

# **First Nations and Métis Settlements Administration**

Prepared for the  
Northern Labour Market Information Clearinghouse

June 1996

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As self-administration of First Nations and Métis communities increases, post-secondary institutions will have to face growing and changing training needs for those working in the administration of aboriginal communities. This report will shed some light on the leading training opportunities in the administration of aboriginal communities in northern Alberta.

Administration staff is broadly defined as those working in office administration, accounting and program management. The positions included under this definition varied somewhat from one community to another.

Most of the information for this report comes from telephone interviews with Métis settlement and First Nation administrators, as well as with representatives of tribal and regional organizations and with educators experienced in working with native communities.

### **Employment levels**

The on-settlement Métis population in northern Alberta is about 3,842. The on-reserve First Nations population is 37,465. There are approximately 125 people working in Métis settlement administration in northern Alberta, with an estimated 350 working for First Nations. Over the next few years the number of Métis administration staff is likely to decline somewhat due to budgetary constraints. The administrative staffs of First Nations and tribal/regional organizations are likely to grow moderately due to the nations' increased responsibilities. The turnover rate for administrative employees is low in every community surveyed, as a result; the majority of job openings that occur in this field will come from expansion of administrative duties.

### **Training Needs Identified**

The various communities surveyed pointed to a wide range of training requirements. The following categories describe the more commonly identified training needs.

#### *Business training*

In the area of business training the most popular call was for training in accounting. Administrators and their staff need continuous upgrading and introduction to new regulations, procedures and programs. Contacts also identified a need for some training in general business practices and management.

#### *Management/administration*

Many of the administrators contacted for this report identified training needs in the interpersonal aspects of administration. Courses in areas such as communication and public relations; conflict resolution; crisis management; dealing with difficult people and stress management would be useful for several communities. Some also called for training in team building and administrative roles and responsibilities. One Band Manager pointed to a need for training in

professional administrative ethics to help managers separate their personal concerns from their professional life in order to deal with the demands made on them when in a position of authority.

Many also saw a need for training in local governance issues such as policies and policing; planning; by-law development and enforcement; resource use and environmental controls and infrastructure development and housing. Economic Development training was also identified as useful.

### *Computers*

The level of computer training required varies significantly between communities. Some contacts see basic computer skills training as a need both for new employees and for some long-term staff members. Most others however, said that their staff have strong basic skills already and would only need occasional refresher courses and upgrading.

### **Availability**

For some, training is readily available at nearby colleges or through the Métis Settlements General Council or Indian Affairs and Northern Development Canada (for some regulatory and governance training). More isolated communities have trouble accessing training for their personnel. The costs of sending staff away from the community and of bringing trainers in from outside are quite high.

### **Employer Support for Training**

Settlements and First Nations are generally willing to support training for their staff by giving them the time to train at least and will often pay for training as well. The general rule seems to be that the employers will pay all or part of the cost of professional development while employees themselves have to pay for any courses deemed to be for personal development. However, this willingness to support professional training is often limited by resource availability.

### **Barriers to Training in Aboriginal Communities**

Distance and cost are the most commonly reported barriers to administrative training in northern Alberta aboriginal communities. For many communities, travelling to the closest college campus involves several hours of travel making daily trips impractical and adding living expenses to the cost of any course. Many of these communities would prefer to bring instructors into the community but find the cost prohibitive.

As employers, many First Nations and Métis settlements find it difficult to send administrative staff away for extended periods because they do not have enough funds to replace the employee in the office. Long courses can also be a problem for the many employees who have family responsibilities that prevent them from spending more than a few days away from the community at a time.

When asked what would make it easier to get the desired training for staff, many respondents said that more information about available courses would be helpful. The other main response to this was “increased funding”.

### **Comments on Training**

Almost all of the administrators contacted for this report emphasized the importance of customizing training to the needs of the community. Courses should be taught in a culturally sensitive manner, they should relate directly to the work that the students do and they should be scheduled in a way that accommodates the students’ work and family responsibilities. Short, 3- to 5-day courses with workplace-based assignments are the most likely to succeed. In addition, the courses have to be affordable.

Some of the administrators contacted for this report stated that they tend to look to private training companies rather than colleges for their specific training needs. Apparently the private companies have been more willing to provide the training on the communities’ terms.

One Band Manager provided an example of a highly effective course. Staff members travelled out of the community for one week of classes, then returned to work for two weeks before taking one final week of classes. The employees were able to put the first week’s lessons into practise, seeing what worked and what did not before going back to the instructor with questions based on how the course related to their own tasks. In addition to the pedagogical benefits of this arrangement, the employer did not have to operate without those staff members for two weeks in a row. The time between the classes allowed the office to function without a severe disruption.

### **Implications for Employment and Training**

Employment in the administration of Métis settlements will decline slightly over the next few years. First Nations administrative employment will grow slightly at the same time, although the extent of this growth will depend on the number of programs and responsibilities that devolve from the federal and provincial governments. Some growth is also likely in tribal/regional organizations such as the North Peace Tribal Council. Overall, employment in this field will grow slightly. This growth will be spread out across northern Alberta.

The low level of growth, combined with the low employee turnover rate common to all communities contacted, means that there will not be many opportunities for people wishing to enter this field. As a result, the demand for pre-employment training will be limited and geographically dispersed.

There is a strong demand for post-employment, upgrading and professional development training in aboriginal administration. Training in business practices, local governance issues, interpersonal skills and computer skills are all needed in a number of communities.

Institutions hoping to meet this training demand will have to adapt their training to the specific requirements of the communities involved. One Settlement Administrator reported that her community is starting to approach colleges and training companies saying, “this is what we need in the way of training and this is how we want it delivered; now send us a proposal”. In particular, any training provided will have to be delivered in a culturally sensitive manner and tied directly to the work of the employees being trained.

The training opportunities in the field of aboriginal community administration might be well served through the Community Access Points being developed by Alberta North. Administrators from different communities but with similar training requirements could be offered appropriate courses at an affordable cost. Distance delivery to several sites could overcome many of the identified obstacles to training.

## **Contacts**

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Karen Collins, Administrator, Elizabeth Métis Settlement. 594-5026.

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Jerry Peardon, Administrator, Gift Lake Métis Settlement. 767-3894.

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Melvin Steinhauer, Administrator, Saddle Lake First Nation. 726-3829.

Charles Wood, Councillor, Saddle Lake First Nation. 726-3829.

## **Sources**

Indian Affairs and Northern Development Canada, *First Nations Community Profiles: Alberta Region, 1996*.