A Mixed Methods Exploration of Students' Experiences of Taking Part in a Tuition Assistance Program in Rural Alberta, Canada

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This paper reports on the experiences of rural students taking part in the Zero Fee Tuition program—a postsecondary tuition assistance program providing up to $5,000 in tuition subsidies for students residing in Drayton Valley, Alberta, Canada. Zero Fee Tuition was introduced by the Town of Drayton Valley in 2019 as a rural development initiative focused on attracting and retaining postsecondary education students. Here, we present a qualitatively oriented mixed methods study of interview, focus group, and survey data collected with 24 Zero Fee Tuition students in 2021–2022 as part of a broader community-based participatory research project. This paper explores two overarching themes: (a) facing opportunities and challenges throughout zero-fee tuition education and (b) shifting the culture of education and training in Drayton Valley. Our results suggest that students' experiences were heavily shaped by the gendered care work they undertake in addition to, and as part of, their paid work and studies. Further, the Zero Fee Tuition program provided many students the first opportunity to attend a postsecondary education program. In this way, our findings suggest that Zero Fee Tuition is working toward its goal of expanding educational opportunities for residents of Drayton Valley. We discuss our findings within a rural oil-based town shaped by a boom-bust economy. Despite the positive contributions of the Zero Fee Tuition program, our analysis demonstrates the persistence of social structural conditions that impact the challenges faced by participants in this study.

Keywords: tuition assistance programs; rural postsecondary education; student experiences; mixed methods; community-based participatory research; Canada

Rural towns in Canada are increasingly seeking to develop and implement innovative strategies to retain and attract residents. Such strategies include creating job opportunities (Halseth et al., 2016) and increasing access to postsecondary education and training opportunities, acknowledging that many people living in Canadian rural areas

have difficulty accessing these opportunities without moving to larger urban centres (Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016). This paper focuses on the Town of Drayton Valley's (DV) actions to expand residents' access to postsecondary education as part of broader rural development efforts.

DV became a town in 1957 following the discovery of nearby oil reserves. The city is located in the western Canadian province of Alberta, about 130 km from the nearest major urban centre (Edmonton), with a population of 6,970 (Statistics Canada, 2021). The dominant industry in DV is oil and gas, which employs a large portion of the population. Resource-dependent towns like DV are often subject to boom-and-bust cycles, which create increased demand for workers offering lucrative employment, followed by high unemployment and out-migration (Emery & Kneebone, 2013; Höltge et al., 2021).

In response to the most recent bust period, DV Town Council sanctioned the Zero Fee Tuition (ZFT) program in December 2018 as a rural development initiative intended to diversify the local economy, retain and attract new residents, and improve residents' quality of life (Town of Drayton Valley, 2023). ZFT funding recipients can enroll in any credentialed program through the University of Alberta's Faculty of Extension, Northern Lakes College, Health Care Aide (HCA) Academy, and Delmar College. Except for the HCA program, program options are offered remotely. One goal of the ZFT program is to develop a more diverse workforce by reskilling residents looking to train for new higher-paying careers in alternative and emerging industries. The first cohort of ZFT students began their programs in January 2020, with each participant receiving tuition funding for the first year of their program. Per student funding was subsequently capped at $5,000 to enhance the sustainability of ZFT. The Town of DV provided most of the funding, with an initial investment of $250,000. Other funding came from local industry and community groups.

The qualitatively oriented mixed methods (QOMM) study (Poth & Shannon-Baker, 2022) described in this paper is part of a larger community-based participatory research (CBPR) project and examines the ZFT program in partnership with DV elected officials and administration (Ferdinands et al., 2024; Ormandy et al., 2023). For students taking part, DV partners wanted to understand better how the program worked or did not work. Thus, this paper aims to explore students' experiences in the ZFT program and analyze the initial impacts of ZFT on students.

In the following section of this paper, we connect two relevant bodies of research: literature on 1) rural development and 2) tuition assistance programs for postsecondary education programming. Next, we describe our research methods. We then present and situate the results of our analysis in relation to broader rural education and development literature.

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Literature Review

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Rural Development Initiatives

Provincial and federal governments have increasingly asked rural municipalities to implement economic development initiatives (Hallstrom, 2018; Halseth et al., 2017; Ryser et al., 2019). In this context, the actions of rural municipalities and small towns in Alberta have been shaped by political and economic austerity (Hallstrom, 2023). This has resulted in the "downloading of responsibilities" from higher levels of government onto rural municipalities, straining the limited resources of small, rural communities (Gibson & Dale, 2022, p. 177). In particular, towns with economies dominated by a single resource have undertaken development initiatives to diversify their economy to improve residents' job opportunities and quality of life. Some such initiatives include marketing towns as retirement locations (Sullivan et al., 2014), developing new infrastructure, including recreation facilities, green energy facilities, and rural connectivity infrastructure (Meredith et al., 2016), and population mobilization to preserve community history and identity (Moore et al., 2023). Additionally, Halseth et al. (2016) note that these development initiatives, education-focused or otherwise, are difficult to maintain in a boom-bust economy, where support for new and creative initiatives tends to wane in economic boom times.

Education initiatives are another promising, albeit underutilized, approach for rural municipalities to spur economic development and diversification (Beckley & Reimer, 1999; Liu et al., 2020). However, there often needs to be more connection between rural development and education policy in North America (Corbett, 2014; Schafft, 2016). Hillman's (2016) concept of education deserts, wherein marginalized populations have constrained access to postsecondary education, is relevant to this study. Hillman (2016) found that class and race were key factors limiting geographical access to postsecondary education in the United States. In a Canadian context, rural sociologists have found that residents in northern communities experience the greatest lack of access to postsecondary institutions (Zarifa et al., 2018). Moreover, in rural and remote communities, opportunities for skilled work are further constrained. This means many graduates leave their communities to move to larger cities or do not return to their communities after leaving to pursue education (Sano et al., 2020).

Postsecondary Tuition Assistance Programs

Since the early 2000s, no-cost and low-cost tuition programs have been trialed to varying degrees in Canada, predominantly in relatively less wealthy maritime provinces, which typically have higher unemployment rates (Government of Canada, 2020). Such programs have primarily been provincially driven and funded. From 2016 to 2019, New Brunswick offered a free tuition program that provided bursaries for students studying in

a postsecondary program whose gross family income was less than $60,000 annually (Government of New Brunswick, 2016). Students could receive up to $10,000 annually if studying at a university or $5,000 annually if studying at a community college for up to four years. Approximately 6,000 students benefited from this program in the 2017–2018 school year (Trottier, 2019). New Brunswick's free tuition program was ultimately canceled following a change in provincial government. In Nova Scotia, tuition waiver programs were introduced in 2020 for former youth in care to attend postsecondary education (Chisholm, 2022). Waivers are available to eligible study recipients; however, limited spots are available. At Dalhousie University, the largest university in Nova Scotia, 10 waivers are available for eligible recipients (Dalhousie, n.d.). Finally, the Atlantic province of Newfoundland and Labrador claims to have Canada's most generous student financial support system. The province's current Debt Reduction Grant Program may convert up to the total amount of a student's provincial student loan into a non-repayable grant after graduation (Newfoundland and Labrador, n.d.-a). The province also offers a Tuition Relief Grant Program to low- and middle-income students attending the province's largest university, Memorial University, providing up to $3,450 per year in non-repayable grants (Newfoundland and Labrador, n.d.-b).

Similar programs exist in the United States (Custer & Akaeze, 2021; Davidson et al., 2018; Gahagan et al., 2023). Numerous researchers have examined Promise programs, which states or private philanthropists typically fund. The "promise" name comes from the Kalamazoo Promise program, founded in 2005, which promises that students who "meet the basic requirements will receive up to 100% of tuition and mandatory fees paid for at any in-state public community college or university" (Kalamazoo Promise, n.d.). Promise programs have various characteristics—some require students to continue working in the state where they attended school for some time post-graduation, other programs provide funding for a limited number of terms, and some provide a maximum dollar amount to students (Perna & Leigh, 2018). Some Promise programs have been shown to improve postsecondary student retention and graduation rates (Pluhta & Penny, 2013), improve high school graduation rates (Carruthers & Fox, 2016), and increase postsecondary education enrollment for students from low-income families (Andrews et al., 2010). These programs are typically state-driven or, occasionally, driven by a particular postsecondary institution. In this way, many Promise programs differ from the municipally driven ZFT program. Promise programs do, however, share a central characteristic of ZFT and rural development initiatives more broadly: they are place-based. This focus is designed to foster local economic development and increase economic diversification in towns that have dealt with issues related to youth out-migration, a decreasing tax base, and a perceived lack of opportunities for employment and education (Miller-Adams, 2015).

Theoretical Framework

This paper draws on a systems change perspective, interpreting a social system as a "set of actors, activities, and settings that are directly or indirectly perceived to have an influence in or be affected by a given problem situation" (Foster-Fishman et al., 2007, p. 198). Here, we approach ZFT as a social systems strategy to address complex community-level problems in DV, such as out-migration (Mongeon et al., 2023). The paper is also informed by key CBPR principles, including valuing multiple kinds of knowledge, building local research capacity, establishing a sense of mutual reciprocity and trust, and inviting community stakeholders to participate in all aspects of the research process (Cargo & Mercer, 2008; Israel et al., 1998; Minkler, 2004; Wallerstein & Duran, 2006). In alignment with a CBPR approach, we view participants as experts in their experiences and appreciate their experiential knowledge as rural residents enrolled in a postsecondary education tuition assistance program. A constructivist epistemology and ontology underpin these theoretical perspectives, wherein findings are co-created with participants, and multiple perceptions of reality are specific, local, and co-constructed (Lincoln et al., 2011).

Methodology

Informed by the above literature, we aimed to learn whether and how the ZFT program could impact students and, more widely, contribute to community development. We used a QOMM research design (Poth & Shannon-Baker, 2022). QOMM takes qualitative data at its core and supplements it with quantitative data to better understand the phenomenon under study (Johnson et al., 2007; Morse & Cheek, 2015). Tashakkori et al. (2020) recommend a constructivist paradigm when conducting QOMM research to ensure methodological coherence. Quantitative data enriched study participants' descriptions and added supporting details to our thematic analysis (Morse, 1991; Poth & Shannon Baker, 2022). Using purposive sampling, we invited, via email, all past and present ZFT students (n = 42) to participate in 1) surveys and 2) individual interviews or focus groups. Of these 42 students, 24 participated in a survey and an individual interview or focus group. Participants received a $30 honorarium at each point of data collection. Recruitment was facilitated through our relationships with town councilors and administration and by hiring a local community engagement research assistant. Community partners were involved in the design of data collection tools but were not involved in data collection or analysis to preserve participant confidentiality. This study received ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board.

Between August 2021 and May 2022, we conducted one-on-one interviews with ten individuals who studied in ZFT programs. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, while some interviews were conducted in person, others were conducted virtually. Interviews ranged from 8-45 minutes, with an average length of approximately half an hour. Some interview participants (n = 6) had graduated from their programs within the last year, others (n = 3)

were interviewed just before graduation, and one participant had a year left in her program when interviewed. Interview participants studied for business administration, HCA, and office administration certifications. Interview questions were designed to explore students' experiences—both positive and negative—of participating in the ZFT program and to uncover any impacts the program had on their personal and professional lives. Questions such as the following were asked: what were your plans and goals after high school? Have those changed since participating in the ZFT program? How has living in DV influenced your education and work opportunities? What influences your decision-making regarding whether you will stay in DV?

In March and April 2022, we conducted three in-person focus groups with 14 participants, all identified as women and studied in an HCA program through ZFT. In March, one focus group was conducted with all 14 participants. After a preliminary analysis of the participants' varying program experiences due to their age, participants took part in another focus group in April. This time, participants were divided into older participants (over 30) and younger participants (under 30), resulting in two smaller groups of seven. Focus groups were facilitated by a research team member, with at least one additional researcher present for notetaking. Focus group questions were designed to clarify preliminary interview findings and unpack the potentially gendered experiences of the ZFT program. For example, we asked participants how they balanced their roles and responsibilities at home, such as being their children's primary caregiver while simultaneously pursuing postsecondary studies.

Interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim using transcription software, and transcripts were edited and checked for accuracy by a research team member. Qualitative data analysis followed a six-phase reflexive thematic analysis approach—familiarization, coding, theme development, refining, naming, and writing up (Braun et al., 2016; Braun & Clarke, 2019). Data analysis was organized using Dedoose software (Dedoose, n.d.). All textual data were coded for relevance to our research question, and themes were developed and refined through collaborative discussion with the research team. Pseudonyms identify all participants.

In addition to qualitative data collection, ZFT students were invited to participate in an online survey. This survey, developed in Alchemer (2023), captured demographic information and included questions about program participation, employment, stress, hope, and community belonging. Descriptive statistics were calculated from these survey data. We used multiple verification strategies throughout the research process to achieve rigor, such as collecting and analyzing data concurrently (Mayan, 2023). We regularly consulted with community partners through formal and informal communications (e.g., emails, texts, telephone check-ins, in-person conversations). As a means of member checking, we solicited and incorporated feedback from community partners and participants regarding preliminary findings (Mayan, 2023).

Data collection and analysis were shaped by researcher and participant positionalities. Five interviews were conducted by a team member who had lived in DV for more than 30 years, but the remaining interviews and focus groups were conducted by team members who had never lived in DV. As Banack (2021) notes, researchers associated with large urban institutions can be viewed with skepticism by some participants who deem the researchers as outsiders to the rural community. Our CBPR approach to the research design, data collection, and analysis considered these sentiments. Additionally, five research team members, all women, conducted interviews and focus groups, each with differing educational and professional backgrounds and training. Thus, our different approaches to interviewing and focus group facilitation shaped data collection (Braun & Clarke, 2023).

Results

We developed two main themes: first, facing opportunities and challenges throughout a ZFT education, and second, shifting the culture of education and training in DV. Table 1 contains descriptive statistics from survey data about age, length of residence in DV, and income. Table 2 contains further details about participants, including gender, ethnicity, and program of study. Gender and ethnicity options included in the survey followed Datapedia, a document PolicyWise (n.d.) produced guiding the collection of ethnicity data in Canada. The number of responses (n) does not always amount to the total sample size ($n = 24$) because some participants skipped some survey questions.

Table 1

Participants' Age, Length of Residence in DV, and Income (n = 24)

Indicator	n	Mean	SD
Age	24	33.75 years	11.2
Years lived in DV	22	21.1 years	12.7
Household income	22	$73,955	$40,515
Participant income	23	$20,039	$10,338

Hours of paid work/week	24	29 hrs/wk	17.9
Hourly wage	24	$17.60/hr	$2.60/hr

Table 2

Participants' Gender, Ethnicity, and Program of Study (n = 24)

Parameter	Category	n
Gender	Woman	23
	Man	1
Ethnicity	Black	1
	Indigenous	1
	White	18
	South Asian	1
	Multiple ethnicities	3
Program of Study	Health Care Aide	17
	Business Administration	4
	Office Administration	2
	Occupational Health & Safety	1

Theme 1: **Facing Opportunities and Challenges Throughout a ZFT Education**

Throughout our one-on-one and focus group interviews, participants shared insights into the experiences that led to their enrolment in a ZFT program, the education itself, and—for those who had graduated—their experiences after their education. Here, we share these experiences, focusing on areas of opportunity and difficulties ZFT students face. Theme 1 is organized into four subthemes: (a) managing care work and schoolwork, (b) mitigating risk, (c) offering a stepping stone to an end goal, and (d) creating optimism for the future.

Subtheme 1: Managing Care Work and School Work.

Most participants were young or middle-aged women engaged in various paid and unpaid activities under care work. Of 24 participants, 17 (70.8%) were enrolled in an HCA training program. The HCA training program has been the most popular and successful in attracting students to the ZFT program, partly due to the many job opportunities available in DV and elsewhere upon graduation. HCAs work in hospitals, assisted living facilities, and other healthcare facilities. In Canada, HCA roles include a range of care-oriented tasks such as "bathing, dressing, [and] meal preparation" and have expanded over time to "include delegated acts . . . such as catheterization and injection" (Berta et al., 2013, p. 2). In addition to paid roles, participants also cared for their children, adult children with disabilities, grandchildren, or elderly parents. Of 24 participants, 13 were the primary caregiver for a child 17 years of age or younger, and five were the primary caregiver for someone 18 or older.

Some participants, like Trudy, were returning to paid work after many years of being a stay-at-home parent: "Okay, so I got pregnant. And we got married. And we had a family. We had more children. I was home with the kids for many years." Although this was not the case for all participants, most agreed that this was a typical life course in DV, where women stayed home with their children, and their partners worked in well-paid but unstable jobs in the oil and gas industry.

Other participants worked in paid care work positions before starting their ZFT education. Tammy, for example,

> was a respite worker for kids with disabilities, and now I am a Disability Support Worker. However, the pay is crap. I could go flip burgers at McDonald's and make just as much as I'm making by looking after human beings.

Despite the low pay, Tammy explained how she stuck with this work because she found it enjoyable and rewarding.

Although the ZFT program covered a sizable portion of tuition costs—which was very helpful for participants, as discussed below—it did not provide funds to cover other

costs associated with the program (e.g., first aid training and books) or living expenses. As such, many participants had to continue working long hours at low-wage jobs while pursuing their education *and* doing the unpaid care work generally expected of them. When discussing this social context in a focus group, Anna stated, "We [women] do the grunt work all the time."

Survey results indicated a significant disparity between household income and participants' income. Average household income was more than triple the average participant income (Table 1). Most participants (*n* = 16, 66.7%) were not the primary income earner in their family; the remainder of the participants either contributed equally to household income (*n* = 2, 8.3%) or were the primary income earner (*n* = 6, 25%). The average hourly wage for survey participants was $17.60/hour (Table 1), lower than the living wage marker of $19.55 for DV (Alberta Living Wage Network, 2023).

Participants, particularly those studying to be HCAs, identified strongly with the importance of their paid and unpaid care work. When asked about her life and career plans, Margaret answered, "I always pictured myself in the healthcare field." Marie and Diana had grown up visiting their mother and grandmother's workplaces, respectively, where they were nurses at nearby healthcare facilities. This influenced Marie and Diana to pursue healthcare-oriented careers. Overall, for many participants, the desire to care for others was meaningful in choosing a career path.

We asked focus group participants about the relationship between women, care work, and low pay in DV. Francine responded:

> I am one of those [where] at the end of the day I don't want to come home and say, "I made $200 today." I want to say, "I had a really good day at work today." Right? Like I want to get up in the morning and go to work and feel like you made a difference.

To Francine, doing meaningful work was just as, if not more, important than how much money she made.

While participants identified strongly with their care work, many also challenged the ways their time and labour were exploited and undervalued, explaining how this work was highly gendered. For instance, an HCA student, Joyce, stated:

> to be paid so little and treated so low, it's like you just feel unappreciated. I was working like 20 days with no day off, literally pulling overtime, but not getting paid overtime. Working every free available time that I could work, I was working for the last two and a half years and we still didn't make enough money. And that's when I got frustrated because I was like, I'm literally killing myself and we're not even close to making enough money.

Throughout the interviews and focus groups, many participants critiqued how they were exploited at work and overworked.

In the boom-and-bust context of the DV economy, many participants, like Joyce, had experienced extended spells as their family's primary income earner while their husbands were unemployed. Another woman, Stephanie, had similar frustrations working at a day home:

> During COVID I was the breadwinner of my family. And worked full time overtime, six, seven days a week, [for] a year and a half, right. And my husband went back to work in the oil field and in three months made more than I did in an entire year. And that was devastating because that whole year that I suffered during COVID, to pay bills and struggled and he just went back to work for three months and literally made more than I did in a year.

A significant reason for creating the ZFT program was to provide DV residents with the education and training required to secure steady, well-paid employment. Unfortunately, women like Stephanie, who accessed the HCA program, remain in a feminized industry where well-paying employment is difficult to attain.

Subtheme 2: Mitigating Risk

Participants consistently informed us that without the financial support from ZFT, they would not have been able to enroll in their program of study. For example, Allison, who had previously considered enrolling in a postsecondary education program, stated: "I wanted to go back to school regardless. Without zero tuition, I would not have been able to go back. I guess I was motivated to go back. The zero tuition program just allowed me to do it."

Another student, Jane, explained how she *could* afford a postsecondary education program but that ZFT funding still helped her and her family make the transition to full-time studies more manageable. Importantly, ZFT funding was not means-tested in any way. If a prospective student had a residential DV address, they were eligible for ZFT funding. For Jane, this funding, while not necessary for completing her postsecondary education, assisted her with her education regardless.

ZFT also helped reduce the risks of enrolling in a full-time, two-year postsecondary education program. One participant, Sylvia, had a previous postsecondary education that left her in debt but did not result in a job in her field. Following this negative experience, Sylvia would have "just taken [n] whatever job I [could] get. Because I'm $16,000 in debt for [an office administration] course that I'm not using working at [minimum wage job]." Receiving $5,000 in funding from ZFT drastically reduced Sylvia's risk of returning to postsecondary education. Overall, ZFT "opened some doors" (Jane) for participants to enroll in a postsecondary education or training program because of the reduced tuition

cost.

Subtheme 3: Offering A Steppingstone to an End Goal

For many participants, pursuing and completing their ZFT education program was not only something they did to get a job but also an opportunity to pursue a personal goal. Almost three quarters (*n* = 17) of participants enrolled in a ZFT program to expand their employment opportunities and options (Fig. 1). Other reasons for enrolling in a ZFT program included a desire to secure a better-paying job (*n* = 16), a career transition (*n* = 11), and looking for more stable employment (*n* = 9). Before taking their ZFT program, participants worked primarily in service industry jobs, including health care (*n* = 8), food services and accommodation (*n* = 5), or other service industry roles (*n* = 7).
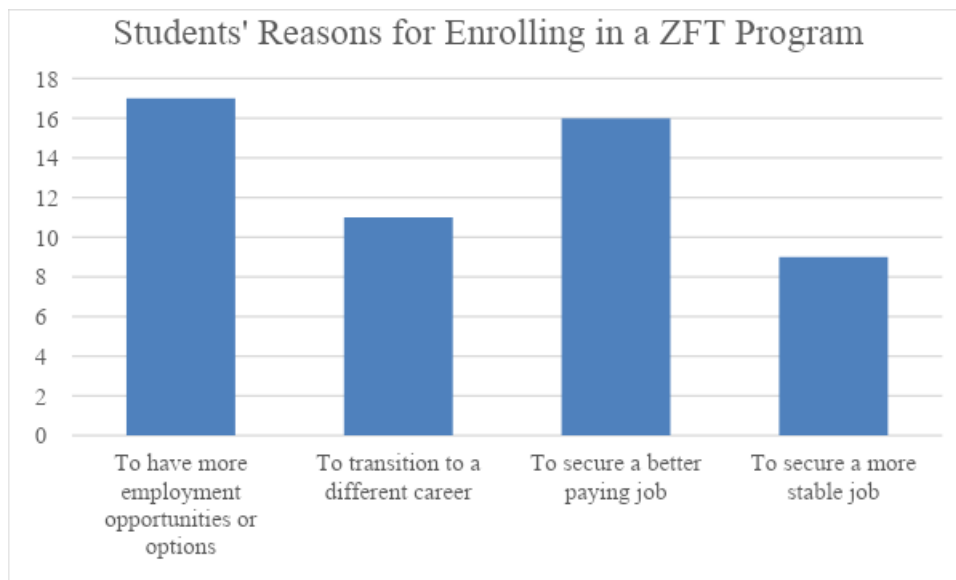

Figure 1. Participants' reasons for enrolling in a ZFT program (*n* = 24)

Most participants were taking their first postsecondary program through ZFT. One-third (*n* = 8) had completed some previous postsecondary education or training. Many participants had plans to pursue further credentials immediately after their ZFT program or viewed their ZFT program as a first step in their long-term educational and career goals. For example, Joan, who completed a business administration program, developed her skills to start her own business. Receiving the ZFT funding meant Joan could "work a little bit and then go to school. If it wouldn't have been for that, [she] would have had to take the two years [instead of one year to finish the program.]" Joan's education helped her to achieve her personal goal of starting her own business.

Additionally, her long-term plan aligned with the Town's goals for ZFT. Specifically, these include promoting economic diversification and creating new business and employment opportunities for residents. Other participants reported enjoying courses and learning new skills so much that they planned to do subsequent courses and

certifications. For example, Allison hoped to transition from a labourer to an administrative role. When we interviewed her, she was studying in an office administration program through ZFT and had plans to "transition into business admin. And then from there, I'm hoping to transition into HR . . . I have a plan, hoping it will come to fruition." The ZFT program helped her plan and achieve her future career goals.

Dawn, who was studying to be an HCA, wanted to pursue further education in the same field, partly to get a higher-paying job and partly because she was enjoying her education:

> This is a steppingstone for me to get there . . . Get a feel of it and know if I still want to finish it, which I really do . . . I'm enjoying it. And I may not end right here but I already think I will take the LPN [licensed practical nursing] program.

HCA students like Dawn viewed future career laddering into licensed practical nursing or registered nursing programs as promising pathways. In this way, the ZFT program was an important steppingstone for continuing to advance their careers.

However, ZFT is a relatively new initiative (established in 2019) that entailed forming new partnerships between the Town of DV and various postsecondary institutions. As such, there were some initial logistical barriers to helping students achieve their goals. For instance, Helen could not complete her education and pursue her goal of working in healthcare. She completed all her coursework and training to become an HCA, except a required practicum. She was not able to complete her practicum and was unable to graduate:

> They moved the practicum date, the practicum location to not DV. So that kind of ruined the point of being able to do schooling in DV. I don't drive and they moved the practicum to somewhere . . . And when I brought up, I can't go there. Everyone involved was like, well, you can get an Airbnb, or you can do this. And they didn't really understand that I took the program because I didn't have much money. . . . So I think if they keep doing it, they should make the practicums, if possible, in DV.

Helen expanded on her frustrations: "The education would have been beneficial because there are so many job opportunities and room for advancement in my field. And I think I would have had a lot of really cool job opportunities."

In other instances, some students were confused about the financial support they would receive. These students understood the "Zero Fee" name to mean they would not have to pay tuition. However, the $5,000 provided by ZFT is sometimes insufficient to cover the total cost of tuition. One such student explained, "It's been very stressful to apply for funding, not knowing whether or not the outcome will be positive. I didn't expect

to pay all the money we've paid or be stressed about whether or not bursary applications will be accepted." While most participants' goals were facilitated, this was not the case for every participant. Some of these issues can be resolved through program administration, while others, such as limited employment opportunities in rural towns, are more difficult to overcome.

Subtheme 4: Creating Optimism for the Future

Participants told us that participating in the ZFT program significantly improved their lives. Some participants' income levels rose substantially due to their education and training. Rachel was comfortably able to support herself with her new job. After asking her how her life is different since having completed the ZFT program, she responded:

> *Rachel*: Mostly, it's just that I have a real job. I was nannying, but I don't think I made minimum wage. I have enough money to support myself now. I don't have to live with roommates. I am married, but before I got married, I was living by myself.
>
> *Interviewer*: When you say a "real job," what do you think constitutes a real job?
>
> *Rachel*: I don't really know. I guess it's more stable. It was kind of back and forth. I could nanny for a few years, but then the kids are gonna grow up. This way, I can, you know, stay at this job for 40 years.

Rachel was earning more money and feeling more confident and secure about her long-term employment prospects because of her education. Survey results similarly suggest that participants found their ZFT education relevant to their career goals and would help them advance their careers. For example, 20 of 24 participants (83.3%) agreed or strongly agreed that they had better employment prospects because of their ZFT education (Fig. 2).

Other participants nearing the end of their education or had recently graduated but not yet found a job still experienced a confidence boost. Roger was "incentivized to go out and start applying for those… jobs [he] had always been thinking about."

Likewise, Allison explained that she enjoyed her work more since completing her education. Although she was working at the same job, she had a raise and:

> a lot more responsibilities at work, which is a good thing. Because that's what I was looking for. I actually learned quite a bit in it [office administration certificate]. So it has affected my life a lot. It's made me more efficient at work.

Many participants told us that they were planning to stay in DV long-term because of familial connections to the area. Anna was optimistic that upon completing her education and attaining a higher paying job, her husband could have a job that enabled

him to stay in DV, and their family could spend more time together: "I believe my situation will change because at least then I'll be providing a decent income. So then, hopefully, my husband wouldn't necessarily have to take a job where he's out of town." Having the opportunity to live close to extended family was extremely important to participants who wanted to stay in DV. Anna identified one way that, individually, this problem could be solved for her family due to her ZFT education.
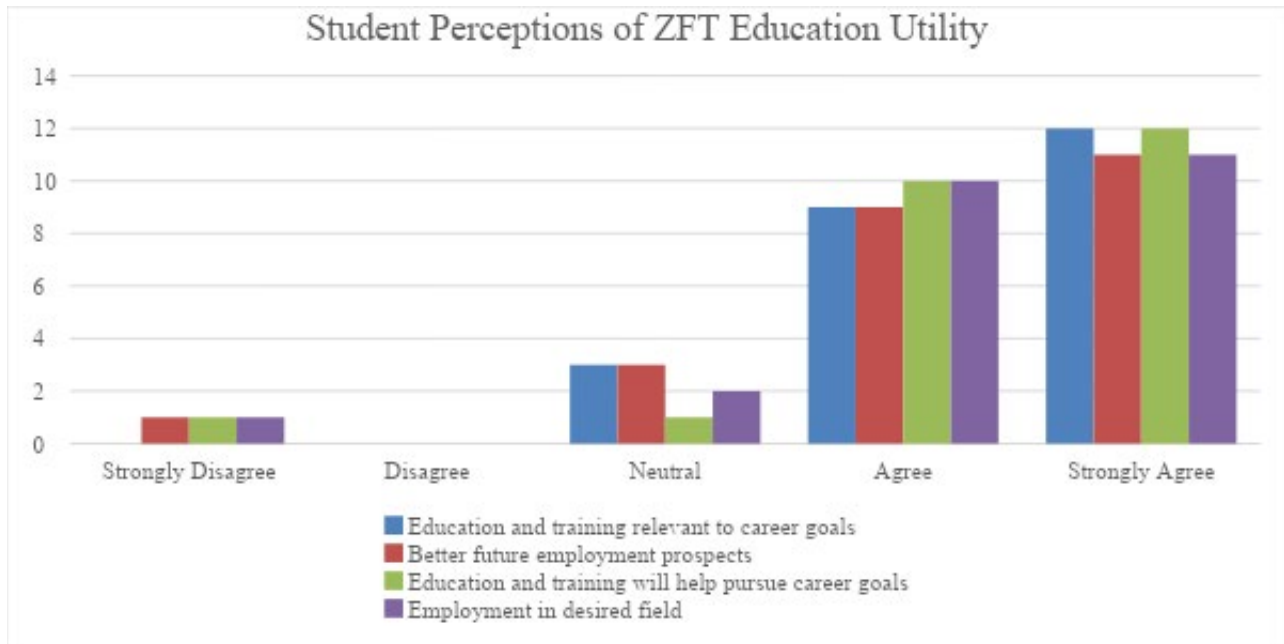

Figure 2. Agreement with the utility of education in the ZFT program (n = 24)

Theme 2: Shifting the Culture of Education and Training in DV

The ZFT program is part of the town's broader efforts to change DV's education landscape. Participants consistently identified the lack of local education opportunities as a longstanding issue for them and their families. In this theme, we discuss how participants explained the context of education in the town, from their youth to the present, and how they understand some of the changes in their lives and educational experiences resulting from their participation in ZFT.

Subtheme 1: Taking Diverse Educational Routes to ZFT

Participants indicated three main educational routes that brought them to their ZFT program of choice. First, some participants had previously started a postsecondary education program but had not completed it. For example, Jane did not finish her previous program due to difficulties with scheduling other aspects of her life:

> Right out of high school, I was in the [postsecondary program] at [college]. And then I did not finish that. . . . And then we ended up having our daughter, so I'm kind of just picking up where I left off, just eight years later.

Cost was also a factor. Another participant, Rachel, had previously been accepted to programs at multiple postsecondary institutions but "just didn't want to spend the money."

Second, eight participants had previous training or education but either did not find full-time work in the field they had trained in or no longer wanted to continue working in that field. For example, one focus group participant, Caroline, held a four-year degree but no longer wished to work in that field because it was "the shits right now. So this [ZFT] is another opportunity to help people still." Her ZFT program allowed her to pursue a new career while remaining in a "helping" field.

Third, most participants previously had no concrete plans to attend a postsecondary program before hearing about ZFT. The most common reason was cost: "I wanted to go to school out of high school, I wanted to go in for [postsecondary program] anyways. But it wasn't affordable at that moment in my life" (Faye). Other participants identified DV's lack of postsecondary options: "There's not really much for college options in Drayton. I think that's a barrier" (Jennifer). Many participants identified a lack of encouragement to pursue education, especially for girls and young women attending high school. Anna discussed how she and her peers were often typecast as those who would or would not participate in university from an early age:

> It was very divided when I was in high school. You had the people who already knew that they are going to be in trades. They didn't work well in school. So like even guidance counsellors would kind of put them in [an apprenticeship] program already. "Take this, take this," but anyone who they already knew was smart enough, or determined enough to go to university, they're like, you're kind of on this side of the school. You're going to take these courses.

Similarly, some participants felt they lacked guidance on education and career paths both at home and school:

> *Interviewer*: Did you have a vision of when you were in grade, say like, 10, 11, 12? What you wanted to do afterward?
>
> *Betty:* No, no, I had no guidance.
>
> *Interviewer*: So within the school context, there wasn't anyone to really—
>
> *Betty:* There was, but I didn't have a lot of guidance at home. So I was skipping. And like, I literally had no idea.

Although most participants voiced similar experiences around a lack of guidance, one participant, Joan, who returned to complete her high school education as an adult, was strongly encouraged by a well-known and liked teacher to pursue further education specifically through ZFT.

> *Joan*: I was taking my high school. I was like, okay what can I take to get into this accounting program? [Teacher] was like, well we can do this and this.
>
> *Interviewer*: Was it [teacher's name]?
>
> *Joan*: He's amazing.

Participants then had varied prior experiences with education from the lead-up to beginning their ZFT-funded programs. In many cases, participants directly linked their experiences to the context of growing up in a small town with relatively limited postsecondary education opportunities.

Subtheme 2: Encouraging and Inspiring Others to Pursue Education

Many participants indicated either a longstanding or a newly developed passion for education. As a result, these participants hoped to inspire or had already inspired others in their lives to pursue educational opportunities. Stephanie hoped to be a role model for her children:

> Me continuing with my education, I'm hoping that setting an example for my children that no matter at what age, you can still carry on and pursue something. Because right now they're at the stage where it's like, school is boring.

Some participants, like Stephanie, were concerned that their children might become apathetic about education as they grew up. These participants viewed their ZFT education as not just their educational attainment but possibly increasing the chances that their children would also pursue postsecondary education. Tammy also inspired her daughter: "My 13-year-old knows she wants to be a nurse. She knows, and then, you know, she sees my textbook. And she's like, this is so cool." In discussing the interpersonal impact of taking the ZFT program, Francine said:

> [I and my cohort of HCA students] have inspired my husband to go back to school, who did not finish high school. He started an apprenticeship 10 years ago and never went through with it. He is now restarting his apprenticeship. Because he's like, okay, if you can do this, if all you ladies can do this, I can do this too. So we've inspired him to go back to school.

Participants who inspired others to complete education and training viewed these opportunities as a chance for their loved ones to pursue more stable and better-paying work. Most (83.3%) participants indicated they would recommend ZFT to someone else or had already done so based on their experience in the program (Figure 3). Sherry explained that she "would rather my boys go into trades than oilfield. And even my husband says to them all the time. 'You do not want to be on a rig like dad.'" For her,

encouraging her children to attain an education created an option to work outside of the oil field and possibly escape the boom-and-bust cycle commonly associated with DV's economy.
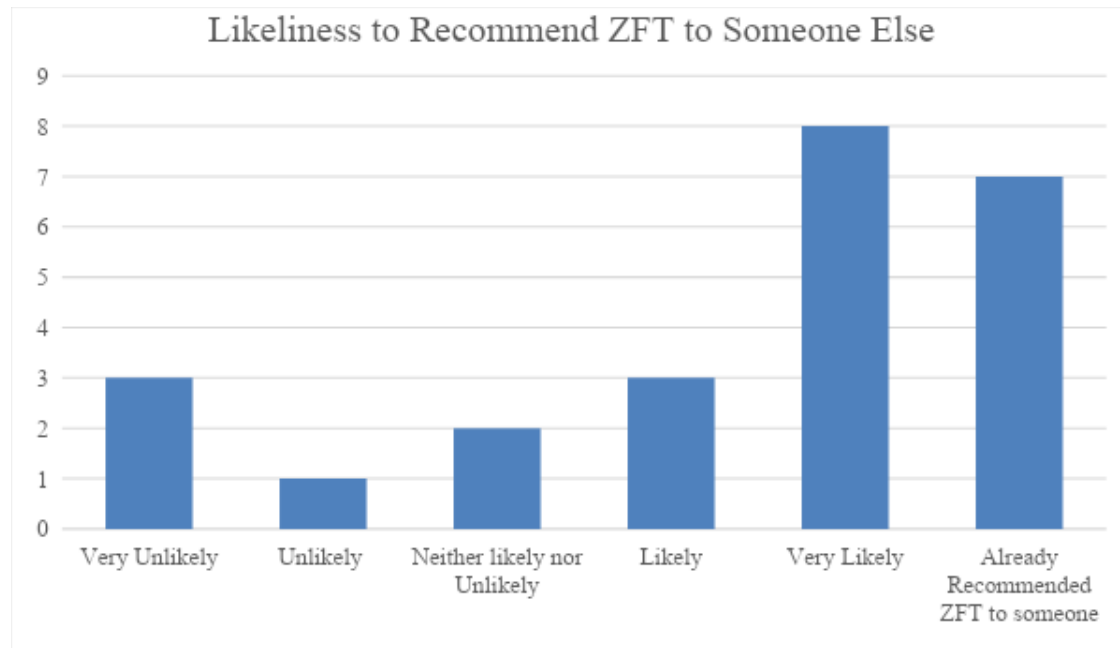

Figure 3. Likeliness to recommend ZFT (n = 24)

Discussion

Realizing "Good Jobs"

There are many challenges to accessing higher education in rural communities. These include limitations on program offerings (as smaller institutions and satellite campuses offer fewer programs), transportation to and from classes, and, most importantly, as seen in this study, cost. Recognizing these barriers, the ZFT program sought to eliminate or at least lighten the financial barrier to postsecondary education. Our results suggest that this has been a program success, at least at this early stage in ZFT implementation.

The stories participants shared with us, and the boom-and-bust character of the DV economy, significantly shaped the themes generated from these stories. For example, bust periods meant that participants often had difficulty finding work as had their partners. For many, this meant saving money for education was not an option. Multiple participants discussed the notion of a "good job" or a "real job," which, in their view, they had been unable to acquire without an education. Participants implied that the jobs they were training for, such as HCA, business, or office administrative, were "real jobs."

In contrast, the jobs they had previously worked, including food servers, nannies, and daycare workers, were not "good jobs." This was due to low wages, unstable or

insufficient hours, and a lack of respect for those professions. Even in boom periods, many participants had difficulty finding employment that paid well and would allow them to save money as few participants had directly worked in the oil and gas industry. These findings build on literature demonstrating the challenges that populations face in boom-and-bust economies even during times of prosperity (Twum-Antwi et al., 2020; Van Assche et al., 2017).

Reducing Financial Barriers and Risks

For some participants, ZFT provided the necessary encouragement to pursue postsecondary education. Previous research has suggested that "willingness to pay" influences whether a student will enroll in postsecondary education, partly due to the increased individual-level financial risk of enrolling in but not completing a credential (Palameta & Voyer, 2010; Queenan & Street, 2020). ZFT eliminated or lessened risks for students "who might have otherwise not enrolled, [and] may realize substantial gains by learning they can attain a degree" (Blagg & Blom, 2018). Additionally, ZFT gave some students the confidence to expand their career goals. For instance, many HCA students intended to enroll in a licensed practical nursing program, a higher certification that would enhance their employment opportunities.

Qualitative data from this study overlap with previous research on tuition assistance programs (Ford et al., 2019; Miller-Adams, 2021), suggesting students who complete their program are optimistic about the future. Most participants, who would not be considered "traditional students" beginning postsecondary studies soon after high school completion, took diverse routes to enroll in their ZFT program. Many participants were first-generation students, middle-aged parents, and/or were from low-income households. Qualitative evidence from this study supports quantitative evidence that tuition assistance programs in Canada (Ford et al., 2019) and the United States (Pluhta & Penny, 2013) can increase enrollment, retention, and graduation from college programs for these groups.

Participants suggested that the lack of education opportunities was tied to the dominance of DV's oil and gas industry. Community leaders have sought to change this aspect of living in DV by implementing ZFT. Rural development literature has grappled with the challenges of sustaining development initiatives during boom times when attention is often directed toward the most profitable economic activities (Halseth et al., 2017). ZFT was conceptualized as a rural development initiative that could revitalize DV and retrain existing residents while attracting more people to the town. The Town of DV hopes to continue ZFT and pursue ongoing support through various funders.

Reframing Resilience

One goal of the ZFT policy is to create an optimistic future for DV residents in part by "reducing financial barriers for community members to [access] postsecondary

education and training" (Zero Fee Tuition Assistance Policy, 2021, purpose section, para 1). This framing of optimism draws on a discourse of resilience. That is an "individual's ability to 'maintain relatively stable, healthy levels of psychological functioning' when facing 'disruptive event'" (Bonanno, 2004, as cited in Mahdiani et al., 2020, p. 149). Resilience is a common frame for rural development initiatives and research examining rural communities (Mahdiani et al., 2020; Ryser & Halseth, 2010; Steiner & Atterton, 2014). While, in many cases, participants described how they overcame challenges during and partly because of their ZFT education, we also wish to draw attention to how this framing of resilience legitimizes social structures that produce such challenges. People who display resilience are required and expected to do so to survive and, to the extent that it is possible, thrive in systems that have let them down. Rather than this framing of resilience, we suggest programs like ZFT can and should be conceptualized as seeking to break down unjust social systems that create and perpetuate inequities.

Gendering ZFT in DV

One of the structural issues that repeatedly arose in conversations with participants was the way that gendered norms in DV had constrained them. The context of DV's resource-dominated economy is essential in care work. In many cases, without postsecondary education, the employment options in DV are limited to low-wage service work or well-paid but unstable, unsecure, and highly gendered work in the oil and gas industry (Murphy et al., 2021). Many participants we spoke to had worked primarily in low-paid positions where they felt undervalued. Throughout our data, HCA students, in particular, expressed concern that the vital care work they would be performing after their education would continue to be low-paid, undervalued, and subject to exploitative conditions such as missed overtime pay and lack of regular hours. This gendering of care work (Chatzidakis et al., 2020; DeVault, 1991) was consistently identified as a significant challenge for our participants, who also passionately identified with the importance of their care work.

ZFT was initially introduced as a skills training program targeting men working in the oil and gas industry to diversify DV's economy. However, almost all students thus far have identified as women. The close links between this kind of vocational skills training, gendered work in DV, and education and training have resulted in a tuition assistance program that is highly gendered in terms of enrollment. This phenomenon is also shaped by the programs (e.g., HCA certificates, office administration) that track graduates into lower-paying careers. That is not to say that only women have or will access ZFT funding, but the gendered structures of family life, work, and education and training in DV shape the pathways residents take to enroll in ZFT. Future research could explore the gendered implications of tuition assistance programs in such social contexts.

Influencing Policy

Golden et al. (2015) have mapped an "inside out" social ecological model to explain policy and environmental change at a community level in assessing the complexity of influencing policy, social structural, and environmental change. While traditional social-ecological models focus on individual development within social conditions, the model developed by Golden et al. (2015) upends this to center the development of policies and environments. We understand ZFT as a policy and program that can contribute to developing a healthy community context. Ultimately, drawing on such a model, it is possible that through ZFT, participants in this study and other community members can and are influencing social policy and educational change in DV. "Interpersonal connections that foster collective action" and "distribution of resources and power across individuals" are two critical ways that individuals can affect and benefit from community and policy change (Golden et al., 2015, p. 10S). As Pluhta and Penny (2013) found, students in tuition assistance programs can impact others in the community, inspiring peers to pursue postsecondary education and training. The outcomes participants discussed with us contributed to initial community change through ZFT as participants created connections with others in the community through their work experiences and inspired others to pursue and champion education in DV. Additionally, the context of DV as a small rural community, where everybody knows everybody, meant that participants frequently shared info about ZFT with others in the community.

Strengths and Limitations

A strength of this study is the CBPR approach. This study was co-designed with elected officials and town staff who partnered with the research team to organize and structure data collection. For example, the town's education coordinator gave substantial input into indicators of importance for data collection. Prolonged engagement and regular communication with community partners helped to ensure research relevance to municipal interests and needs. As part of our CBPR approach, our research team included two research assistants who currently or previously lived in DV. These research assistants were vital in helping us to establish and sustain these research relationships. Additionally, the research team included individuals with diverse skill sets, including expertise in community economic development, business development, qualitative methodology, critical social theory, poverty, and policy. Our different approaches to understanding how ZFT works enrich this CBPR project.

A limitation of this study is that data collection occurred at various points throughout participants' ZFT education programs. Results may have differed had each student been interviewed and surveyed after precisely the same period of starting and completing their programs. Another limitation was the small sample size of participants, which limited analytic possibilities for the survey data.

Conclusions

Postsecondary tuition assistance programs are relatively rare in Canada. Municipally driven and funded programs like DV's ZFT program are even rarer. In this paper, we have shown how this program has been a unique and innovative way for one rural town to spur development and economic activity in the community while directly trying to improve the lives of and opportunities for residents in the community. Additionally, this study contributes to the literature on rural postsecondary students by exploring their challenges while obtaining an education in a rural area. Future research should continue to explore the social, economic, and health impacts of tuition subsidy programs on students. As tuition costs continue to rise in Canada, and if provincial governments continue to reduce their funding commitments to public higher education institutions, programs like ZFT may increasingly be required to support students' postsecondary education goals.

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