeship:** apprentices rotated between employers
- **Consulting:** offer consulting services to businesses (groups or individually).
- **Performances:** provide well-defined opportunities to students pursuing performance-based profession.
- **Field schools:** experiential learning related to their creative/artistic practice.
- **Interdisciplinary research-based internships:** interdisciplinary research under a lead investigator at PSI.
- **Hackathons, competitions, events:** short sessions to apply learning, problem solve, make connections, and learn more about industries.

## Benefits/Costs for Each Stakeholder

WIL impacts are unique to each stakeholder type. Benefits to students centre on personal and self-developmental growth whereas employer benefits are related more to the growth of the business/organization. For PSIs, the benefits of WIL relate more to funding, institutional recognition and appeal, and reputation.

During data collection, many discussions revealed that students, employers and professors are hesitant about the program for fear it is too complicated or not worth it. Therefore, below are potential benefits found based on previous research.

### ***Impact on Students***

Through WIL experiences, students can apply their skills in real-world situations and under differing circumstances (Wyonch, 2020; Blackwell et al., 2001). For example, working for a company on a project places more pressure on students, as deadlines are be less lenient, and expectations are be higher. This allows the students to practice their learning in a high-stakes environment. Students receive valuable feedback and are under the scrutiny of their employer and the public, allowing them to see what does or does not work in the real world.

Students are expected to play many different roles in the workspace, requiring them to take on different perspectives and adhere to a high level of professionalism. These different positions and duties/responsibilities have the potential to alleviate any doubts or concerns students may have about their chosen field (Helyer & Lee, 2014; Wyonch, 2020). Dabbling in various roles may confirm that a certain career path is the right fit, reveal a new passion, or inspire future course selections (Helyer & Lee, 2014; Wyonch, 2020).

Students build their résumé, adding the experience, knowledge, and skills they gain through WIL. In addition, with certain businesses students may gain a full-time position after graduation, as they have already passed the interview process, demonstrated their abilities, and formed relationships within the company and team (Helyer & Lee, 2014; Wyonch, 2020). Thus, WIL can be used as an extended interview process, allowing employers to offer full-time employment to the most successful candidates (Wyonch, 2020).

However, if students do not secure a full-time position with the company, they have still acquired or enhanced skills that they might not have developed had they solely stayed within an educational setting (Fleischmann, 2015; Blackwell et al., 2001). These students have an advantage over their fellow graduates, as academic knowledge is not always sufficient (Wyonch, 2020; Blackwell et al., 2001). Employers often want interactive and personal qualities, such as strong public speaking abilities and work ethic, that are not always taught or practiced in an educational setting (Harvey, 1999; Freudenberg, Brimble, & Cameron, 2011).

By engaging in a WIL experience, students develop/enhance their job-seeking skills, including writing effective applications and honing interview skills (Helyer & Lee, 2014). Recent graduates who partook in WIL are able to overcome bias for experiential characteristics and compete for wage gaps (Wyonch, 2020).

## ***Impact on Post-Secondary Institutions***

Through connecting employers and students, PSIs are keeping up to date with current industry practices (Blackwell et al., 2001; Maertz et al., 2014). Receiving feedback from both students and employers, they are able to understand gaps in knowledge, see what their current students and/or recent graduates may be missing, and consequently refine, improve and update their curricula.

WIL allows PSIs to connect with marginal employers, businesses, and industries they may have otherwise missed, often the smaller or rural enterprises (Helyer & Lee, 2014). PSIs can enhance their research and publication opportunities by pairing with businesses that are engaging in projects. Cooperating with these employers, PSIs have the potential to tie their institution name to something, boosting their reputation and credibility (McRae et al., 2018; Maertz et al., 2014). Through this, PSIs enhance their chances at getting funding to further develop projects or begin new ones (McRae et al., 2018; Maertz et al., 2014). For example, Maertz et al. (2014) note that institutions can offer academic credit in exchange for internships. There is little to no additional labour costs and instead PSIs continue collecting tuition as they would for any course, as faculty members can supervise WIL alongside their regular duties.

Graduate outcomes, for example high numbers and large employability rates, also play a major role in the credibility and reputation of an institution. Offering students work experience through WIL helps build their résumé and offers the learning experience they need for future employment, thus indirectly increasing their employability. When selecting an institution to enrol in, students likely target those with promising post-graduation employability rates (Harvey, 1999).

## ***Impact on Employers***

Employers want work-ready graduates, and by forming a relationship with PSIs they are able to ensure institutions stay up to date on current practices in the field. Involvement in WIL offers businesses and organizations the chance to see what their future employees learn throughout their post-secondary education (Blackwell et al., 2001). WIL employers are creating potential future employees; they can avoid recruitment and screening processes if they have already done so during a WIL project and have already established a good relationship with the student (Helyer & Lee, 2014; Maertz et al., 2014).

Employers are able to gain access to the interfaces and information libraries that their student placements have, giving them the chance to keep up to date on prior work and up and coming research. Offering WIL allows employers to form good relationships with PSIs, students, and the public. In the process, they enhance their chances at funding sources to foster future similar interactions (McRae et al., 2018).

By onboarding a WIL student, employers may lighten the workload of their current employees. Although there is a slight increased workload during initial onboarding and training, it is an investment that eventually pays off as students will be able to complete projects that employees were not able to get to – those put aside or on the backburner (BHER, n.d.; Maertz et al., 2014).



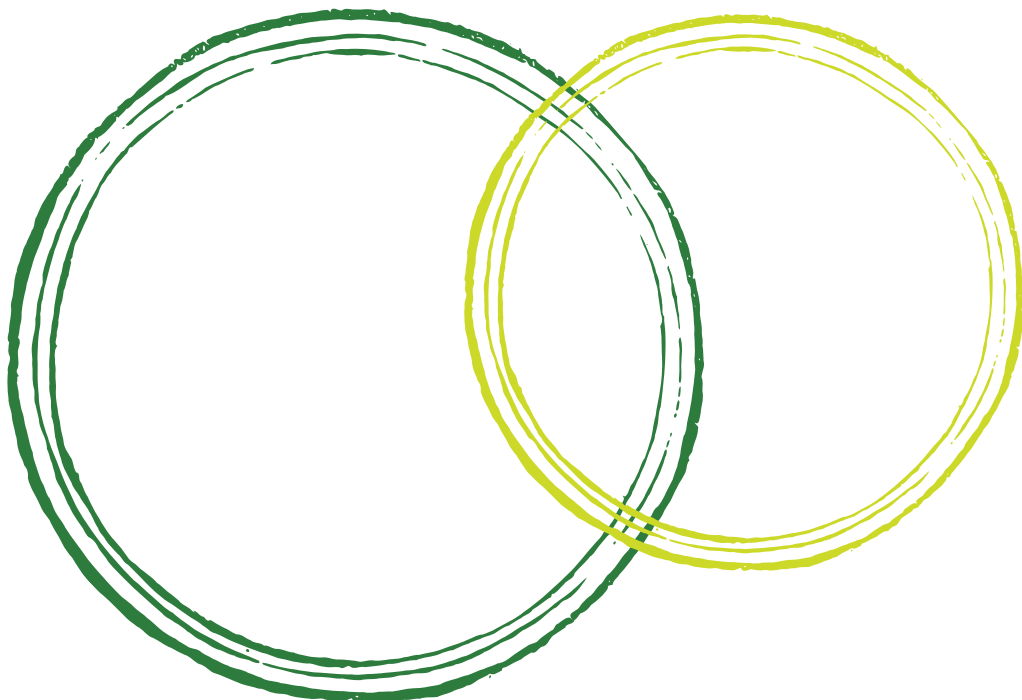


# RESEARCH DESIGN

## A Note on Symplicity

Symplicity was an online landing page through which Rural Roots was able to connect students, employers and PSIs. On this platform, employers created projects and students could build their résumés, search for jobs, and read, watch and download career resources. Through Symplicity, Rural Roots matched employers with students and educators, and tracked and reported key performance indicators.

Using Symplicity was a deliberate decision based on feedback from employers and PSIs on what they wanted to see on the site. Symplicity was most compatible with PSI pages (such as CampusConnect) and therefore easiest for transitioning students and faculty. Feedback from users was critical in finalizing the page.



## Methodology

Following a mixed-methods means of data collection and analysis, participants' input was collected anonymously, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Data was collected and stored in accordance with both the University of Alberta's Research Ethics Standards as well as RDN's privacy policy and data collection and storage policy.

Concerning quantitative methods, RDN collected data from internal surveys (e.g., Google Forms, SurveyMonkey, and Symplicity) and partner PSIs to analyze the program's effectiveness. RDN relied on the following collection methods:

- Symplicity Registration Forms;
- Participant surveys administered through Blueprint ADE, Google forms, and PSI partners;
- Information collected from partner Career Services and Offices of the Registrar.

RDN administered registration forms at the beginning of a match. Participants could register directly with RDN through Symplicity. Registration forms were developed in partnership with BHER and Blueprint ADE inc. to collect information related to participant demographics. If an employer or student chose to engage with a partner PSI directly, RDN collected demographic data from career service departments or Offices of the Registrar at participating institutions.

To evaluate the effectiveness of the program and WIL experience for employers and students, RDN administered surveys in partnership with our partner PSIs or through the Symplicity platform. The student pre-survey was mandatory when enrolling in the program, whereas the post-survey was not. Students who completed the survey(s) were offered a financial incentive for doing so.

Employers were given a single survey, and those who completed it were entered into a draw. Both surveys collected information on demographic questions such as age, gender, ethnicity, and province of residence. The student survey asked questions about credentials, discipline, and enrolment status, and their off-boarding survey asked questions regarding skills built, project impact and overall WIL experience. The employer survey asked questions about the company, their experience with WIL, resources used, and feedback on the Rural Roots process.

Concerning qualitative methods, semi-structured interviews and focus groups were conducted. Interviews were conducted virtually and followed questions featured in Appendix A. Virtual focus groups used a similar questionnaire to that of the surveys, but were conducted using NearPod, a collaborative platform. The Nearpod site allowed participants to post anonymous responses to questions on a shared slideshow, with the option of elaborating on answers aloud by unmuting.

## Participants

Data for this project was collected from students, PSIs, and employers in Alberta. Survey participants were students and employers who have used the Rural Roots Symplicity platform.

Voluntary interview participants were recruited through passive communications (i.e., email campaigns, social media and blog posts, and newsletters) and active communications (i.e., presentations at virtual meetings and invites sent from a contact list created from historical contact with RDN/Rural Roots). Snowball sampling was also utilized as participants could share the invite within their organizations or to any of their contacts.

Students, employers and PSI WIL representatives in various roles (e.g., Student Advisors, Experiential Learning Facilitators, Program Managers, Manager of Engagement and Relationships, Executive Director) participated in the interviews.

## **Ethical Considerations**

This mixed-method study design was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Board of the University of Alberta (Pro00130702). Participation in this study was completely voluntary and the identities of all research participants remain confidential. Interview notes and audio recordings made over the course of this study have been safely stored and encrypted on a password-protected computer with information access only available to the research team. Data will be stored up to five years after the publication of the findings and will then be destroyed.

All participants retained the right to withdraw from the study for any reason at any time, including in the middle of the interview or focus group. If a participant wished to withdraw from the study within 90 days of completing the interview, all associated data collected was immediately destroyed. After this 90-day window, the research team retained the right to use their data in the study.

# RESULTS

## Surveys

Since the inception of Rural Roots, RDN has worked with PSI partners and third-party evaluation firms to assess the effectiveness of their program and the impact of WIL experiences for community partners and employers. Prior to starting a placement, employers and students were required to complete a pre-survey. Because an offboarding survey was not required, and not all users started or completed a placement, there was a low participation rate of 6% for the Symplicity post-survey.

Using data collected by the Rural Roots program, including surveys administered by RDN and third-party evaluations, the following infographic demonstrates the impact of WIL on students skill development, learning and employment outcomes, and their confidence to enter the job market:



# WIL BY THE NUMBERS

Evaluating the impact of work-integrated learning for students



**1,800+**

students matched through Rural Roots' partnerships across Canada

**100%**

of projects enhanced skill set and prepared students for the workforce

**BUILT NETWORKS:**

**82%**

of students felt they had increased their peer-to-peer network through WIL

**ADAPATABILITY:**

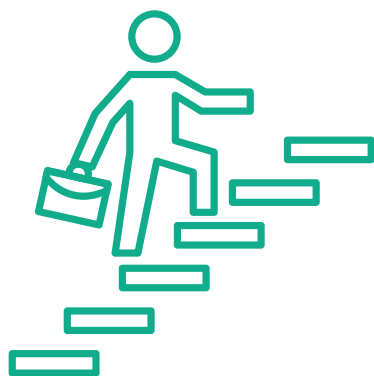
**88%**

of students feel they are better equipped to handle complex workloads



**9 OUT OF 10**

can better articulate their skills and understand employer expectations in the workplace



**SKILL BREAKDOWN:**

As a result of their experiences, students developed these important skills:

- Teamwork (100%)
- Communication (100%)
- Critical thinking (100%)
- Problem solving and interpersonal skills (94%)
- Professionalism (76%)
- Technical skills (76%)
- Creativity (71%)

## REFERENCES

Rural Roots program data (2021-23)

# WIL BY THE NUMBERS

Evaluating the impact of work-integrated learning for employers



**100+**

rural SMEs matched through Rural Roots' partnerships

**100%**

of projects considered to be successful and build short-term capacity

**INHERENT VALUE:**

**91%**

of employers hosted multiple students and engaged over multiple semesters

**INNOVATIVE SPACES:**

**53%**

of employers hosted placements that involved hybrid or remote work, like course-based projects



**10 OUT OF 10**

employers would recommend Rural Roots or WIL as a way to build short-term capacity and address skill gaps



**PLACEMENT TRENDS:**

Employers needed capacity and skills in the following areas:

- Marketing and Communications
- Business analysis
- Research and evidence-based recommendations
- Program and product development
- Finance and accounting
- Graphic Design
- Front-line service (e.g., teachers and nurses)

## REFERENCES

Rural Roots program data (2021-23)

Some baseline metrics were developed in the 2022-23 program year as a result of new partnerships and funding opportunities. Despite the changes in survey questions between years 1 and 2 of Rural Roots, RDN was still able to collect information about the makeup of these WIL projects and satisfaction with the program, as well as track important trends that influence the program's future directions. The following charts highlight the program's year-over-year impact from 2021-2023:

## SINCE 2021...

### 1,500 MATCHES FACILITATED

Across Canada, highest representation of students from Alberta and SK

### 3,000+ EMPLOYERS ENGAGED

Through active and passive communications



### 20+ POST-SECONDARY PARTNERS

Started with four PSI partners and expanded the program to include 22 PSIs from across Canada



## Interviews

Participants were asked a series of questions during one-on-one interviews (see Appendix A). The questions were adjusted depending on the participants' role or their prior responses. Interview participants are labeled with the acronym "INT" and the number that corresponds with the order of which they were spoken with. For example, the first interview participant is labeled "INT-1."

### ***Benefits of WIL***

Participants were prompted to answer questions about the benefits of WIL for all three parties involved (PSI, employers, and students). There was notable consensus, with participants typically listing a long list of positives for all three.

PSIs reported that having successful WIL programs allowed them to be "set apart from other programs" (INT-3). Although some placed their initial interest in WIL to be because they were "following the strategic vision of the government" (INT-3), they found that integrating the workforce and their curricula "makes their name stronger," speaking to institution recognition (INT-3). Offering WIL entices students to apply and complete their education at the institution, and thus can contribute to increased completion rates (INT-8). Through WIL, institutions are able to "connect with industry and get outside in the community" (INT-8). Creating partnerships helps ensure programs fulfill industry needs and increase chances of receiving funding (INT-8). Educators agreed that the goal is to "creat[e] what [they] want to see in the workforce" (INT-4).

The overarching theme regarding employer benefits is boosting capacity (INT-5; INT-10; INT-12). Participants described having “an extra set of hands [...] to help out” (INT-10) being useful in supporting organization programs (INT-5). Students are a “source of semi-skilled labour” (INT-10) that can “help in positions that organizations might not otherwise have” (INT-5). Employers gain the ability to begin and complete “backburner projects” that they do not normally have “the expertise or the bandwidth to be able to take on” (INT-7), giving small enterprises a chance to grow and remain competitive (INT-2). Although WIL is considered a low cost, low risk investment, employers receive similar results as they would have from a professional (INT-4) as students are “eager to learn and passionate about the work they are doing” (INT-5).

By onboarding students, employers are able to stay “up to date” on what schools are teaching (INT-4; INT-6); students are able to introduce teams to new knowledge and offer unique, out-of-the-box thinking (INT-7; INT-10; INT-11; INT-12). Through students, industries also gain “access to databases and [employees] with a working knowledge of research reviews” (INT-6). Engaging students also offers employers the opportunity to create what they expect to see in the future workforce by providing feedback to the students and PSI curricula (INT-2; INT-4). In addition, these short-term commitments can be a soft recruitment tool, potentially leading to long-term, permanent positions (INT-5; INT-6; INT-7; INT-10). Having students come in helps smaller or rural employers compete with larger organizations, making a name for themselves in the educational community (INT-7; INT-8). Combining the potential of long-term employment and the exposure and marketing from hiring students, rural communities have a better chance of retaining students if they can set roots through employment availability (INT-10). Finally, employees are able to practice their leadership and management skills (INT-6; INT-11) while their organizations gain “early access into the labour market and potential employees” (INT-12).

Benefits listed for students were numerous, with much of the input received corroborating previous research. Described as a “holistic approach to learning,” (INT-7) below are some benefits participants described for students:

- **Experience:** Often described as hands-on learning (INT-4; INT-10), through which students get a “taste of real-life” (INT-2) and “real-world experience” (INT-7; INT-8), WIL is a great way for students to “get their hands dirty” (INT-1). With the end result of “getting more skilled students” (INT-4), employers and PSIs encourage them to put to action what they are learning (INT-3) and connect their studies to real-life scenarios (INT-2). Students get to see real results instead of simulated projects, potentially motivating them to invest more (INT-2; INT-7). Students are also able to see an organization’s “function behind the scenes” (INT-1), practice working in teams (INT-3), “understand professionalism and etiquette” (INT-12), and “develop strengths and weaknesses” (INT-4).
- **Future:** Students are able to try out their prospective career path (INT-1) and be prepared for what will be asked of them post-graduation (INT-2). Through WIL they can ease into the workforce (INT-3) and learn about their field of interest with low risk (INT-4; INT-10). WIL is one of the best ways for employers to advertise jobs to students (INT-5), as students are able to see what it would be like to work within the organization and potentially become permanent employees after graduating (INT-6; INT-7; INT-10). Students are described as “re-energized” and better able to “focus on completing their studies” after receiving motivation from a WIL project (INT-8).

- **Résumé and transcript:** Through WIL, students gain experience that they can highlight in their résumé (INT-3; INT-6; INT-7; INT-11; INT-12). WIL can be used as a filler while students study, leaving less gaps in their résumé/work experience (INT-3). In addition, WIL helps them gain the necessary credits and graduate with both the education and experience needed for a job (INT-3; INT-11). Overall, WIL provides leverage for employment and gives students a competitive edge (INT-12)
- **Networking and references:** With WIL, students can network and build connections (INT-11; INT-12). They gain references that can be used later on when applying to full-time employment after graduation.
- **Fulfill a requirement:** WIL is sometimes mandatory, and thus students who participate will be completing part of the course requirements or fulfilling a class learning goal (INT-5). For certain fields or programs, students need a certain amount of volunteer hours in order to graduate or attain a degree/certificate (INT-6; INT-10). Instead of paying to get these practice hours, students are getting paid to get that experience (INT-10). Often, students are not completely motivated by grades, and thus WIL can act as a motivator (INT-7). In addition, these WIL hours and experiences can be put towards gaining an extra certificate (INT-6).

- **Keeping their institution and curricula up to date:** WIL keeps curricula up to date, adjusting it if employers find they do not align with industry needs (INT-4; INT-12). To ensure all institutions follow common practice, it is beneficial for PSIs to remain connected with industry through WIL (INT-10).
- **Financial:** Already paying tuition, students often do not have the time or the financial ability to volunteer outside their studies (INT-4; INT-12). Having a paid position therefore helps offset the cost of post-secondary education (INT-12). Again, instead of paying to gain work experience for programs that require it, students can get paid to get needed experience (INT-10).

### ***Resources or Supports Needed***

Participants highlighted four key resources/supports they believe would be beneficial in improving their understanding of WIL:

1. **The need for guidelines on WIL implementation** (INT-2; INT-10) including definitions (INT-3; INT-8), what is needed and steps to take (INT-2; INT-4), assistance coming up with roles and navigating specialized onboarding (INT-6). PSIs would benefit from a consistent start-up package containing guidelines for how to recruit community partners, examples of appropriate/successful WIL, coaching for students, and services to reduce any challenges for faculty in adopting this pedagogy (INT-7; INT-12).

**2. A list of the different employers or organizations that want to or have already participated in WIL (INT-1; INT-2; INT-4).** This was described either as a “repository” (INT-1) or a “third party” (INT-2). One employer described the difficulty posting opportunities on their website, supporting the advantage of having a shared database that both PSIs and employers could access (INT-5; INT-12). Often, WIL roles were described as needing to be “centralized” (INT-7; INT-8), accentuating the desire for a third party that can assist in pairing institutions and organizations.

**3. More conferences and presentations where employers, PSIs, and students may interact.** Participants disclosed that networking, conversing with other PSIs and employers at gatherings, was their best tool when it came to uncovering gaps and gathering information (INT-1; INT-3; INT-4; INT-11).

**4. Promotional tools to raise awareness for WIL programs.** An emphasis was placed on the need for students to “tap into resources available for them at the post-secondaries” (INT-8). These include career advising and referrals to WIL programs. Other tactics included having “WIL alumni tell their stories” (INT-1; INT-12), creating more exposure through webinars or two-pagers (INT-4; INT-5), and having guides for benefits and funding available to employers (INT-11; INT-12).

## ***Improve WIL Experience***

Participants were asked what could be done to improve their experience engaging in WIL in the future. One participant commented that WIL programs are “in a state of maintenance, not growth” (INT-1), revealing the overarching theme of capacity issues. Feeling the impact on PSIs and employers from ongoing cutbacks and staffing crises, some improvements individuals suggested to improve the WIL process included:

- **More or improved funding opportunities:** Participants noted that funding restrictions were an issue, whether they be restrictions as to which students they could onboard or WIL project they could host (INT-5), or the restrictions they felt working as an “office of one” (INT-12). Often the expectation was having more staff or an administrative person to better support WIL, with a participant stating “as [WIL] scales up, we need to scale up our team as well” (INT-7).
- **Curating new relationships** was another area in need of improvement, relating to the need that all contributors raised for a shared WIL database or repository (INT-1; INT-4; INT-8; INT-11). One participant mentioned that often a professor will want to engage in WIL but needs contacts for a niche area of study that their WIL department might not have (INT-1). Another mentioned that WIL is often biased toward industries, that either institutions do not want to host a variety of WIL placements (in different fields of study) or employers only want students from a specific program (INT-1; INT-8). This raises the need for better awareness tactics and marketing tools (INT-2; INT-4), be they external teams (INT-8), consolidation (INT-11), newsletters, communications, collaboration or networking (INT-2).

- For WIL implementation across the board, consistent standards for all institutions and employers are required. “Keeping a standard but meeting it at different levels” (INT-6) depending on different capacities, while sticking to one end goal (WIL deliverable) is optimal. Guidance would be helpful for: setting up reflective assignments, marking (INT-1), aligning WIL with institutional timelines (implementation during fall semester is easier than spring or summer; INT-2), realistic numbers of students that organizations can host (INT-6) and standard level of investment for mentoring students (having minimums and staying within capacity; INT-6).

### ***What is Working?***

Employers and PSIs were asked what they are already doing well regarding WIL opportunities. The question was centered on the idea of emphasizing proven tactics for implementing WIL to reinforce the things organizations already do well, encourage them to continue, and pass this knowledge on to others.

- Institutions and employers were pleased with their relationship building (INT-3; INT-4; INT-5; INT-6; INT-11), with many focusing on their communication skills (or ability to offer alternative modes of communication). One PSI stated that they “keep the channel open for communications” (INT-3) and others discussed their use of consistent check-ins (INT-4; INT-5; INT-6).



- PSIs listed the value of having a **centralized WIL office** that can take care of vetting, recruiting, and mediating any challenges with partners (INT-7; INT-8). If this centralization is not available, another mentioned their structuring of a WIL program around already-working professionals so that they do not have to begin a new initial placement but rather partake in upskilling within the field they already work in (INT-10).
- One PSI was proud to disclose the **workshops** it offers students prior to beginning a WIL program (INT-1) that focus on professionalism, résumé guidance, and interview practice. Other workshops, such as helping students fill out mandatory paperwork and guiding them through the WIL process, are listed as critical to their process (INT-1).
- One PSI described the importance it places on ensuring **student ability to complete the selected WIL, having realistic expectations, and placing thought into project creation** (INT-6). Two employers highlighted their efforts to ensure their projects are entry level and have the capacity to finish in the short term (INT-5; INT-6; INT-12). Students are not meant to “replace paid roles” but ensure flexibility among workers by “co-creating [...] on the deliverables” (INT-6).
- One PSI described the importance it places on **setting boundaries** and that it takes supervising students seriously, disclosing that it expects supervisors to carve out time for their student placements and consistently check the workload (INT-6).

## ***Improve Overall WIL Process***

Participants were also asked how to improve the WIL engagement process at their institutions or their primary WIL provider:

- Participants expressed the need for WIL departments to communicate amongst themselves. Although all participants were happy to disclose the great communication they had with employers or students, one raised concerns about their difficulty communicating within their WIL department. They discussed the need to combine meetings and/or piggyback off conversations their coworkers were having with a community partner, as there were often miscommunications or employers over-promising themselves to placements (INT-3).
- Although it makes things easier when reforming their WIL program and roles, participants described themselves often as too small capacity-wise. Often “one person [is] wear[ing] many hats” (INT-10) and has a lack of time to dedicate or accommodate the integration of projects and classes (INT-7). One PSI mentioned the need for a role specific to job boards, as the process proves difficult when it comes to advising, formatting and posting (INT-5).
- Often WIL offices noted the difficulty they have curating relationships with professors and selling them on the idea of WIL. Educators do not always understand WIL benefits or funding or recognize they will have support forming WIL (INT-1; INT-12). One employer suggested having a short Q&A at the beginning of every semester where organizations and professors discuss potential projects (INT-6).

## ***Gap/Barriers Implementing WIL***

The overarching theme concerning current gaps or barriers that exist to engaging students/community partners/post-secondary institutions is the ability to connect students to these opportunities. These include:

**1. Limits set by funding.** Students often do not have time to volunteer and are already paying tuition for the course associated with WIL (INT-1; INT-5; INT-12). Instead, they need an incentive and prefer paid roles (INT-5). The cost of this, especially for small studios and businesses, can be difficult for employers to offer (INT-4).

**2. Limits set by stigma.** Often community partners do not understand the value of having students work for them, underestimating their abilities or overestimating the time it takes to onboard (INT-5). Employers are reluctant to bring students into professional avenues, feeling they are not ready (INT-4).

**3. Limits set by employer or PSI capacity.** Often employers wish to have a PSI contact available to reach out to when creating WIL projects or posting a position (INT-5). Educators need to be better prepared to establish programs that enable student growth and potentially change their curricula to match WIL goals (INT-4). Sometimes schools are in competition with each other when it comes to getting in contact with employers, the bigger or better-recognized schools often winning (INT-11). A barrier between employers and students is intergenerational communication skills; students may be anxious working under mentors, or mentors may feel anxious supervising someone much younger than them (INT-6).

4. **Time often works against WIL placements.** Adequate time is needed to curate relationships, create WIL opportunities and submit proposals by cutoff dates for academic calendars and funding deadlines (INT-3). Employers and faculty are busy, making it difficult to form connections (INT-1; INT-7). Time for WIL placements can also be an issue, as sometimes semesters may be too short for certain projects (INT-4; INT-7).

5. **Government engagement and employer/PSI understanding.** The new WIL initiative placed on PSIs by the government is sometimes confusing as PSIs and employers lack the knowledge to implement the program. They rely on resources and support to follow the new policies, needing information on funding, organizing a WIL department, defining projects, etc. (INT-1; INT-8; INT-10).

6. **Individual requirements for students to engage in WIL.** Often students will need assistance to acquire criminal or vulnerable sector record checks, filling out and filing paperwork, etc (INT-10).

### ***Rural/Remote Gaps/Barriers***

Participants were also asked if they could identify any gaps specific to rural and remote communities. Although “everybody and their dog wants students,” (INT-1) implementing WIL in rural/remote communities was described as difficult (INT-1). Despite students being “very valued for their knowledge,” (INT-1) employers and PSIs encounter the following difficulties when implementing WIL in rural/remote areas:

- The ability to define what is rural or remote (INT-2).

- **Forming connections for programs, getting word out about WIL** (INT-1; INT-2). It is a smaller pool of businesses or industries to choose from (INT-1; INT-5). Less people means smaller capacity (INT-1).
- **Finding roles for students in rural areas.** A participant stated “rural community/rural businesses on a small scale, [marketing or other skills WIL students may offer] is not their top priority” (INT-2).
- **Transportation.** Often students do not have a driver’s licence (INT-4) and public transportation in rural/remote areas is not abundant, making commuting difficult (INT-1; INT-3; INT-12).
- **Moving** (INT-2; INT-5). Rural areas want students, but students may not want to relocate to rural areas (INT-1).
- **Awareness from both PSIs and students** (INT-5). A participant mentioned the need for an empathy lens when it comes time to interact with rural or remote communities (INT-6). A portion of a PSI’s WIL budget should be allocated to travel to these areas to speak with employers in person and learn about the community (INT-6).

### ***What Students Gain***

Asked about qualities students may gain through WIL, many respondents focused on soft skills and personal growth. Most agreed that confidence is the biggest benefit students gain through WIL. Students learn to no longer “see a difference in hierarchy or power dynamics between an organization and themselves” (INT-7). Instead they learn that they are consultants with the expertise an organization is missing (INT-7). Listed below are the qualities participants offered:

- **Gaining confidence** (INT-5; INT-6; INT-7; INT-11; INT-12).
- **Learning how to act in a professional setting** (INT-5). Examples given included showing up to work/having a work ethic (INT-4; INT-12), understanding long response times (INT-1), ability to work in a team (INT-3; INT-5), appropriate language and conduct (INT-7), experiencing work culture in different fields (INT-4), conflict resolution (INT-11) and basic etiquette (INT-12).
- **Interprofessional skills** such as communication, accountability, and responsibility (INT-4; INT-5).
- **Understanding the hiring process** (INT-4), such as developing interview skills and practicing résumé-building (INT-3).
- **Getting to know themselves** (INT-12). Students learn what they like and do not like (INT-4) and whether this is the career they are interested in (INT-3).
- **Developing strengths and recognizing weaknesses** (INT-4) such as critical thinking (INT-11).
- **Developing and practicing soft skills** (INT-7; INT-10; INT-11)
- **Practicing office skills** like creating presentations (INT-6).
- **Developing passion and learning what is needed from a career to feel fulfilled** (INT-12).
- **Developing a sense of community, and global citizenship.** Understanding their impact on the world around them, improving their community and developing a sense of empathy/awareness (INT-12).

## ***Students More Likely to Take Advantage of WIL Opportunities***

As many respondents mentioned the lack of awareness and difficulty convincing students to partake in WIL, they were asked about the type of students who enrol in WIL programs. Having a better grasp on this could aid in targeted promotions, raising awareness of WIL programs, and increasing engagement.

- **WIL was described as the “carrot,”** the motivation for why some students enrol in a program (INT-4). Most commonly cited were students who see the value of working for small organizations or non-profits, those who appreciate the chance of getting “their foot in the door” (INT-5) or the “chance to accelerate the thing they want to do faster” (INT-4). Students see WIL as “the incentive for opportunity and advancement,” (INT-4) and recognize that this is an excellent way for themselves to be career-ready (INT-7). As listed in the benefits to students, WIL is a way for them to “sample careers” (INT-1), get exposure before committing to a program (INT-4) and “figure out what they like” (INT-5).
- Those who take WIL opportunities are **students who are keen to self-improve**, already “high achieving with a good GPA, and already on a clear path” (INT-12). These students are able to see “how [WIL] would help them” (INT-12) in the long run. Often those enrolled have a “background in volunteering” (INT-1) and leadership roles (INT-1; INT-2), and are driven by real-life training for real-world skills (soft skills, interview skills, critical thinking) (INT-2; INT-6). They are “interested in research or business, interested to learn” and can offer no specialized skill set, but want to be helpful and sport excitement to learn and support (INT-5). They have “so much enthusiasm” and are “excited to try something new” (INT-6). Professionally speaking, “students want and recognize they need work experience” (INT-7).

## Virtual Focus Groups

Three different dates/times were offered to each of three participant groups, with a maximum of ten participants in each: 1) PSI WIL representatives, 2) employers, and 3) WIL students. There were no sign-ups for the student focus group. The employer focus group consisted of only two participants, both of whom had shown interest in supporting a WIL program but had not yet hosted a WIL student. The PSI focus groups had a total of six participants. The collaboration boards (NearPod) proved easy to use and allowed all participants to contribute without worrying about time constraints. Participants were allowed to virtually raise their hand should they desire to contribute aloud in more depth. The intent of hosting the focus groups virtually was to create more engagement. While there were fewer participants in the focus groups than expected, we supplemented our findings with survey and interview data collected firsthand or over the course of the program.

The following eight pages consist of figures depicting data collected during focus groups and from the NearPod boards. General themes are similar to those found during interviews: benefits are numerous for students, PSIs and employers; resources needed address decision makers and those in leadership (funding, guidance and definitions); gaps and barriers centre on lack of awareness and opportunities for collaboration; students gain many qualities, most often professional and soft skills.

### ***Roles:***

Participants in the PSI focus groups (labeled FG1 and FG2) consisted of a WIL Academic Lead, a Career Services Coordinator, a WIL Specialist, an Instructor of Community Engagement Courses and a WIL Coordinator. The employer focus group (labeled FG3) consisted of two participants with roles in management, particularly Special Projects Lead and Research Funding Management. Below are their responses to the interview questions found in Appendix A.



## In your own words, please describe the benefits of WIL

Students benefit from exposure to the workplace environment and a chance to apply their course content to the workplace (FG1-P1)

Students can identify and lead their own learning, rather than passively learning content in a lecture (FG1-P1)

Providing students with relevant work experience; applying theory in practice. It also provides them with the chance to network and connect with those in the industry they plan to work in (FG1-P2)

Industry Partners - a chance to find a unique solution to work place problems/challenges. Gaining fresh and different perspectives (FG1-P2)

The workplace benefits by having students bring in new ideas and content from their classes, and also benefit from having students come with their goals and ideas of things to learn (FG1-P1)

Students benefit by building their network of professional connections (FG1-P1)

Faculty - an opportunity for them to integrate real problems/dynamic experiences to emphasize program content/teachings (FG1-P2)

Faculty - able to stay up to date on current trends/opportunities /challenges in industry (FG1-P2)

Students learn self-assessment, self-awareness, and self-advocacy skills (FG1-P1)

Employers- an opportunity to create a talent pipeline and connect with prospective employees early on (FG1-P2)

## In your own words, please describe the benefits of WIL

Relationship development between students, employers and post-secondaries strengthens community capacity for development of opportunities that add to our society (FG1-P3)

WIL empowers students to be a part of their community in a way that isn't just as a student, but allows them to see themselves as contributors (FG1-P3)

WIL projects can be non-traditional so both students and employers have can have a unique opportunity to work on something that may not otherwise happen outside of WIL (FG1-P3)

Students - international students obtain Canadian work experience that contributes to their future immigration status (FG1-P4)

WIL connects employers to youth and the new ideas, new perspectives they bring, and it also can challenge employers to BE better for the sake of a WIL experience because they have to think about how to support learning, how to support the student (FG1-P3)

Industry partners - access to fresh talent and ability to give back to the community (many industry partners are alumni who want to give back to their program) (FG1-P4)

Industry partners - extended probation period for a potential long term employee potentially (FG1-P4)

Students - exposure to the industry and career avenues within the industry (FG1-P4)

Faculty - opportunities to create and maintain relationships with industry partners (FG1-P4)

Students - in paid opportunities allows them to recoup some of their tuition (FG1-P4)

## In your own words, please describe the benefits of WIL

Students are able to be put in uncomfortable situations where they have support systems to work through problems (FG2-P1)

Students go from one instructor in a class setting to many mentors in the broader community (FG2-P1)

Employer: pipeline of workforce with experience (FG3-P1)

Employer: students offer new information and ideas (FG3-P1)

Community organizations get access to post-secondary resources and materials (FG2-P1)

For the PSI: Industry contacts, understanding of programs in the community, employment opportunities for students (FG2-P2)

Employers gain access to 'newest and latest and greatest' research and technology (FG3-P2)

Students: Practical experience, industry contacts, development of skills, experience with "real world" work (FG2-P2)

It is a way for the university to live up to its commitment and responsibilities to respond to public needs (FG2-P1)

Companies: Connecting talent with industry, providing candidates with the latest, newest skills (FG2-P2)

Student: potential of long-term career upon graduation (FG3-P1)

## What other resources or supports are needed to improve your understanding of WIL, the types of placements available, and its benefits?

Something to explain the benefits of WIL to the employer - sometimes they struggle seeing how it will benefit them to take on a student (FG1-P1)

More funding - funding for staff and faculty at post-secondaries to hire WIL students, funding for international students (FG1-P3)

Shared frameworks to make it easy for PSI's to implement WIL and interprofessional WIL in an efficient and organized way (FG1-P3)

Additional resources to take on students (FG1-P4)

A comprehensive resource bank of funding opportunities to share with employers that help them hire students and offer paid WIL opportunities (FG1-P2)

A better way to learn about current funding opportunities/collaborations for WIL available to PSI partners (FG1-P2)

Consistency in mentorship training resources for industry partners (FG1-P4)

Short, concise, videos representing a nationally shared language (FG1-P3)

The difference between WIL and experiential learning (FG1-P1)

More success stories local to our province of WIL experiences to share with employers and students (FG1-P3)



**What other resources or supports are needed to improve your understanding of WIL, the types of placements available, and its benefits?**

Consistency in definitions (types of WIL) from the provincial government (FG1-P4)

Institutional barriers: need support for training staff, increasing/boosting capacity and funding (FG2-P1)

Need standard across all industries and sectors (ensure funding and attention is evenly distributed through diverse fields and not focused on small handful of opportunities) (FG2-P1)

Documents/written material, workshops, or presentations that help organizations understand WIL (FG2-P2)

Additional WIL funding opportunities - ESPECIALLY those that international students are eligible for (FG1-P4)

The matchmaking is what we're looking for (FG3-P2)

Online database with registration for faculty, students and employers to connect with WIL (FG3-P1)

Additional partnerships across institutions - students could collaborate from different program areas on a problem for an employer or community organization (FG1-P4)

Clear definition, WIL is an umbrella term: difficulty having different models across same campus (FG2-P1)

Conferences/gatherings with industries, organizations, PSIs and students (FG2-P2)

**Thinking back on the process, what could be done to improve your experience for engaging in WIL in the future?**

A career management system (orbis, sympathy) (FG1-P2)

WIL falls in the Academic Portfolio, but there could be additional collaboration with the Career Services team (FG1-P4)

More preparation available for students prior to post-secondary on what WIL is and the importance. They can't engage if they don't really understand it (FG1-P3)

Rural organizations don't need to be smaller facsimiles or copies of larger organizations where they're selling themselves as a smaller version of such and such. So if it's a rural organization that has experiences that are unique to rural settings, it's celebrated (FG2-P1)

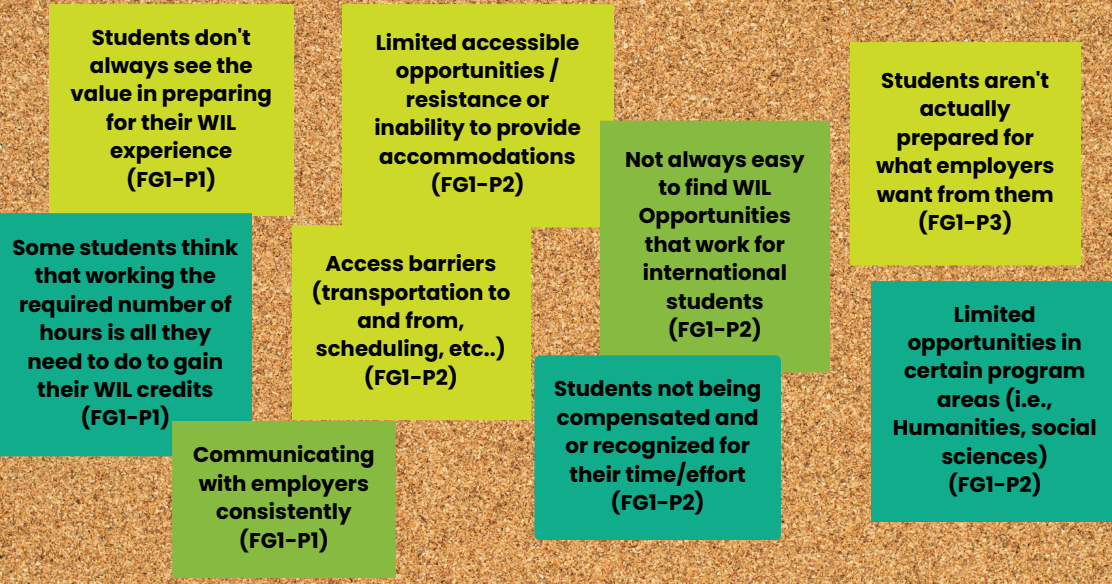
More awareness, having groups or businesses share information and contacts (FG2-P2)

More synergy/collaboration between initial career advising from the Registrar's office, a career development office to support students, and faculty (FG1-P1)

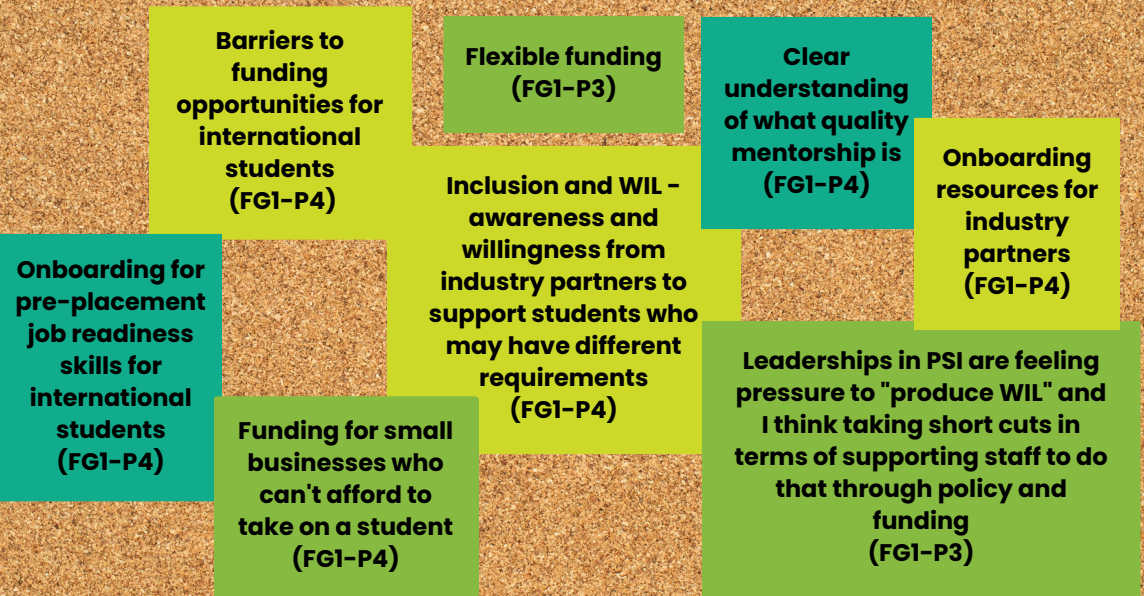
A streamlined way to identify and share opportunities (FG1-P2)



**When it comes to work-integrated learning, what current gaps or barriers exist when it comes to engaging students/CPs/PSIs?**



**When it comes to work-integrated learning, what current gaps or barriers exist when it comes to engaging students/CPs/PSIs?**





## Are there any gaps that are specific to rural and remote communities?

Lack of opportunities related to the program needs (FG1-P1)

Lack of outreach/engagement to rural areas specifically (FG1-P4)

Lack of student interest in attending rural opportunities if they're not from that area (FG1-P4)

Distance: Leaving comfort of big city, moving to small town (FG3-P1)

Transportation is a major concern; especially for students who can't drive/ don't have a place to stay (FG1-P2)

Limited employers able/interested in offering WIL opportunities for students (FG1-P2)

Lack of familiarity between PSI's and businesses if they aren't used to working together due to distance (FG1-P3)

Accessibility – if students need to relocate for the duration of the placement there is no additional funding specific to this (FG1-P4)

Limited opportunities in certain program areas (FG1-P2)

Lack of housing and transportation (FG1-P1)

Organizations lack experience with WIL, smaller organizations don't always have HR department/HR training (FG3-P1)

## Are there any gaps that are specific to rural and remote communities?

Community partners don't receive a lot of selection in applications. (FG3-P2)

Difficulty connecting with communities: knowing we're accessible or able to meet with them (FG2-P1)

Institutions difficult to navigate (paperwork/websites). Often people working for urban organizations are students from the same city, therefore they already have that historical knowledge/able to continue relationships. If you're coming from/going to a rural/remote business, you have to take more time getting to know that system (FG2-P1)

Difficulty getting back to in-person after being online/COVID (FG2-P2)

Lack experience that students might be looking for, difficulty for student to embed themselves in community or create a project representing a community they don't know (FG2-P1)

Remove expectation that just because you went to university in an urban area/big city, you're unable to go back to your rural/remote roots. You still retain connections and can move back home with that certification (FG2-P1)

Local burnout (FG1-P1)



## What current barriers exist when it comes to engaging students, community partners, and faculty in WIL?

Lack of funding! Lack of resources! Lack of shared leadership understanding on what is considered quality WIL (FG1-P3)

Lack of funding for community partners (would love to engage more small/locally owned businesses, but many have challenges of less resources available (FG1-P2)

I second the lack of leadership, funding, and resources (FG1-P1)

Lack of funding for international students (FG1-P3)

## What do you encourage employers to do for offboarding?

I will do something now! (FG1-P1)

Employer evaluation of the student and a student evaluation of the employer (FG2-P2)

Sharing future opportunities with students / suggesting positions they should apply to when they finish their program (FG1-P2)

Encourage employers to offer student advice, point in right direction, suggest potential companies that might be hiring later on (FG2-P2)

Offboarding interview (what was done well, what to work on, skills to work on, skills gained) (FG3-P2)

Student wrap up and reflection (FG2-P1)

Not currently, but thank you for the tips :) (FG1-P3)

Share the job board and remind employers that alumni have access (FG1-P4)

Student can give feedback to employer (FG3-P1)

Reference letter (FG3-P2)



## Qualities students may gain through WIL

Goal setting and personal skill evaluation (FG1-P1)

Networking (FG1-P1)

Confidence in the workplace (FG1-P4)

Canadian work experience (FG1-P4)

Industry specific software (FG1-P1)

Technical Skills - using tech they may be expected to use in their respective industry that they don't have access to in the classroom (FG1-P2)

Job application skills - résumé writing, interview prep etc (FG1-P4)

Work experience. Some students may not have had a job prior to their WIL opportunity (FG1-P2)

Work experience (FG3-P1)

Experience living on own (FG3-P1)

New or different equipment (FG3-P1)

Working in teams (FG3-P1)

Customer service (FG3-P2)

Self-reflection (FG1-P4)

## Is there a specific group of students that you find take more of these opportunities than others?

Students looking for RELEVANT work experience. Perhaps they already have a job, but its not providing meaningful relevant work that they can include on their résumé. The WIL opportunity may help them in accessing post-grad opportunities (FG1-P2)

Many students are interested in opt-in WIL as they are paid experiences - especially students who would be working summer jobs in their industry anyways that can be formalized as a co-op (FG1-P4)

Students who are motivated and driven (FG1-P3)

Opportunity to get a foot in the door with large organizations (FG1-P4)

International students - the experience is valuable for their post-graduate work permits and immigration status (FG1-P4)



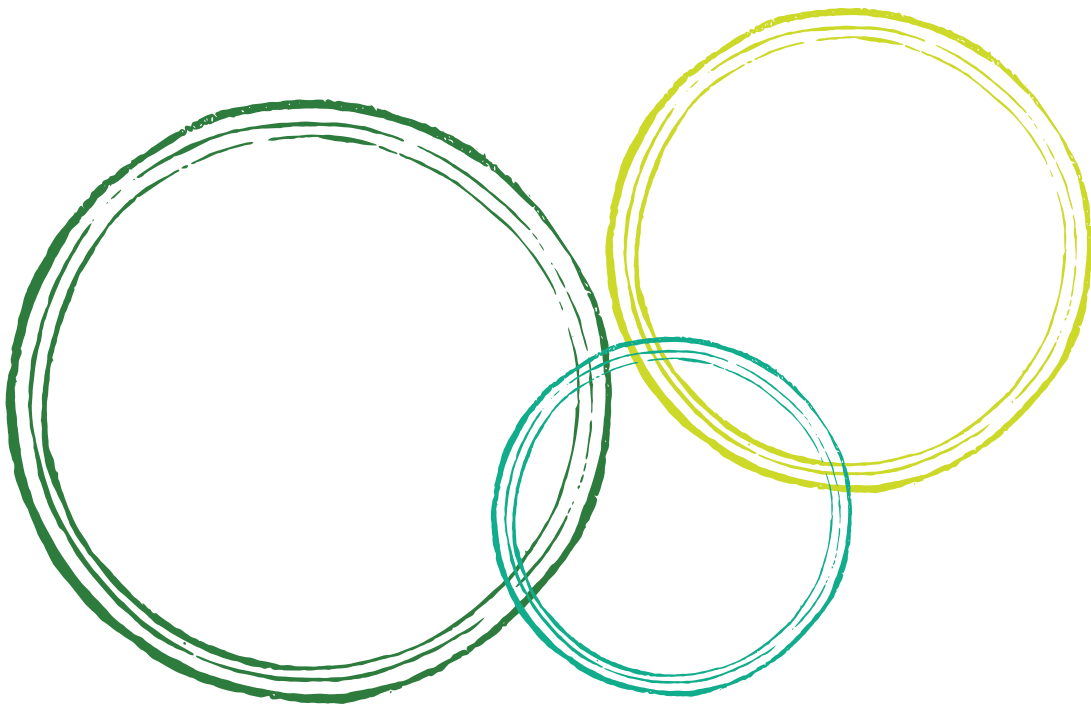
**Thoughts on preparing students pre-WIL and who should this role fall on?**

**Collaborative approach!  
(FG1-P4)**

**Pre-Employment programming workshops, co-curricular credit or zero-credit course opportunities, dedicated class time within the program..  
(FG1-P2)**

**We do pre-WIL prep as an academic course, so this falls on faculty  
(FG1-P1)**

**It would be nice to have some super general pre-WIL onboarding resources for students (and/or employers) from even the provincial level that could then be tailored to the industry/program area by the institute  
(FG1-P4)**





# PROPOSED SOLUTIONS/ RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results of the research and consultations, the most highlighted barriers to implementing WIL are a lack of awareness, unclear guidelines, and the absence of a centralized WIL expert to assist in project creation, matching PSIs and employers, and guiding students.

Through this project, RDN/Rural Roots was able to compile a list regarding the best WIL implementation strategy found on the next page:





# LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS

1

## Timeliness:

Academic semesters have clear recruitment timelines for submitting projects and engaging students. Planning ahead is crucial.



2

## Pre-assessment for employers:

Make sure employers have the capacity to meet the requirements of the different types of WIL before starting a project. Look into the [BHER "find your WIL" quiz](#) and [RDN project workbook](#).



3

## List of funding opportunities/sources:

Employers may explore potential funding for a project. A potential list can be found in [BHER's funding support catalogue](#) and the [Alberta WIL voucher program](#).



4

## Collaboration:

Follow a cohesive approach, effectively integrating work experience in academics. Encourage cooperation across departments and services (career and industry).



5

**Fostering good relationships with the employers:**

Communicate regularly and collaborate to design good programs with valuable learning opportunities.



6

**Learning outcomes:**

Must be clear. Align with academic goals and those required by the industry. Must be well understood by all parties.

7

**Prepared students:**

Orientation/preparation. Offer training sessions, info sessions, workshops, etc. Students can be informed on workplace culture, ethics, safety, etc...



8

**Structured learning plan:**

Regular check-ins on progress, clear schedule for goals, activities, and evaluations (with clear assessment criteria).

9

**Support/mentoring:**

Ensure students have feedback, time for [supervised] reflection, and guidance. An assigned/dedicated mentor/supervisor is optimal. Constructive feedback will depend on WIL type.



10

**Reflection:**

Integrate reflection components to connect the real experience to classroom theory helps deepen understanding.

11

**Monitor quality:**

Monitor the quality of the experiences. Done through site visits, data collection to evaluate impact, etc. Track outcome completion, employability and skill development.



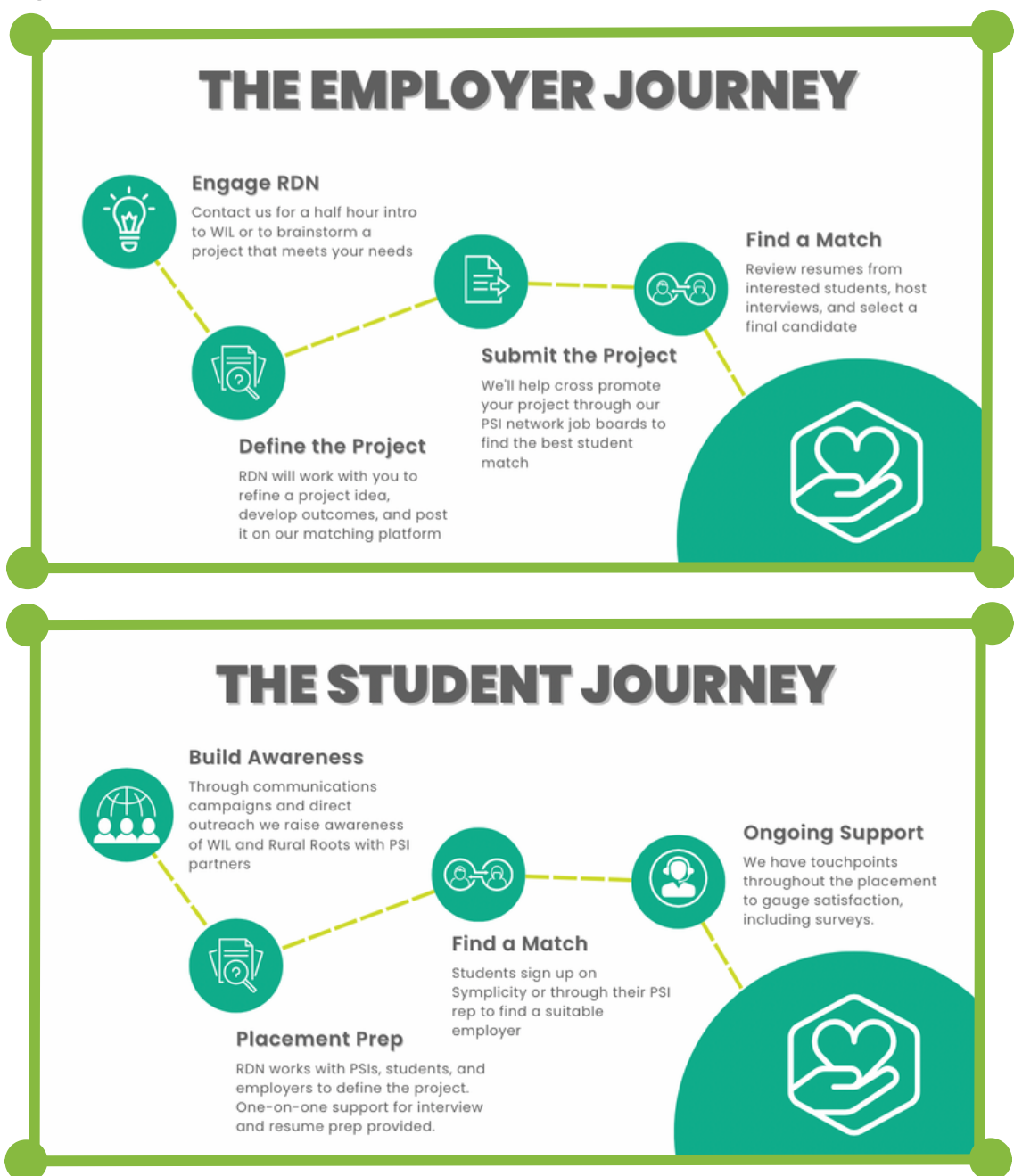
12

**Constant improvement:**

Check-in with employers, students and PSIs to see what in the program could be better. Continue to improve, enhance and refine the program.

# APPLICATION OF A PILOT PROGRAM

Rural Roots, an RDN pilot program, helped create projects, find the best match (pairing PSIs and employers), screen applicants and onboard students. Rural Roots was reflective of the need for a centralized WIL expert. It received positive feedback from prior users who described it as offering “great recommendations and expertise” and were “good at directing and refining expectations” (INT-2). Rural Roots followed the road maps below to engage employers and students in WIL:



Rural Roots was influential in building capacity for rural and remote communities. Short-term and projected long-term impacts show benefits for employers, PSIs, and students. Rural Roots offered PSIs a wider geographic reach, allowing them to tap into previously underserved client markets and support their WIL outcomes. Placements offered students opportunities to enhance their learning and support their future careers through practical, hands-on learning. Placements also offered employers a chance to address gaps in capacity by tapping into innovative ideas and skill sets to successfully complete projects that had been on the back burner. Since 2021, Rural Roots:

- Facilitated more than 1,700 placements in partnership with participating PSIs.
- Engaged over 6,000 businesses through passive and active communications.
- Fostered a network of partnerships that encompassed more than 25 PSIs and 20 employer networks to raise awareness of WIL and its benefits.
- Hosted two project showcases highlighting achievements and connecting rural employers to WIL opportunities, further strengthening the relationship between employers and PSIs.
- Launched paid advertising and email campaigns that expanded the program's reach beyond Alberta and re-engaged stagnant audiences. These campaigns reached more than 100,000 individuals across Canada and garnered national interest, drawing traffic to RDN's website and blog.
- Received positive feedback from students and employers about their placement experiences and the value of RDN's services.

RDN was successful in meeting short-term goals, which were to raise awareness of the benefits of WIL and facilitate placements in rural and remote areas. Throughout its development, program data was monitored to identify trends around career pathways and in-demand skills.

The demand for WIL placements among students was diverse, but some roles proved to be particularly sought after. Non-profit branding, graphic design, marketing, and communications were consistently in high demand from both employers and students. Additionally, students displayed a keen interest in data analysis, business consulting, and supporting social enterprises, indicating their desire to contribute research expertise to small businesses and support sustainable economic development.

By implementing targeted communication campaigns, launching a new matching platform, and creating a WIL microsite, Rural Roots made significant strides in connecting with employers, students, and PSIs, both organically and through established networks. Notably, the program witnessed a surge in engagement from Indigenous-led organizations, economic development entities, and innovation hubs, underscoring the program's ability to resonate with a diverse range of stakeholders. Efforts to support employers throughout the WIL process have fostered strong bonds between Rural Roots and rural communities. The Rural Roots team does a lot of pre-work with employers, including meeting with organizations to understand their current gaps in capacity and help them frame their project in a way that meets their needs, both financially and capacity-wise, to ensure they have achievable outcomes. Support has helped address an increased demand for WIL and has also fostered new connections and new opportunities in rural communities.

WIL as an academic practice continues to evolve. There is increased emphasis on place-based education and ways for students or skilled professionals to gain practical experience outside the classroom. Society faces unprecedented challenges from globalization and fast-paced technological development. Learning opportunities need to prepare today's labour force for tomorrow's jobs, emerging technologies, and complex challenges.

WIL plays a critical role in developing knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that enable young people to contribute to an inclusive, sustainable future. Creating spaces for multiple types of learning to happen in rural communities allows students to develop important skills, including professional communication, applicable problem-solving skills, and critical thinking.

RDN's Rural Roots program was one way to enhance graduation and employment outcomes for rural and remote communities. The program explored ways to address these challenges and be responsive to emerging trends and increased competition for funding. Rural Roots aspired to:

- Strengthen relationships with post-secondary institutions and expand partnerships beyond Alberta.
- Offer more innovative WIL placements, including course-based projects and competitions.
- Explore funding models including grants and fee-for-service offerings, to expand into high school WIL and support newcomer integration by providing meaningful opportunities in the Canadian context.

The Rural Roots program came to a close in August 2023 when the funding for the program ended. RDN is seeking new funding opportunities and exploring strategies to continue supporting employers and students in rural communities.



# POTENTIAL FUTURE RESEARCH

This research project focused on best WIL program practices, aiming to strengthen collaboration between PSIs, students, and employers, particularly in rural or remote communities. Therefore, listed below are some potential areas of future investigation:

## ***Orientations/Workshops***

During interviews and focus groups, participants were asked their thoughts on preparing students for WIL (Appendix A). Expectations of who this task fell on differed, with some saying it fell on the PSIs (INT-3; INT-4; INT-5; INT-10; INT-11; INT-12), some saying both PSIs and employers (INT-2; INT-6, INT-7), and others saying students themselves (INT-2; INT-5). No participant found that the responsibility of student preparedness relied entirely on the community partner.

The majority of participants agreed that student preparedness falls on the PSI (INT-3; INT-4; INT-5; INT-10; INT-11; INT-12). It was said that PSIs are promising placements for a position, and thus must provide work-ready students (INT-4). Most participants touched on résumé-writing workshops (INT-3; INT-4; INT-11; INT-12). Other workshops listed were interview skills, how to find a placement, and emotion/mental health preparation (INT-11). One participant described the need to do student presentations prior to beginning a program that defined WIL and explained the project (INT-3; INT-8). Another added that students should receive an overview on WIL policies and requirements, specifically concerning confidentiality agreements, professionalism, etiquette, timeliness, and WCB and OHS regulations (INT-12).

It is important for PSIs to adequately prepare their students as they are representing their school (INT-12).

Regarding aligning WIL with curricula and subsequently preparing a student for that specific project, one institution representative stated that “teachers are clever, we can put pieces together. Once [the project creation phase] is done, we can check the box; yes, this [student] is ready” (INT-4).

Many participants recognized the importance of “collaboration and partnership” (INT-7) from PSIs and employers when preparing students. Whereas any certifications or checks are the PSI’s responsibility, a brief from the employer/organization before a student applies or begins a WIL project is beneficial (INT-6). The importance of a sit-down where organizations and professors discuss the project and answer any questions at the beginning of every semester was also noted (INT-6). The PSI WIL team would focus on competency development and preparedness (communication skills, team management, confidentiality agreements, payment contracts, challenges and benefits, and mediation), and the community partner would focus on training or workshops on any niche information or technology (INT-7).

A couple of participants felt that when it comes to specific topics or knowledge needed, it is the student’s responsibility to do some prior research (INT-2; INT-5). Both agreed that projects should always align with students’ field of study, but if there is any additional information required to complete the project, students would be encouraged to self-educate. Additional information required could include knowledge about the community they are working with, knowledge of specific tools or technology, and best practices. Typically, WIL projects require “transferable skills,” such as reading research and writing professionally, which students already have from their educational experiences (INT-5). One participant added that it is also up to the student to understand their rights as a placement and ensure they understand the objective (INT-6).

Future research could explore the impacts that orientations or workshops would have on WIL programs, both impacts on the WIL process and project deliverables.

## **Shared Database**

Reflective of the Rural Roots Symplicity platform, multiple individual interviews and focus groups demonstrated their need for a shared WIL database or repository (INT-1; INT-4; INT-8; INT-11). This is important as often those who want to engage struggle to find contacts (INT-1; INT-8). A list of different employers or organizations that want to or have previously participated in WIL would help when pairing institutions and organizations (INT-1; INT-2; INT-4; INT-5; INT-7; INT-8; INT-12). Future research could explore database prototypes and the effect they have on WIL programs. More can be found about this in the above “Application” section.

## **International Students**

Although not the focus of this research, many post-secondary representatives expressed concerns regarding WIL and international students. Research on WIL and international students could address funding gaps and the impact of creating more inclusive WIL programs. The majority of the discussions for international students took place in the first focus group:

Benefits: International students are able to obtain Canadian work experience, contributing to their future immigration status (FG1-P4)

Resources/supports needed: Additional WIL funding opportunities - ESPECIALLY those that international students are eligible for (FG1-P4). More funding - funding for staff and faculty at post-secondaries to hire WIL students, funding for international students... (FG1-P3)

Gaps/Barriers: Onboarding for pre-placement job readiness skills for international students (FG1-P4). Barriers to funding opportunities for international students (FG1-P4). Not always easy to find WIL Opportunities that work for international students (FG1-P2). Lack of funding for international students (FG1-P4)

Group of students that take: International students - the experience is valuable for their post-graduate work permits and immigration status (FG1-P4). Many students are interested in opt-in WIL as they are paid experiences - especially students who would be working summer jobs in their industry anyways that can be formalized as a co-op (FG1-P4)

## ***Indigenous Communities, Businesses and Students***

During the interviews and focus groups, a discussion concerning Indigenous communities, businesses and students came up. It was centered around engaging both Indigenous businesses and students in WIL, and how to better create an equitable space (INT-12). Often overlooked when discussing rural context/definition, issues to explore include “how to bring Indigenous communities into the conversation, what is the appropriate approach for connecting with Indigenous businesses in terms of providing WIL opportunities... [and] should those opportunities go to Indigenous students from those communities versus a settler or an international student?” (INT-12). Similar to the above discussion on international students, research on Indigenous WIL placements could direct more inclusive WIL and guidelines for collaborating with Indigenous communities.

## ***Disabilities and Accommodations***

Although the research focused on rural communities, an investigative interview was conducted with a specialist on inclusivity and development of representation and awareness in WIL. Though not extensive, the discussion highlighted important future research in this area. The aim would be to increase inclusivity for diverse students/students with disabilities as they transition into placement programs as part of learning. This would encompass advocacy and accessibility training, namely learning to have conversations and create policies that create an inclusive workplace.

Inclusivity training programs could offer training and feedback on whether the material featured on university or WIL websites and databases is accessible. For example, discussion of an Artificial Intelligence (AI) program that uses various filters to imitate a disability so the PSI or organization can see how someone with a disability sees/navigates their site, what it looks like or sounds like (if read by text-to-speech). Doing practical exercises, like the AI example, can improve WIL experiences for all students.

Additionally, this type of program adjustment could include coaching for people with chronic illnesses/disabilities as well as the parents raising children with these conditions. Students may lack the confidence to speak up, so having frequent check-ins and discussing methods they can use when struggling with something could open a line of communication between them and their supervisors, diminishing the chances of a project or placement failure. An accessibility plan comprises:

- Meeting with student, employer and academic faculty facilitating WIL (separately and potentially together)
- Transferability of accommodations between course accommodations and workplace accommodations.
- Introduction not only to company/organization but perhaps office layout
- Learning to advocate for needs in job interviews
- Resolving issues as they come up

PSI WIL faculty could work with accessibility services to better create these work experiences for students with accommodations. Input was collected from a PSI (INT-11) on its endeavour to adjust WIL process and placements. In the process of drafting and sending for feedback, the end goal is to have a form that students fill out prior to applying for a WIL placement. Listed below are some of the questions this institution came up with that need to be answered in order to create more accessible WIL:

- What accommodations do we need to be mindful of and what can we do to support them?
- Is there something you want to disclose that we should be aware of?
- Is there something you think would be helpful for us to know? (Urging students to consider their own background of mental health, trauma, and life experiences. Encouraging them to think about how it might impact their placement and the type of site they have in mind).

Future research could address the impact of incorporating accessibility plans into WIL programs.

## ***Offboarding***

The importance of the right amount and delivery of feedback and constructive criticism to the students they work with was another topic broached during the focus groups. As an employer, one participant noted that it is important to offer students guidance for future employment, without deterring or slowing their project progress, much less risking their grade in the course (INT\_6). During focus group #1, the majority of participants disclosed they had not done any offboarding or thought about it. One shared that they “[share] future opportunities with students and suggest positions they should apply for when they finish their program” (FG1-P2) while another noted they “share the job board [to students who have completed a WIL placement] and remind employers that alumni have access” (FG1-P4). More extensive research into exploring methods of offboarding and the impact they may have on students, employers and PSIs post-WIL would be beneficial when adjusting WIL programs or creating future placements. Additionally, the data collected could aid in WIL marketing and awareness.

## ***Levels of Investment/Statistics***

One participant mentioned an interest in PSI and employer levels of investment and outcomes of WIL placements. Level of investment was described as how often the PSI or employer meets with the student and the ratio of supervisors to students (how many students one community partner/organization can host while still having WIL/outcomes be successful). “I think even just having some stats of like, you know, supervisors who give X number of hours per month to their students are more likely to have their students be employed after” (INT-6). It was noted that “having those minimums” were important to ensure “[students] are being guided through the process well” (INT-6). Similar to the above discussion on offboarding, further research into levels of investment could assist PSIs and employers when it comes to WIL programming and curricula adjustments.

# CONCLUSION

As many resources used by employers and PSIs can be contradictory or confusing, it can be challenging for either party to be inclined to engage in WIL. With the launch of the WIL pilot program by the Government of Alberta, PSIs have scrambled to learn about WIL, create WIL departments or roles, and ask more of their teaching faculty. However, without clear guidelines or a definition of quality WIL, they are often left frustrated.

As evidenced by previous research and the results of the current project, WIL is a beneficial program that holds a lot of potential. Taking action to create and promote consistent, quality WIL will significantly contribute to its success.

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# APPENDIX A

**Interview and Focus Groups Questions.** The questions below will be adjusted based on the focus group audience. Questions will be adapted for post-secondary institutions/educators, employers, or students.

1. Do you facilitate WIL opportunities at your institution? If yes, what is your current role (e.g., educator, WIL practitioner, Experiential Learning Coordinator)
2. Have you participated in WIL as a student or community partner/employer?
  - a. Student Specific: Was this an opportunity through Rural Roots or through a specific institution?
  - b. Employer Specific: Was this opportunity facilitated by RDN through the Rural Roots initiative or a partner school?
3. In your own words, please describe the benefits of WIL:
4. What other resources or supports are needed to improve your understanding of WIL, the types of placements available, and its benefits?
5. Please provide an overview of your process for engaging in WIL from project creation to project match to project completion
  - a. PSI/Educator Specific: Please provide an overview of your institution's current WIL processes?
6. Thinking back on the process, what could be done to improve your experience for engaging in WIL in the future?
7. Overall, what does your institution or the WIL provider you work(ed) with do well when it comes to providing projects or facilitating WIL opportunities?
8. In your opinion, what could be improved when it comes to the WIL engagement process at your institution or with your primary WIL provider?
9. When it comes to work-integrated learning, what current gaps or barriers exist when it comes to engaging students/community partners/post-secondary institutions?
  - a. Are there any gaps that are specific to rural and remote communities?
10. PSI Specific Question: What current barriers exist when it comes to engaging students, community partners, and faculty in WIL (e.g., no buy-in from leadership, lack of funding, lack of resources)?