National Consultation on Career Development in Rural Settings 2004

G.S. Peruniak
Athabasca University
Athabasca, Alberta
Canada

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Geoff Peruniak, Ph.D.
Athabasca University
Athabasca, Alberta
Canada

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the important voice of rural career development professionals as the whole field of career development seeks a greater voice informing policies that affect us. Rural Canada is of great significance to the whole nation and plays an integral part in defining the Canadian identity. Not only do rural communities provide a choice in lifestyle and living circumstances but also rural places underpin large sectors of our economy. Rural areas are the point of extraction of raw materials and a significant source of labour, capital, and international exchange (Flora and Christensen, 1991). Rural Canada is a source of inspiration, an escape from urban confinement, and a destination for foreign tourists. It is the breadbasket for large parts of the world, the lungs of the nation, and the breeding ground for North America’s migratory birds. It is also the recipient of urban garbage and pollution, the site of devastating clear cutting and other resource exploitations, and the casualty of uncaring and unfettered global markets.

Rural citizens are well placed to develop creative solutions to some of these challenges if they are given adequate resources and supportive policies. The career development professional, hereafter called a career professional, specialist, or practitioner, is part of the rural community’s resources. This paper is intended to sample the perspectives of career practitioners who work in rural areas of Canada to provide input that would find its way into future policy development.

Background

The global, national, and regional forces affecting life and careers in rural Canada are diverse and complex. Certainly no single analysis can do justice to these interrelated forces. Bollman (1992) has pointed out the diversity of rural Canada reinforced by variations in climate and resources. The portrayal of viewpoints on rural career development provided here is a preliminary analysis, and while certainly not comprehensive, it is suggestive of attitudes and beliefs of career practitioners who are in the trenches in rural regions of Canada.

Rapid changes in the international trading markets have impacted almost all aspects of rural life as governments, industries, businesses, and social institutions scramble to adjust to these forces through a process known as “restructuring” (Rounds, 1997; Rural Development Institute, 1990). Stabler and Rounds (1995) suggest that these restructuring forces such as technology, communications, and growth in service industries may be accelerating instead of stabilizing as job losses continue to mount in agriculture, mining, forestry, and certain energy sectors. Statistics Canada reports that the number of family farms has continued its downward trend another 11% since 1996 while the number of agribusinesses is on the increase (Statistics Canada, 2002). An out migration from rural areas lying outside the commuting range of urban centres has been one consequence of restructuring forces. Only about 20% of the Canadian population is rural based (Statistics Canada, 2001). The impending economic, social, political forces have brought the definition of what is “rural” into dispute (Dasgupta, 1988; Statistics Canada, 2001). In this paper, “rural” refers to the Statistics Canada 2001 definition of areas of population that are less than 10,000 where at least half the workforce is employed locally (i.e., not a bedroom community of an urban centre).
Within this context of change, career developers have been endeavouring to find a voice in policy as part of the adjustments to restructuring. The International Symposium in 1999 (Hiebert and Bezanson, 2000) was devoted to this theme and a number of sessions at NATCON 2004 reflect more initiatives aimed at influencing policy. While there have been notable policy initiatives by the federal government such as Community Futures and The Canadian Rural Partnership (1990) as well as provincial undertakings, career professionals have been represented very little in such policy development. The analysis presented here represents an initial step in a grassroots approach to affecting policy development in career development in rural areas of Canada. This initial step gives voice to the situations faced by career professionals in rural settings. It is part of an informal assessment strategy.

Previous Consultations

In several years of earlier consultations, a total of 63 rural career professionals from Western Canada identified the following set of challenges facing them (Peruniak, 2002). This set is listed in descending order of priority from this particular group of practitioners.

Travel and Transportation

The role of travel and transportation in the rural context was identified by most of the individuals and groups as a major preoccupation in the delivery of career development and in the sense of isolation that was experienced by clients and practitioners alike. Transportation played out in different ways for different individuals. Travel by the practitioner out to small isolated places was an expensive endeavour in terms of time. On the other hand, lack of transportation for some clients such as single moms meant that they could not come in to access services and nor could they come in to take the next step after an intervention. Clients often had limited choice of employment opportunities, affordable housing, or food banks because they did not have transportation. High school students often had difficulties in reaching practicum placements. Transportation problems were often associated with limited resources and shrinking budgets.

Employers

The role of employers was seen as crucial to career development in the rural setting. Some groups emphasized the importance of finding ways to support local employers. Other groups talked about how hard it was to keep an ongoing dialogue with employers who were too busy. Others highlighted the importance of assisting employers to help develop employee/client skills.

Broad Use of Career

This refers to the importance of thinking of the notion of career in the broad context of one’s whole life and the long-term life of the community in such a way to provide self-sustaining and diversified work opportunities. Career development was variously identified as being able to contribute to community economic development and taking initiative in the creation of jobs as well as helping clients react to such openings. Job development was seen as an important role for career development practitioners to address the problem of shrinking populations and to help individuals and communities to become more self-sufficient. Related to this topic were the theme of long-term continuity in employment initiatives and the importance of seeking community support. Lower case loads would help in the development of a long-term strategy. The danger of short-term thinking was reflected in trying to fit the client into the program rather than customizing the program for the client.
Parents and Elders

This refers to the importance of parents and elders in the success of career development. Parents and elders often have considerable influence with clients but they rarely know career development theory and some of them are not very well educated themselves. As a result, parents and elders may be offering advice based on distorted understandings of the labour market.

Schools

The role of schools and the liaison with schools was seen as important in developing career initiatives. One of these groups was dismayed at the idealism in careers portrayed by schools (e.g., follow your dreams) in the context of the realities of the work world. As this group reported, a high school diploma meant little to employers unless the recipient had useful skills; they recommended that graduates be encouraged to select the “right” skills.

Shrinking Rural Population

The decreasing population in many rural areas has led to efforts to mitigate this trend with local economic development activities. Some small communities had populations that ebbed and flowed with people following employment opportunities elsewhere. In other cases, villages lost their population to “larger” centres that were in the vicinity.

Special Needs

The difficulties of accessibility to services in rural jurisdictions are exacerbated for people with special needs including those who “fall between the jurisdictional cracks.”

Day Care

The availability and accessibility of day care was crucial for some parents in order to participate in their own career development let alone assisting others in the household.

Basic Needs

For some citizens, meeting basic needs was a precondition to employment considerations. It is not surprising that those who were preoccupied with food, shelter and security concerns were not ready to talk to a career practitioner unless it was about these worries.

Youth

The lack of opportunities for youth was identified as a special problem.

Professional Development

This refers to the importance of training opportunities for career development practitioners.

Community Attitudes

Community attitudes play a significant role with respect to biases and stereotypes toward people who seek assistance from career development practitioners. Sometimes, communities blackballed an individual who went against the norm (e.g., tried to start a union). Obviously, this
characteristic is not exclusive to small communities but given the smaller population, the effects of prejudice may take on added significance than in an urban setting where other opportunities might exist.

Roles of Rural Career Professionals

In the context of these kinds of challenges, the career practitioners represented at the NATCON 2004 session were asked to reflect on what kind of role they would like to play in their location in rural Canada, what role they currently do play, what barriers stood in the way of their preferred role, and what recommendations they would wish to make to move closer to their preferred role. What follows is an outline of the methods used to gather and analyze the results, some background on the participants, a summary of the results, and a tentative conclusion.

Method

Thirty-one career practitioners participated in the Natcon 2004 consultation. Participants were affiliated with a wide range of public and private sector organizations from federal, provincial, and local government to the military, colleges and universities, private career agencies, First Nation reserves, Metis settlements, and non-profit disability agencies. Practitioners were located across Canada from British Columbia to Newfoundland (see Figure 1) with the majority being from Ontario.

Locations of the Participants of Career Development in Rural Settings
NATCON 2004 (n=31)
Participants were divided into four groups and set the task of identifying the key features of their preferred and present roles, barriers between the two, and recommendations. There was some variation in the context that each group took in looking at these roles, barriers, and recommendations. For instance, one group chose a town that had a mixed economy of mining, oil, and farming. Other groups took a town in general without specifying the nature of the local economy.

Two raters independently categorized the main written themes and comments from the four groups and, upon first examination, reached an 80% inter-rater reliability agreement on the themes and the groups reflecting those themes. This suggested that in spite of differences in wording, the themes were largely evident. Subsequent discussion and clarification by the two raters resulted in 100% concordance in the categorization themes and number of groups that represented those themes. Each theme recorded was agreed to by the group and was counted only once in the analysis1.

Preferred Role

The question was, “What is the preferred role(s) for a career development practitioner in a rural community?” There were several consistent themes that emerged. All four groups reported that they needed to collaborate and network with more of the community including employers, other agencies, and other practitioners. Three of the four groups identified they would like to be able to take a proactive stance rather than a reactive one. Three groups pointed out the need for a long-term and broad view of career, the need to troubleshoot problems in the community, and the importance of being able to advocate for clients with policy makers who would listen. Three groups identified guidance and helping as one of their preferred roles. Two groups explicitly mentioned the role of inspiration and identifying role models in the community.

Present Role

To the question, “What is the present role(s) of a career development practitioner in a rural community?” most groups mentioned that the present role was focused on short-term employment objectives, was reactive in nature, left little time to reflect on what was happening and, for those in government, was more that of an administrator than a practitioner (three groups). As might be expected, there were a range of roles including individual counselling (three groups), networking (three groups), matching employer needs to clients and vice versa (three groups), and managing programs while trying to change program criteria to fit the client more appropriately (one group). One group focused on the role of career assistance during a serious lay-off period in the town.

Barriers

This analysis concerned the question, “What are the barriers between the preferred and actual role(s)?” In response to this question three groups identified a lack of a collective voice in trying to inform policy makers about rural career development. “We are the little ants” was how one group characterized this barrier. Three of the four groups explicitly mentioned the bureaucratic, hierarchical mindset as an obstacle to long-term, creative career development. Three groups mentioned the challenge of transportation - both costs and opportunities – in rural career development. Two groups mentioned dependence on government programs, or the stigma of dependency, as a barrier. Two groups mentioned short-term thinking as a major barrier to moving to the preferred role. The limited tax base and restricted employment opportunities were barriers for two groups.

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1. Each theme recorded was agreed to by the group and was counted only once in the analysis.
Recommendations

The question here was, “What do you recommend to move from the present role to the preferred role?” There was an interesting mix of recommendations from the four groups. Two groups aimed at improving the context for career development while the other two looked at optimizing what was at hand. Nevertheless, three groups mentioned the need for more collaboration and partnerships with others in the community. Three groups explicitly stated that an important priority was lobbying policy makers on behalf of rural clients. Two groups recommended the development of better transportation for clients (i.e., a community-based system). One group suggested a flexible association of rural career development practitioners to act as a lobby group and a regular forum for these rural practitioners to review priorities and policies. One group mentioned the need for professional certification in career development. One group advocated a client-centred approach to counselling. Finally, a common theme through all of the groups was a need to restore human dignity and respect to the process of rural career development. Statistical summaries and short-term solutions were seen as insufficient to this task.

Conclusion

It looks quite clear from this sample of practitioners that some of the major challenges facing them are short-term solutions to unemployment on the part of employment agencies, a narrow definition to “career”, trouble getting out of the office to develop collaborations in the local community, and a role that reacts to problems rather than prevents them. These challenges are interwoven with one another. Government out-sourcing has often left internal career practitioners cut off from the role they were trained for and the increased administrative role has isolated them further from their communities making prevention difficult. These frustrations are aggravated by the perceived lack of a voice in the policies that affect the role of the career professional.

The question of representativeness is always present in a survey such as this where participants have self-selected and where numbers are relatively low. However, the purpose here was not to provide a comprehensive statistical survey but rather to sample a group of rural career practitioners to identify some of the features of their lived work experience, some of the challenges they face, and some of the solutions they would propose. Such a survey can serve as the basis for further investigation.

What does this survey mean? Hopefully, it means that we have started to develop a broader and more comprehensive picture of the role and preferences for career development practitioners in rural Canada. It forms a context for each of our individual situations. Sometimes a local voice is lost or dismissed. More voices, sometimes even external ones, lend added support to local initiatives. There may be more than one route to influence policy makers and our session gave voice to issues and concerns that can feed into national and provincial associations, local chapters, and individual career development agencies and situations. We were able to identify features of our collective effort that we share as rural career development practitioners. Perhaps this will contribute to a greater sense of identity in the role and activities of career practitioners in rural Canada.

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Bibliography


