

Environmental Scan Series.10

Williams Lake (School District 27)

This installment is an overview of Williams Lake and the surrounding area (Cariboo-Chilcotin School District 27). A sampling of STEEP themes, including Social, Economic, and Environmental, are explored to provide richer context. Previous environmental scans and the Williams Lake Economic Development Strategy (WLEDS) report provide the basis for this report. For brief comparisons, a group of ten school districts has been used: Campbell River, Dawson Creek, Fort St. John, Kimberley, Port Alberni, Prince Rupert, Quesnel, Salmon Arm, Terrace, and Williams Lake. This scan will include population projections, transition rates, economic trends, labour market considerations, environmental impacts, Indigenous youth transitions to post-secondary, and perceptions of community safety.

Demographics

The current population of Cariboo-Chilcotin school district (SD27) is just under 42,000 residents.¹ The population for this area will incur only modest growth of about 2% between 2018 and 2030.¹ The situation is in contrast to comparator school districts that are set to expand at a faster pace over the same period (7% median growth rate among ten comparators).¹ For example, Fort St. John, which feeds into Northern Lights College, is due to experience substantial growth that will likely see the city increase an additional one-fifth in size by 2030, while other areas are projected to grow at rates between 3% and 9%.¹

The projections below are indicators of the present and future magnitude of potential students to enroll in or return to post-secondary. The population aged 15 to 34 will grow by about 5.5% (8,176 to 8,630 people) in SD27 when comparing 2018 to projections for 2030.¹ Moreover, Grade 12 class size will remain constant at about 320 students over this period of time.¹ Kindergarteners are expected to settle to 350 students by 2030 from 400 in 2018, but will more than keep pace with Grade 12 projections.¹

Transition Rates to Post-Secondary

In 2016/17, about 40% of Grade 12 graduates in SD27 transitioned to a public BC post-secondary institution.

Employment

In 2016, nearly 30% of Williams Lake's labour force was employed in goods production (forestry, mining, manufacturing), compared to about 20% for the province.

A Shifting Economy

There will be strong demand in healthcare, social assistance, and professional, scientific, and technical services. Unfilled vacancies exist as employers struggle to find and retain employees with the right skill set.

Indigenous Transition to Post-Secondary

Recent years have seen Indigenous transition rates to a post-secondary institution (PSI) fall significantly, compared to 2007/08 when almost half of Indigenous students enrolled at a PSI.

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Education

Student Transitions Project (STP) describes the process and pattern of the movement of students across grades K-12 to public post-secondary institutions. In 2016/17, about 40% of Grade 12 graduates in SD27 transitioned to a public BC post-secondary institution immediately after graduation.² While this rate is below the provincial transition average of 52%, lower transition rates are typical of rural school districts.² As those students looked to post-secondary, just over half enrolled at TRU (not only the Williams Lake campus).² This is consistent with prior years (2011/12 to 2016/17) that saw SD27 enrolments at TRU range from 40% to 62%.² Most students not attending TRU have generally enrolled in an Engineering and Applied Sciences program at the next nearest institutions, with UNBC, Okanagan College, UBC Okanagan, and UVIC being the most popular destinations, in order of preference.²

Socio Economic Indicators

Median household income in Williams Lake was noticeably above the BC average until 2005, but according to the 2016 Census, household income settled to just under \$69K versus the BC average of \$70K.³ An explanation of this, as interpreted by the WLEDS report, stems from the decline in goods producing employment.⁴ This sector generally provides higher paying jobs but, as jobs have transitioned from goods production to other sectors, income levels have fallen.³ Although household income has steadily declined over time, residents of Williams Lake are employed at a higher rate than almost all other comparator school districts. In 2016, Williams Lake had an unemployment rate of 7.6% and a participation rate (percentage of the

population working or available to work) of 65.3%.³

Historically, Williams Lake has been highly dependent on goods production (i.e. forestry, mining, manufacturing).⁴ In 2016, nearly 30% of Williams Lake's labour force was employed in goods production, compared to about 20% for the province.⁴ Of note, however, is how the forestry industry, a long-standing primary economic engine for Williams Lake, has had its labour force shrink by almost 40% since 2001.⁵ According to the WLEDS report, "It is clear that the City of Williams Lake is sitting at a crossroads in its economic history. There are inevitable and unavoidable disruptions coming to the long-term regional timber supply."⁴ In terms of the path ahead, according to [Chapter 3 Labour Market Outlook](#), forestry and logging employment is expected to contract by almost 30% in the next ten years. As such, [Chapter 2 Economic Trends](#) outlines how reskilling among forestry workers may arise given the trends in the industry.

Related to the declines in the forestry industry, wildfires have become an ongoing challenge for B.C. that have created significant impacts regarding not only the economy but also public safety. In the summer of 2017, the Williams Lake area experienced its most significant wildfire season.⁶ The economic impacts are not yet completely known; however, the forestry, tourism, and services sectors were substantially impacted.⁶

Recognizing the need for governments and institutions to take action to address such severe environmental events, [Chapter 1 Trends in Higher Education](#) highlights how institutions like TRU have partnered together to form an Interior Universities Research Coalition

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(IURC).⁷ The IURC's purpose is to provide critical funding to research projects related to natural disaster challenges, knowledge, and response in Kamloops, Prince George, and Kelowna.⁷

Looking at the general educational profile of the area to see how current and future labour market needs can be met, in Williams Lake, of note, those who hold a trades certificate or diploma, or a certificate of apprenticeship qualification are represented slightly more than the provincial average.³ In conjunction, a higher percentage of residents have not graduated from high school compared to the provincial average.³ The proportion of residents with university certificates, diplomas, or bachelor degrees is approximately 40%, which is well below the provincial average of 55%.³

As may be expected, the Williams Lake area leads comparator regions and the province in the number of those employed in the mining; quarrying and oil and gas extraction fields (6.5%), as well as the agriculture and forestry fields (5.9%).³ However, residents are also notably employed in the industries of manufacturing (11.7%) and healthcare and social assistance (11.5%).³

Described in [Chapter 3 Labour Market Outlook](#), there will be strong labour market demand in healthcare, social assistance, and professional, scientific, and technical services. Unfilled vacancies exist as employers struggle to find and retain employees that have the right skill set.⁸ As well, the WLEDS report indicates that "the [Williams Lake] region has continually been working to recruit a variety of skilled workers such as counselors, medical staff, teachers, and trades people."⁴

Additionally, the City of Williams Lake will be pursuing economic opportunities related to further investments in mountain biking as a developing tourism activity and the pursuit of greater agricultural diversification.⁴

TRU's programs in Adventure Tourism, Trades, Nursing and Applied Sustainable Ranching are positioned to help new Grade 12 graduates and adult workers gain the education, skills, and training they need to succeed in the changing economy.

Indigenous Youth Transitions to Post-Secondary

Williams Lake is home to a large Indigenous community, which represents roughly one-fifth of the city's population.³ A good portion of TRU Williams Lake's educational offerings are filled by Indigenous students, as they make up more than a quarter of full-time equivalents at the Williams Lake campus. However, challenges recently exist concerning the rates of Indigenous high school graduates who transition to post-secondary.

Up until the 2013/14 school year, Grade 12 Indigenous students in SD27 had immediate transition rates on par with Non-Indigenous students.² The following few years, however, saw Indigenous transition rates diverge, from 42% in 2013/14 to 36% in 2014/15, 25% in 2015/16 and 33% in 2016/17.² From a broader perspective, SD27 transition rates have fallen from about half of Indigenous students (49%) going on to post-secondary in 2007/08 down to lows of about a quarter to a third by 2016/17, as mentioned.² Comparatively, transitions for Non-Indigenous students over the same period were consistent at about 41%, showing little signs of decline.²

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TRU has made a firm commitment to the Indigenization of education at the university through its [Coyote Project](#) that seeks to support Indigenous students in their journeys toward transitioning to post-secondary and to successfully completing their programs once they have enrolled. Some of TRU's faculty share about some of the goals of the project.

- “Every Indigenous student deserves the chance to succeed in this Coyote Project.”
“When Indigenous students come to [TRU], they don't have to leave their culture, language, and identity at the gate.” – Professor Airini, Dean, Education & Social Work⁹
- “We want to have retention and completion rates [for Indigenous students] that are parity. So, we want the students that are coming in to complete the program and complete the program successfully.” – Doug Ellis, Interim Dean, Faculty of Adventure, Culinary Arts and Tourism, TRU⁹

Video: [Coyote Project: TRU's Response to Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#)

Crime, Safety & TRU Commitment

Maclean's magazine's list of “Canada's Most Dangerous Places 2018” ranked the City of Williams Lake the fourth most dangerous city overall in all of Canada and seventh overall in their 2019 list.^{10,11} Crime scores are based on incidents per 100,000 people. For a city like Williams Lake with a population of under 11,000, the question arises of how applicable such comparisons might be.^{10,11} Of concern is how such labeling affects current and potential workers, families, and students in terms of their residency in Williams Lake.

In response, the city strives to be, “a safe, great place to do business, invest, live, work and play; and, the regional centre of education, government, health care,...”⁴ Assisting in this vision and providing stability and services to the community, the Williams Lake campus has long been a foundational cornerstone in carrying out TRU's vision and commitment to serving surrounding communities. TRU established the Williams Lake campus in 1971 shortly after its initial inception in 1970 as Cariboo College in Kamloops.¹²

Next in the Series

Upcoming scans will explore the future of work along with the knowledge and skills required.

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Sources

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