Rural Capacity Internship Evaluate Outcomes Report

Alberta Centre for Sustainable Rural Communities

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Abstract

In light of the capacity concerns observed in rural Alberta, the University of Alberta – Augustana Campus devised a community-university collaborative endeavor that aims to address these issues. The purpose of this rural capacity internship is to offer rural communities a student intern who, using the knowledge and experiences they have gained through their university careers, will be able to work with a community partner/supervisor to assess the needs of the rural community. With this information, the intern can work with their community supervisor to begin to develop projects and initiatives that will address capacity issues. The intern also acts as a much-needed human resource within the community.

During the evaluation process of the Rural Capacity Internship Program, many highlights were noted. There is substantial evidence that this program has provided rural Albertan communities with a unique opportunity to move beyond the initial planning stages of sustainability planning. It has allowed these communities to implement strategies that will enhance the capacity of their community and redefine themselves as thriving.
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Overview

Program evaluation focusing on outcomes is a very complex process, and often this process is completed at a time when the long-term outcomes are not yet developed. Because of this, it is important to stress that this report is in no way exhaustive and in no way surely conclusive. Because of the many factors that are connected to each intern and host community, it is likely that the breadth of outcomes will differ amongst individual internships. However, the Rural Capacity Internship as a whole will likely see some long-term outcomes produced.

It is crucial to identify that this report is based on interviews of the interns and community members, and program evaluations completed by the interns and the community partners following the end of the internship. Noting this helps to identify that there is minimal availability of resources to create a formula of success, and must be done so through a wide variety of qualitative information, rather than quantitative data.

Evaluation Process

The following document will use the background information provided by the introductory (P.2) and program overview (P.3) sections, such as the anticipated outcomes and deliverables to thoughtfully evaluate the impact that the internship program had both internally and externally. This process will focus on what the program hoped to accomplish versus the actual accomplishments, and will identify the successes of the program and the possibilities of the program into the future. This will be done by focusing on (1) what the program intended to accomplish by providing a program outline to draw conclusions from; (2) analyzing student evaluations to recognize the value they saw in the program; (3) focusing on the community partner interviews to discuss the significance they have seen in the program, not only for themselves but for the sustainability and capacity of their community into the future; and, (4) how the outputs of the program as identified by student deliverables and community partner interviews have affected the communities and have (or will) result in short, medium and long-term outcomes.

Using student evaluations, community evaluations, student deliverables and outputs we are able to see the effect that this program had on the student, the university and most importantly, the capacity of rural communities in Alberta. By evaluating the program we are able to identify the uniqueness of the Rural Capacity Internship and recognize the importance of having such programs in an undergraduate setting. This process will also allow us to be the model from which other academic institutions can develop similar programs that suit the needs of their goals and vision and their rural areas.
Introduction

The Rural Capacity Internship program is an initiative developed by the University of Alberta – Augustana Campus, Alberta Centre for Sustainable Rural Communities (ACSRC), Augustana Learning and Beyond (LaB), and in partnership with Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development. The program is a mutually beneficial capacity building initiative focused on addressing issues affecting the sustainability and vibrancy of rural Albertan communities.

A two-year pilot project, beginning in the summer of 2010, was completed in the summer of 2011. Providing three students with the opportunity to live and work in a rural community during the summer of 2010 and had 12 students scattered throughout rural communities all over Alberta in 2011. (NOTE: The recruitment process has begun for the Summer 2012 Internship).

Placing students in rural communities in Alberta through a collaborative effort between the University of Alberta – Augustana Campus and various municipal offices and not-for-profit organizations allowed these students the chance to work in a unique environment, and to use the skills and knowledge that they have learned throughout their education. Attending to the many issues affecting rural communities, these students worked with their community supervisor and the university to assess the community’s needs, define project goals through a workplan and begin to execute deliverables. Projects ranged from developing a policy review, to executing youth engagement events, to hosting a First Responder’s conference, to planning and executing a local food event that reached an extremely high attendance, to engaging with social media to increase function and reach of a local initiative.

By creating this collaborative internship program, the ACSRC and LaB were able to address the gap between a rural community’s assessment of capacity and creating ideas and the ability to implement those ideas. With the addition of a student as a form of human capacity, there was an instantaneous increase in a community’s ability to move beyond the planning process into implementation.

The vision of this program is of resilient rural communities that utilize existing knowledge to enhance their sustainability through evidence-informed decisions, interventions, programs and public policies.

Why this program is needed

Those who paint a grim picture for the future of rural communities have sobering facts with which to draw their reality. Despite this, many rural Canadian communities are redefining themselves as thriving, resilient communities. Regardless of outside pressures suggesting that ‘rural’ is a thing of the past, communities have been successful in increasing capacity and developing initiatives to increase sustainability. The task at hand is sometimes overwhelming for rural communities, who often have minimal funding and
little to no resources to devote towards moving beyond the evaluation stage of community sustainability.

In comparison to their more urban counterparts, rural communities are much more likely to ‘disappear’ when confronted with challenges to secure financial and human resources. This means that, even if the community has ideas on how to deal with the issues they face, there simply might not be enough money or people to carry out the initiative. The reality can be quite discouraging and can lead to a disconnect between the community, its organizations and businesses, and eventually lead a rural community to be overwhelmed and hopeless. A cyclical pattern can be observed in rural capacity literature (see Beckley 2008; Langille et al. 2008): without the human resources to look for alternative funding sources a lack of funds prevents the hiring of additional human resources which then creates further conflicts to a rural community’s ability to access and utilize resources. This issue further compounds a community’s struggle to build capacity and in turn, increase sustainability, and become resilient into the future. However, there are ways to accommodate these limits.

Rural capacity building can be achieved through a variety of means, including the highly beneficial collaboration between communities and universities (in this case the Rural Capacity Internship). As is implied, a university and a community work jointly in collaboration with one another, generally with a common goal in mind. In the case of addressing capacity issues, communities and universities can work together to attend to this issue. Literature suggests that such alliances can result in “significant benefits” for all parties involved, including students, the university, and the community (Savan 2004, 382; see also Chupp and Joseph 2010, Timmermans and Bouman 2005, and Jones and Pomeroy 2009).

Through collaborative efforts, universities and rural communities can work towards maintaining and enhancing the resiliency and vibrancy of rural areas. The Rural Capacity Internship is an effective collaboration towards achieving these goals. The idea of collaborative capacity building recognizes that communities can benefit from having access to the research potential inherent in academic settings, while universities benefit from being able to foster engagement with their neighbouring communities

Community-university collaboration recognizes that, in a time of funding constraints, it is necessary to work together and form relationships in order to provide services (Johnson Butterfield and Soska 2005, 7). This collaboration has the potential to alleviate capacity issues in the short-term in rural communities. However, the real significance of capacity-focused community-university collaboration is in its ability to impact the long-term sustainability of rural communities and organizations by connecting community partners with examples of relevant emerging practices and pertinent academic research. In addition, the introduction of a student intern to the community offers a new way of thinking, an increase in human capacity, and the possibility to develop a wide range of capacity building projects and initiatives. By working with community partners to identify local needs, this kind of relationship develops the community-university rapport that is necessary for successful knowledge translation (see Williams et al. 2008, 114).
Program Overview

The objectives of the program included:

1. Linking small rural communities in Alberta to each other within the context of public policy, public administration, management and governance;
2. Linking small rural communities in Alberta to existing knowledge, practices and strategies to foster community resilience and development;
3. Increasing the capacity of small rural communities to engage in evidence-informed decision-making;
4. Increasing the capacity of small rural community to engage in evidence-informed program development and implementation;
5. Increasing the role, retention and presence of university students in rural Alberta;
6. Increasing the presence and connectivity of the post-secondary sector as a source of research, teaching and administrative capacity in rural Alberta;
7. Contributing to the University of Alberta’s commitment to rural engagement as articulated in Dare to Discover and the “uplifting of the whole people” (Henry Marshall Tory);

The program also defined a variety of deliverables and outcomes that were anticipated to be achieved by the interns:

Specific Deliverables:
- Workplans;
- Needs assessments for host communities;
- Knowledge synthesis project documents (1p:3p:25p format) or appropriate project deliverable (podcasts, streaming video, recording, radio broadcasts, etc.);
- Knowledge synthesis events or dissemination plans;
- Bi-weekly video conferences;
- Journals;
- Project inventories;
- Community-based events (as appropriate and/or applicable);
- Internship reports;
- Weekly blog postings;

Outcomes:
- Producing a better understanding of the factors that affect rural communities’ well-being and capacity through knowledge exchange and collaboration;
- Improving student and youth knowledge and experiences of rural communities, rural policy-making and community development;
- Contributing to the financial/administrative elements of policy-making capacity of smaller rural communities through increased human resources, training and knowledge synthesis, translation and exchange;
- Improved/increased uptake of federal/provincial programming by rural communities;
• Increasing the training and mentoring of future CAOs, administrators, elected officials and practitioners;
• Fostering collaboration among rural government and decision-makers, researchers, administrators and other stakeholder around the collection synthesis and sharing of evaluated programs, policies and interventions;

In order to successfully address these objectives, anticipated deliverables and outcomes, there must be an understanding of collaborative partnerships amongst the community, university and student. See the next page for a brief schematic identifying the ways in which the rural capacity internship used collaborative efforts to satisfy goals:
Policy Problems/Goals

- Sustainability Plans
- Community Priorities

Source the Evidence

- Knowledge
- Research
- Ideas/Interests
- Economics
- Politics

Design/Implement & Assess

- Community decisions and policies
- Assess/Foster Capacity

Use the Evidence

- Introducing, interpreting, applying knowledge utilization

Assess/Foster Capacity

- Individual
- Organizational
- System/Policy

University-Community Partnerships

- Multidisciplinary
- Educated Interns
- Rural Interns
- Interns

Figure 1: Collaborative Capacity Building Schematic © L. Hallstrom/K. Mundel – University of Alberta 2011

Policy Process adapted from: Lowi (1964), Bowen and Zwi (2005); KSTE concept adapted from Medlar et al. (2006)
Program Evaluation

Inputs of the Program

Administrative Support

Due to the complexity of the program, including recruitment, community and intern support and community check-ins, the program needed a willing team in order to succeed at executing the program. This involved a variety of in-kind support provided by the ACSRC and LaB. Both centres needed assistance from preexisting staff to fill the roles required to create and execute a successful internship program. Providing staff, hours and wages to the program ensured a strong planning and support team.

Director Support

In addition, the in-kind support provided by the Directors of ACSRC and LaB through designing the program, the recruitment of communities and students, communication and hosting was a necessary benefit to the program. In order for the program to be successful, the leadership of the directors was an absolute must. Leading up to the beginning of the program, the Directors had to work together to design the program, creates boundaries with room for flexibility, create goals and visions they wished to see in this program, and define types of communities and students that would fit the program. The time and energy it took to make connections with communities in rural Alberta, select communities based on the necessary requirements, and interview students for the program is insurmountable.

Funding

Financial and in-kind contributions were provided in partnership from the University of Alberta –Augustana Campus and Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development.

Other

Using the university resources to host a variety of events, most of which included food services, room rental and other resources all helped to create a connected community between the university, communities and students.

See below for a logic model that describes the inputs of the program in a more visual manner.
In addition to the activities developed by the interns in each host community, the university hosted an internship orientation week. Prior to entering the host communities, the interns took part in a weeklong orientation, which offered lectures on rural issues, icebreaker activities, and information about knowledge synthesis, translation and exchange, as well as an understanding of the tasks at hand for the interns during the summer. On the final day of the orientation week, the university partners hosted a “meet and greet”, which helped to familiarize the interns and community partners with the goals of the program, the requirements, and with one another. This event helped to form relationships between the students, communities and the university partners.

The program also included site visits, where university partners visited the students in their host communities to see the progress they were making on their deliverables, and to
learn about the community as a whole. Also, the university partners made it a priority to have regular electronic check-ins via Skype\textsuperscript{1} with the students as a group.

As the program was coming to an end, the university hosted an internship wind-up, which was a day of reflection and discussion on the internship program. It was a way to verbalize the benefits, opportunities, gaps, needs and challenges of the program. This event provided the university with the opportunity to assess the program as it currently stands and begin to evaluate and make any necessary changes. It was also a great way for all interns and community partners to see what one another had accomplished during the internship program. Seeing such a multidisciplinary group of students produce such a wide variety of projects, programs, events and initiatives was a true testament to what the vision of the program was trying to accomplish.

\textbf{Breadth of the Program}

This internship has employed fifteen students (3 in year one, and 12 in year two) from a wide variety of disciplines. From Global and Development Studies, to History, to Political Studies and Business Management, these students brought a unique range of skills to the internship and to their host communities. That is one of the most valuable aspects of the internship – it does not require a specific kind of student, but rather, welcomes a wide range of skill sets that arise from a variety of disciplines.

In addition to the diversity of student disciplines, the program also recruits host communities from several population sizes – the smallest having been, Heisler, AB with a population of 150 and the largest being Sturgeon County with a population 18,621. The internship also recruited host organizations that ranged from non-profit organizations such as Family and Community Social Services (FCSS), to economic development organizations such as Community Futures East Parkland, to umbrella organizations such as Alberta Urban Municipalities Association, to municipalities such as the Village of Edgerton and Smoky Lake County.

The flexibility that is seen within this program is quite unique, and also necessary, to its success. Being that the program is able to run under such a variety of conditions, including community size, type of community organization and the wide range of student disciplines is a testament to the abilities of this program to meet the needs of a wide scope of the province. This program is not restrictive – it can offer a benefit to nearly any community and any student with the right combination of partnerships and collaboration. After all, although all rural communities are unique, all are facing issues of limited capacity.

\footnote{www.skype.com}
Intern Evaluations

Following the internship, the students were asked to participate in evaluating their experiences with the program. Provided with an evaluation that focused both on quantitative and qualitative data, the students were offered the opportunity to provide significant insight into their experiences, and in turn, allowed us to reflect on the program and the process.

This section consists of graph-based evidence of the value of the program in regards to students learning, reflection, life and career goals, and understanding of ‘rural’ and the issues surrounding that, as well as their overall experience with the Rural Capacity Internship program.

In addition, an overview of the qualitative data produced from the student evaluation will be presented. Because this section offers a variety of opinions from the student participants, it is important to state that this data is not exhaustive. A summary of what the students said will be shown, along with a selection of quotes from the student participants.

Through this internship I have gained a greater appreciation of rural communities

![Pie chart showing the distribution of responses.]

Figure 3

“Through this exchange I have been able to see the unique power that our rural communities hold in helping to shape a more sustainable Canada.”
This experience as a rural capacity intern has given me a new understanding of rural sustainability. Beginning this internship I thought I had a well developed understanding of sustainability, however, I have learnt that when envisioning rural sustainability the importance of context is critical.

“I was extremely excited because my work on [the] video had drawn a lot of positive feedback and media to Hobbema.”

“After [the omnibus bylaw I wrote] was reviewed by the administration, the bylaw proposal was submitted to council for approval, and was given three prompt readings and made into law the same day.”

Continued on next page
“A great deal of research stands to aid municipal governments in their decision-making processes and affect knowledge building in even small government institutions.”

“I have made a lot of ties and contacts in this community, and I plan to continue to volunteer there. But I also predict job opportunities in the area to pop up in the future.”

Continued on next page
"I was originally from Strathmore...and had, at the beginning of the summer anyway, no intention of ever returning...This internship, at the end, inspired my decision to move back to my home community. So that was something really pleasant that I wasn’t expecting to come out of this internship, and really important- it was a major life decision for me."

As shown above, the students benefited from the Rural Capacity Internship in a variety of ways. The interns were placed in unfamiliar territory and were given the opportunity to take from the situation whatever they wished. Most students took this as a chance to learn and discover new knowledge, create new opinions and perspectives of ‘rural’, and some even developed insight into their future goals and their place in rural areas.

Community Partner Evaluations

The goal of this internship is to increase the capacity and sustainability of rural communities in Alberta, recognizing the importance of rural communities to the whole of the province. The benefits of a rural community to a province are undeniable, and without the capacity to be resilient and vibrant, many of these communities struggle to survive. With the help of rural municipalities and rural non-profit organizations, the internship has assisted in increasing the capacity of these organizations and of the rural communities as a whole.

Following the end of the program, each community supervisor was asked to evaluate the program in regards to the benefits that they saw within their organization, as well as within the community as a whole. The results of this evaluation were astoundingly positive. There were many initial benefits to having a student intern in rural Albertan communities, and the community partners stated so in their evaluations. They said that the most significant experience gained by their organizations included:
- Receiving new ideas from fresh minds;
- Ability of the interns to “run” with projects;
- The interns required little supervision;
- The interns respected the culture and community of the host organization;
- Valuable assistance with research and the unexpected results of that research;
- Being able to complete projects that would have otherwise not been completed;
- Social media strategy implementation;
- New views and perspectives from someone outside of the established team;

Acknowledging that the feedback in the community partner evaluations was thoughtful, an even greater depth of understanding has come out of in-person interviews with community partners where they were able to express their opinions of the internship program.

This section has been divided into a variety of subcategories in order to better express the statements made during the in-person interviews. We have chosen four categories to express the community partner responses in: impacts, benefits, collaboration, and capacity building.

**Impacts**

Community partners recognized that the Rural Capacity Internship program has had, and will continue to, impact their respective communities. One community supervisor, referring to their intern’s work in bylaw review, stated that,

Fifty years from now…we won’t have to go through this type of arduous exercise again, it’s going to be second nature- I think that speaks to the strength of the intent of the program.

Though it is impossible to say, with certainty, what lasting impacts the internship will have on rural Alberta, community supervisors seemed confident that the effects of the program will be observed well into the future. This speaks to the internship’s ability to synthesize and translate knowledge - “Once you have somebody like [the intern] in the community…it spurs other things that you can do.” The internship was seen as creating positive momentum that could be used to move the community forward in its efforts to build capacity and become more sustainable in the long run.

**Benefits**

Throughout every in-person interview there was resounding evidence in support of the continuation of this program. Community partners saw a wide range of benefits from their collaborative efforts. “The intern [added] value to my day, my program, my work – I appreciate that”, said one community supervisor. Due to the flexible nature of the internship program, communities were able to guide their intern’s efforts towards projects that they knew required additional attention.
We really struggle to provide programming for youth in our community. I think of all of the demographics we provide services to, youth is one of the harder groups to connect to, and so the youthfulness of the intern certainly facilitated that for us.

In general, most commented that the benefit of having an intern was that they contributed a new way of thinking about challenges and provided new ideas.

**Collaboration**

“I think that working with post secondary institutions like the university is a wonderful opportunity for us that we don’t always get.” This remark, and others like it, suggests that communities valued the collaborative nature of the Rural Capacity Internship. Not only did communities have the opportunity to partner with a student intern, they were also connected with the university and, perhaps most significantly, with the other host communities.

In terms of community development, the project [the intern worked on] is becoming a tool to actually begin community conversations, especially in rural areas across Central Alberta.

For a program that aims to promote knowledge transfer, synthesis, and exchange, this observation speaks highly of the success of the internship.

**Capacity Building**

One community partner said that the internship program has “been a tremendous success in building our capacity, even now that the intern is not here.” Although it is difficult at this point to see long-term outcomes of this internship program, it is easy to see that there have been short-term impacts on the organizations and their communities, as well as on the student and the university. Because of the added human capacity to each organization, there was an instant boost in said organizations’ ability to implement ideas. By researching, creating needs assessments and developing projects, events and initiatives, these student interns offered their community partners the chance to reflect on their current capacity status and move towards longer term increases in capacity. The ability of the host communities to make decisions about the future, to act upon and implement those decisions and to evaluate the decisions made, were all increased due to the internship program.

**Outputs**

Listed are a variety of outputs seen throughout the two-year pilot project. Each student intern entered a rural community, and with the assistance of the community partner and the university, assessed the needs of their host community. In turn, projects, initiatives and events such as these were executed in rural communities around Alberta. Although
not an exhaustive list of outputs, this list defines the multidisciplinary aspects and uniqueness of the program.

**Society**

- Blog for the Maskwacis Justice Society to foster a positive image of Hobbema as a community;
- Marketing campaigns for the Return to Rural initiative;
- Research regarding the creation of a “volunteer liaison” position for the Village of Forestburg (recommendations to the Village council);
- “Survey of Small Communities” for the Welcoming and Inclusive Communities project of the AUMA;
- “Evolving Communities Speakers’ Series” for the communities of Bashaw and Delburne;
- Community events for the Village of Edgerton, including “Edgerton’s Beach Day”, “Senior’s Information Session”, and “Edgerton Kid’s Day”;

**Governance**

- Bylaw review for the Smoky Lake county;
- Electronic document of Smoky Lake bylaws;
- Omnibus bylaw for Smoky Lake;
- “Surveillance Policy” for the Camrose City Administration;
- Census for the Village of Hay Lakes;
- Alberta Municipal Self-Assessment for the Village of Hay Lakes;
- “Comprehensive Safety Manual” for the Village of Hay Lakes;
- “Level of Service” document for the Village of Hay Lakes;

**Environment**

- Sturgeon County Bounty Canada Day event that showcased local food producers;

**Economy**

- GETGlobal Summit for Return to Rural;
- S.W.O.T. analysis regarding the potential for successful agri-tourism in Sturgeon County;
- Tourism package for the Village of Hardisty;
- New road equipment for Village of Heisler (reallocating grant funding);

**Culture**

- Canoe instruction for the “Traditional Cultural Camp” for the Maskwacis Justice Society;
Outcomes

Short-Term

Seeing changes in knowledge, attitudes, skills or behaviours directly following the implementation of a capacity building initiative is a short-term outcome. In other words, short-term outcomes are benefits seen during or immediately after an impact is made on an area of capacity in a community. Some examples of short-term outcomes from the Rural Capacity Internship include:

Sturgeon County Bounty

An annual event, the Sturgeon County Bounty offers its visitors a one day event featuring a variety of local farmers, producers, artisans and others that offer their products and teach the importance of buying, eating and living local. The value of this event to not only the community of Sturgeon County, but to all visitors from several communities, and to the local farmers, producers and artisans, has the potential of being huge. Although the event is only for one day, the benefits of having such an event is great. The short-term outcomes of such an event include voicing the importance of a locally driven economy, provides the producers the opportunity to sell their items, and gives the visitors the chance to learn about, eat and enjoy amazing products from the surrounding local producers. The Bounty has the potential to be of great value in the long-term as well.

Youth Engagement Events in Edgerton, Wainwright, Irma and Chauvin

These events sought to provide the youth of each community with a fun, engaging, thought provoking, local summer fun event. In the short-term, these events provided youth with the opportunity to participate in something that was developed for them, and designed to show that the community wants to be involved in their lives. The events themselves were only offered for one day in each community, however there is such a huge opportunity for the events to evolve and become a permanent part of the community events. In the long-term these events could essentially change some youth’s minds about leaving rural areas, or about moving back to a rural area with their young family. It is the hope that these events not only provided a short-term outcome to the community, but that programming or changes in knowledge and behaviour resulting from this event are very impactful on the capacity of the rural communities.

Programming Awareness

This helped to publicize available Greenwood Community Place (FCSS) programs to individuals in the community of Sundre. By bringing about awareness, FCSS is able to serve more people in their rural community. Awareness and publicizing services is generally a short-term outcome, but there is value to these ventures because they can often result in longer-term outcomes such as uptake in FCSS services and programs and community connectedness.
**GETGlobal Summit**

The GETGlobal Summit was a rural marketing event hosted by Return to Rural, offering small business owners and others interested with useful information on how to maximize their business potential and remain resilient and vibrant into the future. A half-day workshop, GETGlobal offered a variety of speakers, group sessions and creative ways to engage the participants. In addition, GETGlobal also offered a venue for Return to Rural to get feedback on the organization, and ask the participants about ways to improve Return to Rural, and where to go next with the initiative. In the short-term, this event offered useful information to business owners and entrepreneurs, but it also offered the potential to have a great impact on rural communities in the long-term. If business owners and entrepreneurs use some of the tactics learned at the workshop to better their business, it is likely that rural businesses will be able to thrive and increase capacity for the community as a whole.

**Medium-Term**

These are the outcomes that will be seen in the next two to ten years following the program. It is likely that many of the outputs developed by the students and their community partners will carry on beyond the short-term into longer-term increases in community capacity.

**Tourism package for the Town of Hardisty**

This package was produced as a way to enhance the tourism value in the Town of Hardisty. Offered to businesses, hotels and restaurants to distribute, this package will be used for years to come to market community tourism. It is likely that this package, with a hand-drawn map of some of the community’s features, will continue to be used to promote and enhance Hardisty’s tourism market.

**New road equipment for Village of Heisler**

The acquisition of new road equipment such as a grader for the Village of Heisler is extremely impactful, and will be an outcome of the intern program for years to come. The village will be able to use this equipment to better their community and will have reliable road equipment for a long time. It is probable that this equipment will be used for the next two to ten years and will provide the community with the ability to maintain and care for roads in all seasons.

**Long-Term**

Long-term outcomes are unlikely to reveal themselves at this point following the internship. Due to the nature of outcomes, it is likely that we see the short and medium-term outcomes produced by the program, and can predict the long-term outcomes of the program.
During the in-person interviews with the community partners, many potential long-term outcomes were defined. Because of the work done by the interns, many of these communities will have long-term benefits from the work that they did. In Smoky Lake, for example, the intern completed a policy review, wrote a new policy to remove policies that were no longer applicable, and developed an online database of policies to ensure that they were easily accessible and organized. The community partner stated that this was a huge benefit to the community – it would not have been completed due to a lack of human capacity, and it likely would have remained an issue for years to come. Because of the work the intern completed, Smoky Lake now has up to date policies and a database that will be useful for years. The overhaul on the policies that the intern completed has helped to ensure the community will never get behind on revising policies again.

In another interview, a community partner mentioned that their intern was interested in entering politics as a future career. The intern had hoped at the beginning of the internship to work in federal government, however, following the internship, the intern is heading towards small, rural municipal government. This can turn into a long-term benefit because not only will this intern likely grow a family in a small community, they will have also increased capacity in the municipal sector by being a trained CAO, Councilor, Mayor, or other. Having young people interested in municipal government is the only way the municipalities will survive into the long-term, and so the changes seen in this intern’s thinking provides hope for the future of municipal government.

Additionally, this internship has accomplished its anticipated outcomes (see P.2) in a variety of ways. Each intern was able to produce projects and initiatives that will enable the community’s to begin forward thinking, increasing capacity, and creating a vibrant, resilient community into the future. By enabling people of all ages to feel engaged in their rural community, the internship program has helped to redefine rural as thriving and important to Alberta. There is no doubt that there will be many long-term outcomes that will arise out of the outputs developed by the students, and that the internship has met its goal of increasing capacity in rural areas, and offering a collaborative partnership amongst students, communities and the university.

The Reach of the Internship

The potential of the internship program to affect change in the host communities, produce changes for students, and enhance and change the university’s outlook is clear, but the effects of the program range far beyond those directly involved. Every community involved has seen successes, and from those successes, others can see the potential of the program. There has been plenty of talk around rural Alberta about other communities hoping to become involved with the program in the upcoming years.

In addition, the goals of this program – to support and build strong, resilient rural communities – affect the entire province, and perhaps even the entire nation. In order to have a strong nation, all parts of the nation must be strong, including rural communities, so this program is truly beneficial ‘beyond its borders’. By investing in rural areas, the
vibrancy of the whole country is increased. In other words, resilient rural communities lead to resilience overall.

A very exciting prospect of this internship program is that it is so flexible, and can be completely transferrable across the country. Rural communities are suffering a lot of the same challenges from one coast to the other in Canada, so any organization or academic institution with the right mix of funding, partners, and passion for rural development can create similar programs and help to better rural communities across the nation, not only across the province of Alberta.

The need for programs such as the Rural Capacity Internship is obvious as it can be seen that human capacity is an enormous challenge for many small communities, and that is an issue that will not disappear on its own – it must be tackled head on. Because of the lack of human capacity, and it turn, a loss of interest and opportunities in rural communities, there are high numbers of migration away from the rural centres, especially youth migration. It is essential that programs like this exist to show the rural is not a thing of the past, but is thriving, resilient and vibrant and can offer youth and young families so much opportunity. By placing youth who are in the undergraduate university setting in rural areas, a step is taken to show that youth can make a difference in rural communities, are that the skills that they gain while in university can be utilized in rural areas.

Conclusion

During the evaluation process of the Rural Capacity Internship Program, many highlights were noted. There is substantial evidence that this program has provided rural Albertan communities with a unique opportunity to move beyond the initial planning stages of sustainability planning. It has allowed these communities to implement strategies that will enhance the capacity of their community and redefine themselves as thriving.

This program also benefitted the undergraduate student interns, who were able to move beyond the teachings in the classroom to a real-life setting. They were able to affect change, and provide valuable resources to communities in need. The projects and initiatives developed by the students and community partners will indeed provide long-term positive effects on these communities into the future, and has helped to highlight the possibilities of rural communities. Not only has this internship allowed for the rural communities to begin thinking differently, acting differently, and reacting differently, but it has also allowed for community members to feel reinvigorated and engaged in the future of their community.

The connections made amongst the students and communities have begun a valuable information transfer with the university, which will likely continue into the future. Small improvements, including increased communication and more lead-time prior to the start of the internship program will be extremely helpful in enhancing the effects of this program.
Finally, this program is an example of something that, as quoted by a community partner, “has had a genuine real impact within the community itself.” This program should be a model of success for others wishing to pursue similar goals and vision for their Post-Secondary institution, undergraduate students and surrounding rural communities. The Rural Capacity Internship program is an extremely unique initiative in the rural development programming pool that is seen in Alberta, and will continue to be impactful and progressive in its visions and goals into the future.
References


