

Media Release

For Immediate Release

Red Deer Polytechnic ready to celebrate graduates at 2026 Convocation Ceremonies

Randy Ermineskin and Dianne Finstad Harder to receive Honorary Degrees

Red Deer, June 4, 2026 – Red Deer Polytechnic (RDP) will celebrate the Class of 2026 with families, faculty, staff and community members at its 62nd Convocation taking place on June 5. More than 1,080 RDP graduates from 2026 will attend the morning and afternoon ceremonies in the Gary W. Harris Canada Games Centre, marking the largest graduating class in the Polytechnic's history.

"I want to congratulate the Class of 2026 on achieving this significant milestone," says Stuart Cullum, President, Red Deer Polytechnic. "Convocation is both an ending and a beginning. At Red Deer Polytechnic, our graduates have gained the knowledge, confidence, and real-world experience to succeed and to make a meaningful impact in their communities and industries. As they move forward, guided by purpose and a commitment to lifelong learning, their journey is just beginning and full of possibility."

Debra Lynn Murphy is receiving the Governor General's Academic Medal (Collegiate Bronze Level), achieving the highest overall academic standing amongst the 2026 graduating class. Murphy completed a Legal Assistant Diploma, earning 14 A+ and seven A grades while maintaining a GPA of 4.0 throughout the program.

Laura Abraham is being acknowledged as the recipient of the Alberta Teachers' Association Gold Medal in Education. Abraham was selected by RDP faculty for demonstrating the highest general proficiency in her coursework and field experiences.

The Polytechnic is also celebrating the first graduating classes of its dual credit Health Care Aide Certificate program, providing high school learners an opportunity to begin post-secondary studies.

This year, Red Deer Polytechnic will be granting an Honorary Bachelor of Arts in Multidisciplinary Studies Degree to both **Randy Ermineskin** and **Dianne Finstad Harder** at the Convocation ceremonies. The prestigious honorary degrees recognize individuals who have made an outstanding social, cultural, or economic contribution locally, provincially and nationally.

Ermineskin is a lifelong educator and leader dedicated to strengthening Indigenous communities. A former Ermineskin Cree Nation Chief, President of Yellowhead Tribal College and Treaty Six Grand Chief, he has championed education and Treaty rights for decades. Now pursuing doctoral studies, he continues to advance Indigenous led learning. His guidance to Red Deer Polytechnic has shaped conversations on reconciliation, governance and community partnership, reflecting his commitment to mentorship and educational empowerment.

Finstad Harder has spent more than 40 years elevating rural Alberta's stories through trusted, award-winning agricultural and rodeo reporting. Raised on a ranch in Manyberries, Alberta, she built a distinguished broadcasting career with CKRD and programs like "This Business of Farming" and "Makin' 8". A mentor and post-secondary contributor, she has shaped public understanding of Western heritage. Her celebrated work reflects RDP's values of community, applied learning and uplifting others.

Since 2014, Red Deer Polytechnic has bestowed Honorary Degrees to 17 individuals, including Ermineskin and Finstad Harder.

A new ceremonial staff was also integrated into the Polytechnic's Convocation Ceremonies. Designed by Cassie Suche, an Alberta artist, the staff titled *The River Stem* blends Indigenous teachings with modern polytechnic characteristics. The ceremonial staff is spiraling, carved balsam poplar which represents the turning of the earth and motion of water while resembling a drill bit that resonates with productivity and the Polytechnic's applied research and hands-on learning.

More details about RDP's 62nd Convocation, and a livestream of the ceremonies on June 5, are available at: rdpolytech.ca/convocation.

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For more information about Ermineskin, Finstad Harder, Murphy and Abraham please view the backgrounder attached.

About Red Deer Polytechnic: Aligning more than 80 industry-relevant credit and non-credit programs, hands-on training and applied research, Red Deer Polytechnic (RDP) provides dynamic opportunities to approximately 10,500 credit, non-credit and apprenticeship students in diverse sectors. RDP creates opportunities that align with the aspirations of its learners and the needs of the region.

With four areas of focus, Advanced Manufacturing, Health Care and Health Technology, Energy Innovation and Social Innovation, RDP makes a positive impact contributing to Alberta's economic and social priorities.

Red Deer Polytechnic's campuses are located on Treaty 7, Treaty 6 and Métis ancestral lands. This is where we will strive to honour and transform our relationships with one another.

For more information, visit: rdpolytech.ca | [LinkedIn](#) | [facebook](#) | [instagram](#)

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Backgrounder

Randy Ermineskin - 2026 Honorary Degree Recipient

Randy Ermineskin's career is defined by inspirational leadership, lifelong learning and a deep commitment to strengthening Indigenous communities. Whether engaging with individuals at Red Deer Polytechnic (RDP) or leading national conversations on Treaty rights, he brings a steady presence rooted in experience, cultural knowledge and service.

An educator, coach and former two-term Chief of the Ermineskin Cree Nation, Randy has long championed opportunities for Indigenous youth. His leadership extended across Treaty Six First Nations when he served as Grand Chief from 2016 to 2017, representing 15 Nations and advocating for the protection and advancement of Aboriginal and Treaty rights at every level of government. In 2024, he became President of Yellowhead Tribal College, where he advanced Indigenous-led education.

Randy's connection to RDP has been meaningful. Throughout several visits, he has shared his expertise with students, faculty, staff and members of the Board of Governors, offering insights on governance, reconciliation and the evolving needs of First Nations learners. His vast knowledge has helped shape conversations around Indigenous curriculum, community engagement and the responsibilities of post-secondary institutions in advancing reconciliation. Those who have learned from Randy describe his approach as both motivational and practical, grounded in decades of teaching, coaching and community-building.

With more than 30 years of experience as a teacher and coach, Randy has influenced hundreds of youth, encouraging them to pursue education, sport and wellness. A former junior and semi-professional hockey player, he remains a strong advocate for athletics as a pathway to growing confidence and community strength.

Now pursuing doctoral studies, Randy continues to shape the future of Indigenous education. His visits to Red Deer Polytechnic reflect the values that define his life's work: collaboration, mentorship and a belief in the power of education to advance the priorities of communities. In many ways, Randy's contributions embody the spirit of RDP's *Reconcili-action Plan 2023-2028*, moving toward meaningful, sustained action that honours Indigenous knowledge and strengthens relationships for generations to come.

Dianne Finstad Harder - 2026 Honorary Degree Recipient

Dianne Finstad Harder has spent more than four decades amplifying the stories of rural Alberta. A gifted communicator with deep agricultural roots, she has become one of the province's most trusted voices in rodeo and farm reporting. Her work has shaped public understanding of rural life while inspiring generations, including those studying and working at Red Deer Polytechnic (RDP).

Raised on a ranch near Manyberries, Alberta, Dianne's early experiences with agriculture and rodeo set the stage for a remarkable broadcasting career. After graduating from Lethbridge Community College in 1981 with a Diploma in Radio Arts and Broadcast Journalism, she joined CKRD Radio and TV in Red Deer. Over 25 years, she reported on both urban and rural issues, anchored newscasts and became widely known for her award-winning programs "This Business of Farming" and "Makin' 8." Her coverage of the Canadian Finals Rodeo, the Calgary Stampede and major rodeo events across North America showcased her rare ability to blend technical knowledge with genuine human connection.

Dianne's work has long intersected with education. Her storytelling has served as an informal curriculum for countless young Albertans learning about agriculture, rural issues and Western heritage. She has also contributed directly to Alberta's post-secondary sector through her service on the Lakeland College Board of Governors and through her mentorship of aspiring journalists. Her career exemplifies the power of applied learning, community engagement and professional excellence, which are values central to RDP's mission.

Her contributions have earned widespread recognition, including induction into the Alberta Sports Hall of Fame, the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal and numerous industry awards.

Dianne embodies the qualities Red Deer Polytechnic seeks to celebrate: dedication, service to communities and the ability to elevate others through knowledge. Her career stands as an inspiring example for graduates preparing to make their own impact within Alberta's communities.

Debra Lynn Murphy - 2026 Governor General's Academic Medal

When Debra Lynn Murphy decided to return to post-secondary education after several years away, she felt unsure about how her experience would unfold. That uncertainty quickly faded once she entered the two-year Legal Assistant Diploma program at Red Deer Polytechnic (RDP), where she was warmly welcomed by her classmates and immediately felt part of a supportive academic community.

This sense of belonging, combined with Debra's exceptional ability, helped her earn the 2026 Governor General's Academic Medal (Collegiate Bronze Level) at RDP. This prestigious award recognizes the graduating student who achieved the highest overall academic average from a diploma-level post-secondary program.

Originally from Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, Debra excelled throughout RDP's two-year program. She achieved 14 A+ and seven A grades while maintaining a 4.0 GPA, accomplishments that came from careful planning, disciplined study habits and a strong personal commitment to her goals.

Debra's student experience at RDP reached beyond her coursework. She became involved in campus life and formed meaningful friendships. As a member of the Legal Assistant Student Society, she helped organize guest speakers and fundraising activities. She also made time to support her well-being by using the on-campus Collicutt Performance Fitness Zone, which helped her balance academic responsibilities with personal health.

Throughout her journey, Debra felt supported by many people. Her fiancé, Brian Hutzkal, and her children, Emma, Taylor and Kane, encouraged her every step of the way. She also appreciated the guidance of her mentor, Ryan McDougall. Debra speaks highly of her instructors at RDP, noting that each one brought unique experiences and perspectives that enriched the classroom environment. She also credits her classmates for their intelligence and encouragement, which contributed to a positive and collaborative learning experience.

Outside of work and study, Debra is deeply involved in her children's activities. She often volunteers as a chaperone for marching band parades and serves as a timekeeper at synchronized swimming competitions. When she has time for herself, she enjoys softball, swimming, kayaking, paddleboarding, traveling, gardening and bowling.

Since moving to Alberta in 2006, Debra has built a life rooted in family, community and service. Today, she is applying her education as a Legal Assistant at Emma & Co. Law Firm, where she supports clients in Real Estate and Family Law. She enjoys her new career and looks forward to continuing to learn and grow.

Laura Abraham - Alberta Teachers' Association Gold Medal in Education

Laura Abraham's enjoyment of sports was the first step to her pursuing a teaching career. What began as a love of athletics soon grew into a deeper purpose. Through coaching, she discovered how much she valued working with youth, helping them strengthen their skills, build confidence and grow as leaders. As she spent more time mentoring young athletes, Laura realized that she was especially drawn to supporting high school students, a stage where guidance can have a lasting impact. This realization set her firmly on the path to education.

Laura's dedication to mentoring youth was recognized with the 2025-26 Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) Gold Medal in Education, an honour awarded to a student at Red Deer Polytechnic (RDP) demonstrating academic excellence and commitment to teaching. This prestigious award validates her hard work and development as an educator.

The award is particularly meaningful to Laura because it was chosen by faculty at RDP, individuals she deeply respects. She feels grateful and humbled, especially knowing that many of her peers also excelled academically and were equally deserving. Throughout her Bachelor of Education (BEd.) degree, Laura viewed challenges as opportunities to learn, a mindset that strengthened her resilience and prepared her for the realities of a teaching career.

Laura's ability to persevere is rooted in her upbringing. Growing up on her family's ranch taught her the value of hard work, organization and determination. These qualities became essential during demanding academic periods. She also drew on her experience managing a team at Stride Physiotherapy & Wellness, where she developed communication, training and leadership skills. These experiences supported her academic success and enriched her work with students.

She credits a strong support system for helping her earn the ATA Gold Medal in Education: her fiancé, family, friends, Jesus, teachers and mentors. Laura is especially appreciative of her fourth-year mentors and advisors Sarah Steinbach, Nicole Round and Dr. Jody Dennis. Laura is also grateful for the flexibility offered by Stride Physiotherapy & Wellness, which allowed her to continue working while juggling a busy academic schedule.

After previously attending a larger post-secondary institution, Laura appreciated many aspects of the BEd. program at Red Deer Polytechnic. She felt it was easier to form personal connections with her instructors and peers, which enhanced support, authentic conversations and collaboration. She especially appreciated gaining classroom experience in her first year, earlier than many comparable programs. This early exposure helped her and her classmates apply theory to real-world teaching scenarios.

Laura did not have to wait long to begin her professional journey. Shortly after completing the academic requirements for her BEd. in April, Laura accepted a temporary position with Chinook's Edge School Division for the remainder of the 2025-26 school year. She will also return to the same school for the 2026-27 year, eager to continue building relationships and supporting students.

The ATA Gold Medal in Education represents Laura's passion to mentoring the next generation. Through hard work, she is helping to ensure that youth experience impactful learning opportunities.