"Actually Working": The political economy of work-integrated learning in small and mid-sized cities in Western Canada

SYDNEY WHITING
TAYLOR MANNS
LARS K. HALLSTRÖM[1]
University of Lethbridge, Lethbridge, Canada
PERRY STEIN
City of Lethbridge, Lethbridge, Canada

This paper considers the role of work-integrated learning (WIL) in the Albertan economy through an assessment of impacts on economic development, retention, and employability outcomes. We draw from the results from a survey with alumni from two post-secondary campuses in the province (n=611); interviews and focus groups with a sub-sample of alumni (n=10); and focus groups with employers and WIL practitioners in Western Canada (n=15). We find that the conventional model of WIL, based on an "education-to-work" pipeline, aligns with the economic expectations of the Government of Alberta and has the potential to support increased integration between post-secondaries and the labor market. This model does not, however, fully address the diverse reasons for the out-migration of skilled laborers after graduation, such as a desired lifestyle. Through a more integrated view of work-integrated learning, we explore how the traditional 'pipeline' model can be revised to suit community and individual needs.

Keywords: Political economy, post-secondary education, Western Canada, neoliberalism, student perspectives

THE SHIFT TO JOB-CENTRIC LEARNING

Several colleges in Canada have shifted to polytechnic status over the past few years. Recently, in keeping with this trend, one college in Alberta announced its transition as the province's newest polytechnic institution[2] in 2024. Functionally, the rebranding does not mark a significant change in programmatic design or delivery, but rather, it reflects ongoing investments by both the province and institution into research, skills training, experiential and applied learning opportunities, and reputational changes (Lethbridge Polytechnic, 2024). Perhaps most interesting, however, is the underlying emphasis on the alignment between industry priorities, the labor market, economic development, and education through such institutions. The Government of Alberta's news release on the re-branding often mentions this, stating that the "[r]edesignation as a polytechnic institution will provide more hands-on, industry responsive higher education" (Government of Alberta, 2024, para. 1). On this note, some Albertan scholars have criticized the *Alberta 2030* report for its neoliberal emphasis on employability (Harrison & Mueller, 2021).

The emphasis on economic benefits generated through post-secondary education (PSE) is not a new phenomenon, nor are the ideas of profit motives and commercialization. The enforcement of new performance-based funding (PBF) models and guidelines for work-integrated learning (WIL)[3] in

[1] Corresponding author: Lars K. Hallström, lars.hallstrom@uleth.ca
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[2] A polytechnic is a post-secondary institution that may offer certificates, diplomas, and undergraduate degrees focused on technical, industry, and career-ready training (Government of Alberta, n.d.).
[3] Work-integrated learning (WIL) bridges experiential learning opportunities with students' academic studies in a formal setting (CEWIL Canada, n.d.).

Alberta post-secondary institutions (PSIs) (Arney & Krygsman, 2022) also align with an ongoing, neoliberal trend of anti-intellectualism in the province and the potential weaponization of WIL-related policy. These priorities inform the evolving political economy of Alberta at both the provincial and the municipal level, especially as small and medium-sized cities implement new strategies to reduce the "brain drain" and "out-migration" of skilled workers (Mueller, 2023). This paper interrogates these goals through the perspectives of WIL partners; students, employers, and institutional representatives. We find that while increased investment into WIL can have measurable impacts on student success and positive economic outcomes, it is not a 'fix-all' solution to some of the underlying concerns in employment, education, and community and economic development in Alberta. Indeed, we argue that the traditional pipeline model of WIL does not support holistic student development (i.e., balance and growth as individuals, community members, and workers), and that alternative models are needed.

WIL IN CANADA

WIL is a "form of curricular experiential education that formally integrates a student's academic studies with quality experiences within a workplace or practice setting" (CEWIL Canada, n.d., para. 1). These experiential learning models, much like those highlighted in Alberta, have proven to be successful for personal growth, skill development, and industry engagement (Drewery et al., 2020; Freudenberg et al., 2011). Different types of WIL—such as cooperative education, which consists of paid full-time work terms with an employer; internships (which can be paid or unpaid), where students work with a supervisor; and service learning, where community organizations collaborate with students through the class structure (CEWIL Canada, n.d.)—have also been found to increase confidence among students, improve their knowledge of the workplace, and foster technical and transferable skills (Arney, 2022). This has been shown to lead to higher quality and more relevant or permanent employment after graduation (Jackson & Collings, 2018; Wyonch, 2020).

Work-integrated learning, as the name suggests, connects the world of work with the realm of education. But what *exactly* is WIL attempting to bridge in the modern political economy, and how can this benefit both the self and society? In this section, we explore the intended goals of WIL in the context of 'work' and the Albertan economy.

Perspectives on the Meaning of Work

Some posit that the central aim of PSE should be to equip learners with skills and competencies to ensure they are adaptable and resilient workers (Gerstein & Friedman, 2016). Others argue that it must mold reflexive and knowledgeable citizens (McArthur, 2011), but Woolley (2018) disregards these potential "non-pecuniary benefits of education" (p. 1063) as too nebulous. Instead, he argues that the earning potential of graduates—and thus, their contribution to the economy—is based on "the program's effectiveness in generating valuable human capital" (Woolley, 2018, p. 1065), among other factors. This represents a bias among some scholars in centering the values of Human Capital Theory (HCT), rather than more holistic measures, when determining or defining 'success.'

HCT emerged in the 1960s with the work of Gary Becker (Becker, 1964). It assumes that the "transferability of [...] acquired skills" (Kessler & Lulfesmann, 2006, p. 1) encourages employers to offer continuous training opportunities to foster in-house potential. The theory also "suggests that education increases the productivity and earnings of individuals" (Tan, 2014, p. 411), and it positions education as a useful investment for one's economic and earning potential (Tan, 2014; Woolley, 2018).

However, HCT is rather deterministic in its perception of skill development. In practice, the theory often views individuals—capable of acquiring (and retaining) skills and education—as a substitutable commodity that must be developed and invested in to ensure retention. We argue that HCT informs current models of WIL and positions WIL as a useful tool, given that it can serve as a bridge between employee attraction, training, and retention (Drewery et al., 2020; Jackson & Collings, 2018). Others caution against the design of WIL experiences as a pipeline to specific roles or industries and argue that WIL models should instead create space for more holistic personal and professional development (Arney & Krygsman, 2022; Harrison & Mueller, 2021).

The risks of these linear 'pipeline' models of WIL are clear. By aligning the skills earned in PSE too closely with a specific career and supporting "an economy based on just-in-time labour" (Harrison & Mueller, 2021, p. 2), students are limited in their pursuit of meaningful employment and holistic, lifelong learning. While this perpetuates an understanding of employability that is rooted in ideas of profit-maximization, competition, and hyper-individuality (Arney & Krygsman, 2022; Björck, 2020), the WIL model could be adapted to suit other goals. Indeed, a revised version of WIL that seeks to address and counter some of these ideas could be a disruptive, and yet useful, tool in countering traditional neoliberal understandings of 'work.'

Revisiting WIL as a Tool in the Political Economy

To explore how WIL can best be adapted as a more holistic model, we must first look at the current roles of WIL for students, employers, and institutions. WIL has been described as a "trial run career transition" (Inceoglu et al., 2019, p. 2), a talent pipeline (Drewery et al., 2020), or as a strategy to ensure 'future-ready talent' (Pretti et al., 2021), all of which act as risk mitigation strategies for employers looking to hire and retain talent. Other employers used WIL for "prescreening potential hires, developing industry/profession workforce skills, and bringing in specific skills and talent" (DeClou et al., 2013, p. 5).

WIL can also be directly tied to other needs in the workplace, such as those of environmental, social, and governance knowledge and skills (Oldford et al., 2022). However, these skills may not always be valued or prioritized in WIL programs by employers or policymakers. This is often the case in Alberta, where economic development continues to be prioritized through WIL programming (Arney & Krygsman, 2022).

The Government of Alberta: New and Old Priorities

In Alberta, Arney and Krygsman (2022) have examined WIL through the lens of educational policy responses at the post-secondary level. They note how policies from the Ministry of Education shape how the gap between academia and workplace skills is understood, further driving the province's interest in WIL opportunities in PSE curricula and programming (Arney & Krygsman, 2022). Rationalizing this push toward universal WIL expansion, the authors outline how the Government of Alberta believes the purpose of PSE "is to get citizens employed and contributing to the economy" and "shows an assumption that every post-secondary program can be mapped to specific industries, regulatory bodies, professional organizations, or employers" (Arney & Krygsman, 2022, p. 103). This is not a new approach. Throughout the 20th century, Albertan governments have adopted similar strategies to promote the commercialization and economic potential of PSE. Despite different financial investments from provincial and federal governments over time, the role of higher education in the political economy of Alberta is informed by decades of debate and policy inertia, (much of which we cannot fully outline in this article).

For example, under Premier Ralph Klein in the 1990s, the Progressive Conservatives implemented a neoliberal agenda in education. An emphasis on individualism, marked by policies which promoted greater 'parental choice' in education and charter schools, and a "three-year business plan for education" in 1994, also supported this trend (Taylor, 2001, pp. 4-8). Other advocacy efforts, such as those led by the Conference Board of Canada, encouraged greater emphasis on the economic benefits of education during this time (Taylor, 2001). Three decades later, the rebranded conservatives—the United Conservatives—have positioned post-secondary institutions to be "less as providers of public goods (higher education and research) and more as 'businesses' that should produce commodities and attract private sector investment" (Adkin et al., 2022, p. 1). This helps contextualize the Government of Alberta's emphasis on economic development in WIL opportunities and through the new polytechnic institution, as discussed earlier.

Ultimately, in a political context that has long emphasized economic development and 'marketable' PSE, this paper addresses the research question: Can WIL be used as a useful strategy for community development, youth employability, and graduate retention in the Albertan political economy? We find that there are significant benefits for employers, students, and PSE to implement WIL programs, but that current models of WIL—which prioritize economic development over personal growth—can be improved. In the discussion, we propose a refined model of WIL that balances personal, professional, community, and economic development.

METHODOLOGY

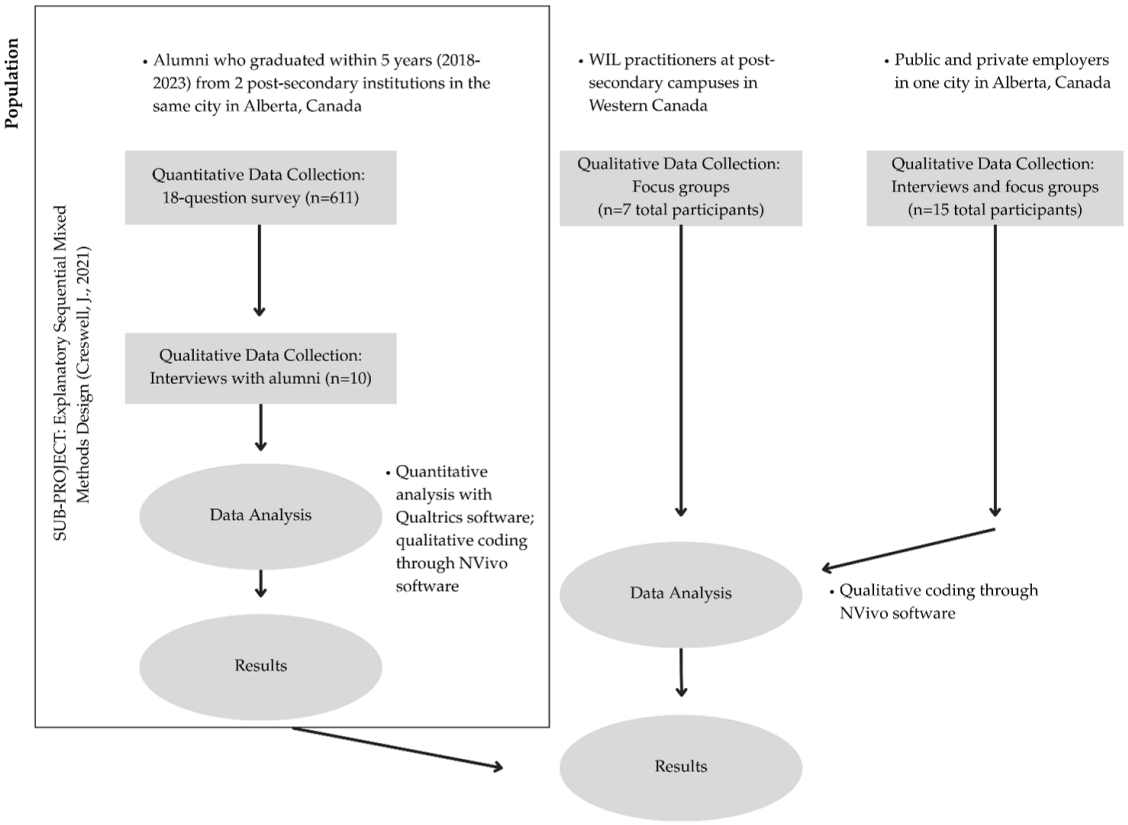
To conduct a comprehensive review of those most impacted by WIL programming, we took a mixed methodological approach to survey alumni, employers, and WIL practitioners from PSIs in Western Canada. While this project explored many themes, the results presented in this paper reflect a sub-theme on how WIL intersects with the political economy of Alberta at the municipal and provincial scale. This research relies on the theoretical foundation outlined in the previous section, including critiques to Human Capital theory and challenges to the neoliberal educational context in Alberta, to explore the potential role of WIL to support holistic student development.

We identified three study populations to assess our research questions, including: (1) alumni who graduated within five years from one of two post-secondary institutions in the same city in Alberta, Canada, who both *did* and *did not* complete a WIL placement during their program; (2) work-integrated learning professionals at post-secondary institutions in Western Canada; and (3) employers from medium-to-large organizations (i.e., 500 employees or more) in the public and private sector. Students who were currently enrolled in post-secondary education at the time of the study were not included, as they do not often participate in full-time work in the professional field they trained in before graduation. These populations were chosen due to their proximity to, and engagement into WIL programming, as validated by the literature [e.g., Drewery et al. (2020) worked with employers; Arney (2022) interviewed students; and Arney and Krygsman (2022) considered institutional framings of WIL].

'WIL' was broadly defined in this study according to the CEWIL Canada guidelines (e.g., students were asked to self-identify whether they participated in WIL, and many people had completed practicums, co-op work terms, applied study courses, and more).

The diagram in Figure 1 provides an overview of our mixed methods approach.

FIGURE 1: Overview of research methodology.



Population: Alumni of Post-Secondary Institutions

In the first phase of the project, an 18-question survey was shared with alumni who had graduated within five years (2018-2023) from a university or college in the same Albertan city. We approached the alumni survey with an explanatory sequential design method, one of the core tenets of mixed methods research, wherein "the researcher connects quantitative and qualitative data by having one database build on the other" (Creswell, 2021, p. 7). First, quantitative data is collected, and then qualitative data is collected afterwards to help "*explain* from personal experiences the quantitative results in more detail" (Creswell, 2021, p. 7). This method helps deepen the researchers' understanding of the topic through blended results and analysis (Creswell, 2021).

This survey explored whether students' participation in WIL (or lack of participation) impacted their perceptions of job opportunities and the livability of the community, as well as questions of retention post-graduation. The individuals were contacted by their respective institutions through their alumni email addresses. If they chose to participate, the alumni could self-identify at the end of the survey to be contacted for a follow-up interview or focus group (otherwise their participation remained anonymous). The questions were a combination of multiple-choice and short, open-response formats.

This survey was delivered through Qualtrics, an encrypted digital survey software. Based on estimates of the combined graduation rate at the post-secondary institutions surveyed, the sample was drawn from a population of approximately 20,000. Therefore, the representative sample was 378 respondents,

with a confidence interval of 95% and a margin of error of 5%. Alumni were surveyed regardless of whether they had participated in WIL, and a control group representing 47.5% of the sample was maintained in the results. The survey was open from March 28th to May 31st, 2024, with one invitation and two reminders sent out to all alumni of both institutions. Due to scheduling conflicts, alumni from the College received only one reminder prior to the survey closing. Overall, prospective participants had, on average, three weeks from when they were made aware of the survey to the last reminder. The survey had a response rate of 3.055%, resulting in 611 individualized responses and a representative sample of the population. Analysis was conducted through Qualtrics to generate descriptive statistics and assess correlations between variables. At the end of the survey, individuals were asked whether they would like to participate in a short, 20-minute follow-up interview or focus group with other student alumni. In total, 10 individuals participated, and data were analyzed using the same methodology discussed in the following section.

Focus Groups and Interviews: Qualitative Analysis

Known to create spaces for important dialogue that helps researchers better understand the contexts of their questions, focus groups provided opportunities for collaborative knowledge production for researchers and participants, and space to consider new ways of thinking (Cameron, 2021). Semi-structured in-depth focus groups allowed for most of the discussion to be led by participants, with some prompting and moderation from facilitators as necessary. In some cases, short 20-minute individual interviews were conducted when participants were unable to attend a focus group. Four focus groups were conducted, each with 2-4 participants (n=15). These included participants from WIL offices at university, college, and polytechnic institutions from Western Canada, who were contacted based on publicly available contact information through the institutions' WIL offices. In different sessions, private and public employers from the community (n=7) participated in focus groups, after being recruited through online outreach and word-of-mouth.

In each session, participants were asked to reflect on a series of 4-6 questions on the role of WIL in postsecondary education and the connections between education and industry, such as skill development and measurements of WIL. Discussions were audio-recorded, auto-transcribed and manually adjusted by the researchers, and coded using NVivo software. Patterns and themes frequently encountered were identified, discussed, interpreted, and collectively defined (Naeem et al., 2023). Strauss and Corbin (1990) distinguish between different types of coding, and for this project, we used the generalized category of 'open coding,' "the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 61). During the coding process, each researcher was assigned to one of three research populations (alumni, employers, or WIL focus groups) to analyze. Intercoder reliability (as per O'Connor & Joffe, 2020) was maintained through frequent team meetings. As per the Tri-Agency Policy for Ethical Research Involving Humans, this project received ethics approval from the University of Alberta Ethics Office (reference number Pro00135433).

RESULTS

When the results were combined and analyzed across the different populations, there were several key themes relevant to the framing of WIL as part of the local political economy. First, there was a clear disconnect between each group's understanding of skills, work experience, and general qualifications. There was an issue of articulation (i.e., the ability to describe one's own skills and abilities) due to siloing between industry and education spaces and norms. We found that some students struggled to tell

employers what they were skilled at, and some employers struggled to communicate what skills they needed. Additionally, several individuals resisted language that framed WIL as merely a pipeline that accelerates students into the world of work, rather than helping them develop a unique set of interpersonal, professional, and technical skills (see also, Arney & Krygsman, 2022).

However, if the goals of WIL are to be re-examined, how can the training-to-working pipeline (or lack thereof) be conceptualized alongside the talent demands of small and medium-sized communities? In the last part of the paper, we discuss results that suggest retention is based on a complex set of factors and propose that WIL can be a useful tool to encourage students to stay in the community (and with the same employer) post-graduation. Ultimately, we argue that a more holistic model of student development and WIL is needed, even as WIL was found to be a valuable tool for individuals (in finding and training for work), employers (for retention and training), and communities (for retention and community development).

Perspectives on the Adequacy of Different Work Experiences

The quote that helped coin the title of this article, "Actually Working," comes from a recent graduate who reflected on the role of WIL to help students with:

> the learning curve of actually working, you know [the] kind of job that isn't customer service like working at the grocery store or whatever, it's like actually working in the business world. There's definitely some growing pains, but I think most of that was more so just moving from student to actually working in the workforce. (Alumnus, Interview).

What does it mean to be 'actually working?' The participant identified a stark contrast between employment in the customer service and business fields, and they disregarded their experiences as a student in academia as 'work'. This relates to the dichotomy of academic and 'real-world' skills discussed earlier (Arney & Krygsman, 2022; Björck, 2020). Minimum wage work is integral within the workforce, but the value placed on these options is minimized. This holds true for both the workers (i.e., students and new graduates), and the Government in Alberta in their advancement of career-training and pipeline opportunities. A different participant highlights this disconnect, saying:

> I think there are some employers who say, well, you just came out of school, and all you've been doing while you're in school for part-time jobs is working as a barista […] so their academic work is not seen. And… I think this is wrong. It should be seen as work-related that they're developing these skills. (Alumnus, Interview).

There is an assumption that to be 'actually working,' one must be engaged in highly skilled work that contributes to the health and wealth of the Albertan economy. The marketability of certain professions and training options is integral to this goal, and more ambiguous training and educational pathways—including the emphasis on Liberal Education at some campuses in Alberta—can be considered antithetical to this goal. An alumnus shared that "we have a government who does not see the benefit of a liberal arts education at all" and instead, "they're supporting what they see as marketable jobs" (Alumnus, Interview). These perceptions on the purpose of education and the value of certain credentials provide the backdrop to a more expansive discussion on skill development and student preparedness in the workplace.

Skills, Training, and the Challenge of Articulating Skills and Training

In response to a question on whose 'responsibility' it is to train the incoming workforce, a balanced and collaborative approach was suggested by participants in the focus group with employers. As one participant noted, "[students] …bring those skills to the table [and] it's the employer's responsibility to give them the opportunity to apply the skills and learn how to use them in the workplace" (Private Sector Employer, Focus Group). However, when "industry thinks that the education system should train people properly" (Private Sector Employer, Focus Group), there is a clear disconnect with the:

> education system [that] says, it's not our jobs to necessarily prepare people for all jobs, […] it's your job [as employers] to teach them the kind of competency and skills that they are going to require for your specific employer—or not employer, but task. (Private Sector Employer, Focus Group)

Not only do employers, students, and industry representatives have different expectations surrounding work, training, and, by extension, WIL placements (see, for example, DeClou et al., 2013) but they are using different terminology to communicate these varied expectations and the skills necessary to perform the job. Students' inability to articulate the skills they have learned in school or in WIL placements, or at least the disconnection between what students share and what employers communicate or advertise that they are looking for, emerged as a key theme in our research. As one participant explained, students can

> articulate the skills they have, but then they're using language that might be different than what an employer has. Or various employers are using different language to describe what is likely the same kind of skills, which might throw off a student who is looking at multiple job postings. (WIL Practitioner, Focus Group)

Other participants echoed this, saying:

> I think we often do really well at giving [students] the skills, but we don't necessarily help them to recognize that they've gained those skills and be able to speak about it from a reference of applicability to the future. (WIL Practitioner, Focus Group)

> In order for our students to be successful, they have to be able to articulate. They have to be able to understand what skills are, what competencies are, and then how to articulate those in a very dynamic and changing labor market. (WIL Practitioner, Focus Group)

Something as simple as a job ad—an evolving and ever-present representation of 'what is needed' in the political economy—can be the source of this disconnect. In industries where a diverse skill set is needed, but the job posting provides a narrow scope of what may qualify as experience or suitable skills, prospective talent may be lost. One WIL practitioner observed that "there's sometimes these boxes that students put themselves in" (WIL Practitioner, Focus Group), but in fact, employers also may reinforce the idea of these boxes. Some WIL Practitioners shared that they feel stuck between the juxtaposing needs of student development and employer engagement, saying:

> How do we help [students] understand what they're capable [of] fits within the labor market as it exists right now, but also educating employers that there's so many more individuals that they could really be looking at and utilizing in a way that they maybe haven't thought about. (WIL Practitioner, Focus Group)

This framing, which calls on students to 'fit in' and position their skills and experiences to suit their perception of the needs in the labor market, reinforces the Government of Alberta's framing of an education-to-employment pipeline as a necessary outcome of WIL. It does not, as the WIL practitioners outline, allow for a reimagining of the labor market, the applicability of students' skills, or the future of work itself.

WIL as a Strategy for Retention

There has been limited research on the role of WIL in retaining individuals in the same community where they studied. However, in a sample of students who secured full-time employment after graduation, in the short term (i.e., four months post-graduation), over 50% of them were working for the same employer as they completed paid work experience in their last year of studies (Jackson & Collings, 2018). This may indicate that quality work placements contribute to higher rates of community-based talent retention.

Holding with other research (see Jackson & Collings, 2018; Wyonch, 2020), we found a relationship between student participation in WIL and students' ability to find employment relevant to their academic field within at least five years from the completion of their academic program in our survey of alumni (as per Table 1).

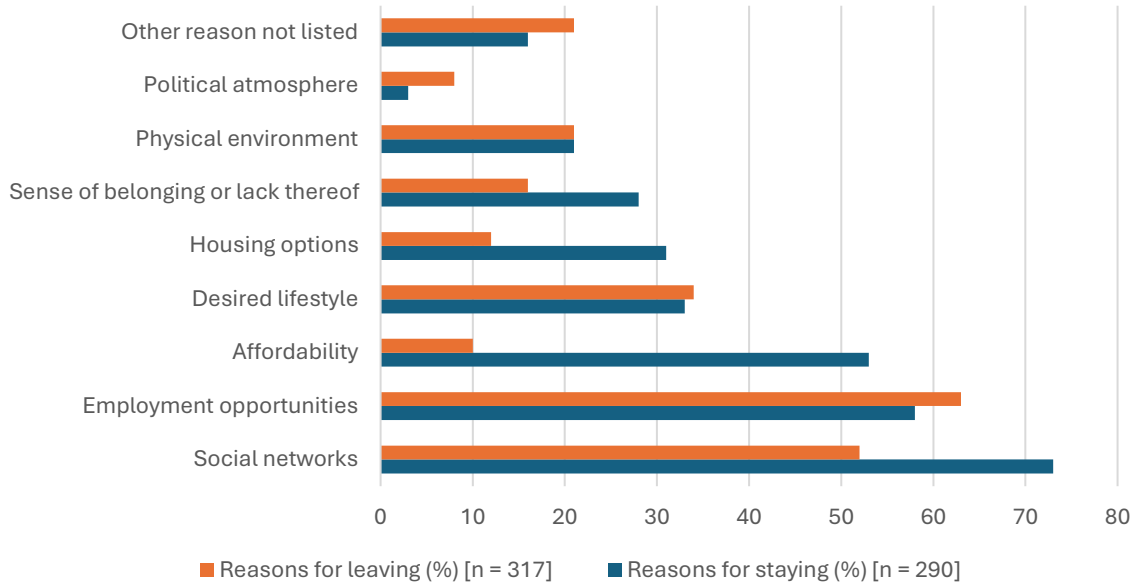
TABLE 1: WIL participation cross-tabulated with current employment.

	Are you currently employed in a job that reflects your skillset?			Fisher's Exact Test	
		YES	NO	P-Value	**0.0021**
Did you participate in WIL?	YES	55.3%	40.9%	Effect Size (Cramér's V)	0.127
	NO	44.7%	59.1%	Sample Size (n)	597

This is further validated by alumni interviews, with one participant noting that, "I had never planned to stay here [in the community] after school, but it kind of just happened. So now I'm here and now I don't wanna leave" (Alumnus, Interview). This reflection came after the student completed a co-op term in the community that was aligned with their professional goals and was then hired full-time after graduation.

There is, of course, much-needed nuance to add to this discussion of retention. The idea put forth by the provincial government that "providing post-secondary education close to home is key to supporting the economic growth in communities of all sizes…" (Government of Alberta, 2024, para. 6), assumes that students choose, at least in part, to attend educational institutions based on the proximity of the institution to their primary place of residence, and by extension, will choose to stay in the community once they graduate. As demonstrated in Figure 2, where we compare the survey responses from alumni who left the community after graduation and those who stayed, including the factors that influenced their decision, employment opportunities are only part of a recent graduate's decision to stay or leave the community. A political economy that relies on the retention of skilled workers must recognize the full range of reasons of why individuals leave.

FIGURE 2: Results from two sub-populations - those who stayed and those who left the community.



Note: Figure 2 shows the results from the survey question, *"What factors contributed to you staying in/leaving [the community]?"*

In Figure 2, we see that alumni who left after graduation (n=317) reported in a 'select-all' style question that their top three reasons for doing so were *employment opportunities* (63%), *social networks outside of [the community]* (52%), and *desired lifestyle* (34%). Conversely, alumni who stayed after graduation (n=290) reported that *social networks* (73%), *employment opportunities* (58%), and *affordability* in the city (53%) were among their top three reasons for staying. Interestingly, the largest gaps between the two samples (as reasons for why people chose to stay) were *affordability* (+43%), *social networks* (+21%), and *housing options* (+19%). Therefore, while employment opportunities are the usual target of retention initiatives, evident through the ongoing investment into WIL, policies which maintain general affordability and suitable housing options may be an equally valuable, or perhaps even more consequential, investment to avoid the out-migration of skilled graduates.

In the local economy, employers, especially small business owners, may also need extra support to coordinate WIL placements and contribute to the goals outlined by the Government of Alberta. The 2023 *Brighter Together Survey* from Economic Development Lethbridge found that 12% of employers sought assistance setting up WIL programming for their business (Economic Development Lethbridge, 2023). They also found that local businesses are adapting to labor market changes through increased investments in staff training, upskilling and reskilling of current employees, and some ongoing partnerships with 'new talent' through WIL and apprenticeships (Economic Development Lethbridge, 2023). Given this context, it is understandable that employers would share that graduate retention is a:

> kind of a chicken egg situation, right? If the grads aren't there, or sometimes companies say, "we can't reliably find the talent we need." And so other places look more alluring. Conversely, individuals might graduate and think, "you know, I'd really like to stay in [the community]." But if there aren't places there to help them grow in their career and develop those kinds of skills, sometimes they get pushed elsewhere. (Private Employer, Focus Group)

It is interesting to explore the differences between alumni and employer perspectives on retention. Overall, similar sentiments to the 'chicken and egg' narrative emerged in the interviews with alumni, with one individual sharing that "the reason why I'm not in [the community], I would say, is because the opportunities related to sort of my interests weren't really there" (Alumnus, Interview). Other alumni stayed with the same organization post-graduation: "so then I just finished my last year and went right back here [to their previous WIL employer] … you know how nice it is to go to your last year not worrying about a job?" (Alumni, Interview). Individuals also stressed the importance of WIL to integrate into the work environment and learn, first-hand, the work culture:

> I think it [CO-OP] helped me just like learn the vernacular of like a corporate job [and] how to navigate [work] cultures. And then also it—it helped me learn what I didn't like…which was…a slow-growing company that…was cutting full-time workers for CO-OPs like me. (Alumni, Interview)

Therefore, similar to Inceoglu et al.'s (2019) framing of WIL as a "trial run" (p. 2), this individual reported that their WIL experience was beneficial for personal and professional learning.

DISCUSSION

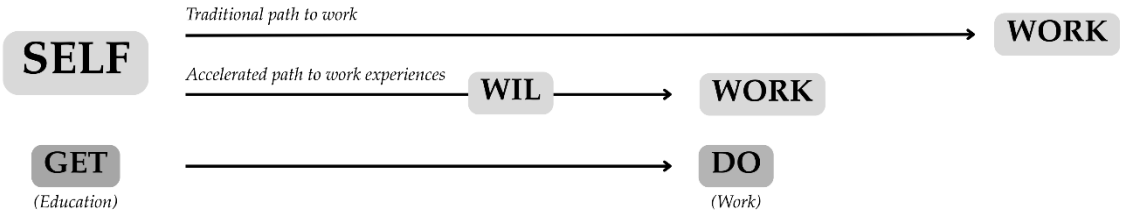
In this paper, we were interested in the role of WIL in the Albertan political economy, including the potential impact of WIL on graduate retention, local economic development, and student employability. Our results aligned with previous research that WIL can positively impact students' personal and professional development (Arney, 2022; Drewery et al., 2020; Freudenberg et al., 2011), and we found that WIL can be a viable tool to ensure graduate retention in the local economy and strengthen recruitment efforts by local employers. By expanding on existing WIL programs, community, post-secondary, and employer partners can strengthen their relationship with one another, offer meaningful training opportunities for a diverse set of students, and contribute to broader community development.

There were several other themes that emerged. First, we observed the issue of 'skills articulation' and a disconnect between employers, students, and the post-secondary institutions understanding of the labor market and 'in-demand' skills. We also found that some participants resisted the idea of WIL as a 'pipeline' to the labor market (see also, Arney & Krygsman, 2022). Additionally, all populations emphasized the importance of community connections and secondary supports that would improve access to and experiences of WIL, such as affordability and transportation. These results prompted us to re-imagine the model itself, as identified in Figure 3 (below).

Based on these results, we argue that the traditional model of university education in Canada is that of a "get-and-do" system. As Woolley (2018) highlights, students, employers, and funders expect a relatively linear trajectory of education: "Phase 1: Attend university. Phase 2: [blank]. Phase 3: Profit" (p. 1062). How this occurs is less clear. What is happening, or what needs to happen in 'Phase 2' is often left up to the individual. In the context of the Albertan political economy, we argue that this "get-and-do" understanding of PSE and work informs the conventional WIL programming model. However, our results reflect an interest by program partners in a more holistic, equity-rooted design for partnership-based learning. This aligns with previous research on the impact of gender (Lyons et al., 2022), international student or immigration status (Esses et al., 2018; Wyonch, 2020), Indigeneity (Arney, 2022; Nielsen et al., 2022), race (Wyonch, 2020), disability (Gatto, 2021), and general social experiences and cultural backgrounds (Lyons et al., 2022; Wyonch, 2020) on student experiences and programming in WIL. To better support diverse student populations and construct equity-based

models for WIL, we argue that WIL must shift from a "work-learning" model (where integration is not a key, identifiable goal) to an "integrated-learning" model (that promotes holistic development, personal growth, and increased social cohesion).

FIGURE 3: Conventional Work-Learning "Get-Do" WIL Model.



In the conventional model (Figure 3)—based on Woolley's (2018) work and the authors' own interpretations of WIL—emphasis is placed on the individual and their journey toward becoming a more skilled, adaptable, and knowledgeable worker. It relies on the 'pipeline' mentality that WIL supports students to get "career experience" faster than traditional education-to-work pipelines. Rather than encouraging community-based integration, the model helps students 'learn how to work' and educational systems are predominantly viewed as transactional spaces (where an individual "gets" something [e.g., a degree or diploma] in exchange for the opportunity to "do" a specific career). Notably, this model has limited opportunities for program design that supports community and social cohesion, but it helps students get to "do" their work faster than non-WIL students.

WIL practitioners specifically identified the need for equity and community-driven opportunities, stating that "there's so many changes that need to be done … I'm hearing a lot from people and from students [saying] 'I need community.' Like, community is one of the number one things … especially in DEI" (WIL Practitioner, Focus Group). Employers echoed a similar sentiment, expressing that there needs to be opportunities in WIL that allow people to bring their whole selves to the experience:

> Most of the students that we bring into our work are from diverse backgrounds. It's like, if we can not only help students from diverse backgrounds understand how they can use that perspective and then voice within [this] work—it's also about helping existing staff understand the value of that perspective in a really safe environment where, you know, life or death is not at the table. (Public Sector Employer, Focus Group)

Finally, alumni from the post-secondary institutions also expressed their desire to be a part of the local community and feel accepted in their WIL placements. One respondent who desired community connection also noted that it was difficult to get involved due to the community's perceived sentiments toward students:

> So basically, like, anything outside of the university, there was always kind of like an active push from anyone outside of the school [to not welcome students] … they weren't really interested in like young people and like young activities downtown, right? (Alumnus, Interview)

All populations in the study expressed that there should be more benefits in WIL than *just* developing work skills (such as developing a sense of belonging, feeling accepted in the workplace, and the ability to be their authentic selves within a placement). This was important to participants because some felt

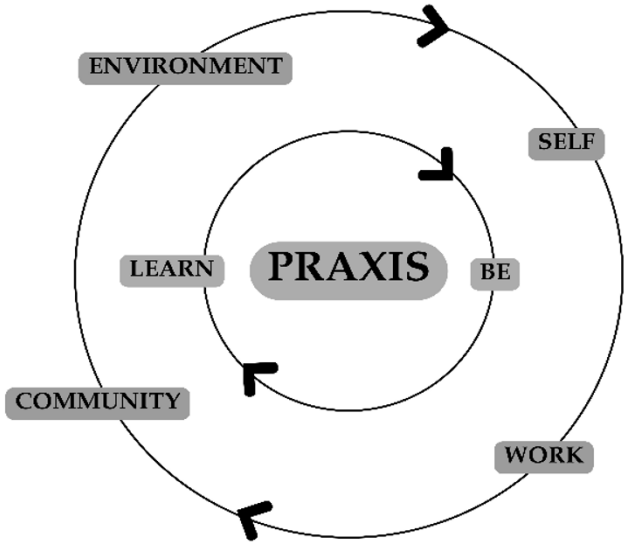
disadvantaged in the workforce due to ability, gender orientation, or other factors. As one alumnus shared:

> I know I'm qualified when I apply for jobs, and even, like, this last round of several years of unemployment, I went into a disability program that helps you, and because of my gender diversity as well, we ran into a couple of issues where they were rejecting me even though I was qualified for [their] process. (Alumnus, Interview)

Given these results, we see a need for WIL to shift away from a "get-do" model that prioritizes the learning of workplace skills and human capital development, to a more holistic model that combines learning about work, the self, the community, and the environments in which they exist.

In the proposed "integrated learning" model (Figure 4), the connections between 'work' and the 'self' comprise only a small portion of the program goals, and there is a clear praxis around personal development that informs all program development, implementation, and evaluation processes.

FIGURE 4: Proposed 'Integrated Learning' WIL Model.



Instead of learning how to work, or rather, "getting" something to simply "do" the tasks, the core of this model is to "learn how to be." As such, individuals can learn how to *be* community members, environmental stewards, responsible citizens, and workers. With an astute focus on community connections in WIL from all three study populations, four pillars of the integrated model emerged that focus on holistic and human-centered development in WIL.

This shift in mindset, and therefore, a shift in the programmatic design, has the potential to benefit all WIL partners. Informed by the results of our study, the "integrated learning" model would help ensure that everyone (employers, students, PSIs, etc.) benefits from more holistic, inclusive models of community development and lifelong learning.

To begin testing and applying this model, WIL practitioners can expand their programming to further emphasize self-exploration, community development and partnerships, and environmental awareness in the training and programming provided to incoming WIL students, employer partners, and their institutions.

CONCLUSION

These findings highlight the complexity of graduate retention and WIL programming in small and medium-sized communities in Western Canada. While the research demonstrates the potential impact that WIL can have on retention and increased integration between education and employment realms, an ensuing challenge is how employers and WIL practitioners, should they wish to contribute to the central goals of the local political economy, ensure that students are engaged in 'quality' work experiences. Thus, while there have been attempts made to define and outline 'quality' work experiences (Drewery et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2019), more research is needed to build a universal or transferable model of quality experiences that supports student development, industry needs, and the community in a holistic way.

Ultimately, we find that the conventional model of WIL, based on a traditional understanding of work and workplace culture, has the potential to support increased integration between the post-secondaries and the labor market. However, the model, which is related to theories and assumptions ranging from Human Capital Theory to Human Resource Development, does not fully address the challenges of graduate retention. To avoid out-migration of skilled, entry-level workers, the myriads of social conditions, employment opportunities, workplace cultures, and living conditions must all be considered and held in balance with other factors. Thus, while the priorities of the Government of Alberta align with an Adam Smithian-informed perception of economic growth and WIL as a tool in the political economy, this case study highlights the unique challenges that many cities face in attracting, training, and retaining skilled workers and building strong, enduring communities. To address these concerns, we proposed a new "integrated-learning" model for WIL that can be piloted in Alberta and elsewhere.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides the justification and evidence for a new WIL model, there needs to be further research to develop and apply the model in WIL programs. Future studies, then, should be conducted on the impact of 'integrated' WIL approaches on personal, professional, and community development.

Finally, a central limitation of this study was that despite receiving demographic information in the alumni survey regarding gender and ethnicity, there was no opportunity for participants to indicate international or domestic student status. This may have impacted different students' access to WIL opportunities, as student visa guidelines often restrict the number of hours which international students can work or may otherwise be a barrier to access WIL programming (IRCC, 2025). The inclusion of immigration status in future studies on WIL may also help reveal (and address) potential experiences of xenophobia and/or racism in WIL. As such, further research on supporting diversity in WIL programming, especially in the context of the development of more 'integrated' and holistic models, should be conducted.

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DISCLOSURE OF THE USE OF GENERATIVE AI

No generative AI was used in any stage of this research project or to aid in the writing of this manuscript.

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The International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning (IJWIL) publishes double-blind peer-reviewed original research and topical issues related to Work-Integrated Learning (WIL). IJWIL first published in 2000 under the name of Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education (APJCE).

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> *An educational approach involving three parties – the student, educational institution, and an external stakeholder – consisting of authentic work-focused experiences as an intentional component of the curriculum. Students learn through active engagement in purposeful work tasks, which enable the integration of theory with meaningful practice that is relevant to the students' discipline of study and/or professional development* (Zegwaard et al., 2023, p. 38*).

Examples of practice include off-campus workplace immersion activities such as work placements, internships, practicum, service learning, and cooperative education (co-op), and on-campus activities such as work-related projects/competitions, entrepreneurships, student-led enterprise, student consultancies, etc. WIL is related to, and overlaps with, the fields of experiential learning, work-based learning, and vocational education and training.

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