Home to the Alberta Centre for Sustainable Rural Communities (ACSRC), Augustana Campus has a demonstrated commitment to and history of addressing many of the economic, demographic, and environmental challenges faced by both rural and Indigenous communities. This commitment has led to the recent creation of a professional development program for municipal leaders and elected officials. Now the Campus is adding an additional program to focus attention on a specific demographic challenge—the fact that Canadian rural and Indigenous communities are losing their most educated young people, the individuals they most need to ensure their future prosperity and health.

Throughout his tenure, Dean Allen Berger has noticed the ambivalence that many parents from rural and Indigenous communities feel when sending their children to university. “They know and believe in the importance of education, but they also sense that, having earned a university degree, their children may never come home again,” says Dean Berger. This ambivalence is not unfounded—it is estimated that at the most, only 1 in 4 rural youth who leave their community will return to the same community within 10 years.

Augustana’s new Pathways Program will create opportunities for rural and indigenous students to participate in summer internships within their home or similar communities.
With 80% of its students coming from rural and Indigenous communities, Augustana Campus is well-positioned to help address this challenge. But resources were needed.

Fortunately, one of Augustana’s alumni, Gordon Warnke (’76), stepped forward with a generous gift, partnering with Learning~Advising~Beyond (LAB) at Augustana to create the Pathways Program.

Open to Augustana students in their third or fourth year, the Pathways Program will provide an opportunity for those selected as Fellows to undertake a summer research project as an intern with a community organization, municipal agency, or not-for-profit in a rural or Indigenous community. In every placement, students will work with a community partner on evidence-informed projects that support both their own academic learning and specific needs within the community. Students can also connect with faculty mentors from Augustana for additional assistance during their placements. The first Pathways Fellowships will begin in Summer 2018.

Raised in Wetaskiwin, AB and now working as a lawyer in New York City, Gordon Warnke holds a fond spot in his heart for both Alberta and his alma mater. “My education has been a life changer for me. Being at Augustana, which back in my day was Camrose Lutheran College, felt like a chance to expand your horizons beyond your own community. Yet, at the same time, coming from rural Alberta, you weren’t being overwhelmed by a dramatically different environment,” says Warnke. “As an adult, it has always seemed to me that we could encourage more students from rural and Indigenous areas to advance their education, and I wanted to help in that regard.”

To Warnke, rural and Indigenous students advancing their education should be viewed as a benefit to their home communities, rather than a risk. “I think it’s only through the combined aspects of education and local experience that you can develop ideas that best suit the community,” says Warnke.

Along with providing valuable research experience, the Pathways Program will likely help some students discover meaningful career possibilities back home. According to Dean Berger, “Every fellowship will be a resume enhancing opportunity, but more than that also an opportunity for students to network locally and to assess both their interest in and the viability of a professional pathway back (either to their own community or to a similar locale).” Most job opportunities will continue to be in metropolitan areas, but through Pathways, Dean Berger emphasizes, “students may discover that, contrary to Thomas Wolfe, you can go home again. And you can build a meaningful life back home.”

Augustana Campus invites expressions of interest from any alumni and friends affiliated with rural and Indigenous organizations that may wish to make use of a Pathways Intern.
In addition, Augustana invites other alumni and friends to join Gordon Warnke in supporting the Pathways Program. We hope this will be of special interest to those who grew up in rural or Indigenous communities and today, regardless of where they live, maintain an interest in the future of these communities. Together, and through our students, we can have an enormous impact. Current funding from Mr. Warnke and existing endowments will allow Augustana to run the Pathways Program for the next five years, with three to four Fellows each year. To increase that annual number and to extend beyond five years, Augustana seeks additional gifts. Donations of any size will help strengthen the program; gifts of $10,000 (the cost of a single fellowship) or multiples of $10,000 will be recognized through named fellowships. Lars Hallstrom, Director of the ACSRC, invites us all to imagine, “what if several years from now we could initiate a cycle, placing an Augustana Fellow in every qualifying rural and Indigenous community in Alberta at least once every five years?”

“Exposure to different ways of thinking through some of the best thought leadership around, not only in the country but in the world, gives students a different perspective and unique capacity to contribute to their own community,” says Warnke. “I look at Augustana today and am proud to be associated with the Campus.”

If you would like to support the Pathways Program, please contact:
Augustana Development Office
780-679-1558
augdev@ualberta.ca

For more information on becoming a community partner within the Pathways Program, please contact:
Jason Taylor, Director of Experiential Learning.
780-679-1652
jdtaylor@ualberta.ca