

# **UNWRAP THE RESEARCH: EXPLORING LIFE IN THE FISHBOWL**

## **SUMMARY REPORT AND REFLECTIONS**

### **Introduction**

“Unwrap the Research” was a first-of-its-kind effort to gather researchers studying social issues in the Wood Buffalo region. Held October 22-24, 2010 at the Suncor Leisure Center at MacDonald Island Park in Fort McMurray, the conference brought together more than 80 people from both inside and outside the region.

The event had two interrelated goals: to give researchers the opportunity to learn from each other’s work, and to give local residents the opportunity to learn about and respond to research results. The tag line, Exploring Life in the Fishbowl, captured the idea that even as the region is “under the gaze” of the outside world, local and external researchers are undertaking a great variety of explorations of social life.

The event was a joint effort of individuals from the University of Alberta, Keyano College, the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, The Redpoll Centre, and the Fort McMurray Health Promotions Centre, along with a number of local volunteers. Also contracted to collaborate on the event was Dodolab, an art and design group that employs experimental and adaptive processes to spark positive change and resiliency ([www.dodolab.ca](http://www.dodolab.ca)).

The conference program, along with an archive of presentations and abstracts, can be found on the conference website at [www.unwraptheresearch.ca](http://www.unwraptheresearch.ca).

### *Contents of the Report*

Summary of Conference Activities and Attendance	p. 2
Evaluation and Reflection	p. 3
Lessons and Recommendations	p. 5
Appendix - Funding Sponsors & Organizing Committee Members	p. 7

## Summary of Conference Activities and Attendance

### *Pre-Conference and Conference-Based Dodolab Dialogues (week of Oct. 18)*

Throughout the week leading up to the conference, the creative team at Dodolab engaged community members in discussions and activities reflecting on 'outside' and 'inside' perspectives on Fort McMurray. They engaged with:

- 120 high school students, including an improvisational theatre group;
- 25 community members who use the services of The Health Promotion Centre;
- 50 students and staff at Keyano College;
- hundreds of public users of MacDonald Island Park (all day Saturday), including use of a twitter feed from the conference.

### *Pre-Conference Research Workshops (Friday, Oct. 22)*

Three concurrent two-hour workshops were held at Keyano College; they focused on research skills for capacity-building and community-based knowledge generation.

- Community-Based Research and Evaluation – 16 attendees
- Digital Storytelling – 12 attendees
- Social Surveying – 10 attendees

### *Keynote and Panel Discussion (Evening of Friday, Oct. 22)*

Keynote speaker Mark Cabaj (Director, Vibrant Communities - Edmonton) spoke on 'social capital' and 'community resiliency', with three regional leaders acting as panel respondents: Melissa Blake (Mayor), Ron Quintal (President, Fort McKay Métis Nation), and Diane Shannon (Executive Director, United Way).

- 85+ attendees
- Approximately half of attendees were local and half were from out of town.

### *Panel Sessions (Saturday, Oct. 23 and morning of Sunday, Oct 24)*

Panels were organized around a diverse range of topics, and usually consisted of two or three 15-minute presentations; a few were run as workshops or group presentations.

- Across 34 presentations, 14 presenters were local practitioner researchers (from non-profit, government, and other community orgs), and 20 were junior and senior academic researchers from Alberta, BC, Ontario, and Newfoundland.
- There were six pairs of sessions throughout the day on Saturday, one plenary session of visual displays on Saturday, and one plenary session on Sunday morning, for a total of 14 sessions.
- Attendance at individual sessions ranged from 10 to 50 people.
- Attendees were invited to enjoy local talent at the Full Moon Café in the evening.

### *Wrap-up Session: What Now? (Sunday, Oct. 24)*

The closing session was an open discussion of what was learned at the conference, of the practice of holding this kind of event, and of possible directions forward.

- 40+ people attended
- A list of 'what now' actions, and people interested in follow-up, was generated.

## Evaluation and Reflection

This section assesses the success and outcomes of the “Unwrap the Research” event based on discussions at the wrap-up session, reflections from the organizing committee, and the results of the evaluation survey sent electronically to all registrants. We received 20 completed surveys out of 70 registrants. The survey included a series of close-ended questions on a five-point ‘strongly agree – strongly disagree’ scale as well as several open-ended questions that invited free comments.

### *Success of Conference as a Learning and Knowledge Exchange Event*

Of those who submitted an evaluation survey, the vast majority agreed or strongly agreed that they:

- learned a lot (94%);
- found the panel presentations ‘generally good’ (88%);
- had opportunities to make new connections with people (88%).

When asked in wrap-up discussions and in the survey *what they liked best about the event*, participants emphasized the opportunity for a variety of researchers and community members to interact. Written comments on the survey included:

- “the chance to network with other researchers, including local practitioner researchers”
- “the contact between academics and the general community”
- “the intimate nature of the conference”

A related aspect of what participants *liked best about the event* was the diversity of topics at the conference, as seen in a couple of examples from survey comments:

- “the variety of presentations and recent research”
- “wide range of presentations”

Survey ratings of ‘the diversity of perspectives presented at the conference’ were generally positive but mixed (18% of respondents were neutral or disagreed on this point). So, while many participants liked the variety of opportunities to learn and interact, this was not a universal experience. There seem to be two important reasons for this.

First, some felt that the language and style of the conference was too ‘academic.’ This was the most common response (4 out of 15) to the survey question that asked what participants *liked least about the event*, and was a key topic of discussion at the wrap-up session. As a couple of survey respondents put it:

- “some of the presenters were not able to, or didn't make the effort to, speak in lay terms”
- “the use of plain language in presentations could have been better utilized”

Second, the conference structure did not allow enough opportunities for interaction and discussion. 79% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the conference was well structured. But when asked what *they liked least about* the conference, several respondents mentioned the strictures on time and interaction. As one of them wrote,

“It would have been great if there was more time allotted to the presenters, and there were times when the presentations were rushed. The information they had to share was exceptionally valuable.”

In sum, “just being in the community” was in itself a novel and important aspect of the conference, as a number of people pointed out. At the same time, holding such an event in the community does not in itself bridge the “division between the researchers and ‘the people’,” as another respondent put it.

#### *Other Facets of the Event*

- The 5 survey respondents who also attended a pre-conference research workshop were overwhelmingly positive about the structure and usefulness of the workshops.
- Survey responses to the Friday Keynote and to the activities of Dodolab were generally positive but mixed. Discussion at the wrap-up session noted the difficulties of adequately grappling with social capital and resiliency (the subject of the keynote address) with a mixed audience. With regard to Dodolab, one respondent wrote this about their activities:

“[It] allowed us to hear about what people were saying outside of the conference. I found it interesting to hear the insights of the public, the twitter followings, read the tags done by public, etc. It would have been interesting to bring that into the presentations somehow more interactively.”
- Discussions about promotion and outreach revealed that people found the posters and other outreach material lively and well done, but that a general public information campaign may not be as effective as targeting specific groups and listservs. Some local attendees said they had heard about the event just one or two days beforehand through work personal networks.
- Discussions about the venue indicated that the MacDonald Island facility is very impressive, and the conference services (food, AV, etc.) are good. However, the location of the conference rooms in a back corner of the building may not encourage public participation.

## Lessons and Recommendations

“Unwrap the Research” was an initial attempt to create conversation around social research in the region. Some of the key “lessons learned” are summarized here, followed by recommendations for building on this first step.

- Simply bringing research “back” to the community is a good experience for researchers, and is symbolically important for community members, but researchers need more opportunities and tools for effectively communicating the relevance and usefulness of their work to non-specialist and local audiences.
- Given the diverse levels and types of interest and knowledge at this kind of conference, it should be structured in a way that promotes interaction and sharing of ideas (e.g., short presentations and long round table discussions; panels of researchers with local respondents; clear integration of all of the different activities occurring before and during the conference).
- Integration of multiple perspectives would benefit from a broader representation of local stakeholders in planning and shaping the conference.
- Local participants and stakeholders are more likely to attend if they:
  - See topics of direct interest/relevance to them;
  - Receive targeted announcements (e.g., a workplace listserv or newsletter, or a community group to which they belong);
  - Receive invitations from researchers in whose studies they have participated.
- Events like this usefully showcase and promote collaboration – this happened quite well both formally and informally.

### *What Next?*

The wrap-up discussion generated three key ideas for ‘next steps.’ These were then listed on the evaluation survey with the following choices:

I would use this, I think this is a good idea, I am not sure whether this would be useful, *or* This would not be useful.

#### *1) A second research-focused event, with a more open format.*

38% of survey respondents said they would attend a second research-focused event, and 56% thought it a good idea. In addition to the ‘lessons learned’ and recommendations presented above, discussion of a second event generated the following ideas:

- involve youth, library staff, and labour organizations in future conferences;
- hold the event in multiple locations throughout the city, i.e., take the research “to” the community;
- local, non-elite stakeholders need opportunities to identify their goals and desire for social change in order to take full advantage of this kind of event.

2) A “field school” to support research and research collaborations in the area.

38% of survey respondents said they would use a field school, and 56% thought it a good idea. Keyano College is an obvious potential partner. Discussion of the field school has generated the following reasons a field school would be useful:

- a strong research presence is vital to understanding and responding to the complex social challenges in the region;
- it could actively encourage and facilitate truly collaborative research among local groups, and between local stakeholders and outside researchers;
- a field school could help to channel research results to relevant parties, and would hook research into the online database;
- staying in the region is expensive for researchers (especially for graduate students), so a field school that facilitated relatively inexpensive accommodation would also encourage longer stays (rather than ‘fly in, fly out’ research).

3) An online, accessible database of research done in and about the region.

The most enthusiasm was shown for this initiative. 76% of respondents said they would use such a database, and 24% thought it was a good idea. Discussion of the database has generated the following ideas:

- the database could be launched with a simple archive of material from “Unwrap the Research,” with a longer term goal being a flexible, sustainable, accessible, and searchable tool;
- the database would consider a broad audience of users, including local community groups, college and high school students, policymakers, researchers, etc.;
- the local library should be approached as a local host to this project, with additional expertise coming from postsecondary partners.

*Report authored by Dr. Sara Dorow, the conference convener, in December 2010.*

## **Appendix: Funding Sponsors and Organizing Committee Members**

### *Funding Sponsors*

Suncor Energy Foundation  
Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo  
Alberta Rural Development Network / Keyano College  
University of Alberta Faculty of Extension  
University of Alberta Faculty of Arts

### *Organizing Committee*

Angela Angell (Rural Sociology, University of Alberta)  
Sara Dorow (Sociology, University of Alberta)  
Kira Hunt (City-Region Studies Centre, University of Alberta)  
Ed Kamps (The Redpoll Centre)  
Howie Phung (City-Region Studies Centre, University of Alberta)  
Daven Seebarran (The Health Promotions Centre)  
Rob Shields (City-Region Studies Centre, University of Alberta)  
Renee Summers (Marketing & Communications, Keyano College)  
Russell Thomas (Marketing & Communications, Keyano College)  
Terri Vallance (Social Planning, Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo)  
Maryanne Wynne (City-Region Studies Centre, University of Alberta)

### *Other Partners*

Andrew Hunter and Lisa Hirmer (Dodolab)