

Perceptions of rural communities  
and civic and political engagement  
amongst undergraduate students  
from rural backgrounds:

*A report for Alberta rural communities*

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Research Funded by the Alberta Rural  
Development Network (ARDN)

## **Acknowledgements**

We would like to first acknowledge our participants without whom this research would not be possible. We would also like to acknowledge that this research was generously funded by the Alberta Rural Development Network (ARDN). Finally, we would like to thank Brittany Gray who assisted on some of the transcribing of the interviews, as well as providing feedback on a draft of this report.

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## Executive Summary

This report presents to Alberta rural communities research that is aimed at better understanding how university students from rural backgrounds view the relationship between rural communities and civic and political engagement (CPE). Some of the main goals for the project included investigating how these university students think about growing up in rural communities, as well as how the rural setting may have influenced their views on CPE and if they plan to return to rural post-graduation.

While many results are presented, three main themes are discussed. First, the defining theme for rural communities identified by our participants is “relationships.” In other words, rural communities may be characterized by residents knowing, and regularly relating with, each other (vs. being relatively disconnected). Second, there may often be an increased sense of “interdependence” in a rural community where everyone is more likely to help each other out (vs. being relatively independent). Third, individuals in a rural community are “identified” to one another in that individuals and their actions are more known to others in the community (vs. being relatively anonymous).

These three themes are discussed as important for CPE in a variety of ways. However, to summarize: First, “relationships” help to promote CPE because individuals are more likely to support those whom they know personally. Second, the “interdependence” of rural communities may more often lead to CPE being an expected norm for behaviour. Third, constantly being an “identified” individual may more often lead one to follow through on this expectation of engagement, as it would be more easily recognized if one regularly chose to disengage. Taken together, these themes characterize CPE as being a “default position” for residents of rural communities, as engagement may be more often a necessary part of rural life.

These and other results are presented in more detail in the body of this report. Conclusions based on the results are also presented.

## Introduction

This report presents research to Alberta rural communities that is aimed at better understanding youths' views on civic and political engagement (CPE; e.g., volunteering, voting). Specifically, this research is aimed at better understanding how university students from rural backgrounds view the relationship between rural communities and CPE.

Some of the main goals for this research are as follows:

- To investigate how university students from rural backgrounds think about growing up in rural communities
- To explore how these students view rural communities in relation to CPE – especially in terms of how the rural setting may have influenced their views on CPE
- To study how these students compare and contrast the rural setting versus the urban setting for CPE (e.g., pros and cons)
- To inquire as to whether these students plan to return to rural communities after they graduate and/or whether they plan to engage in their chosen community post-graduation

This research is exploratory in nature and, therefore, should be interpreted cautiously. However, it provides initial findings on university-educated rural youths' views on rural communities. It also provides insight into whether they plan to return to, and engage in, rural communities post-graduation.

These results may be of interest at this time when our educated youths' abilities and perspectives may prove valuable for securing the future of Alberta rural communities.

## Research Methodology

This research study involved approximately one-hour interviews with 10 senior (i.e., 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> year) university students from the University of Alberta, Augustana Campus in Camrose, Alberta. The students were required to have grown up in a rural community and be between the ages of 18-30.

Some of the main questions that guided the interviews are as follows (for the complete interview script, please see Appendix A):

- Could you discuss the experience of being from a rural setting? What is it like growing up in a rural setting?
- Do you feel that a rural setting has shaped your engagement in any particular way? Why or why not?
- In your opinion, what draws people to a rural/urban setting? What makes people want to live in a rural/urban setting?
- From your own experience, or in your opinion, are there qualities of a rural/urban setting that make engagement easier/more difficult?
- Are you planning to return to living in a rural setting post-graduation? Why or why not?
- Do you see yourself engaging in your chosen community after graduation? Why or why not?

The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed and then analyzed using an analysis technique known as grounded theory. This analysis technique is beneficial because it allows for the development of an overall theory that attempts to represent the interview data (i.e., hundreds of typed pages) in a more simple and straightforward way.

It is also important for us to highlight that our results are based on *how our participants perceive* rural communities, which does not *necessarily* equate to how rural communities may actually exist or be perceived by others.

## Results for Questions Pertaining to the Rural Setting

The research results are presented below, organized according to:

1) Interview question topic (e.g., the rural setting); and, 2) themes that were identified during the analysis.

### *Relationships*

The defining theme for rural communities identified by our participants is “relationships.” In contrast to urban settings, in a rural setting, the potential is there to know everyone – and, usually, everyone knows everyone very well. These closer relationships may develop over time and through regular interaction. They may also often be generational in nature, as multiple generations of families may have resided in the same community.

As a result of these relationships, there may be a heightened sense of community and friendliness. For example, there may be more “inter-webbing” and “networking” amongst families and friends as they share in community activities. Even if residents are spread out on farms, there may still be a sense of belonging together – for example, through helping one’s neighbour with cows or horses that occasionally get loose from their pens.

Also due to the relational nature of rural communities, our participants highlight that one can often get more things done through direct contact with people – as opposed to dealing with a lot of bureaucratic hoops. Because people may know each other well – either directly, or through a friend or family member – it may be easier to gain direct access to people (e.g., community leaders) and resources. Similarly, community members, even when working in various roles (e.g., jobs), may also be more flexible and accommodating with one another because of their relationships.

Due to the generational nature of these relationships, our participants point out that a leading “in-group” can develop who may be responsible for much of the community’s functioning. This can be a positive once one is “in,” but may make it difficult for “outsiders,” or those who are new to the community, who may view the community as “cliquey,” at least at first.

## *Interdependence*

Another primary theme raised by our participants is “interdependence.” There is often a lot of work to be done in rural communities, especially on farms. As a result, from a young age, individuals may be expected not only to do a lot of their own work, but also to help others in need. Furthermore, as one of our participants put it, if one decides to host an event, if you don’t clean up after yourself, there is no one else who is going to do it for you. Therefore, people may be more likely to pitch in to help each other out when there is a need – and may, in turn, expect help when they need it too.

Similarly, in large part due to relationships, there may be a greater sense of collectivity in rural settings. Our participants talked about the “family way” of doing things and making decisions as a unit, which can include extended family, as well as friends and community members. As a result, community members can often expect support – for example, to be listened to or assisted in tasks that need to be done.

## *Identified*

Our participants also emphasized that individuals are “identified” in rural communities. That is, people know you in a rural community. As a result, it may be very difficult to be anonymous and one may also have less privacy. Due also to relationships, the “rumour mill” may turn more quickly in a rural community, which can lead youth to engage in more “self-monitoring,” as word of their behaviours may be more likely to find its way back to their parents. Furthermore, because one may be more identified, youth may be more careful in their actions, as it may be easier for their reputation to become positive/negative by being associated with positive/negative deeds.

## *The Rural Atmosphere: Familiarity, Safety, Scenic*

A cluster of themes raised by our participants can be presented together as centering on the ‘atmosphere’ of the rural setting. For example, they described the rural atmosphere as a place of comfort and familiarity, due to being raised there. The rural may also provide greater freedom (e.g., due to being very spacious). Rural settings may also offer increased feelings of

safety, in that they were consistently identified by our participants as having less perceived crime than urban settings. This feeling of safety may also be due, in part, to the “relationships” and “identified” themes discussed above. Finally, the rural atmosphere may be characterized by its spacious and scenic qualities, as well as a slower pace of life overall. As a result, some parents may find the rural setting more desirable for raising children.

### *The Rural Economy*

As upcoming graduates who are facing the prospect of (re-)entering the work force in the near future, “jobs” is another factor of which our participants were mindful. Specifically, if one would like to live in a rural setting, the availability of jobs – especially those where graduates can make use of their degree – can be an important consideration. The two main industries discussed by our participants were agriculture/farming and oil/related industry. In addition, they identified primary/secondary school teaching as a job that may draw people to rural settings. In contrast, when there is drought or low grain prices, or a downswing in the oil industry, this may lead individuals to leave rural communities. However, having/getting a job – especially, for example, a high-paying oil industry job – may often be a deciding factor in whether individuals stay in/move to rural communities, as well as in the types of individuals who choose to do so.

### *Some Potential Challenges: Inconvenience and Lower Diversity*

Two additional themes raised by our participants may be best presented as potential challenges facing rural communities, especially with regards to attracting and retaining new youth residents. First, rural communities may often be inconvenient, restricted, or isolated. One of the most commonly discussed examples was “getting groceries.” Rather than just driving quickly to the store to pick up some food, our participants talked about how one may often have to plan one’s day or week around travelling into a nearby town to get groceries. In other words, due to time and distance, as well as weather conditions for highways, going into town often has to be intentional and planned, as opposed to spontaneous and convenient. In addition, high speed internet/WIFI, cell phone reception, certain television channels/packages, and other technological conveniences may be more

difficult to obtain in some rural communities.

However, more positively, our participants also discussed how being relatively isolated can be advantageous in that one *has* to go out into the world, beyond one's own comfort zone, in order to explore and get one's needs met. For some individuals, this necessity may invoke feelings of adventure and confidence. However, for others, it may invoke feelings of fear of the "big city" (e.g., strangers, traffic, and public transportation).

A second potential challenge discussed by our participants is that rural communities may offer less variety/diversity than urban settings. If an individual enjoys some or all of what activities *are* available (e.g., hockey, church groups, etc.), then one may be happy and content. However, if an individual prefers other activities less commonly found in rural settings (e.g., theatre/fine arts), these communities may be less of a "fit."

Similarly, simply due to lower numbers of people overall, there may be less choice of friends for both adults and children. As one of our participants put it, if some of the available friends are "troublemakers," they may be a problematic influence on one's children.

Additionally, there may be less available types of jobs, as mentioned above, which means that some individuals who may want to live in rural communities, find themselves unable to do so because of their chosen career (e.g., university professor, opera singer, medical researcher).

A final example related to less diversity is that rural communities may have less diversity with respect to ethnicity, viewpoints/perspectives, values, etc. Again, if an individual fits well within the majority, this may not be a problem for them. However, if an individual is in the minority in some way, there may be a risk of them not fitting in. Our participants discussed how many rural communities in Alberta may be quite politically conservative, as well as focused on issues relating to the elderly, due to having aging populations. As a result, this may make it challenging for youths to more easily see how they fit in, especially if they hold more politically "left-wing" or otherwise minority positions.

## Results for Questions Pertaining to the Urban Setting

### *Summary*

Since the focus of this research is on the rural setting, we will not go into detail on the urban setting results; however, we provide them for a sense of contrast with the rural data and to set the stage for results discussed below.

In contrast to the rural setting, our participants described the urban setting as more: convenient (e.g., shopping), fast-paced, diverse/fragmented, bureaucratic/rule-oriented, individualistic/independent, liberal, and anonymous/superficial (e.g., for interactions with people in public).

In addition, they discussed how the urban economy provides different and more varied career opportunities. There may also be more wealth available overall in urban cities, which often have major political, educational, and economic institutions. As a result, the urban setting may be presented (e.g., on television) or perceived as more glamorous/successful.

Urban centres may also have higher perceived crime (e.g., drugs, violence), as well as traffic problems and the need for public transit.

Finally, although one is typically surrounded by many more people in urban settings, due to the anonymous/superficial nature of relationships amongst most city residents, one may often feel more “confined.” That is, while in a rural setting one may feel surrounded and supported by people one knows, in an urban setting, this sense of support may be limited to a particular neighbourhood or smaller network of family and friends.

## Results for Questions Pertaining to the Influence of Rural Communities on CPE

### *Hard to Know for Sure*

Has the rural setting shaped these youths' views and behaviours for CPE? Many of them indicated that it is hard to know for sure, as they likened it to trying to see the back of one's own head – it is just hard to fully see the influences that shaped one's own perceptions of the world.

[Note: It is possible further insight may have been obtained if we asked about participants' CPE values, opinions, and beliefs, relative to urban peers]

### *Relationships, Interdependence, Identified*

However, they did often talk about how they continue to value community relationships, a sense of interdependence, and a desire to live an identified (vs. an anonymous) life in their communities – and, that, as a result, they may be more likely to engage in their communities, even if they are urban.

### *Parental Influence*

Our participants also often credited their parents as a main influence on their views on CPE. For example, some of them felt that they would have grown up as a very engaged person regardless of where they lived, since their parents were very engaged and encouraged engagement. However, some of them also indicated that their parents chose a rural setting for raising kids.

### *Picking Out Rural Individuals in a Mixed Crowd*

While it may be difficult to put in words what makes up the experience of being from a rural setting, some of our participants talked about characteristics of a rural individual that may make them identifiable when mixed in with individuals from urban backgrounds. For example, they talked about a rural individual's "confidence" (from being supported by one's community), willingness to engage, and hard work ethic. While these characteristics may not be unique to rural youth, they may be more typical.

## **Results for Qualities of Rural that Make CPE Easier**

### *Relationships: People May Support You Because They Know You*

The key rural quality our participants discussed that makes *civic* engagement (CE) easier is our main theme of relationships. There are at least three main reasons why relationships are so valuable for rural CE. First, as our participants pointed out, people may support you because they know you. In other words, if one is attempting to organize, for example, a community event, one is more likely to get the support of one's community because the organizer is known to the residents.

Secondly, as a result of the greater homogeneity of rural communities (i.e., less diversity), there may be stronger shared values amongst residents, which can make working together on a civic issue easier, as more people will be likely to come on board and with less interpersonal conflict.

Finally, as discussed above, having relationships with community members can mean that it is easier to get things done more directly with people, rather than going through a lot of bureaucracy and red tape. Furthermore, it may be easier to gain direct access to key community figures who may be able to help out with whatever is being planned.

### *Interdependence: CE is the "Default Position" for Rural Communities*

Again specifically for CE, our participants often discussed how the interdependent nature of rural communities can often make CE the "default position" for people to have. In other words, there is an interpersonal expectation amongst residents that they will help each other out. As a result, engaging in one's community and with other community members may be more likely to be the norm.

Furthermore, as discussed above, there may be an increased sense of obligation to each other amongst residents, as, when there is work to be done, there is often no one else who is going to do it but those who are already involved with the task.

### *Identified: It is Harder to Be Disengaged by Being Anonymous*

Whereas in a big city one might be able to avoid engaging by remaining anonymous, our participants highlight how such a tactic may be much less of an option in rural settings where everyone knows everyone well. For example, because a youth citizen is known – and because of the “default position” discussed above – they may be expected to be at a given community event. If they choose to blow it off and not go, people may ask around as to why they were not there. Over time, if one were to regularly disengage, it would be more likely to become known to others, which could put the individual at odds with the norms and expectations of the community. Again, due to “less diversity” and the risk of not fitting in discussed above, this conflict may be problematic. As a result, our participants discussed how it can “just be easier to be engaged.”

### *Fewer Competing Voices and Issues*

As a result of there being fewer overall residents in a rural setting, there may also be fewer competing voices and civic/political issues, as compared to an urban setting. Especially when one factors in “relationships,” “interdependence,” and “less diversity,” having fewer competing voices/issues can mean significantly increased support for the issues that are raised, as well as the people who are voicing them. In other words, if one engages on a topic that is favourable to the majority, one may be more likely to receive significant community support.

## Results for Qualities of Rural that Make CPE Harder

### *Distance*

One factor that may make *political* engagement (PE) more difficult is distance. For example, distance from major political centres may make it more difficult to have any impact on broader (e.g., provincial) political matters. Furthermore, travel distance to get to, for example, polling stations, may make it more difficult to vote. Similarly, for both CE and PE, travel distance may make engaging more inconvenient.

### *Lower Diversity: Difficult for Minority Perspectives*

Due to rural communities often possessing less diversity overall, as well as the possibility for an incumbent in-group, it may be more difficult for individuals with minority/different perspectives to engage. Newcomers to the community or other “outsiders” may face a difficult challenge in that the community may expect them to engage (i.e., the “default position” discussed above), but it may be more difficult for them to do so if they hold different values and opinions. Furthermore, due in part to less financial resources, but also due to fewer people overall, there may be fewer opportunities for engagement (e.g., different kinds of volunteering options). As a result, if one is not interested in/suited for the available options, CPE may be harder.

## **Results for Qualities of Urban that Make CPE Easier/Harder**

### *Summary*

To provide a sense of contrast, we will now provide a summary of results for the urban setting regarding factors that make CPE easier/harder.

In terms of making CPE easier, our participants discussed the urban setting as making the “logistics” (e.g., convenience, travel) easier. Similarly, being closer to political centres and broader political issues can make PE easier, especially as political matters may be given increased attention in urban settings because they may affect more people overall there. Further due to more people overall, there can often be more variety of people, allowing for more familiarity with a variety of perspectives and concerns. Also, there may be more volunteer options, allowing for more people to find their “niche.”

In terms of making CPE harder, the lack of relationships was again raised as a concern in that: it may be harder to access key figures; there are more superficial interactions with residents; it may be easier to remain anonymous and disengage; there may be more bureaucracy; and it may be harder to raise support for one’s issues. In addition, there may be a lower sense of obligation and an increased sense of “someone else will do it.” Finally, with many more competing voices and issues, the competition for attention for one’s issue may make it more difficult to gain support.

## **Results for Planning to Return to/Engage in Rural Post-Graduation**

### *Individual Differences*

Overall, some participants indicated they wanted to return and some did not. In general, their decision was often influenced by whether they had a positive or negative view of their experience of rural growing up. Furthermore, it was also often influenced by whether they identified with the rural or urban setting and its related strengths/values; for example, whether one identified with relationships and a slower pace versus wealth/status and convenience. Finally, there were individual differences as to how important familiarity/comfort was to our participants. If it was very important, they may be more inclined to return to a rural setting.

### *Career Influence*

A major stumbling block for some individuals with a desire to return to rural was choice of career. In short, if their chosen career required living in an urban centre, they were more likely to accept the need to move to a big city. In addition, with dual incomes becoming more of a norm, our participants talked about how they also had to factor in their partner's career plans and whether those careers could be pursued in a rural setting.

### *Later in Life*

Some of our participants indicated that they may need to leave rural to pursue their careers, but that they may return to rural later. Specifically, they often mentioned a desire to return to rural to raise their family and/or upon retirement.

### *Best of Both Worlds*

In contrast, some participants indicated that they would ideally like to pursue the “best of both worlds” in terms of living in a rural setting, but close enough to an urban setting that they could live in rural but work in urban.

## *CPE Plans*

Typically our participants indicated a desire to engage in their communities post-graduation. Some who had a strong personal history/identity built around engaging definitely planned on engaging. However, overall, our participants indicated that there are many competing demands on their time, including career, raising a family, maintaining a social life, and so forth, and that there is a finite amount of available time. As a result, plans for engagement may often be dependent on how highly CPE is able to be prioritized relative to these other goals and commitments.

## Conclusions

### *Rural Communities and CPE*

One of the clear advantages that our participants perceived about rural communities in relation to CPE is an opportunity to capitalize on the rich networks of personal relationships amongst residents. CPE is generally a social activity that relies on the coordinated actions of individuals working together. Compared to the more individualistic and anonymous urban centres, rural communities may have the advantage of having this characteristic of CPE readily available.

As a result, as long as one is able to successfully navigate the lower diversity of rural centres – i.e., to find CPE issues/concerns/interests in common – CPE (especially CE) initiatives may be easier to get off the ground and sustain in rural settings. As a result, rural communities may be preferable for some forms of CPE, especially for youth who may be just beginning to be more involved in such activities.

### *Welcoming/Including New or Minority Perspectives*

However, one of the challenges to capitalizing on the relationships found in rural communities – especially relevant for youth moving to new rural communities – can be getting “in” to these networks. As a result, rural communities may wish to further consider their current initiatives for welcoming/including new individuals and their perspectives, as well as individuals who may not be new to the community but who hold minority perspectives. These individuals may have valuable contributions they could make to the community, if given the opportunity to do so.

### *Marketing Rural*

If rural communities are interested in attracting more/new residents, a couple of relevant factors stand out from this research. First, economic/career factors can play an important role in decisions on where to live. As a result, if rural communities wish to attract more variety of individuals (e.g., to address the possible challenge of “less diversity”), it may

be necessary (though challenging) to increase the economic diversity of the community, leading to more variety of available jobs. If this is not possible or desirable, then communities may choose instead to target their marketing toward individuals more likely to be a fit for the currently available jobs.

Secondly, our participants highlighted raising a family and retirement as two phases of their lives that would lead them to more strongly consider moving to a rural setting, after they initially moved to an urban setting for career reasons. As a result, these two age cohorts (e.g., late 20s-early 30s and 55+) could be especially targeted for marketing efforts.

Some of the main “selling points” for rural that were identified in our research include: interdependent and identified relationships with residents, perceived safety, comfort and familiarity, slower pace and greater space/freedom, and scenic beauty.

## Appendix A: Interview Script

*Note: This was the final version of the interview script. As a result of theoretical sampling (as per grounded theory method), some changes were made to the script over the course of the 10 interviews. All participants responded to all questions they were asked.*

- 1) The literature described CPE as things like voting and volunteering, but we find that to be somewhat limiting. What is civic and political engagement to you? How would you define these concepts?

Follow Up: Do you define civic engagement and political engagement as interrelated constructs or are they unrelated?

Follow Up: What does disengagement look like?

- 2) Now we are interested in your perspective of CPE?

Probe: How do you feel about civic and political issues? What do you think the implications of CPE are? What does engaging in communities and politics mean to you? Just kind of tell me about your general perspective on CPE?

- 3) In terms of your understanding of engagement, could you discuss some of the engagement experiences that you have been involved with in the past?

Probe: For example, things like voting and volunteering, could you discuss other experiences that you might have had?

- 4) Could you discuss what motivates you in your engagement?

Probe: Positive motivating factors? Negative motivating factors?

- 5) Part of your being involved in this study is your rural background. Could you discuss the experience of being from a rural setting?

Probe: What is it like growing up in a rural setting?

Follow Up: Do you feel that a rural setting has shaped your engagement in any particular way?

6) From your own experience (if applicable) or in your opinion are there qualities of a rural setting that make engagement easier or more difficult?

Follow up: (If answered structurally) Is there anything unique about the experience of living in a rural setting that makes engagement easier? More difficult?

(If answered experiential) Are there structures in place or ways of doing things in a rural setting that make engagement easier? More difficult?

7) From your own experience (if applicable) or in your opinion are there qualities of an urban setting that make engagement easier or more difficult?

Follow up: (If answered structurally) Is there anything unique about the experience of living in an urban setting that makes engagement easier? More difficult?

(If answered experiential) Are there structures in place or ways of doing things in an urban setting that make engagement easier? More difficult?

8) In your opinion what draws people to a rural setting? What makes people want to live in a rural setting?

Follow Up: What draws people to an urban setting? What makes people want to live in an urban setting?

9) Are you planning to return to living in a rural setting post graduation?

Probe: (If answered yes) Why?

(If answered no) Why not?

Follow up: Do you see yourself engaging in the rural/urban setting that you choose after graduation?

Probe: (If answered yes) Why?

(If answered no) Why not?

Follow up: What about other people, do you think that they have a similar experience?

Probe: Do they tend to return to a rural setting or urban?

Probe: Do you think that deciding where to live and work after university is a difficult or conflicting decision for students?

- 10) Although we have heard a little bit about engagement in relation to urban and rural environments in our previous work, this is an exploratory research study to find out about your perception of engagement in rural settings. Obviously, you are the expert on your experience. Are there any topics related to CPE in rural settings that you would like to discuss that we haven't asked you about?