

# **Reasons for Students Going South**

Prepared for the  
Northern Labour Market Information Clearinghouse

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# Reasons for Students Going South

## A. Introduction

This report is prepared for the Northern Labour Market Information Clearinghouse, a research consortium consisting of the Northern Alberta Development Council (NADC) and five Northern Alberta colleges.

Alberta has developed a network of post-secondary institutions that offer post-secondary opportunities without having to necessarily relocate to a larger urban centre. Yet, each year students living in Northern Alberta communities with local colleges/technical institutes choose to “go south” for post-secondary studies. Clearinghouse members expressed interest in investigating the reasons that students graduating from high schools in Northern Alberta are making this choice.

This group of students represents an opportunity for the Clearinghouse partner colleges to increase their enrollments by learning more about the needs and interests of potential students in their catchment area.

## B. Perspectives from the Literature

### 1. Choosing to pursue post-secondary studies

Research has shown that a variety of factors influence a high school graduate’s decision about whether or not to pursue post-secondary education. A review of Canadian research on this topic (Look, 2002) identified the following factors that will cause a student to be less likely to attend a post-secondary institution including:

- Low parental income
- Low parental education
- Male gender
- Francophone heritage
- Rural youth
- Aboriginal youth
- Member of visible minority group
- Physical or learning disability
- Child of single parent family
- Low academic performance
- Completion of non-academic high school stream, and
- Negative attitude toward education.

A study commissioned by the Canadian Millennium Scholarship that used the 1991 and 1995 *School Leavers Survey Data* (Foley, 2001) established several demographic factors for participation in post-secondary education including gender, income, parental education, parental occupational status and language. Specifically

“among the high school graduates in this sample, the sub-groups less likely to pursue post-secondary studies were males; older students; those living in New Brunswick, Alberta and British Columbia; Anglophones; those who, by 1995, were married or had a child; those with lower marks; and those whose own annual incomes were over \$10,000.” (p. 3)

Another study built on an analysis of the *1995 High School Leavers Follow-up Survey* (Butlin, 1999) identified several factors that affect the type of post-secondary institution attended. This data showed that high school graduates from urban areas are more likely to participate in university education (45%) than those from rural areas (34%). Urban high school graduates are less likely to participate in college level education (28%) than those in rural areas (33%).

A qualitative study (Cogem Research, 2001) based on interviews with 62 Canadians from across Canada, aged 23 to 26, focused on exploring the reasons why they chose not to pursue post-secondary studies after completing high school. The principal barriers identified by these respondents were:

- Lack of awareness of post-secondary education as an available option
- Lack of financial resources
- Lack of academic ability or academic credentials needed to gain admittance to post-secondary education
- Unexpected disruptions which changed plans to attend post-secondary education

## **2. Choosing a post-secondary institution**

Rural students face different challenges than urban students when making choices about post-secondary education and careers. Reduced accessibility to post-secondary education programs, limitations of rural school curricula, and exposure to a limited array of occupations and role models create limitations on perceptions of options and opportunities (Apostal & Bilden, 1991). While early studies of students' aspirations showed that rural high school students were less likely than their urban counterparts to pursue post-high school education, the trend through the 1970s and 1980s was for increasing numbers of rural men and women to enroll in college or university programs.

A 1988 study of rural North Dakota high school students provides some interesting perspectives on their post-secondary choices. Like Alberta, the North Dakota students live in a region that has experienced shifts in agricultural and energy resource markets over time. The study participants (84 females and 90 males) completed a two-question survey that inquired what they were planning to do in the four years following high

school graduation and what job they would like to have. The data analysis indicated that 72.4% of the rural North Dakota students aspired to attend a 4-year post-secondary institution compared to 18.4% who planned to attend a two-year institution.

### **3. Influences of counseling on post-secondary institution choice**

Labour market trend data continues to highlight the importance of post-secondary education in developing the skill sets and knowledge required by today's workforce. Given the need to prepare students for continuously changing social and economic conditions, career guidance programs should not be limited to the high school years (Hossler & Maple, 1993). Historically, career counseling has focused on high school students assuming that plans for post-secondary education and employment are not formed until high school (Hossler & Maple). Research has shown that tentative post-secondary plans may be formed in early elementary school (Ring, 1994) and career preferences may be evident as early as kindergarten (Trice & King, 1991). A recent Alberta Learning study (Ipsos Reid, 2001) concluded that 75% of students who made their post-secondary attendance decision before junior high school enrolled in a post-secondary program compared to 25% of those students who made their decision after high school graduation.

Wahl and Blackhurst (2000) recommend that as school counselors develop comprehensive K-12 career programs, knowledge of how and when students' educational and occupational aspirations are formed is critical. In their view,

“effective career guidance programs should: a) be developmentally appropriate, b) actively dispel limiting occupational stereotypes and broaden students' awareness of potential occupations, c) be responsive to cultural values, and d) furnish practical and realistic information about a wide range of post-secondary options.”  
(p. 371)

Programs that support the transition from high school to community college need to target students throughout their time in high school (Watson, 2000). Transition initiatives will be most effective when college counselors work cooperatively with high school counselors (Watson, 2000). Examples of successful transition assistance include:

- Programs that address academic readiness of high school students for post-secondary studies,
- New student orientation programs that involve high school and college counseling staff.
- Regularly scheduled meetings between high school and college counselors, and
- Opportunities for high school teachers and counselors to participate in community college staff development activities.

#### **4. Influence of parents in student's post-secondary choice**

Foley (2001) also found that parental education and occupation had an influence with those from higher status households being more likely to continue beyond high school.

Specifically,

“Those respondents whose fathers had a low level of education (i.e. less than high school) were more likely than others to report that the main reason they didn't attend a post-secondary institution was because they had no interest in further education. Respondents' mother's level of education had no statistically significant effect on the most important reason for non-attendance.” (p.5)

Parental influence can also play a positive role in the student's choice of post-secondary institution. Research (Lapan et. al., 1999) indicates that school counselors would benefit from finding ways to better engage parents in career development programs offered in the K-12 school system.

Furthermore, parental influence has been found to be a significant factor in choosing to attend college (Beyer & Feller, 1991). Research suggests that parental influence in the college choice process can affect the consideration of community colleges as an alternative.

A Canadian study of high school seniors' post-secondary aspirations (educational and occupational) from urban, rural and rural non-farm communities (O'Neill, 1981) illustrated that parental expectations (as well as peer group influence) did account for most of the variance among individuals. A national study of over 10,000 rural American high school seniors (Cobb, 1989) confirmed that rural students' vocational and educational aspirations were consistent with perceived expectations of their parents (and teachers).

#### **5. Importance of working with the community**

By working with secondary schools, business and the community, college counselors can better understand their students and their transitional needs before they arrive on the college campus (Terrell & Watson, 1996). Building partnerships within the community strengthens the perception of the community college as a learning provider and as a force in economic development. This can lead to increased support by employers including work placements, hiring of graduates and contributions to scholarships and fundraising campaigns.

## 6. Cost of post-secondary education

A recent post-secondary accessibility study (Ipsos Reid, 2001) commissioned by Alberta Learning identified the factors that influence the decision to pursue or not pursue post-secondary learning, and more specifically, gathered perceptions of the financial and non-financial barriers to post-secondary learning. Some key findings of this research regarding perceptions of costs of post-secondary learning included:

- Post-secondary costs are perceived as the greatest barrier to post-secondary learning but are not the main reason that individuals do not attend.
- Recent high school graduates in Alberta over-estimate direct post-secondary costs for all types of post-secondary education (especially tuition). Those not enrolled in post-secondary studies, those from middle income households and those not living in close proximity to a post-secondary institution were most likely to overestimate costs.
- Average student loan debts are also over-estimated by recent high school graduates.
- Respondents underestimated the extent to which government is funding post-secondary education.
- Primary information sources about the post-secondary costs were high school teachers and counselors (92%), friends or peers (89%) and parents (86%).

## C. Methodology

This report is based on data from both primary and secondary sources.

Primary data sources were students, parents and high school counselors. This data were gathered through focus groups, telephone interviews and e-mail surveys. The approach to data analysis was a qualitative one; the intent was to identify common themes expressed in response to the questions identified. Through the process of coding, conceptual labels were ascribed to the comments generated through interviews, surveys and focus group discussions. These concepts were then compared one to another to determine categories of similar response.

Secondary data was secured from Alberta Learning's *Common Information System (CIS)* on the post-secondary registration patterns of 1998/99 Grade 12 students in the Clearinghouse catchment area. CIS information lists full-time students at Alberta colleges and technical institutes by their institution and program as well as by their community of origin. As of August 2002, Alberta Learning staff would not release data beyond 1998/99.

## D. Perspectives Based on Alberta Learning Data

### 1. Where are students pursuing post-secondary studies?

**Table 1 – Alberta Learning 1998/99 Grade 12 Students from Selected Jurisdictions Attend Post-Secondary Institutions, by Category of Institution**

School Authority Name	# and % Students Attending Northern Colleges	# and % Students Attending Southern Post-Sec. Institutes	# and % Students Attending Residential Universities (excludes Athabasca University)	Total # of Students Attending Post-Secondary Institutes
Aspen View Reg. Div. No. 19	12 (17%)	38 (53%)	21 (30%)	71
Buffalo Trail Reg. Div. No. 28	22 (16%)	80 (60%)	32 (24%)	134
Fort McMurray RCSS Dist. No. 32	54 (64%)	14 (17%)	16 (19%)	84
Fort McMurray School Dist. No. 2833	77 (69%)	14 (13%)	20 (18%)	111
Fort Vermillion School Div. No. 52	23 (47%)	20 (41%)	6 (12%)	49
Grande Prairie Public School Dist. No. 2357	101 (82%)	11 (9%)	11 (9%)	123
Grande Prairie RCSS Dist. No. 28	46 (85%)	<6	8 (15%)	54
Grande Yellowhead Reg. Div. No. 35	21 (16%)	55 (43%)	53 (41%)	129
High Prairie School Div. No. 48	23 (33%)	29 (41%)	18 (26%)	70
Holy Family Catholic School Div. No. 37	17 (40%)	17 (40%)	8 (20%)	42
Lakeland Roman Catholic SS Dist. No. 150	<6	15 (65%)	8 (35%)	23
Living Waters Catholic Reg. Div. No. 10	0	6 (43%)	8 (57%)	14
Northern Gateway Reg. Div. No. 10	19 (20%)	49 (53%)	25 (27%)	93
Northern Lights School Div. No. 69	20 (18%)	56 (49%)	38 (33%)	114
Northland School Division No. 61	<6	<6	0	0
Peace River School Div. No. 10	26 (41%)	26 (41%)	12 (18%)	64
Peace Wapiti School Div. No. 33	88 (72%)	20 (16%)	15 (12%)	123
Pembina Hills Reg. Div. No. 7	30 (14%)	149 (64%)	53 (23%)	232
St. Paul Educational Reg. Div. No. 1	10 (12%)	51 (63%)	20 (25%)	81
<b>Total</b>	<b>589 (37%)</b>	<b>650 (40%)</b>	<b>372 (23%)</b>	<b>1,611 (100%)</b>

Source: Constructed from data provided by Information Access and Reporting, Alberta Learning

Notes:

- Includes all students who had been registered in at least one grade 12 course in the 1998/99 school year at a public or separate authority within the boundaries of the NADC region and went on to attend post-secondary programs within Alberta in the Fall of 1999.
- In accordance with FOIPP, Data Suppression has been applied to student counts <6. Totals exclude suppressed values.



The data presented in Table 1 clearly show that the majority (63%) of high school graduates are attending post-secondary institutes in the southern region of the province (49% attending colleges and technical training institutes and 23% attending residential universities). An analysis of this data by school authority indicates that on average 34% of Grade 12 graduates attend Northern Alberta colleges, 37% of this population attends southern post-secondary institutions and on average 23% attend residential universities.

School authorities where Grade 12 graduates continuing on to post-secondary studies showed a **preference for attending Northern Alberta colleges** included:

- Grande Prairie RCSS District No. 28 (85%)
- Grande Prairie RCSS Public School District No. 2357 (82%)
- Peace Wapiti School Division No. 33 (72%)
- Fort McMurray School District No. 2833 (69%)
- Fort McMurray RCSS District No. 32 (64%)
- Fort Vermillion School Division No. 52 (47%)
- Peace River School Division No. 10 (41%)
- Holy Family Catholic School Division No. 37 (40%)

School authorities where Grade 12 graduates continuing on to post-secondary studies showed a **preference for attending Southern Alberta post-secondary institutes** included:

- Lakeland Roman Catholic SS. District No. 150 (65%)
- Pembina Hills Regional Division No. 7 (64%)
- St. Paul Educational Regional Division No. 1 (63%)
- Buffalo Trail Regional Division No. 28 (60%)
- Aspen View Regional Division No. 19 (53%)
- Northern Gateway Regional Division No. 10 (53%)
- Northern Lights School Division No. 69 (49%)
- Grande Yellowhead Regional Division No. 35 (43%)
- High Prairie School Division No. 48 (41%)

In two school authorities, Grade 12 graduates continuing on to post-secondary studies showed an **equal preference** for attending Northern or Southern Alberta post-secondary institutes, namely:

- Peace River School Division No. 10 (41%)
- Holy Family Catholic School Division No. 37 (40%)

In only one jurisdiction did Graduate 12 graduates continuing on to post-secondary studies indicate a strong **preference for attending residential universities**, as noted below:

- Living Waters Catholic Regional Division No. 10 (57%)

## 2. What Southern Post-Secondary Institutions Are Students Attending?

**Table 2 – 1998/99 Grade 12 Students from NADC Region Attending Post-Secondary Institutions in the Fall of 1999, by Post-Secondary Institution**

<b>Post-Secondary Institution</b>	<b>Number of Students Attending</b>
<i><b>Southern Post-Secondary Institutions</b></i>	
Alberta College of Art and Design	<6
Athabasca University	12
Augustana University	53
Bow Valley College	8
Concordia University College	12
Grant MacEwan College	159
King's University College	8
Lethbridge Community College	19
Medicine Hat College	8
Mount Royal College	36
Northern Alberta Institute of Technology	160
Norquest College	28
Olds College	16
Red Deer College	94
Southern Alberta Institute of Technology	54
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>673 (41%)</b>
<i><b>Residential Universities</b></i>	
University of Alberta	291
University of Calgary	48
University of Lethbridge	33
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>372 (23%)</b>
<i><b>Northern Post-Secondary Institutions</b></i>	
Fairview College	35
Grande Prairie College	329
Keyano College	138
Lakeland College	45
Northern Lakes College	19
Portage College	28
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>594 (36%)</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1,639 (100%)</b>

Source: Information Access and Reporting, Alberta Learning

Notes:

- Includes all students who had been registered in at least one grade 12 course in the 1998/99 school year at a public or separate authority within the boundaries of the NADC region and went on to attend post-secondary programs within Alberta in the Fall of 1999.
- In accordance with FOIPP, Data Suppression has been applied to student counts <6. Totals exclude suppressed values.
- Post-secondary institutions are categorized either as Northern or Southern Post-Secondary Institutions or Residential Universities.

### 3. What Subjects Are Students Taking?

The following table shows the most common programs (by Standard Name) that Northern Alberta students take outside the Clearinghouse region.

**Table 3 - Ten Most Popular Subjects for 1998/99 Grade 12 Students from NADC Region Attending Post-Secondary Institutions in Alberta**

<b>Subject Area</b>	<b>Number of Attendees</b>
Science (General)	244
Business (and related)	223
Humanities and Social Sciences	219
Education (and related)	132
College University Preparation	116
Arts and Science (General)	84
Mechanical (Engineering and related)	78
Engineering (General and related)	73
Health Related (not including Medicine)	65
Fine and Performing Arts	52
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,286</b>

Source: Information Access and Reporting, Alberta Learning

Notes:

- a. Includes all students who had been registered in at least one Grade 12 course in the 1998/99 school year at a public or separate authority within the boundaries of the NADC region and who went to post-secondary programs within the Province of Alberta in the Fall of 1999.

The subject areas that are listed above are available at one or more Northern Alberta colleges. Students who are relocating to Southern Alberta post-secondary institutions to study University Transfer level programs could be encouraged to remain in the region.

## **E. Student Perspectives on Reasons for “Going South”**

Student perspectives were gathered through three focus groups held in Edmonton in Spring 2001 with students from Grant MacEwan College, the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology (NAIT) and the University of Alberta. A total of 28 students participated in these focus groups. Appendix A provides additional demographic data on these focus group participants.

The focus groups were held on campus during the day. The groups were organized through contacts the researcher has in each of the post-secondary institution’s Student Associations. Students attending the focus groups were graduates of a Northern Alberta high school and were currently enrolled in full-time studies at a post-secondary institution.

Each focus group was 1.5 hours in length and guiding questions were used. A listing of these guiding questions is provided in Appendix B. Notes were recorded on flip chart paper that were later transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis.

### **1. Factors influencing decision to attend a post-secondary institution in “the south”**

Students identified a variety of factors that influenced their decision to attend a post-secondary institution outside of Northern Alberta. It is important to note that students made a decision to not attend the post-secondary institution in closest proximity to their ‘home town’ and also did not consider attending another post-secondary institution in Northern Alberta.

The three most common reasons that students gave for not enrolling in a post-secondary institution in Northern Alberta were:

- Lack of access to program of study (93%)
- Perception of lesser quality of program of study (71%)
- Desire to move away from home (43%)

Reasons that students gave for wanting to study in “the south” included:

- Program of study (93%)
- Desire to be independent from family (43%)
- Better opportunities for jobs after graduation (43%)
- Parental encouragement to move away from home (29%)
- Desire to follow friends or girlfriend/boyfriend (14%)

## **2. Sources of information used to select post-secondary institution**

The majority (90%) of the students stated that they relied on their high school counselor and favourite teachers to provide general information about post-secondary studies. Over 80% of these students had used ALIS (the Alberta Learning Information System) at some point in their high school studies to investigate their career options. Several commented that this on-line resource was a very effective and efficient way to initially gather information about the programs offered by post-secondary institutions.

Other sources of information that were commonly accessed included:

- Post-secondary Course Calendars (93%)
- School Career Fairs (64%)

Attending an open house or visiting the post-secondary institution were other ways to determine whether the student “felt comfortable” relocating to another community.

All respondents indicated that their parents had some involvement in their decision to “move south”. Although initially, their parents varied in their level of support for this decision, many had traveled with them to appointments, interviews and/or had helped move them to their new “home.”

## **3. Previous attendance at a post-secondary institution in Northern Alberta**

Three students had previously attended a post-secondary institution in Northern Alberta. One had completed academic upgrading courses at the local community college. Another had completed a two-year diploma at a near-by community college and after working in the field had decided to change careers. The third student had taken University Transfer science courses at the local community college.

Students who chose to enroll in general arts or science programs at the University of Alberta or through University Transfer at Grant MacEwan College were aware of University Transfer programs available in Northern Alberta.

## **4. Consideration of attending a post-secondary institution in Northern Alberta**

Of the 28 students who participated in the focus group sessions, 65% were aware of the University Transfer programs in their area. A few had considered applying for University Transfer studies at their local college, however:

- 72% thought that the academic staff were less qualified
- 72% questioned whether University Transfer students from the northern colleges would be able to successfully transfer to an Alberta university

## **5. “Second thoughts” about “moving south” to attend a post-secondary institution**

Each student stated that they had experienced some “second thoughts” about their choice to “move south” during the course of their studies. All admitted experiencing feelings of loneliness at some point. Initially, students had maintained contact with friends and family members through visits and phone calls, however, as their course demands increased, they stopped going home for an ‘extended’ weekend and were less likely to have friends/family visit them in Edmonton.

Some students were living in residence (38%) or had previously lived in residence (25%). They found that this environment provided plenty of social opportunities. Several students indicated they were considering moving out into the community and rooming with friends they had met while living in residence. Students attending NAIT and Grant MacEwan were living in apartments or rental suites in the area. A few of the students (20%) were living with relatives.

Students listed a variety of factors that they did not anticipate when they decided to relocate for their post-secondary studies. These included:

- Additional costs other than tuition and books (e.g. photocopying, computer printing, materials, additional reference books, library fines, etc.)
- The cost of living away from home (e.g. groceries, transportation, laundry costs, etc.)
- The higher cost of social activities in larger urban centers (e.g. going to the pub, going out for dinner, etc.)
- The need to be conscious of personal safety (several female students reported that they relied upon Safe Walk volunteers to walk them to their vehicles or transit stop)

Two students indicated that they would be returning to their home community at the end of the school year. One student was not succeeding academically and was going to work for a year and then return to school. The other student was going to enroll in a career program in a college in Northern Alberta because she wanted to be closer to her fiancé.

## **6. Suggestions for encouraging students to undertake post-secondary studies in Northern Alberta**

Students indicated that the Northern Alberta colleges needed to assume a major role in communicating these opportunities since they did not always receive accurate, timely, in-depth information from their high school counseling staff or teachers.

These students offered other suggestions including:

- Share student success stories on the web
- Share student success stories in the newspaper so parents can read them
- Keep sending the program brochures and other information to the schools (and send lots of copies)
- Make websites user-friendly and post as much program information as possible, including graduate profiles
- Continue to have college liaison officers visit the schools
- Work with the CTS teachers to encourage more school tours
- Provide cost/benefit analysis information so can compare the value of starting university studies through a college (like Grant MacEwan does)
- Publicize University Transfer rates

## **7. Student perceptions of cost of post-secondary education**

Fourteen of the original focus group participants were contacted by telephone to determine their views on the cost of post-secondary education. Those students attending the University of Alberta expressed the strongest concerns about the rising costs of tuition.

Presently, all of these students are working part-time to offset the costs of their education. The majority had started their search for summer employment in early January.

Thirteen students were receiving Student Loans. All expressed concern about their ability to repay their Student Loan at the end of their program of study, particularly if they are unable to find employment upon graduation.

When asked to recall their perceptions as high school students of the costs of post-secondary learning, respondents indicated that they were uncertain about the costs of tuition, books, etc. Most had relied upon a parent or school counselor to help them determine the cost of their education.

## **F. Parent Perspectives on Reasons for “Going South”**

In Spring 2001, parent focus groups were hosted by local contacts of the researcher in Grande Prairie and Peace River. Participants in these focus groups were parents of Grade 12 students planning to attend a “southern” post-secondary institution or parents of students who were currently attending their first year of studies in a “southern” post-secondary institution. A total of twelve parents participated in these focus groups.

Each focus group was 1.5 hours in length. Appendix C outlines the guiding questions used for these focus groups. Notes were recorded on flip chart paper that were later transcribed by the researcher and analyzed using thematic analysis.

In analyzing the data collected from the two focus groups, there were no distinctive differences in responses from the parents in the two communities.

### **1. Factors influencing your daughter/son's decision to attend a post-secondary institution in "the south"**

Parents identified a variety of factors that influenced their child's decision to attend a post-secondary institution outside Northern Alberta. The four most common reasons that parents identified were:

- Access to program of study
- Perception of quality of program of study.
- Desire to move away from home
- Desire to live in a larger urban center

For two parents, the opportunity to play on a college athletic team (supported by a scholarship) was a key determinant in their child's choice of post-secondary institution.

Parents did not think that they played a significant role in the decision making process about post-secondary studies. Typically they had greatest input into discussions about the financing of post-secondary studies. Parents thought that their children listened to their peers, the occasional teacher (although typically not the school counselor) and were impressed by some of the displays and presentations hosted by the post-secondary institutions. Relatives, or relatives of their child's peer group who "went south" to study were also considered a good source of information.

Four parents attended open houses at their local college to try to encourage their child to start post-secondary studies in their local community. All parents expressed a need for better access to information about post-secondary program choices.

### **2. Information sources used to choose a post-secondary institution**

Parents commented that the Internet was a key information tool used by their daughters/sons. A few parents were familiar with ALIS since their children had shown the web site to other siblings using their home computer.

Some parents reported that college calendars were brought home and used to help review course offerings.



### **3. Previous attendance at a post-secondary institution in Northern Alberta**

One parent reported her child had upgraded a few courses at a local college before applying to Grant MacEwan for the University Transfer Arts program. This young woman had withdrawn from her first year in a university outside of Alberta due to poor grades.

### **4. Consideration of enrolment in a Northern Alberta post-secondary institution**

About one-third of the parents participating in the focus groups expressed disappointment that their daughter/son did not consider enrolling in a Northern Alberta post-secondary institution.

Parents identified a number of perceived benefits of their children attending Northern Alberta colleges as follows:

- Lower tuition fees
- Lower cost of living (whether they live at home or move out on their own)
- Ability to continue with part-time employment
- Closer connection to family and friends
- More gradual development of independent living skills

### **5. “Second thoughts” about the decision to “move south”**

Parents whose children are currently attending post-secondary institutions outside of Northern Alberta commented that at some point they had heard their children express “second thoughts”, although for the most part these feelings were temporary.

Concerns that children had expressed included:

- Cost of tuition and books
- Experiencing difficulty ‘making ends meet’ due to higher costs of living
- Missing friends/family
- Additional costs for course supplies, photocopying, etc.
- Missing the local landscape
- Tired of institutional food and lack of access to a ‘home-cooked’ meal
- Concerns about ability to pay off Student Loan after graduation
- Concern for personal safety in a large urban environment

## **6. Suggestions for ways to encourage students to attend a Northern Alberta post-secondary institution**

In light of rising tuition costs, parents indicated that students and parents might be increasingly interested in the cost/benefit analysis of post-secondary options. While parents thought it unlikely that students ‘whose hearts are set on a university education’ would likely be attracted to a diploma career program, commencing their university studies in Northern Alberta may be an option.

Parents offered the following suggestions to increase interest in Northern Alberta post-secondary institutions:

- Promote the value of post-secondary education. In rural areas, fewer parents have completed post-secondary education and do not understand the value of this learning.
- Provide labour market information on the website that shows careers in high demand.
- Publicize the employment rates of Northern Alberta post-secondary institute graduates to a greater extent.
- Share graduate success stories.
- Provide a cost/benefit analysis of studying locally/regionally versus ‘going south’.
- Increase the awareness levels of key high school staff of Northern Alberta college program offerings.
- Continue to provide opportunities for high school students to visit the institutions, perhaps starting in the junior high years.
- Use the web to communicate promotional information.
- Run contests for free tuition.
- Promote the value of commencing university studies in an environment that is more personal with smaller class sizes.
- Publicize the quality of faculty that are instructing (profile in local news). The public often assumption is that the better quality faculty teach in the larger institutions to the south.
- Host mini-sessions about particular careers throughout the year (e.g. engineering, psychology, etc.).
- Recognize Northern Alberta college alumni for their contributions to the community.

## **7. Parent perceptions of cost of post-secondary education**

Participants in the focus groups spoke often of their concerns about the rising costs of education and the resulting rising debt load of post-secondary students/graduates. Parents participating in the focus groups said they had overestimated the costs of college and university tuition by 20 to 40 percent.

As well, parents expressed concern about the number of students who are not completing their high school diploma requirements for entry into post-secondary education during a three-year period. In their opinion, this has resulted in an increase in the number of students who are ‘stopping out’ of learning to work. For some students, this interruption in studies results in a decision not to pursue post-secondary learning.

## **G. High School Counselor Perspectives on Reasons for “Going South”**

Six high school counselors from schools in Northern Alberta responded to an e-mail survey. The questions that were included in the survey are provided in Appendix D. In a follow-up e-mail, these respondents were asked to share their perspectives on the costs of post-secondary education.

### **1. Factors influencing students’ decisions to attend a post-secondary institution in “the south”**

Counselors indicated that the attractors to “move south” varied by student. Generally, students made this decision in order to:

- Pursue a particular program of study that may or may not be available in Northern Alberta
- Ensure that they would have the best quality faculty, lab facilities and instructional technology
- Ensure that they would have a better chance at post-graduation employment

Some students left for monetary reasons such as:

- Institution had offered them an academic or athletic scholarship
- Opportunity to gain work experience in their field of study on a part-time basis in a large community

Certainly for some students the appeal of “moving south” included:

- Independence from family
- Opportunities to make new friends
- Following their boyfriend/girlfriend and/or friends
- Attraction of “big city” life

### **2. Information sources used to choose a post-secondary institution**

While counselors certainly recognized their role as a key starting point for students seeking career information, they all expressed concern that they faced limitations in this regard including:

- Lack of time to provide career educational counseling due to need to support students with higher priority counseling needs

- Lack of time to update themselves on new post-secondary programs
- Lack of time to build rapport with Northern Alberta college counseling and advising staff
- Familiarity with “southern” post-secondary institutions based on their own learning experience
- Lack of interest by other key school personnel in maintaining collection of career and educational resources

Counselors often direct students to College Course Calendars or ALIS to gain more information and would encourage them to visit the post-secondary institution they were interested in applying to.

### **3. Student awareness of Northern Alberta post-secondary institutions**

Counselors concluded that students varied in their level of awareness of Northern Alberta post-secondary institutions and suggested that this is an ongoing marketing challenge. Two counselors indicated that the quality of information and promotional materials had improved over time and that the ALIS web site has helped create “a more level playing” field for Northern and Southern Alberta colleges.

### **4. High school counselor familiarity with programs offered by Northern Alberta post-secondary institutions**

As previously mentioned, keeping up-to-date on program changes is a challenge given the conflicting, multiple priorities faced by high school counseling staff.

### **5. Suggestions for ways to encourage students to attend a Northern Alberta post-secondary institution**

High school counselors offered several suggestions including:

- Career fairs
- Site visits and Open Houses
- Brochures, posters, video clips
- Contests with prizes (like a year’s free tuition)

### **6. High school counselor perceptions of cost of post-secondary education**

Responses to this question were very limited. For the most part, counselors thought that:

- The cost of post-secondary education was rising
- Students were facing hardship due to Student Loan debt load

- Uncertain of difference in costs of college programs compared to university programs
- Referred students directly to the post-secondary institution of choice to gather information about program and associated costs

## **H. Implications of Research and Findings**

Based on this research it appears that the challenge facing Northern Alberta colleges is twofold:

- To encourage more high school graduates in the catchment area to continue on to post-secondary studies, and
- To encourage these post-secondary candidates to attend Northern Alberta colleges.

In order to achieve the greatest impact it is recommended that a multi-stream strategy be undertaken to address this challenge. Communication, awareness building and recruitment building are key elements of this strategy. These efforts will need to be directed to prospective students, parents, high school counselors and teachers and the community at large, particularly employers.

Suggestions for future actions include:

1. Increase the promotion of Northern Alberta post-secondary opportunities to prospective students, parents, high school counselors and teachers, and the community through
  - Brochures, posters, video clips, site visits, open houses, career fairs, mini-sessions about particular careers throughout the year (e.g. engineering, psychology, etc.).
2. Increase partnership activities with local schools by
  - Providing career information at Division 2 elementary, junior high and high school levels
  - Hosting forums for high school and college counseling/advising staff to interact
  - Hosting joint professional development activities that focus on labour market trends and how Northern Alberta colleges are responding to these areas of high demand and skills shortages.

3. Raise awareness of the quality of Northern Alberta college programs and graduates (diploma programs, applied degrees, University Transfer, etc.) by
  - Publicizing the employment rates of Northern Alberta post-secondary institute graduates to a greater extent
  - Sharing graduate success stories (on the web, in local newspapers, etc.)
  - Publicizing University Transfer rates of entry into third year at Universities
  - Recognizing Northern Alberta college alumni for their contributions to the community
  - Publicizing the quality of faculty that are instructing (profile in local news).
4. Continue to develop incentives to attract students including:
  - More scholarships and bursaries for students to remain in the North
  - More athletic scholarships
  - Contests for free tuition for a year
5. Continue to work with the community, especially employers to
  - Raise awareness of the quality of graduates
  - Secure support for work placements,
  - Secure support for scholarships, bursaries, capital equipment, etc.
6. Raise awareness of the costs and benefits of post-secondary learning by
  - Providing a cost/benefit analysis of studying locally/regionally versus 'going south'.
  - Providing cost/benefit analysis information so can compare the value of starting university studies through a college.
  - Promoting the value of post-secondary education. In rural areas, fewer parents have completed post-secondary education and do not understand the value of this learning.

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**Table A - Grant MacEwan College Student Focus Group**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Program of Study</b>	<b>Year in Program</b>	<b>Previous Post-Secondary Studies in Northern Alberta</b>
male	19	UT Commerce	1 <sup>st</sup>	none
male	18	UT Commerce	1 <sup>st</sup>	none
female	24	Public Relations	1 <sup>st</sup>	none
female	22	UT Science	1 <sup>st</sup>	none
female	19	Music	2 <sup>nd</sup>	none
male	19	Law Enforcement	1 <sup>st</sup>	none
female	22	Child and Youth Care	1 <sup>st</sup>	none
male	22	Management Studies	2 <sup>nd</sup>	none
female	19	Management Studies	1 <sup>st</sup>	none
female	19	Fine Arts	1 <sup>st</sup>	none

**Table B – Northern Alberta Institute of Technology Student Focus Group**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Program of Study</b>	<b>Year in Program</b>	<b>Previous Post-Secondary Studies in Northern Alberta</b>
male	19	Biological Sciences Technology	1 <sup>st</sup> year	none
female	22	Animal Health Technology	1 <sup>st</sup> year	none
female	19	Computer Systems Technology – Co-op	2 <sup>nd</sup> year	none
male	19	Engineering Design & Drafting Technology	1 <sup>st</sup> year	none
male	18	Business Admin. - Finance	1 <sup>st</sup> year	none
male	20	Petroleum Engineering Technology	1 <sup>st</sup> year	none
male	24	Apprenticeship - Electrician	-3 <sup>rd</sup> period	none
male	25	Apprenticeship - Boilermaker	-3 <sup>rd</sup> period	Academic Upgrading
male	19	Business Admin.	1 <sup>st</sup> year	none
male	20	Chemical Engineering Technology	1 <sup>st</sup> year	none

**Table C – University of Alberta Student Focus Group**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Program of Study</b>	<b>Year in Program</b>	<b>Previous Post-Secondary Studies in Northern Alberta</b>
male	25	Medicine	2 <sup>nd</sup>	some UT science
female	22	Education	4 <sup>th</sup>	none
female	26	Education	4 <sup>th</sup>	secretarial
male	19	Computing Science	1 <sup>st</sup>	none
female	22	Law	1 <sup>st</sup>	none
male	19	Physical Education	1 <sup>st</sup>	none
male	19	Engineering	1 <sup>st</sup>	none
male	18	Engineering	1 <sup>st</sup>	none

**Guiding Questions - Student Focus Groups**

1. What factors influenced your decision to attend a post-secondary institution in “the south”?
2. What sources of information did you use to help make your decision about which post-secondary institution to attend?
3. Have you previously attended a Northern Alberta post-secondary institution?
4. Did you at any point in your career investigation consider attending a Northern Alberta post-secondary institution?
5. Do you have any “second thoughts” about your decision to “move south” to attend a post-secondary institution?
6. Do you have any suggestions for ways to encourage students to attend a Northern Alberta post-secondary institution?

**Guiding Questions - Parent Focus Groups**

1. In your opinion what factors influenced your daughter/son's decision to attend a post-secondary institution in "the south"?

Were you actively involved with this decision-making process?

2. What sources of information did you and/or your daughter/son use to help make the decision about which post-secondary institution to attend?

3. Did your daughter/son previously attend a Northern Alberta post-secondary institution?

4. Did your daughter/son at any point in her/his career investigation consider attending a Northern Alberta post-secondary institution?

5. Do you or your daughter/son have any "second thoughts" about the decision to "move south" to attend a post-secondary institution?

6. Do you have any suggestions for ways to encourage students to attend a Northern Alberta post-secondary institution?

**Guiding Questions – High School Counselor E-mail Survey**

1. In your opinion what factors influence your students' decisions to attend a post-secondary institution in "the south"?

Are you involved with this decision-making process?

2. What sources of information do students use to help make the decision about which post-secondary institution to attend?

3. In your opinion, are students aware of the programs available at Northern Alberta post-secondary institutions?

4. Are you familiar with the programs available at Northern Alberta post-secondary institutions?

5. Do you have any suggestions for ways to attract students to Northern Alberta post-secondary institutions?