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# Building Capacity in Rural Manitoba Research Travel Log:

Documenting the emergence of RDI's Capacity Building Research Pillar



*Following the research trail to develop a Rural Community Capacity Building Framework - Image courtesy of Canva*

**Prepared by:**  
**Gary McNeely,**  
 Rural PLAR Researcher

**Wayne Kelly,**  
 Director

Rural Development Institute  
 Brandon University  
 270-18th Street,  
 Brandon, MB R7A 6A9

[brandonu.ca/rdi](http://brandonu.ca/rdi)



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Traveling from place to place in rural regions is sometimes planned and carefully timed with a particular destination in mind—to grocery shop and gas up the truck, to meet the local doctor for a yearly checkup, or to get to school for a Grade 12 graduation ceremony. But sometimes unexpected and frustratingly long detours arise due to a raging snow squall or a serious traffic accident. And, sometimes, we turn onto a road less well-traveled just to discover what's around the corner. This metaphor of being on the road describes the idea's journey, a **Research Travel Log**, if you will, taken over the last couple of years at RDI while trying to unravel the complex idea of building capacity in rural communities.

While I am authoring this blog, my co-pilot contributing to both this journey and this blog, is Wayne Kelly, the director of RDI. However, we have also met with others involved in community development who have pointed us in new directions. They included the entire RDI team that is busy with their own research projects, as well as colleagues in Manitoba, the rest of Canada, and in countries scattered across the globe.

This lengthy blog documents some of the milestones achieved through our literature scans on the topic or which developed in response to comments and questions received during our conference presentations and webinars. These milestones underscore the transformative nature of this research journey.

*Where we started and where we are now  
 are very different places.*

## WHERE IT STARTED

It all started back in December 2022 when I was invited back to RDI after Covid put life on hold. As the newly appointed acting director of RDI beginning in January 2023, Wayne's knock on my office door and a long conversation on what capacity building means for rural communities rekindled my involvement with RDI.

Our discussion focused on a project initiated by the Myera Group. It involved developing a virtual farm designed specifically as an education tool for Indigenous youth to gain knowledge and skills in sustainable food production practices and to preserve local Traditional Knowledges within their local communities. My task on this project was to develop a list of positions and their responsibilities needed on this farm, including fish farmers and horticulturalist, managers, accountants, and marketers. It didn't take much discussion with Wayne to convince me how my role as the Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) Coordinator at Brandon University could play a role in recognizing the full scale of the new capacities and skills expected to be attained as the students work in the various roles on the virtual farm.



RDI Research  
Partner

## BUILDING DIGITAL BADGES AND BUILDING IDEAS

Running parallel to the Myera project early in 2023, capacity was also at the centre of Wayne's question of whether I would be interested in exploring the research findings from the project evaluation conducted at the close of the Rural Policy Learning Commons (RPLC) in 2021. A key deliverable from the evaluation was the awarding of "Certificates of Achievement" to the students involved in administering the RPLC Secretariat. The RPLC exploration turned into a presentation at the Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation conference in 2023 that laid the foundation for a much broader question: *How can PLAR support rural community capacity building?*

My first task was to open my PLAR files to consider whether anything resembled these "certificates." I hit upon what is called "digital badges." While certificates are often nicely designed pieces of paper, digital badges are electronic files that can be added to a resume, email, or social media accounts. Clicking on the badges reveals a fuller description of what has been achieved, but also who/what organization verifies this learning and accomplishment. Basically, digital badges provide more detail than a resume bullet point.



This simple idea led Wayne and I to develop an RDI Digital Badges Initiative through the winter of 2023. These badges were to be awarded to students in the Master of Arts in Rural Development (MARD) program who were invited to serve as volunteer researchers over the summer, as well as RDI staff involved in research projects. Both students and RDI staff were asked to conduct a PLAR self-assessment to establish a baseline of their knowledge and skills in rural research, which in turn was used to design personalized academic, career, and professional development pathways. Their awarded badges would be a testament to their accomplishments as rural researchers. We also considered that these badges might be awarded to communities and organizations based on their contributions and achievements in community development.

After giving this idea some shape, I presented it to several offices around campus to see if they were in support of the concept. As many warmed to the idea, Wayne and I made a pitch to Brandon University Senate in February. This sparked a discussion to revive the Senate policy governing these kinds of “certificates.” While our initiative has been paused, given these campus consultations, we look forward to its resolution so digital badges can be incorporated into our larger capacity-building project.

## **CREATING A CAPACITY BUILDING RESEARCH INITIATIVE AT RDI**

Around the same time, we finalized the [Project Overview: Designing Capacity Building Pathways for Rural Community Development](#). It provides our initial thoughts on what these pathways might include: profiles of individuals typically involved in community development (CD) projects, outlines of education and training programs in CD, and a PLAR process adapted for identifying the resources, knowledge, and skills required by individuals and organizations to engage in rural community projects. Our most important concern is that these pathways must be flexible and adaptable to address the community’s capacity needs and interests.

These initial steps led us to introduce our capacity-building project to two audiences and to ask for their comments and suggestions: (1) rural researchers and CD practitioners who met at the Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation Conference hosted at the University of Lethbridge in June 2023, and (2) PLAR practitioners who met virtually for the Annual General Meeting of the Manitoba Prior Learning Assessment Network also in June. Both groups provided informed comments, which confirmed that we do need to seek audiences with unique perspectives on capacity building to help revise the pathways.

## DIGGING IN

The next major development of the capacity building project came in December 2023, when I jumped at the opportunity to submit a proposal to present at the 5th Validating Prior Learning Conference in Kilkenny, Ireland, in mid-May 2024. Who wouldn't want to head to Ireland? The proposal prompted me to delve deeper into the literature on capacity building and to read through RDI's project reports on the issue. Little did I know how big the capacity "can of worms" would be. The scan of sources and impromptu discussions with Wayne, both in preparation for the proposal and afterward, revealed how impactful capacity can be in completing CD projects in rural communities that often rely on volunteers and have limited resources. And yet, some communities punch above their weight and are successful in realizing very demanding projects.

The fact that communities have differing levels of capacity has become a cornerstone of this project, and it must be acknowledged if these communities wish to undertake measures to help resolve their capacity challenges.

By coincidence, I was able to get a better handle on what these capacity levels entail when I was asked to help draft a final report on the findings from a research project conducted through the Covid era in partnership with Endow Manitoba, a program of The Winnipeg Foundation. Throughout the drafting, the research made it crystal clear that community foundations play, certainly in Manitoba, a key role in rural community development. It also confirmed that capacity challenges are experienced by both individuals and organizations. This insight drove me to scan the literature on organization and management capacity. I soon discovered from the literature that capacity (and capacity levels) has been adopted in a broad range of sectors, including business, technology, manufacturing, medicine, education, and the non-profit sector. I was somewhat surprised by the degree of similarity in their discussions of capacity but shocked by how little attention was given to discussing businesses and organizations that struggle significantly with capacity issues. It was a stark reminder of why this project focuses on the needs and interests of rural communities that face similar hard circumstances.

The other major development through the 2024 winter was a series of discussions with the RDI Team leads and project partners about how capacity is a factor in these projects, which cover a range of issues from immigration services and climate adaptation to digital connectivity and rural tourism. Although capacity was not included directly in each project's design, the findings in these projects frequently pointed in this direction, so much so that capacity could be a factor in every CD project to some degree.



### RDI Capacity Building Partner



### RDI Reports for Well-being and Maturation Models

## SHARING OUR CAPACITY BUILDING IDEAS

Sharing our ideas generated another evolution as the next pieces of the capacity-building puzzle came together when designing the 5th Validating Prior Learning Conference in Kilkenny, Ireland in mid-May 2024. The slide deck included four main components:

- An illustration of how capacity can be an issue at any point of the CD cycle
- A list of individuals and organizations involved in CD projects
- The profiles of these roles based on Canada's National Occupational Codes database, and
- The resources required for engaging in CD projects



Alongside these elements was a demonstration of how PLAR processes can be used to recognize the capacity strengths and limitations of those involved in such projects. Where capacity is a problem, gap training is suggested as a pathway to address the issue. After the presentation, one participant's question shook me. She asked: *"How can our capacity building project help communities devastated by conflict and famine?"* I had a hard time responding, not having anticipated the question. I suggested that community leaders could be catalysts around which capacity might emerge, aware that my reply was cold comfort to those facing such dire circumstances around the world.

An additional outcome of the conference was the invitation to repurpose the presentation as a peer-reviewed journal article. Through the summer and into the fall, Wayne and I took up this opportunity, which led us back to new literature scans to fine-tune the main pieces in our conference slides. Several key developments arose from this research. The first was shifting our attention from capacity to competencies, as this new concept aligns more closely with terminology in the PLAR-focused journal that accepted our manuscript for publication. Second, competencies had the added advantage as it opened the door to competency frameworks. I tracked down a number linked to the roles and tasks expected of those involved in CD projects, such as planners, community administrators, leaders in community organizations, etc. I still remember the look Wayne gave me, as if to say, "I told you so," when I announced my discovery. No wonder he's the director! Anyway, the frameworks applied a scale of competencies from novice to expert (much like capacity levels), which helped me reflect on how capable these individuals are in fulfilling their roles and tasks in CD projects. The point is that they may not have the knowledge and skills to do so. Lastly, the manuscript included a more complete PLAR process to recognize the competency strengths and gaps of those involved in CD.

## DISTILLING IT DOWN

Getting the manuscript readied for submission pulled together these CD capacity elements as if they were a bunch of converging pathways. Through the summer, we didn't succeed in visualizing what an infographic might look like, but we did get a core statement of community development and the role of capacity simplified into one sentence. Community development focuses on:

*“bringing the right people and organizations together with the right skills, data, and resources at the right time and place.”*

After teasing out the phrasing, we chuckled as we've been down a similar road before. The way we had been thinking around capacity building seemed a lot like the Choice Matrix project we helped design back in 2012. The matrix was a searchable database of over 125 CED tools that align with the CD cycle and different types of development - community, economic, environmental, and sustainable. **Dusting off our old files, we noticed that one element of each tool description was left blank – level of expertise.** We had assembled a great toolkit, but we had neglected to consider that capacity to use the tool is as important as the tool itself. Very strange we had come full circle.



Image courtesy of Bowen Hui as part of her contributions to the design and development of the Choice Matrix portal

Another piece of our capacity-building project was started over the 2024 summer. It involved a scan of education and training programs in community development that are offered by post-secondary institutes and CD organizations in Manitoba, which was completed with the assistance of a recent graduate from BU's MA RD program. The scan gave Wayne and me a small glimpse into the range of knowledge and skills attained through these programs that would enable someone to become a competent CD practitioner or to provide gap training to those already involved in CD. A Canada-wide scan and analysis of the findings over the upcoming summer in 2025 will help address our question of whether this training is up to the task given a particular community's development priorities.

## WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Through the fall of 2024 and into 2025, our attention shifted to developing three research proposals and outlining the capacity-building framework to rural research colleagues. Each endeavor boosted our confidence in the framework's design but also confirmed that capacity remains an urgent issue in rural regions across Canada and other countries. Our first proposal was framed in response to an invitation from an agricultural commodity organization. Their interest was to have RDI articulate how to build research capacity in Manitoba's rural communities. This proposal helped us detail how case studies of place-based community CD projects could be used both as capacity-building exercises and as situations to validate and revise our framework.

Significantly, the proposal also gave us pause to reflect on RDI's own capacities, its research agenda, and applied methods. The result was to reconceive RDI's approach as a "Living Lab" focused on its current set of research pillars, with capacity building being one of the key pillars. This initiative remains just an idea, but the Living Lab would serve to reaffirm RDI's commitment to community-based action research as a core principle. The Living Lab concept helped us re-envision our networking and knowledge mobilization efforts as the RDI Learning Commons in homage to the Rural Policy Learning Commons hosted at RDI. If successful, this project will enable RDI to organize and support case-study community development projects with agricultural organizations and rural communities to build the capacity and well-being of those rural communities.

Developing conceptual overviews for government and community-serving organizations was a second instance of using case studies of CD projects to build capacity in rural communities. Thinking of how other rural actors may engage and support capacity building helped finalize our approach to these case studies. Moreover, the initial proposal prompted us to bring our framework to the attention of a federal agency, which focuses on development initiatives across the prairie provinces and is aware of the capacity issue in rural communities. A third proposal arose from ideas and discussions Wayne had with representatives from Community Futures MB while attending the provincial conference at Hecla Island in October 2024. This next capacity-building research idea focused on developing a CD typology of funded projects as a first step towards establishing a database of community development projects. This effort added the CD typology as yet another element to our capacity-building framework.



Images courtesy of W. Kelly

## COLLABORATORS IN CAPACITY BUILDING

This research is not only relevant at RDI, as other partners have expressed interest and shared their approaches and outcomes to date. On a more informal basis, Wayne had an occasion to introduce our project when he reconnected with [Dr. Junichiro Koji](#), who was a visiting researcher at RDI in 2023, coming from Hokkaido University of Education in Japan. Their discussion on how both Japan and Canada share an interest in enhancing rural sustainability led easily to the recognition that capacity building plays a major role in making this possible.

Wayne and I also showcased our capacity project to [Dr. Ian Merrell](#) and his colleagues from Scotland's Rural University College in December 2024. Everyone in the discussion was well aware of the importance of capacity building in rural revitalization, yet I think it fair to say our Scottish hosts were especially intrigued by the scope of and interconnection between the various elements included in the framework. A second meeting with Ian in February explored opportunities to partner on a research project on rural capacity building.

Lastly, Wayne and I met with the [Riverdale Community Development Corporation](#) board members in January 2025. Although the meeting was more of an introduction and exploration of what RDI might do to assist the corporation, the discussion often steered towards capacity issues in the community, such as declining volunteerism and prioritizing CD projects that are achievable rather than overly ambitious. There was also an acknowledgment that CD projects can be opportunities for learning by being involved in community projects even when knowing mistakes and poor choices might happen. Better to gain experience in attempting the possible rather than being overly cautious and conceding that nothing can be done.

Finally, Wayne and I [presented](#) our project at the Manitoba Planning Conference hosted in Brandon on the first week of March. This was an important opportunity to get feedback since planners play such a significant role in many rural community development projects involving any form of construction impacting land use. It was interesting to hear their responses about how they interact and work with the community's leaders and organizations involved in these projects.



*Images courtesy of Canva*

## WHAT'S DOWN THE ROAD?

### WHAT'S AROUND THE NEXT CORNER IN 2025?

In addition to continuing to work with our capacity partners, a few events have been planned, and others are on the horizon.

- First, I will be presenting our Capacity-Building Pathways for Rural Community Development framework at the Canadian Association of Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA) conference at the end of May in Antigonish, Nova Scotia. The expected 150 PLAR practitioners will have a chance to take a much harder look at the PLAR assessment process integrated into the framework, which itself has been expanded significantly since the conference in Ireland.
- Second, Wayne and I will have an opportunity to showcase the framework at the Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation conference to be held in Brandon on September 23–26, 2025. The event has three pillar themes: technology, data governance, and capacity building. The reflections and comments from rural researchers, policymakers and community organizations will offer unique perspectives on our project based on their considerable experiences working with rural communities located from coast to coast to coast.

Scrutiny from these two diverse audiences represented at both conferences will be invaluable in moving our project on down the road.

- Third, and speaking of roads, Wayne and I are in the planning process for a research project traveling around rural Manitoba, and across Canada when possible, to consult with community leaders and organizations about CD priorities, past projects, and capacity issues. This research will provide us with a much clearer picture of CD activities in Manitoba and the experiences gained through their projects. The data collected will also help us identify gap-training community members might undertake to gain skills in CD to facilitate such projects going forward.

To be sure, this Research Travel (B)log has followed a long and winding road. However, around each bend, we have made some progress in clarifying or adding new dimensions to the framework. Through this journey we have been mindful that the capacity-building framework for CD must remain accessible and flexible for the community's sake. It would be less than helpful for communities if it were only understood as an academic exercise. Gaining feedback from communities and community development practitioners would be and has been invaluable in ensuring that we keep it manageable and impactful in building capacity. We look forward to putting the framework into practice, but in the meantime, we would appreciate your thoughts, comments, and suggestions.



## Contact Information

Dr. Wayne Kelly | Brandon University - Director of RDI | [kellyw@brandonu.ca](mailto:kellyw@brandonu.ca)

Dr. Gary McNeely | Brandon University - PLAR Coordinator | [mcneelyg@brandonu.ca](mailto:mcneelyg@brandonu.ca)

## Rural Development Institute

Brandon University established the Rural Development Institute in 1989 as an academic research centre and a leading source of information on issues affecting rural communities in Western Canada and elsewhere.

RDI functions as a not-for-profit research and development organization designed to promote, facilitate, coordinate, initiate and conduct multi-disciplinary academic and applied research on rural issues. The Institute provides an interface between academic research efforts and the community by acting as a conduit of rural research information and by facilitating community involvement in rural development. RDI projects are characterized by cooperative and collaborative efforts of multi-stakeholders.

The Institute has diverse research affiliations, and multiple community and government linkages related to its rural development mandate. RDI disseminates information to a variety of constituents and stakeholders and makes research information and results widely available to the public either in printed form or by means of public lectures, seminars, workshops and conferences.

For more information, please visit [www.brandonu.ca/rdi](http://www.brandonu.ca/rdi)

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