

# **Training Needs of Northern Alberta Aboriginal Communities**

## **Opportunity Report**

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Northern Labour Market Information Clearinghouse

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## Introduction

Demographic figures show that there is a vast and growing number of young Native people in northern Alberta who will need education and training in order to secure employment in an increasingly technological job market. In order to fulfil this training opportunity northern post-secondary institutions will not only have to be aware of the training needs of the region's Aboriginal students, they will also have to develop strong relationships with their communities.

This report examines the primary training needs of northern Alberta Aboriginal communities, as expressed by education coordinators and development officers. It also discusses key aspects of the relationships that these people would like to see develop between their communities and post-secondary institutions.

While this report deals in a general way with First Nations and Métis Settlements throughout northern Alberta, it should be recognized that each community has its own history and opportunities, and should be considered individually.

This report is based on a combination of literature review, conversations with experts in the field, and a survey of education and/or development officers of Native communities throughout the region.

## Employment and Training

Table 1 shows, in order, the most job markets and training areas most frequently cited by survey respondents.

Table 1. Job Opportunities and Training demand

| Rank | Job Opportunities    | Training Demand        |
|------|----------------------|------------------------|
| 1    | Oil & Gas            | Safety                 |
| 2    | Forestry/Logging     | Trades                 |
| 3    | Construction         | Adult Upgrading        |
| 4    | Local Administration | Business/Office Admin. |
| 5    | Social Services      | Social Services        |
| 6    | Education            | Heavy Equipment        |
| 7    | Health               | Education              |

As with the non-Aboriginal community, the energy and forestry sectors are major employers of Aboriginal workers in our region. In addition, many jobs are to be found in social services, education, and health if people are appropriately trained.

Other employment areas mentioned include: law enforcement, labour, and agriculture.

Other Training topics include: chainsaw operation, woodlot management, automotive and heavy duty mechanics, and entrepreneurship.

Alberta Advanced Educations and Careers Development's study, "Students of Aboriginal Ancestry in Alberta Public Post-Secondary Institutions", lists institutional program enrolment by type for 1992/93. That study found that, throughout the province, the Native students enrolled in Upgrading/Life Skills courses outnumbered those in all other program types combined. The next most popular programs were in Humanities/Social Sciences/Education; and Business/Clerical/Administration.

The "Settlement Profiles" of the Métis Settlements General Council, Settlements Census of 1995 contains breakdowns of the industries and occupations of the working members of all eight Alberta Métis Settlements. While the orders are different, most of the major job opportunities match those found in the survey.

- The most common industries of employment for all eight settlements are (in order): local government, forestry/logging, construction, oil and gas, education, and food/accommodation/personal.
- The most common occupations are (in order): management, construction, skilled and semi-skilled labour, general labour, interm. (Sic) transport, trade transport, and sales and service.

### **Comments on Employment and Training Needs**

Training programs, said many respondents, must be realistic in that they must take into account both the preparedness of the students and the needs of industry.

- The job market is limited, so the number of people trained for any one industry or occupation must be related to the number of jobs available.
- High school drop out rates are high in Native schools throughout the region. As a result, many Native students cannot access post-secondary programs. Colleges must recognize this and must work to help students achieve prerequisite skill levels rather than offering courses for which students are not ready.
- Acknowledging the above, colleges also have to ensure that the certificate and diploma programs offered to Native students are fully recognized by employers. In some communities, Native apprentices have had difficulty finding work with off-reserve employers.

One Education Director interviewed stressed that she wants to know that the people whom she sends for training are equipped to succeed in the course and will come out with certification that is recognized throughout the appropriate industry, not just among Native employers.

The Dene Tha First Nation is looking to the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College to find trained Teachers Assistants.

A need was expressed for training in Métis politics and administration which, it was pointed out, is not the same as that for First Nations or non-Native communities.

### **Institution - Community Relationships**

All of the community representatives surveyed were asked two questions regarding their dealings with post-secondary institutions: What can educational institutions do to serve your community better? and, Can you suggest any ways to improve the relationship between the institutions and Aboriginal communities?

Responses to the first question centred on three issues:

- *Cost.* The high cost of training is a major concern for all of the communities surveyed. One Economic Development Officer stated that she objects strongly to paying 15% of a training contract for administrative costs. Others echo this sentiment. Innovative funding arrangements could make a big difference for many communities.
- *Location.* Having to travel away from the community is a strong deterrent to training for many Aboriginal people. The cost of housing and/or transportation is prohibitive. In addition, many people have family responsibilities that preclude long absences from home. Finally, for many students, the added stresses of living in a new place, surrounded by a foreign culture, reduces their chance of success in any training program. Providing courses in the various communities would help to keep costs down and improve the students' chances of success. A successful example of this is the Fast Track business program (discussed in the Training for New Entrepreneurs Opportunity Report) that Grande Prairie Regional College is offering on site at the Gift Lake Métis Settlement. The program suits the community's needs and having it in the settlement makes it accessible for many more students than would otherwise be able to attend.
- *Communication.* Many respondents said that they knew little about what the colleges really could offer them and that the colleges knew little about what the communities really need. The need for communication was underscored by the fact that one Education Coordinator interviewed did not know what Alberta North was. As he said, he may have seen a piece of paper about it cross his desk some months ago but no one had called him about it, let alone gone to visit with him to talk about it. This is an example of the need to take extra, more personal steps in building relationships within Aboriginal communities.

Other responses to the first question included providing more Native Studies courses, providing Aboriginal counselling services and ensuring that instructors are knowledgeable about, and sensitive to, the culture and history of their Aboriginal students. Increased transferability of programs and credits from one institution to another would also be helpful.

It could well be said that much of the response to the first question lies in the second; that colleges can best serve the Aboriginal people of the region by developing strong relationships with them. Those contacted for this report were almost unanimous in their agreement that colleges have to develop better relationships with Aboriginal communities. While different people emphasized different aspects of a good relationship, the overall picture is one of colleges taking a community development approach; working with local people to assess needs and make realistic plans to meet those needs. Colleges should think of this as a long-term investment. It can take several years to develop relationships of mutual trust, and to raise the overall level of education in a community to a level where more people can access post-secondary training.

The first step in this process is person-to-person relationship building. "Come and visit the community" was a common suggestion. This has to be more than a "one-off" visit though; respondents want to see liaison workers who would visit the communities regularly, get to know the people, and develop the mutual sense of trust that comes from working together. Another aspect of relationship building is learning the official and unofficial power structures and the kinship ties that can determine the success or failure of programs in a community. It is important not to underestimate the importance of personal relationships in Aboriginal communities. Where non-Native society generally operates through systems and organizational structures, Native societies tend to operate through relationships.

One Education Director put forward an important caveat regarding community liaison persons; institutions should be conscious of whom they send out to the various communities. As he put it, "Don't send people who have already burned their bridges in a community".

One of the first tasks of a college representative is to work with local people to determine the community's education and training needs. Both listening and talking are important at this stage. The representative has to listen to what the people say they need, and make clear what the college can realistically provide. Flexibility will be a key component of a college's success in this phase; programs may have to be modified or created to fit a community's particular needs. Many respondents complained that institutions have been unwilling to take those steps in the past.

In order to help fill the needs identified, college representatives should work with the secondary school system. Several of those contacted suggested that liaison persons should follow up on school Career Days, answering more detailed questions about job opportunities and about the training needed to get those jobs. This can help students to set goals and to see the realistic steps toward those goals. This may help students to see the connection between their education and their future prospects.

In one of the most condemning assessments of northern post-secondary institutions, one Education Director stated that northern Alberta colleges are not taken seriously in the business of providing training to Aboriginal communities. The colleges, he said, are not flexible enough and have no expertise in developing programs for Aboriginal students. The training field is expanding. Universities and southern colleges are showing an interest in serving this market from a distance. In this environment, this particular respondent does not foresee the northern colleges as being significant players in this field in the future without changes in how they operate.

Some progress has been made in this area, however. While many respondents point to these relationship-building measures as steps that the colleges have yet to take, others pointed happily to those situations in which institutions are moving in the right direction. One Settlement Education Councillor spoke of the good personal working relationship that she has developed with an administrator at AVC - Lac La Biche. The two are in regular communication and co-operate on many training programs. This settlement currently has over 100 residents studying at AVC - Lac La Biche. Another respondent spoke positively of Grande Prairie Regional College's (and others') increasing willingness to come to communities and to adapt their programs to suit local needs.

## **Summary**

To the extent that one can generalize about northern Alberta Aboriginal communities, most of the employment opportunities for the region's Native people lie in resource exploitation (oil and gas and forestry), and in providing services for their community (administration, public works, and social services).

The training for these jobs involves the same programs and courses (safety, trades, office administration) as in non-Native communities. Successful delivery of that training, however; will require the development of long-term relationships with First Nations and Métis Settlements. According to Education Coordinators, Economic Development Officers and other experts, northern colleges can best serve the needs of Aboriginal communities by making long-term investments in cooperation, trust, and community development.

## Sources

Alberta Advanced Education and Career Development, "Students of Aboriginal Ancestry in Alberta public post-secondary Institutions". Edmonton, 1994.

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