



Association of Canadian Community Colleges



Colleges, Institutes and Communities – Alleviating Rural Poverty

Association of Canadian Community Colleges'
Submission to the Standing Senate Committee
on Agriculture and Forestry Hearings on Rural
Poverty in Canada

December 4, 2007

Colleges, institutes, cégeps, university- colleges and polytechnics - partners in addressing key rural public policy objectives:

- ***Productive and skilled resource industries***
- ***Healthy and literate communities***
- ***Enhanced participation of aboriginal communities in education and economic activity***
- ***Sound environmental stewardship***
- ***Enhanced regional economic and community development***

Accessibility

Community-Based

Literacy / Adult Learning

Quality Of Life

Jobs

Industry Focus

Skills Development

Flexibility

Connectivity

Leadership

Partner Of Choice

Introduction

The Association of Canadian Community Colleges (ACCC) welcomes the opportunity to present its views on rural poverty and education to the Standing Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry.

ACCC is the national member service organization of Canada's 150-plus publicly-funded colleges, institutes, cégeps, university-colleges and polytechnics. Colleges and institutes are the largest suppliers of advanced adult education and training with 1.5 million full and part-time students, campuses and learning centres in over 1000 communities and serving over 3000 additional communities. They represent the primary national network mandated to support government, business, labour and community organizations in the design and implementation of human resource development programs and services.

Whether urban, rural/remote or both, Canadian colleges and institutes are fundamental partners in the socio-economic infrastructure and development of their local communities. While Canadian colleges have much in common, the varied realities of rural Canada necessarily create differences in institutional focus and organizational challenge. Rural-based colleges are often the only post-secondary institution in the region and play a key role in facilitating a strong rural revitalization strategy through local and regional economic and social development. Colleges and Institutes deliver a comprehensive array of programs through multi-campus networks distributed over large geographic regions and serve small resource-based communities undergoing rapid change.

The consultation process on rural poverty undertaken by the Standing Senate Committee is broad in scope, involving a multitude of issues and options. The Association is aware of the huge task confronting the Committee, namely targeting the inequalities that rural Canadians face and articulating a coherent, national public policy framework which will contribute to their social and economic well-being.

The purpose of our submission is to bring to the Committee's attention the key roles that our national network of colleges and institutes can play in addressing poverty in rural, remote and northern communities.

Capitalizing on the Expertise of Colleges and Institutes

Providing a strong base for attracting economic activity, retaining residents and maintaining communities will be critical for the quality of life in rural and small town communities. The health and vitality of rural and northern communities will depend on federal and provincial policy agendas that seek to alleviate inequity stemming from geography, demographic, social and economic differences, while encouraging sustainable community development. Although the federal government has made enormous efforts to reduce the barriers and challenges to rural policy development, it has not fully understood the important role that colleges, institutes and communities together can play in responding to the socio-economic needs of rural Canada.

Colleges and Institutes are firmly rooted in the rural and remote communities they serve and are seen as the hub of community response and local socio-economic well being. Individually, and as a pan-Canadian network through the Association of Canadian Community Colleges, these institutions are a valuable resource in providing rural Canadians with equitable access to postsecondary education and skills training as well as contributing to economic development.

For the past several years, the Association and its member rural colleges have proactively interfaced with the federal government to promote the development and diversification of rural Canada, to coordinate sustainable economic activity in rural communities and to reflect rural Canadian interests in national decision making.

The Association of Canadian Community Colleges has a policy framework of applying a “Rural Lens” to all of our work. This Lens evolved from the work of a pan-Canadian Task Force of Presidents which was created in 2001. The Association was able to enhance the work of our members through the innovative support of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada and the Rural Secretariat. For a three year period, we benefited from the expertise of the former head of the Rural Secretariat, housed at ACCC, but working with ourselves and the Federal Government Departments, the Rural Team in all regions of the country, and other national and regional bodies to further engage colleges and their communities – to share expertise, resources and lessons in better serving rural/remote/northern Canada.

Education, Training and Rural Development

Education and training are two of the most powerful drivers to alleviate rural poverty and encourage sustainable development. Colleges and institutes are mandated to be closely tied to their communities and to act quickly to foresee and meet the changing knowledge skill needs of their regions. Guided by thousands of Industry Advisory Committees ensuring that curriculum is pertinent and employment-oriented, colleges and institutes provide key support to economic development goals and strategies.

Growing labour market shortages, low adult education levels, the educational needs of a rapidly expanding aboriginal population and the shift towards a knowledge-based economy (e.g. the agricultural sector is experiencing a transition towards more diversity, value-added related industries and a declining number of producers) will require that rural colleges deliver more sophisticated programs, including the expansion of distance and technology enhanced opportunities. The necessary expansion of distance and technology enhanced learning opportunities will tax both the financial and human resource capacity of rural colleges. The challenges colleges face are numerous particularly given the complexities of rural/remote Canada and the characteristics of the populations served. These challenges are exacerbated when it comes to serving the impoverished. For example:

- The need for assessment and counseling services – including assessment of skills acquired through work which could be recognized and leveraged for training to fit the economic development strategies of communities.
- The fragmentation of funding – institutions must piece together funding sources tied to with the eligibility criteria different learners are eligible for – for example the Aboriginal Human Resource Development funds, social assistance etc – provincial/territorial, federal, Bands and Tribal Councils etc. Such funding is sometimes referred to as “fly by” or “carousel” and makes it incredibly difficult to develop sustained community partnered initiatives to enhance with dignity and respect the skill sets of the poor.
- Lack of adequate supports for not only individual Aboriginal learners but also for the Aboriginal Colleges who play a vital role with their respective communities and in partnership with the publicly funded institutions.
- Inadequate resources for technology enabled/delivered education and limited broadband access are significant barriers to reaching disadvantaged Canadians from rural areas. In addition, this group often does not have the skill sets to use such technologies, nor the access, even with the Industry Canada Community Access Centres in many regions of the Country (many located in College venues). An Access center is not the best venue for learning, a learning centre and home learning venues are when trying to serve the poor...but where do they get the computer, the DVD's, etc, they need? Where can they find resources like the old Farm Radio Forum? Where are the innovative approaches – like literacy programs on DVD's, complemented by learning tutors and counsellors at colleges.

The Rural Knowledge Cluster Initiative

In 2004, the Association sought the support of the Rural Secretariat to design and implement a model for rural development and community capacity building. The Rural Knowledge Clusters Model Project brings together the local community college, community organizations, government, employers, workers and others, to create a hub of expertise in a specific industry. Three pilot colleges across Canada have developed, adapted and implemented a college-assisted rural knowledge model within each of their respective regions. They are as follows:

- College Boreal, North Eastern Ontario - Value-Added Forest Products Cluster
- Nova Scotia Community College, Annapolis, Digby Counties and District of Clare, Nova Scotia – Geomatics Innovation Cluster
- College of the Rockies, East Kootenay Region, British Columbia – Tourism Knowledge Cluster

Each project has addressed the following three areas critical to building an economy that creates quality job growth and regional economic development:

- knowledge sharing and transfer
- applied research, innovation and technology transfer
- workforce development.

The pilot phase ends in March 2008 – it has demonstrated significant success and has been showcased not only in Canada but also in France, Iceland and the US.

The questions now are:

- How could rural, remote and northern Canada further capitalize and apply the lessons learned from this pilot?
- How can other economic Cluster approaches emerge and be supported in other communities?
- How can the pilot knowledge acquired with respect to community economic development and education be further applied as mechanisms of poverty alleviation?
- Can these three initial models be evolved to their next stage of development for the benefit of the pilot regions of the country?

The federal government must continue to support and enhance these types of initiatives. Could there be a horizontal approach across various federal departments that the Rural Secretariat could coordinate with ACCC – one that enables different approaches across the country – be they in fisheries, extraction industries, agriculture, waterways, information, technology etc.?

Recommendations

While colleges and institutes are engaged everyday in building rural human and societal capital, their potential as catalysts for advancing new economic and community development approaches which will lead to sustainable regional economies across rural Canada must be more effectively optimized. The following recommendations are especially tied to rural poverty alleviation:

- The creation of a poverty alleviation fund that colleges can access to enhance their regular program and services. The fund would support areas such as:
 - Literacy and skills assessments
 - Enhanced counseling and tutor/mentor services
 - Technology based learning materials and technological infrastructure (e.g. broadband access and tools such as DVD's).
- An examination of all federal training programs with the goal of eliminating fragmentation, short term funding and inequities for learners.
- The creation of a permanent Rural Knowledge Clusters Program. This program should be led by the Rural Secretariat and the Association of Canadian Community Colleges. This would enable colleges and institutes to be catalysts in their communities for economic development and poverty alleviation.

Conclusion

The needs of the rural poor are without a doubt complex and multi-faceted. Improving the socio-economic and productive workforce capacity development of rural Canadians through a coordinated, integrated approach by colleges and institutes towards community and regional development is part of the solution. Governments must stop underestimating the huge and positive impact that these colleges can and do have within their regions and begin exploring opportunities for partnerships to ensure rural communities are not left at the wayside and that they are able to contribute fully to the growth and stability of our country.

Colleges, institutes, cégeps, university-colleges and polytechnics contribute to community economic development and poverty alleviation through:

- *Improving access to government programs, services and financial resources*
- *Providing more targeted opportunities/programs for youth and Aboriginal peoples*
- *Strengthening community capacity building, leadership and skills development*
- *Maintaining and developing community infrastructure*
- *Connecting rural Canadians to the knowledge-based economy*
- *Strengthening economic diversification*
- *Providing access to local health care and education*
- *Fostering strategic partnerships within and amongst communities and governments to facilitate rural community development*
- *Promoting rural Canada as an attractive place to live, work and raise a family*