

This year we focus on Hands-on and experiential learning, Work-Integrated Learning and other practical approaches to skills and talent development.

Future-Proof Your Workforce

The **Growing Your Workforce Conference** is an annual cornerstone event in Southwestern Ontario that brings together employers, workforce development professionals, service providers, educators, community leaders, and policy makers to tackle pressing labour market challenges, exchange innovative ideas, and share practical solutions that strengthen regional workforce systems.

Organized by the collaborative network of Ontario's Workforce Planning boards, this conference builds on years of impactful gatherings where attendees connect, learn from subject-matter experts, and explore trends shaping how we attract, retain, and develop talent across industries and communities.

In 2026, the conference will be hosted by the Workforce Planning Board of Grand Erie in Brantford, Ontario. This year's event will place a special focus on the role of hands-on and experiential learning—including Work-Integrated Learning (WIL), mentorship, co-operative education placements, on-the-job training, and other practical approaches to skills and talent development—in strengthening workforce systems. Attendees can expect a rich lineup of presentations, keynote sessions, interactive panels, and networking opportunities that reflect the structure and purpose of previous years' events, all designed to support workforce strategy and regional economic growth.

The Conference will take place on Wednesday, October 28, 2026, at Six Nations Polytechnic, 411 Elgin Street, Brantford, ON, in the Athletic Lounge (Athletic Building).

The world is changing quickly. Get up to speed with:

- ***Hands-on workforce solutions that actually work***
- ***Game-changing ideas in co-op, mentorship, and on-the-job training***
- ***Actionable tools and new connections for a rapidly evolving workforce***
- ***Proven approaches to workforce development and retention***
- ***Meaningful networking that leads to real opportunities***

This one day conference event will help you:

- ***Build stronger talent pipelines with WIL and experiential learning***
- ***Align education and industry for better outcomes***
- ***Explore scalable training models for your organization***
- ***Connect with leaders driving regional economic growth***

Dr. Leo Groarke

Dr. Leo Groarke served as President of Trent University for ten years. Before his two terms as President, he was Vice-President Academic at the University of Windsor, and Vice-President Brantford at Wilfrid Laurier University, where he helped spearhead the development of the Laurier's Brantford Campus. He retains an interest in economic development (and redevelopment) and has worked on campus expansions in Brantford, downtown Windsor, and Oshawa.

Dr. Groarke remains an active professor at Trent, where he teaches and conducts research on higher education and on skills development. He is the author of Reinventing: Brantford (by Dundurn Press), the textbook Good Reasoning Matters! (Broadview Press), and many professional publications. He currently serves as a regular opinion columnist for the Peterborough Examiner.



Dr. Leo Groarke
Author, Professor, Philosopher
8th President/Vice-Chancellor of Trent University
Former Principal and Vice-President Wilfrid Laurier University Brantford campus

Summer Burton

Summer joined Literacy Link South Central in 2012, and currently oversees the organization as the Executive Director. With a corporate background that includes adult education and administration, Summer brings her experience in classroom and workshop facilitation, writing, editing, coaching and mentoring to her many roles at LLSC. She has done extensive work in curriculum development, and her key focuses include adult and accelerated

learning philosophies, play-based learning, gamification in education, and effective communication.

In recent years Summer has worked within both adult literacy and workforce planning organizations developing resources, facilitating webinars and training sessions, and coordinating community programs. She has a professional certificate in Not-For-Profit Management from Western University, and before taking on the role of Executive Director, she worked as a Project Manager developing work plans, managing communication, and overseeing project staff. Summer is also proud to be the Chair of the Learning Networks of Ontario. |

In 2021 Summer was chosen as the winner of the 17th annual Council of the Federation Literacy Award for Ontario for her work in innovative program development and design.



Summer Burton
Executive Director
Literacy Link South Central

Facilitator Maria Scovino

Maria Scovino is an experienced Employment Counsellor and community services professional with over eight years of experience supporting individuals and families through employment, education, and social service programs.

Currently serving with Six Nations Polytechnic Career Hub, she provides employment counselling, career planning, job search support, and client advocacy for individuals facing barriers to employment. Previously, Maria held leadership and coordination roles in skilled trades education, child and family services, and community support programs across Indigenous and social service organizations. Her expertise includes case management, crisis intervention, program coordination, stakeholder engagement, and trauma-informed service delivery.

Passionate about empowering people to achieve their goals, Maria is committed to fostering inclusive opportunities, strengthening community connections, and helping clients build pathways to sustainable employment and personal success.



Summer Burton
Executive Director
Literacy Link South Central

CO-MC Connor Webb



Connor Webb is the Business Resource Assistant with the Brantford-Brant Business Resource Enterprise Centre (BRC).

Connor graduated from the University of Guelph in 2021 with a Bachelor of Commerce in Marketing Management. Connor has conducted over 1000 consultations with new entrepreneurs since his time at the BRC began in 2022. With a wide range of expertise in government licensing requirements, grant opportunities and business strategy Connor has enabled over 600 people to take the plunge into self-employment, creating over 700 jobs for the local economies of Brantford, the County of Brant, Norfolk, Haldimand, and Six Nations.

Connor has a passion for using consumer data and grassroots insights to give new businesses an edge in their start-up phase. Connor spends his time outside of work following the Toronto Maple Leafs and planning his next Golf Trip!

CO-MC Brandon Webb



Brandon Webb is the Research and Marketing Economic Development Officer for the County of Brant.

A graduate of the University of Guelph's Gordon S. Lang School of Business and Economics, Brandon obtained his Bachelor of Commerce (B. Comm) with a focus in Leadership and Organizational Management. As an Economic Developer, Brandon has studied a variety of topics within the profession, including performance measurement, for which he and his team's research paper was selected as the winner in the 2021 Economic Developers Council of Ontario (EDCO) Bright Ideas Competition. Additionally, Brandon received his "Ec. D" designation in 2024.

Personally, when not in the office, you can find Brandon either

Facilitator Mason Braga



Mason uses creative strategy and digital content creation to build engaging marketing campaigns for our region's workforce development initiatives. He holds an Honours Bachelor of Commerce in Marketing Management from the University of Guelph. As Marketing Coordinator, Mason oversees social media content, visual design, e-newsletters, photography, and videography to keep workers, employers, and community partners connected to vital local opportunities.

Facilitator Wynona Mendes

Wynona uses local data to identify and analyze trends that can tell us a story about the area's labour market. She has a Master of Economic Development and Innovation (University of Waterloo) and a BA in International Development (Waterloo). Wynona is passionate about using her knowledge to help workers, job seekers, employers, community partners and government leaders make informed decisions about the labour market.



Wynona Mendes
Research Lead
Workforce Planning Board Of Grand Erie

Christina Han

Dr. Christina Han is an Associate Professor of History at Wilfrid Laurier University, Brantford Campus. She is a cultural historian, curator, and community builder.

Since 2022, she has served as the inaugural director of the Laurier Hub for Community Solutions. The role of the Hub is to connect the university with the community, and since 2022, the Hub has been a key part in creating Community Service Learning placements and Work-Study program positions for students. To date, the Hub has worked on over 80 different projects and has created numerous partnerships with Brantford and Brant nonprofit organizations, as well as municipal services and businesses.

She is a recipient of Laurier's Community Engaged Research Award in 2024. The Laurier Hub for Community Solutions was a nominee for the Brantford-Brant Chamber of Commerce Business Excellence Award in the Community Leaders Category in 2025.



Christian Han
Associate professor of History
Laurier Brantford

Karen Matthews

Karen Matthews is a distinguished Norfolk County business and community leader with a career spanning tourism, agriculture, hospitality, events and economic development.

She has served as General Manager of the Norfolk County Fair & Horse Show and Burning Kiln Winery, where she helped establish and grow its acclaimed concert series. Karen was the inaugural Chair of Norfolk County's Tourism & Economic Development Advisory Committee and inaugural Secretary and Board Director of Ontario's Southwest Tourism Development Corporation.

She also played a leadership role in the internationally recognized 2013 Gentlemen of the Road festival featuring Mumford & Sons. She currently serves as Executive Director of the Simcoe & District Chamber of Commerce.



Karen Matthews
Executive Director
Simcoe and District Chamber of

CONFERENCE AGENDA

A full day of knowledge, connections, and actionable ideas.

TIME	ACTIVITY	LOCATION	SPONSOR
8:00 A.M. – 8:45 A.M.	**REGISTRATION** Sign-in and get name tags	MAIN ENTRANCE FIRST FLOOR	SKILLS ADVANCE
	SHOWCASE LOUNGE Networking, meet the sponsors	ATRIUM FIRST FLOOR	
	BREAKFAST Breakfast wraps, fruit and coffee/tea	ATRIUM FIRST FLOOR	CHAMBER OF COMMERCE BRANTFORD • BRANT
8:45 A.M. – 9:00 A.M.	**WELCOME** Danette Dalton, Executive Director WPBGE Board Member Member, Six Nations Polytechnic	ATHLETIC LOUNGE SECOND FLOOR	SIX NATIONS POLYTECHNIC
9:00 A.M. – 9:30 A.M.	**CHRISTINA HAN, WLU** Community as Classroom: Advancing Work-Integrated Learning Through the Laurier Hub for Community Solutions	ATHLETIC LOUNGE SECOND FLOOR	LAURIER WILFRID LAURIER UNIVERSITY
9:30 A.M. – 10:15 A.M.	**KEYNOTE – DR. LEO GROARKE** Growing Your Workforce through Experiential Learning	ATHLETIC LOUNGE SECOND FLOOR	WORKFORCE SYNERGY
10:15 A.M. – 10:45 A.M.	**BREAK**	ATRIUM FIRST FLOOR	FANSHAWE Community Career and Employment Services
10:45 A.M. – 11:00 A.M.	**SUMMER BURTON** The Get SET System: Connecting Learners, Employers and Opportunity	ATHLETIC LOUNGE SECOND FLOOR	
11:00 A.M. – 12:00 P.M.	**EDUCATOR PANEL – FUTURE SKILLS 2030 INTERACTIVE SESSION** Facilitated by Summer Burton	ATHLETIC LOUNGE SECOND FLOOR	Literacy Link South Central

12:00 P.M. – 1:00 P.M.	**LUNCH**	ATHLETIC LOUNGE SECOND FLOOR	
1:00 P.M. – 1:15 P.M.	**LIGHTNING ROUND 1: GRAND ERIE EMPLOYERONE & WORKFORCE SURVEY RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT** Danette Dalton, Executive Director Wynona Mendes, Research Lead	ATHLETIC LOUNGE SECOND FLOOR	
1:15 P.M. – 2:00 P.M.	**EMPLOYER PANEL – PARTNERSHIPS THAT WORK: EMPLOYERS BUILDING THE FUTURE WORKFORCE** Employer Panel facilitated by Karen Matthews	ATHLETIC LOUNGE SECOND FLOOR	
2:00 P.M. – 2:15 P.M.	**LIGHTNING ROUND 2: BUILDING THE JOB READINESS BRIDGE: SPOTLIGHT ON CAREER COACHING** Danette Dalton, Executive Director Wynona Mendes, Research Lead Mason Braga, Marketing Coordinator Guangming Gao, Research Assistant Josha Yang, UX Developer	ATHLETIC LOUNGE SECOND FLOOR	
2:15 P.M. – 3:00 P.M.	**STUDENT PANEL – BUILDING SKILLS, BUILDING CONFIDENCE: THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE** Student Panel facilitated by Maria Scovino	ATHLETIC LOUNGE SECOND FLOOR	
3:00 P.M. – 3:15 P.M.	**LIGHTNING ROUND 3: CANADA'S DATA TOOLS** Justin Falconer, WFWE	ATHLETIC LOUNGE SECOND FLOOR	
3:20 P.M. – 3:45 P.M.	**BREAK**	ATRIUM FIRST FLOOR	
3:45 P.M. – 5:00 P.M.	**FEET ON THE GROUND: EXPERIENCING INDIGENOUS INNOVATION AND LEARNING AT SIX NATIONS POLYTECHNIC**	SNP BRANTFORD CAMPUS TOUR	
3:30 P.M. – 5:00 P.M.	**ON THE ROAD: EXPLORING BRANTFORD-BRANT'S EMPLOYMENT LANDS**	SELECT BRANTFORD-BRANT EMPLOYMENT LANDS BUS TOUR	

ACCOMODATIONS

The best places to stay and special conference rates for a limited time.

A range of hotel accommodations are available in Brantford, with several convenient options located within a short drive – typically 5–10 minutes (3–5 km) from the venue, offering easy access by car or taxi.

Best Western Brantford Hotel & Conference Centre

Guests are also welcome to call the hotel directly and mention they are apart of the Conference and book a room that way.
The discount rate is only available until Sept 18th so book now!

19 Holiday Dr, Brantford
Phone 519-53-8651



Days Inn by Wyndham Brantford

Conveniently located near Highway 403, this hotel provides easy access to the venue and surrounding area.

460 Fairview Drive, Brantford
Phone 519-759-2700



DIRECTIONS & TRANSPORT

All roads lead to Brantford, Ontario (but some routes are better than others.)

The conference will take place at the Athletic Lounge inside the Athletic Building at Six Nations Polytechnic, located at 411 Elgin Street, Brantford, Ontario.

Event Location
The Athletic Building is located on campus and is easily accessible from the main entrance.

Parking
Free parking is available on-site. Upon arrival, enter through the main campus driveway off Elgin Street.

Location & Transportation

411 Elgin Street is situated in Brantford's east end, with direct access to major routes including Highway 403. Most hotels listed above are within a short driving distance, making commuting to the venue quick and convenient. Visitors can expect travel times of approximately **5–10 minutes by car**, depending on traffic.

For attendees without a vehicle, taxi and rideshare services are readily available throughout Brantford, and many hotels offer assistance with transportation arrangements.

VIA Rail

Positioned along the Toronto–London–Windsor route, Brantford benefits from multiple daily departures, making it an ideal hub for both business and leisure travel. Passengers can enjoy direct rail service to major centres such as Toronto, London, and Windsor, with seamless connections to the wider national network.

With its central location and modern amenities, VIA Rail's Brantford service offers a comfortable, efficient alternative to highway travel—connecting the community to key economic and cultural destinations across the region.

The Brantford station, located at 5 Wadsworth Street, is a staffed and accessible facility with ticketing services, passenger assistance, and links to local transit, taxis, and rideshare options.

https://www.viarail.ca/en

GO Transit

While Brantford does not currently have direct GO train service, the city is served by a dedicated GO bus network that acts as a vital bridge to the rail system. From the central hub at the Brantford Bus Terminal, passengers can board GO buses that connect to key rail corridors—most notably at stations such as Aldershot—where frequent train service continues into Toronto and beyond.

https://www.gotransit.com/en

Brantford Transit

Locally, Brantford Transit further strengthens this connectivity by feeding riders into GO bus routes from across the city. Brantford's municipal bus service is quick, clean and efficient.

https://www.brantford.ca/en/transportation/brantford-transit.aspx