

**COLLEGES, INSTITUTES AND COMMUNITIES
PARTNERS IN RURAL SUSTAINABILITY**

**ACCC SUBMISSION TO THE STANDING SENATE COMMITTEE
ON SOCIAL AFFAIRS, SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY**

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The Association of Canadian Community Colleges

The Association of Canadian Community Colleges (ACCC) welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology as it examines and reports on the accessibility of post-secondary education in Canada.

ACCC is the national and international voice of Canada's 150 colleges, institutes, university colleges, polytechnics and cégeps.¹ With campuses in 1,000 urban, rural and remote communities, 1.5 million learners, and 60,000 educators, these institutions draw students equally from all socio-economic quarters, and supply graduates with the advanced skills essential to Canada's economic growth and productivity. The vast majority of college graduates find employment in their chosen field within six months.

Colleges are the advanced skills educators of choice. Aligned with the needs of employers, and operating on the leading edge of skills identification, economic trends, and market shifts, colleges solicit continuous business and industry input into curriculum development through Program Advisory Committees. Colleges encourage business formation and sustainability by growing the local talent pool, by re-skilling displaced employees, by offering customized education, and by providing applied research and development support to local businesses. They are key to providing different types of education and training programs intended to meet the diverse needs of aboriginal learners or disadvantaged groups.

ACCC wishes to bring to the Committee's attention the key roles that our national network of colleges play in facilitating access to post-secondary education in Canada and in particular to rural, remote and northern communities.

Capitalizing on the Expertise of Colleges

Colleges 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 ACCC, these institutions are a valuable resource in providing rural and remote Canadians with equitable access to post-secondary education and skills training.

Northern Alberta Institute of Technology and Red River College operate mobile training labs to deliver training in rural and remote communities. Programs offered include: automotive service technician, carpentry, electrical, machining, pipefitting, plumbing, welding, and industrial mechanics.

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 development.

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.

¹ This document will hereinafter refer to colleges, institutes, university colleges, polytechnics and cégeps as colleges.

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 and communities together can play in responding to the socio-economic needs of rural and remote Canada.

Advanced Skills and Rural Development

Education is a prerequisite not only for competitiveness and prosperity, but also for entry of the disadvantaged to the economic mainstream. The key to rural and remote community economic and social development lies in the knowledge and skill base of human capital.

The challenges rural colleges face are numerous particularly given the complexities of rural/remote Canada and the characteristics of the populations served. For example:

The need to offer support services aimed at student retention and program completion, including assessment of skills, counseling, bridging and mentoring programs.

The complexity and fragmentation of funding: institutions must piece together funding sources tied to the eligibility criteria different learners are eligible for. For example, the Aboriginal Human Resource Development funds, social assistance, provincial/territorial, federal, Bands and Tribal Councils etc.

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: disadvantaged learners from rural and remote areas often do not have access or the skill sets to use the technologies offered through the Industry Canada Community Access Centres located in many regions of the country (many located in College venues).

Moreover, growing labour market shortages, low adult education levels, high dropout rates for youth, the educational needs of a rapidly expanding aboriginal population and the shift towards a knowledge-based economy 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.

Before the recession, long wait lists of qualified college applicants impeded thousands from acquiring the advanced skills needed to secure employment. Wait lists are even longer now as the newly unemployed flock to colleges to re-skill. Enrolment last fall increased dramatically with some colleges reporting increases over 20 percent. The limited capacity of colleges remains an unfortunate reality.

Stimulus investments and the Knowledge Infrastructure Program (KIP) did make a difference. Despite its merits, KIP was unable to ensure capacity growth to levels adequate to meet the requirements of employers.

Expanding access to advanced skills by building college capacity is a necessary step to ensuring a sustainable rural and urban skills infrastructure.

First Nations and Inuit Post-Secondary Support

The Indian and Northern Affairs Canada Post-Secondary Student Support Program has capped increases at two percent annually since 1996. According to a study commissioned by the Assembly of First Nations, 10,589 eligible students who successfully completed high school were unable to access support for post-secondary education between 2001 and 2006. Each year, approximately 3,000 additional students are denied access.

The short-sightedness of the funding limits is difficult to understand. These are the youth and adults who have succeeded in acquiring their secondary pre-requisites, who are ready to acquire the advanced skills needed for employment, and be role models for others. Instead they languish and de-skill as they wait, and their lack of access to post-secondary education discourages others from following in their footsteps.

An opportunity to enhance First Nations and Inuit economic independence has been squandered in favour of continued dependence.

Mainstream and aboriginal colleges and institutes reach out to form partnerships with aboriginal communities with a view to providing the education, training and skills development that enable aboriginal people to contribute to the economic and social development of aboriginal communities and Canada as a whole.

Responding to low high school completion and low post-secondary participation of Aboriginal youth, the Aboriginal Youth Mentoring Project was developed by College of New Caledonia in partnership with the Carrier Sekani Tribal Council. The program supports Aboriginal youth in achieving career and education goals and prepares them to take leadership role in their career choice, their communities and their personal lives. The objectives of the eight month program are to: provide orientation, and training in communication and teamwork skills along with mentorship roles and expectations to 40 Aboriginal youth; match 20 Aboriginal high school youth with 20 Aboriginal post-secondary students; and, support the mentors and high school participants throughout the project.

Colleges have enormous success in attracting, nurturing, and graduating Aboriginal learners. With adequate resources they could do much more. Demographic realities demand that every individual with the capacity to contribute must have access to advanced skills and, subsequently, employment.

Innovation Matters

For the past several years, ACCC 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.

Federal investments in research over the past decade were overwhelmingly directed to pure or discovery research, with little support to applied research tied to commercialization. This reality is increasingly cited as a barrier to a strong culture of innovation and to the diffusion of new technologies in Canada.

Investments in pure or discovery research may contribute to the economy in the long-term. However, in Canada's relentless support for the exploration of the extreme limits of knowledge, we have dropped the ball on the "here and now." The practical side of business processes and continuous improvement, the very root of productivity, has been neglected.

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are by far the largest contributors to Canada's employment growth. These companies, especially in rural and remote regions, regularly turn to local colleges for product and process innovation, research and development.

Colleges are mandated to support economic development and deliver programs that meet the economic needs of their regions. They conduct, and engage students in applied research and development that enable businesses to improve, develop new or improved products, processes and services, thereby advancing commercialization, technology transfer and productivity. The match between the advanced skills of college faculty and students and commercialization-stage research is proven and dynamic.

By integrating Global Positioning Systems, Global Information Systems and emergency response to 911 calls in the rural municipality of Buckland, the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology (SIAST) is making emergency response more effective in rural communities. In such areas, the location of 911 calls typically generated a "land description" instead of an address. By marrying technologies, SIAST and its industrial partners mapped the entire municipality and integrated the results with a database facilitating the most direct routing of emergency personnel to critical locations.

Colleges are the natural mechanism supporting innovation in Canada's SMEs. With 150 institutions in 1,000 communities, no other institutional infrastructure has the same breadth and impact or the same rural, remote and urban scope.

Moreover, as future employers and employees, Canada's college students under faculty leadership should be given an opportunity to participate robustly in innovation and applied research. This is key to the mandate of colleges to incubate a balance between creative and practical talent, and to train highly qualified people with the advanced skills and innovative instincts who will close Canada's productivity gap and contribute to the economic development and sustainability of rural and remote communities.

It is time for Canada to review its enormous investment in research from the perspective of the SME community. Canada must balance its investments more equitably between discovery research and college-industry partnerships in applied research. It is no surprise that even as Canada invests increasing sums in discovery research, our productivity gap grows.

Opportunities for Federal Engagement

Governments must stop underestimating the huge and positive impact that rural colleges can and do have within their regions and begin exploring opportunities for partnerships to ensure that rural and remote communities are not left at the wayside and that they are able to contribute fully to the growth and stability of our country.

Infrastructure

Establish a college infrastructure and equipment fund adequate to secure the supply of advanced skills requirements of the economy. Over the period 2010-2014 invest \$500 million annually on a cost-shared basis with provinces and territories.

First Nations and Inuit Learners

Increase funding for the Indian and Northern Affairs Canada Post-Secondary Student Support Program to reflect the increasing number of Status Indians and Inuit learners requiring financial support to enter post-secondary education.

Applied Research, Product Development and Commercialization

Increase federal research funding by five percent, dedicating the additional amount to innovation, applied research, product development, technology transfer and commercialization projects of colleges with their private sector partners.