

Athabasca Summary

THE SOCIAL IMPACT LAB ALBERTA

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Background

The Social Impact Lab (The SIL) was established in February 2018 with the goal of fulfilling United Way Calgary and Area's (UWCA) social impact mission. This successful collaboration between UWCA and J5 Design has achieved significant milestones since its inception.

The core concept behind The SIL was to **engage the entire community, including agency partners, donors, and systems players, in addressing complex social issues.** The team at The SIL was entrusted with this task, employing human-centred design and systems thinking frameworks to benefit the most vulnerable members of the Calgary community.

Early Work in The Social Impact Lab Alberta

When we embarked on The Social Impact Lab Alberta (The SIL AB) initiative, it was crucial to involve existing relationships and early advocates in a conversation about how to begin the work in a manner that was appropriate, inclusive, and respectful of Alberta's vast geography. To facilitate this, we collaborated with the United Way Alberta Network, including United Way Calgary and Area, United Way of The Alberta Capital Region, and United Way of Lethbridge and South Western Alberta. We organized three day-long strategic planning sessions in Calgary, Edmonton, and Lethbridge.

These sessions were instrumental in communicating the values of our stakeholders and outlining the approach we intended to take. By involving key partners early on, we garnered their buy-in and used their insights to shape our approach and develop the early community co-design framework. These engagements also generated several specific ideas for engagement, enabling The SIL AB team, social impact champions, stakeholders, future co-designers, and collaborators to uncover community issues, desires, needs, and opportunities.

Community Co-Design

Evidence-Based Approach

Our work revolves around a steadfast dedication to an evidence-based approach, ensuring that our decisions are firmly rooted in the realities of the communities we engage with. To accomplish this, we implemented a two-part community selection process to identify and initiate our community co-design efforts in specific locations.

We conducted research to find municipalities that fell within the middle range of the Innovation Continuum, were geographically diverse in Alberta, and faced unique pressures that shaped their identity. As a result, the Municipal District of Athabasca was selected as one of the first two communities to engage with The SIL AB team.

Athabasca faces challenges associated with being home to Canada's Online University. These challenges include a high proportion of people moving within one year¹, a large number of renters, and a significant percentage of households spending 30% or more of their incomes on shelter costs¹. These data suggest a high rate of temporary living situations and a high cost of living.

After the community selection process, the next step for our team was to establish relationships with leaders in both communities. Ultimately, the decision to engage in the co-design process is influenced by the willingness and invitation of the municipalities. By adopting this intentional, evidence-based, and community-centric approach, we aim to create lasting social impact and foster an inclusive and collaborative environment for all stakeholders involved.

Co-Design Framework

Based on research into successful organizations that have engaged in lasting community innovation work, the primary focus of community co-design efforts has been on shifting mindsets and building capacity within the community. The aim is to empower community members to forge new relationships and adopt sustainable ways of working that extend beyond the involvement of The SIL AB.

The designed approach entails the collaboration of local social impact community champions in each community who will partner with The SIL AB team to co-design the process and advocate for the work within the community. Emphasis will be placed on prioritizing relationship building, as described in the previous section, while also encouraging champions to reach beyond their familiar circles and involve up to 40 local network leaders or other community members as participants in the community co-design sub-labs. The desired outcome is the identification and validation of potential solutions to community problems and the development of capacity in individuals and their organizations to address various issues in the future.



In general, these engagements will go through the following steps:

1. **Co-Design the Process:** Development of a central leadership team with 6-12 chosen social impact champions who help co-design the lab process and support network analysis alongside community observation by The SIL AB team.
2. **Engage Local Networks:** Engagement of up to 40 local network leaders and community members as participants with input on the central problem they hope to focus on and commitment to move through the process.
3. **Unfreeze The Status Quo:** Multi-day convenings of the participants to explore and reframe the central problem, ideate around innovation initiatives in response to the challenge, supported through repeated prototyping cycles of increasing fidelity (with a goal of pursuing divergent experimental directions rather than aligning around one single proposed overarching response).
4. **Test Top Ideas:** Deciding on the most promising prototypes and refining them before continuing to engage the wider community to respond to them. Throughout the process of prototyping and testing, there will be a focus on documenting and consciously shifting the ways in which people are working together. Existing solutions from other communities could also feature as potential solutions.
5. **Anchor Ways of Working:** Finally, through the involvement of social impact champions, participants, and various community stakeholders, the aim is to foster a collective reflection on the newly adopted practices and establish a solid

foundation for collaborative work. This collective effort will enhance the local capacity to effectively apply these newfound relationships and approaches to address future complex challenges. Within the process, this objective will be achieved by encouraging overall reflection and reinforcing the utilization of the tools and skills acquired throughout the process.

*“We are someone else’s future”
- Athabasca Resident*

The Process

As we begin our collaboration with the Athabasca community, we are building on the insights gained from our earlier experiences. We understand that cultivating relationships, gaining a deep understanding of the community, and fostering trust are vital for meaningful and collaborative partnerships.

Our approach to engagement in Athabasca revolves around actively collecting stories from the people who live and work in the community. Our aim is to comprehend how The Social Impact Lab Alberta can support the community's capacity-building efforts in tandem with the existing shifts. We are actively seeking to understand the current dominant system, how things currently operate, and the desired changes expressed by the community. By listening to the hopes and aspirations of the community, we can identify individuals who can champion the necessary energy to drive systemic change.

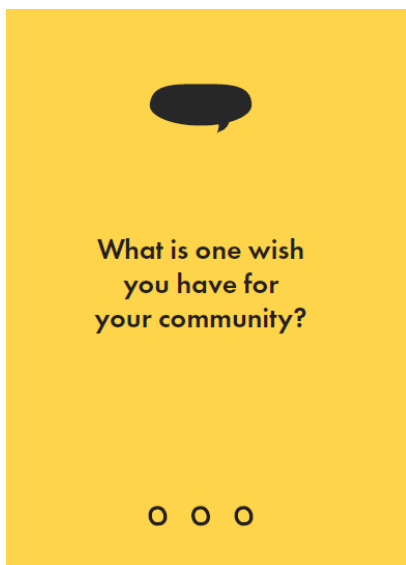
Our journey in Athabasca began with an environmental scan, which highlighted many positive shifts including a new President at Athabasca University who lives in town, a new Mayor and mostly new Town Council, the creation of a town Land Acknowledgement, the establishment of a Healthcare Attraction Committee, and RCMP community consultation meetings. Following this scan, we began to craft a list of community contacts to reach out to from the list on the Town of Athabasca website. This list included people representing Council, small businesses, service & volunteer clubs/groups, the arts, non-profit, agriculture, and other local leaders. In late April, we began emailing and calling these individuals and groups to initiate 30- to 60-minute Zoom interviews to hear their perspectives and thoughts about the current and future states of the community.

Some of the questions we asked in these interviews were:

- What do you love about Athabasca?
- What is it like to live here? Work here?
- What opportunities for do you see in Athabasca?
- What do you think is missing? Where are there potential gaps worth filling?

- What challenges do you think Athabasca is currently facing? What issues do you feel your community is facing? Which ones are most important? Why?
- In your opinion, where is community felt the most in Athabasca?
- What does community mean to you?

Many of our interviewees were keen to connect us with other Athabascans who might be interested in sharing their perspectives, which allowed us to create momentum in hearing more voices. In total, we conducted Zoom or phone interviews with 16 individuals representing 17 different groups/organizations before our trip to Athabasca in June. In our conversations, we also surfaced the idea of a trip to visit and consulted with community members about best dates, times, locations, and opportunities for community engagement in Athabasca.



Building on these conversations, we engaged in a three-day community engagement sprint in mid-June.

A highlight of our first day in town was spending an hour and a half at the local Multiplex, a location was recommended to us by a community member. The Multiplex is adjacent to the high school, and many young people walk to it to buy lunch from the cafeteria there over their school lunch break. We used a card deck we created with prompting questions about the community to generate conversations about Athabasca, and in total we heard from over 40 youth.

Throughout the rest of the day, we conducted several smaller meetings with locals. In the evening, we hosted a group conversation at River Front Park to gather more perspectives. All the conversations throughout the day were fruitful, authentic, and meaningful.

In one of our conversations, we asked a participant to share a story about a time they felt like they belonged in Athabasca. This participant shared with us that it was right there with us, sharing their story, that they felt belonging for the first time in a long time. In their own words, they later said, "They asked me about a time



when I felt like I belong... until I met with them, I didn't have one."

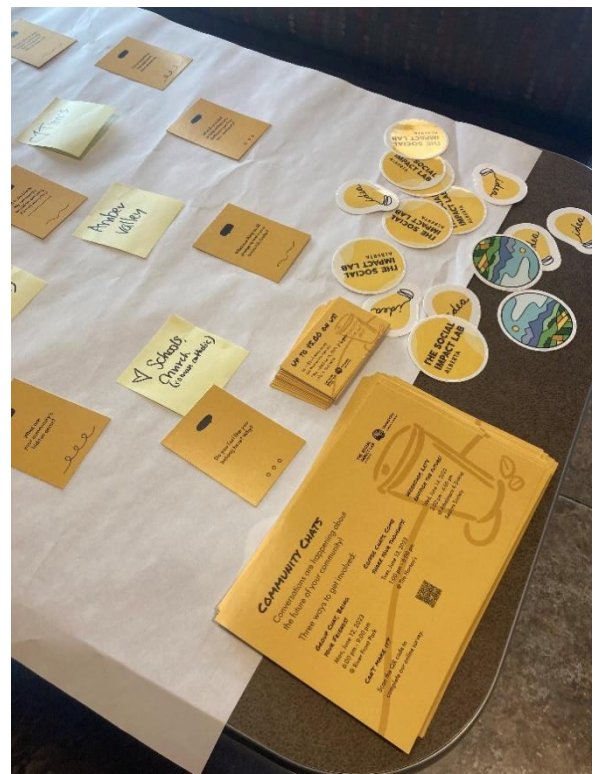
We began our second day with a virtual meeting with representatives from Athabasca University, to find a collaborative path forward and to share general feedback from the community. Athabasca University is eager to work together and to support the integration of academic research into our work.

Following this meeting, we spent time exploring the downtown area of Athabasca, dropping into local businesses, sharing about our work, and listening to the stories of residents. We were delighted by the warm welcome we received and the generosity of locals to share their perspectives, challenges, and joys with us; in total, we connected with 14 people in the community this morning. One learning from this experience is that many small business owners in the area are keen to share their thoughts but have limited capacity to participate in community engagement events because of the many priorities they must manage and the hours they have to work in order to keep up with the business.

We spent the afternoon at the local Tim Horton's, buying people coffees and treats in exchange for a short discussion about their community with us. In total, we connected with 15 individuals both from the town proper and the county, who shared their perspectives.

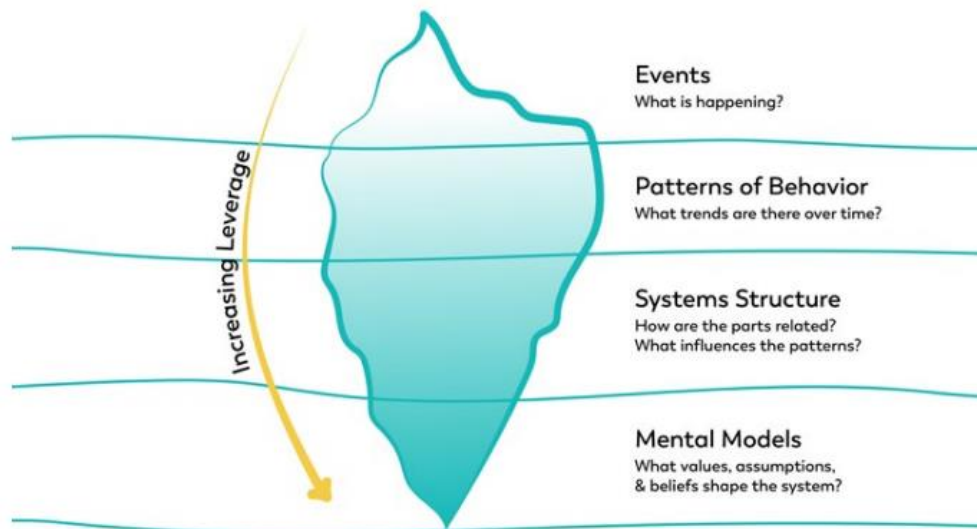
On our final day, we spent most of the morning uncovering themes and repetitions in the feedback we had heard up to that point. We connected with the Town Mayor and County Reeve, who looked over the hundreds of sticky notes we had amassed with thoughts from the community and helped us brainstorm around what further collaboration could look like. Following this meeting, the mayor provided us with nearly 20 names of other people to reach out to and connect with to ensure the diversity of the community's voices is represented.

That afternoon, we hosted a workshop with community leaders to discuss systemic change and envision the future and next steps together. This workshop involved reflecting on the insights we have gathered and identifying further opportunities for collaboration as a team. Some of these individuals had previously participated in engagements with us, while others heard about



our trip on Facebook or Instagram and were keen to participate. We had a total of 9 people participate in this workshop. We shared about our perceptions of belonging in Athabasca and what belonging means to us, and then dove into the iceberg framework to unpack some of the feedback from the community. The iceberg is a tool used to identify events in the community, the underlying patterns & trends, structures that support those patterns, and the mindsets that allow the system to remain dominant.

The Iceberg Model



In this workshop, we used two icebergs to sort the community feedback: one iceberg to represent the current state of Athabasca ("what is"), and the other to represent the potential future state of Athabasca ("what could be"). For a further analysis of this data, see the Results section.

Some quotes from this workshop that reflect the perspectives of the group:

"I want more people to feel belonging because sometimes I don't [feel it]"

"The future is community and being able to rely on your community."

"No one is coming to save us; we need to save ourselves."

"How bad does it have to get before we realize that there is a need to change as a society?"

"We are in this together; if we are looking out for people who are vulnerable, it benefits all of us."

"Even the word 'we' is powerful."

"When the going gets rough, turn to wonder and curiosity."

"In those moments when I feel like I might not belong, I belong."

"We are someone else's history."

"Maybe the energy here can be carried out into the community."

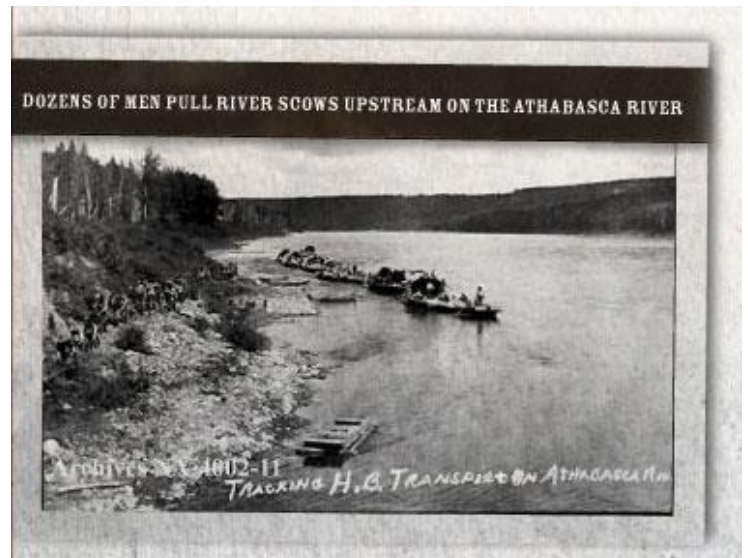
"What is the outcome of the idea that everyone matters?"

One participant in this workshop shared a story about a time she was asked to collaborate on a project with another participant. At the time, the proposal seemed unrealistic and even offensive because of the perceived difference in priorities between the two groups. Sitting beside this other participant and reflecting upon that past situation and the prospects of future collaboration in Athabasca, she said "With more collaboration, ideas that in the past seemed inconceivable seem more real." This mindset shift is representative of the conversations in this 2-hour workshop; the participants expressed an eagerness to work together, find shared values in Athabasca, and collaborate to create opportunities for the future of the community that benefit everyone.

The Story of the Scows

Athabasca has a spirit of collaboration woven into the history of the area and community. The story of the scow boats and the ways the Indigenous and Metis people would walk the shore together, pulling the boats upriver to transport people and important goods is a reminder of the power of working together. Although there were likely times when the people on the boats and the people pulling the ropes on the shore likely didn't see eye to eye, they continued to push forward. It is just as

likely that people stepped in and helped one another, motivated those around them, and supported one another. Community collaboration is the same as pulling scows up the river; it takes time, attention, commitment through challenges, and a shared purpose to motivate people to keep going. In Athabasca, we see this willingness to work together and rally around a shared vision, and we are eager to facilitate opportunities for the residents to connect with their community's past and tap into its legacy of collaboration.



DOZENS OF MEN PULL RIVER SCOWS UPSTREAM ON THE ATHABASCA RIVER

Archives X-10012-11
TRACKING H.C. TRANSFER ON ATHABASCA RIVER

Results

While we are still conducting empathy interviews in the Athabasca community, we have now connected with 118 individuals and have begun to identify core themes within the current state and potential future state of the community.



The current state:

Community members have mentioned that while there is a genuine desire among Athabasca residents to support their community and one another, there is a duplication of services and resources due to a lack of collaboration and connection.

One person described the current state of Athabasca like a tree that is growing, ebbing, and flowing with the changes of life; however, there isn't always enough support and strength to be found. Because of this, branches start to break, and it becomes difficult to thrive.

The high-level themes we heard as potential topics for consideration by the community are as follows:

- There is a mindset of us vs. Them that is felt by people in Athabasca, especially among people who are newer to the community or are a minority/marginalized group (LGBTQ2S+, racialized, Indigenous, etc.).
- Youth in Athabasca don't feel listened to and supported.
- As the population grows older, there is concern about youth not staying in Athabasca.
- People in Athabasca want to see more resources and funding available for small businesses and local economic development.
- People in Athabasca want more community gathering spaces and activities that are accessible, open, and safe.
- There has been an increase in social issues (like drug use and homelessness) leading to a lack of safety felt by the community.

- People want to see non-profits and community organizations increasing collaboration and reducing siloes.
- There is a lack of accessible and affordable social supports for people. The community wants to see supports for people around mental health, housing, and transit.
- People want to tell new and different stories about Athabasca that represent the town as it is now and bring people together.

The future state:

Residents communicated their hopes and dreams for the future of Athabasca to us, resulting in these “how might we” statements. Through the Design Lab, the community will shift and refine these questions based on their own community engagement.

- How might we increase understanding, community, and belonging for people in Athabasca?
- How might we encourage connection among people who feel like they belong and those that don’t?
- How might we create opportunities for youth to help design the future and community they want to see in Athabasca?
- How might we help youth feel heard in Athabasca?
- How might we support an aging population in Athabasca?
- How might we encourage youth and young people to stay in the community?
- How might we change the story of small businesses in Athabasca?
- How might we build a community that supports local businesses?
- How might we try community gathering in different ways in Athabasca?
- How might we try something that would increase the feeling of safety in downtown Athabasca?
- How might we encourage organizations to work together for the community?
- How might we test out the delivery of social supports that meet people’s needs in creative and unique ways?
- How might we encourage collective story telling of different people’s experiences in Athabasca?

“The future is community and being able to rely on your community”

- Workshop Participant

Next Steps

In the coming weeks, The Social Impact Lab Alberta team will continue to engage in Zoom and phone interviews with individuals we were introduced to after the trip. Our online survey will remain open for the time being, and can be accessed [here](#).

We have identified several social impact and community champions, some who will continue through this process with us as we look ahead to a Design Lab, and others who will champion this work from the sidelines and introduce us to more people who can contribute. Our next step will be to collaborate with these social impact and community champions to identify a topic to pursue as a community through The Athabasca Design Lab, which will ideally include 30+ community members. Through this process, we will work through the human-centered design process from empathy to testing ideas that could benefit the community of Athabasca. If you are interested in this opportunity, please reach out to Kelsey Brown at Kelsey.Brown@thesocialimpactlab.com