



# **Learnings to launch a Walls to Bridges NL**

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**With support from W2B partners, the  
national W2B ‘hub,’ consultation assistants,  
and 112 people who shared their best ideas  
and enthusiasm for W2B-NL**

**With funding from the Office of Public  
Engagement MUNL**

# LEARNINGS TO LAUNCH A WALLS TO BRIDGES – NL

## *What is Walls to Bridges<sup>1</sup> (W2B)?*

W2B is collaborative co-learning among 'inside' and 'outside' learners on-site at a prison or jail. W2B has 12+ years of partnerships across Canada with transformative impacts for all learners who participate – inside and outside.

The W2B-NL initiative will be the first in the Atlantic region!

## *What is the W2B-NL consultation project?*

Memorial University (School of Social Work & Faculty of Education), John Howard Society - NL and Her Majesty's Penitentiary partnered to consult with 112 people from community (18), corrections (27) and campus (67) who shared their ideas and excitement for a W2B-NL launch.

## *LEARNINGS: What we heard & why W2B-NL is important*

### *To honour our commitment to education as a human right*

"We want education to be a right ... W2B is breaking down barriers and making education accessible" (campus)

"Our special obligation to the province includes insiders" (campus)

"We have to address the over representation of Indigenous people in prison and the under representation of Indigenous learners in post-secondary" (campus)

### *To create a pathway to reciprocal, inclusive learning as a future builder*

"W2B helps to fill employment not jails" (community)

"We have been waiting for something like this for 30 years" (corrections)

"The learners inside HMP will definitely influence our practice" (campus)

### *To lift up NL led initiative*

"We will be the 1st in the Atlantic and it's a 'tried and true' program" (campus)

"Most NLers views have changed in the last 10 years from "lock 'em up and throw away the key" ... part of that change is a program like W2B" (corrections)



*W2B- NL, like our provincial tree - the Black Spruce, is resilient, adaptable, and can flourish in challenging environments.*

## *LAUNCH: Our next steps*

Our focus will be to formalize our partnerships and share our learnings and support for the W2B-NL initiative with change makers and learners.

'All hands on deck' to launch a W2B-NL in 2026!



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<sup>1</sup> For more information on W2B see the national hub site @ [www.wallstobridges.ca](http://www.wallstobridges.ca)

## SECTION 1: Graphic overview poster

### SECTION 2: What is Walls to Bridges (W2B)?

W2B is an innovative, inclusive, impactful, experiential educational program that brings incarcerated and non-incarcerated learners together to complete post-secondary courses. W2B is not a mentorship or tutoring model but collaborative co-learning among 'inside'<sup>1</sup> and 'outside'<sup>2</sup> learners on-site at a prison or jail. The initial partnership was founded in 2011 by Dr. Shoshana Pollock, Wilfrid Laurier University, in partnership with Grand Valley Institution for Women in Kitchener, Ontario. W2B National hub is currently housed at McMaster Indigenous Research Institute under the directorship of Dr. Savage Bear [wallstobridges.ca](http://wallstobridges.ca). W2B courses have been offered in multiple jurisdictions across Canada with documented transformative impacts to learners and a 12+ year track record without any safety or security issues. It has yet to launch a partnership in Atlantic Canada. W2B-NL is an exceptional opportunity for Corrections: Her Majesty's Penitentiary (HMP) and Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador (MUNL) to lead the first Atlantic Canada W2B partnership.

#### ***More details about W2B partnerships that we heard from the founder:***

Typically, W2B courses are delivered by a trained post-secondary instructor:

- over a 10 – 12 week semester but shorter formats are possible to accommodate learners who are remanded<sup>3</sup> or completing short sentences
- onsite at a prison or jail with an emphasis on Indigenous and decolonizing teaching and learning
- in small classes (8-12) with even numbers of inside and outside learners
- with robust supports to students' diverse learning styles (i.e., all learners are interviewed to determine supports, commitments and capacities; inside and outside cohort meetings are held to develop collective capacities), diverse literacies (i.e., some inside learners have formal education, others do not; some outside learners have formal accommodation supports etc.); and attention to relations of power and access to resources

### SECTION 3: What is the W2B-NL feasibility project?

The W2B-NL feasibility project, funded by the MUNL Office of Public Engagement, explored partnerships, enablers, and challenges to launching a W2B-NL collaboration between Her Majesty's Penitentiary (HMP), John Howard Society - NL (JHS), and Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador (MUNL). The 'what, why, who, and how' learnings and 'what's next' of the 2-year consultation are outlined in the following sections.

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<sup>1</sup> Inside learners are incarcerated people in prison or jails who seek to educate through to different futures.

<sup>2</sup> Outside learners are post-secondary students who seek to educate through to different futures.

<sup>3</sup> Remands occur when a person is returned to custody while awaiting trial or a further detention.

### ***What were the objectives of the W2B-NL feasibility project***

- Engage with W2B national hub to learn from W2B partnerships elsewhere
- Undertake local engaged stakeholder consultation
- Identify the local interests, benefits, enablers and challenges to a NL- based W2B
- Share the results of the consultation and, if warranted, move a pilot forward

### ***Who are the project team members?***

MUNL partners included Fred Andersen, Kathy de Jong and Julia E. Janes from the School of Social Work and Jan Buley from the Faculty of Education; Heather Yetman and Susan Green from Corrections; Cindy Murphy from the John Howard Society of NL, and emerging partnerships with First Light and the Indigenous Student Resource Centre. Numerous consultation assistants contributed to the project including Julia Abundo, Christopher Cumby, Jennifer Daniels, Mandeep Kaur Rangi, Victoria Randell, and Ryan Walsh.

### ***What questions did we ask?***

- 1) What is your interest in W2B-NL?
- 2) What personal, professional, organizational, and institutional benefits of W2B-NL do you anticipate?
- 3) What enablers can you identify for W2B-NL?
- 4) What challenges do you anticipate may arise for W2B-NL?

### ***Who and how did we engage with stakeholders?***

We consulted with 112 diverse stakeholders from campus, community, and corrections. We engaged virtually and in-person via interviews and consultation groups, as well as via email polling and online surveys to optimize accessibility and inclusion.

### **Stakeholders**

- **18 stakeholders from Community-based Organizations (CBOs):** including John Howard Society service users, staff, board members, directors, and senior administration; and staff from First Light
- **27 stakeholders from Corrections:** including incarcerated people (insiders/possible inside learners), staff, and senior administration
- **67 stakeholders from Campus:** including students (outsiders or outside learners), staff, faculty, and deans from the School of Social Work and Faculty of Education, the Indigenous Student Resource Centre, and senior MUNL administration

### ***What else have we done?***

- *Two team members completed the intensive instructor training program required by W2B, so we are ready to launch two W2B courses!*
- *We collaborated with James Neish from seeMeaning™ to create an info graphic poster*



## SECTION 4: What did we hear and learn?

### 1) Why are people interested in W2B-NL?

#### **NL led initiative**

W2B has a “proven record,” appeals to our NL spirit of “all hands-on deck,” leadership in Atlantic Canada, and to our shared sense of justice and citizenry.

*"I love the idea that we will be the 1st in the Atlantic and it's a 'tried and true' program" (campus)*

CBO professionals, who support people with experience of criminal justice systems, told us that W2B can affect change by moving away from punishment-based approaches to those that understand a person's eco-system of social privilege and oppression. MUNL administrators emphasized that accessible education for everyone, including insiders, was a part of our special obligation to the province.

*"It shifts from a punitive philosophy to a more holistic view." (community)*

*"MUNL's special obligation to the provincial economy includes an obligation to insiders." (campus)*

#### **Education is a human right: W2B is an investment in inclusive, impactful, experiential learning**

Many stakeholders stated that education is a human right, one which is not readily available to all of us in NL.

*"We want education to be a right. But as of right now, in society, it's a privilege that very few people get to access in a smooth way. I think this [W2B] is breaking down that barrier and making education accessible." (campus)*

Throughout our consultations, stakeholders spoke of our responsibilities to equity-owed communities (i.e., Indigenous, racialized and disabled communities) due to their disproportionate representation in our prison systems and underrepresentation in post-secondary education. MUNL has advanced strategic frameworks that hold us accountable to Indigenization, including acting on the Truth and Reconciliation Report's Calls to Action (62-65), and impactful community engagement.

*"I am here because we have to address the over representation of Indigenous people in prison and the under representation of Indigenous learners in post-secondary." (campus)*

We heard that, resoundingly, inside learners were on-board and enthusiastic about W2B.

*"It's a Godsend, that's all you need to know, inmates have been waiting for it [W2B] for 30 years." (corrections)*

Campus and community-based professionals, and students highlighted the positive impacts W2B would have on their learning and practices with the communities they will serve in their future professions.

*"I see the benefit of walls to bridges program as a way to bridge a gap in their (students) understanding and insight into some of the experiences, and the challenges that individuals face when they are incarcerated." (campus)*

## **2) What are the anticipated personal, professional, organizational, institutional, and province-wide benefits of W2B-NL?**

### ***Transforming how knowledge is produced, shared, and applied***

We heard that W2B represented a shift in how we think education should look and feel like – one that could benefit the broader communities we serve.

*"This initiative could contribute to a broader narrative that is based on experiential knowledge rather than 'authoritative knowledge' (i.e., health care professionals including social workers) that could promote community-based justice." (campus)*

Campus stakeholders told us that W2B would convey new learning and increase collective empathy, while also leading to stronger research and practice reflecting the strategic plans of the university and individual faculties.

*"The learners inside HMP will definitely influence our practice. I find hearing from somebody with a different perspective makes the biggest difference, even if it's how to start a conversation " (campus)*

*"There is an incredible amount of overlap between this program and the work that we are doing with [similar projects] in terms of nurturing holistic communities." (campus)*

### ***W2B as a 'future builder'***

We heard a lot about the power of positive role-modelling to impact inside and outside learners in ways that might not be possible with conventional educational approaches.

*"A lot of times, especially for our Indigenous folks in HMP, there's a lack of programming ... I feel that if they see other Indigenous people coming into the institution, trying to learn the same thing that they are, how powerful that would be." (community)*

*"I think lots of people lack confidence ... But once they see someone going through it, and doing it, I think it makes it more feasible in their mind." (corrections)*

CBOs working with insiders and those transitioning to outside communities emphasized how W2B will support the well-being, hopefulness, and future visioning of insiders.

*"It's very important to have moments of encouragement and things to do that are productive and that can encourage your self-esteem because it's easy to feel downtrodden, to feel like your life is wasting away and that your life is not worth much." (community)*

Corrections staff and administrators also reinforced the wide-spread benefits to inside learners. They believed the learning experience of W2B could be a window to a different future that could significantly reduce the likelihood of returning to corrections facilities.

*"By providing [access to education], there's a chance of lowering recidivism rates as you're opening opportunities." (corrections)*

### **W2B-NL as regional innovation**

Benefits were advanced as enhancing communities across NL and the Atlantic region.

*"W2B builds community in Newfoundland and Labrador, and even the maritime provinces. I think it's a huge opportunity for us to be the first maritime province and to hopefully empower other provinces to do this as well." (campus)*

*"With initiatives like this [W2B], we could fill employment instead of the jails." (community)*

### **3) What enablers can support W2B-NL?**

#### **Attuned, relational instruction and planning**

Students told us that having an instructor who could provide a space to talk about their collective experiences, on top of what they were learning in the course, would enable them to work through some of the complicated feelings and ideas that may come up when studying together.

*"There has to be someone organizing the program so that we're not just thrown into it ... faculty need to be there so that we're reporting back to or meeting for feedback and dialogue." (campus)*

Similar supports were crucial for learners both on campus and HMP. CBOs working with insiders emphasized the need for specific trauma-informed supports.

*"There's probably going to be some hard conversations. Because things may be brought up that are traumatic." (CBO)*

Many faculty spoke of the value-added to student learning and the importance of including students throughout the planning and implantation of a W2B pilot.

*"The key enablers are the students. I am a big fan of letting them run the show as much as it's feasible." (campus)*

Others spoke of the importance of support from community members who understand collective trauma and systemic oppression as drivers of who and how people find themselves on the ‘inside’ of prison walls.

*"I think it's important that, when we talk about intergenerational trauma and where that trauma comes from, that we have people from those communities involved, that understand that trauma that other people couldn't ... " (campus)*

Administrators and staff in Corrections stressed the need for support from MUNL, multiple levels of government, and local community organizations. Specifically, we heard that important allies will be the NL Departments of Education and Justice, and Public Safety, as well as Federal Correctional Services Canada, to build the necessary infrastructure to support inside/outside post-secondary education.

*"There has to be right infrastructure to support learning, from office supplies to textbooks and reading materials, as well as prior planning with the institution." (corrections)*

*"We have a route to bring students in that don't necessarily meet our admission requirements." (campus)*

#### **4) What challenges to launching W2B-NL do you anticipate?**

##### ***Navigating the limits of HMP's learning environment and resources***

Corrections staff and insiders acknowledge the current constraints on space and staffing but retained a spirit of ‘can do.’ These are important considerations moving forward, but breaking ground for the new HMP in 2025 will transform institutional conditions.

*"The only other barrier, then will be the space. We are very short staffed at the moment, therefore, finding time will be an adventure." (corrections)*

Despite the challenges of space and staffing, the importance of learning on site at HMP was emphasized as crucial. The national W2B hub mandates on site learning and that teaching in circle, experiential learning, and igniting a spirit of reciprocity depend on face-to-face engagement.

*"It could [be] challenging at first ... seeing the conditions that HMP is in. But again, the meeting people 'where they're at' comes in ... how else do you meet them [inside learners] 'where they're at' without going there?" (campus)*

Essential considerations to inclusive learning identified were flexible timelines, accessible technology, and other material supports. Fortunately, W2B-NL can be piloted with instructors who have already provided programming in HMP and with the support of a national hub of experts.

*"Offering the program to inmates who are on remand will be challenging but beneficial to the inmates in the long run." (community)*



*"Bringing in stuff to the prison is hard ... if you go in once a week, and the next week you can't go and they [Correction staff] say: 'well, it's not a good time' - How would that affect the timelines?" (campus)*

### **Providing culturally inclusive learning**

Other concerns centred culturally appropriate support and resources that included attention to language barriers. CBOs already working with insiders signalled the challenges ahead but also offered learnings to navigate culturally inclusive learning.

*"When we go in to HMP... we're Indigenous people going in to provide Indigenous services, right? When we're talking about having non-Indigenous people going in ... sometimes it can be a little bit challenging because the trust is not there. So long as people are going in with good intentions and having knowledge about Indigenous ways of life that will make the process a lot easier." (community)*

### **Optimizing safety and security**

Attention to the safety and security of all learners, instructors and other W2B collaborators was paramount for all stakeholders.

*"Safety and security for the people outside and for the people inside " (community)*

Although general concerns for safety were mentioned, most stakeholders were aware of the 12+ year track record of W2B -- without any safety or security issues. Therefore, the concerns were more specific such as the dynamic of how learners are chosen, but also how W2B may lead to 'harm reductions.'

*"I'd be really interested in how people on the inside and outside are chosen... because we know that many people have things taken from them [and] used as punishment on the inside." (campus)*

*"When inmates have more new, positive programs to look forward to inside, there is less a chance of contraband, violence and disruption." (corrections)*

### **Challenging unjust public narratives**

There was a pragmatic awareness of the public narratives that stereotype people on the inside but also hopefulness that there have been significant shifts in public thinking.

*"Let's not underestimate what kind of pushback ... we are going to receive ... society can be very unforgiving when it comes to people who are incarcerated... stereotyping is something that's really going to be a barrier." (campus)*

*"The majority of people's views about people in facilities is different than it was 10 years ago when it was more 'lock them up, throw away the key.' I think that part of not 'locking them up and throwing away the key' is programming like this." (corrections)*

NL stakeholders have the ‘know how’ to anticipate and navigate the challenges ahead. Additionally, the substantial knowledge and resources of the W2B national hub mean that W2B-NL does not have to ‘reinvent the wheel’ but will make the necessary adaptations to the unique context of this province.

### **SECTION 5: What are our next steps to launch a W2B-NL pilot?**

- Establish a Memorandum of Understanding between MUNL and Corrections
- Form an advisory council/steering committee with stakeholders from the 3 sectors (should we name these?) with ample representation of outside and inside learners
- Partner with Indigenous, racialized and newcomer CBOs and relevant campus offices to ensure culturally safe, accessible, and inclusive supports to all learners
- Plan for logistics including parking, access to technology, appropriate space and correction staff support, course delivery strategies that can flex to short sentences and other emerging adaptations
- Determine a process for admissions that aligns with access for both postsecondary and inside learners’ timelines
- Secure additional, sustainable funding for W2B- NL<sup>4</sup>

#### ***How can NLers support a W2B-NL pilot?***

- Write the Minister of Justice and Public Safety, the NL premier, the federal Minister of Community Safety and Correctional Services, and the MUNL president offering your support for W2B<sup>5</sup>
- Write an inside learner to tell them that you believe in their futures and that you support their right to education<sup>6</sup>
- Share the W2B – NL poster and report with your networks



<sup>4</sup> We have secured scholarships for the first course cohort of inside learners and funded training for two instructors.

<sup>5</sup> Emails: [JPSPMinister@gov.nl.ca](mailto:JPSPMinister@gov.nl.ca) [premier@gov.nl.ca](mailto:premier@gov.nl.ca) ; [david.mcquinty@parl.gc.ca](mailto:david.mcquinty@parl.gc.ca) [president@mun.ca](mailto:president@mun.ca) .

<sup>6</sup> For information on how to write an insider see <https://www.canada.ca/en/correctional-service/services/you-csc/visits-communications/writing-inmate.html>