

Indigenous Issues in Post-Secondary Education: Building on Best Practices



Final Report


SCHOOL OF
Policy Studies
Queen's
UNIVERSITY

Indigenous Issues in Post-Secondary Education: Building on Best Practices

June 12 – 14, 2011

By Ellen Kachuck Rosenbluth

School of Policy Studies
Queen's University

Acknowledgements

Many individuals and institutions contributed to the success of the Queen's Conference on Indigenous Issues in Post-Secondary Education: Building on Best Practices. As conference co-chairs, we would like to acknowledge Queen's University and the School of Policy Studies, and all of those affiliated with the School who volunteered their time. We would like to give special thanks to the TD Bank Group, our primary sponsor, for recognizing the importance of this gathering. We thank our other sponsors for their financial and in-kind support, including Queen's Faculty of Engineering, Colleges Ontario, the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, the Association of Canadian Community Colleges, Queen's University Four Directions Aboriginal Student Centre, and First Nations Technical Institute.

We also acknowledge and thank all of the speakers, facilitators, and participants whose commitment, enthusiasm, and sense of hope set the stage for valuable discussion and the exchange of ideas. Finally, we wish to thank Ellen Kachuck Rosenbluth who assisted with the conference development and prepared this final report.

Acknowledgement of Traditional Territory

The Queen's Conference on Indigenous Issues in Post-Secondary Education: Building on Best Practices took place on the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee peoples. We would like to acknowledge Chief Don Maracle from the Mohawk Nation at Tyendinaga for his inspiring opening remarks and to thank the local First Nations communities for welcoming all of us on their traditional lands.

A Note on Terminology

This report uses the terms Aboriginal, Indigenous, and Indian, in many cases in the context of a quotation or reference of a speaker or document, with no disrespect intended to the First Peoples of Canada, the First Nations, the Inuit, and the Métis.

Don Drummond and Bob Watts, Co-chairs

Conference on Indigenous Issues in Post-Secondary Education: Building on Best Practices

For further information on the conference, please contact:

Chris Cornish
Conference Coordinator
School of Policy Studies
138 Union Street, Room 225
Queen's University
Kingston, ON K7L 3N6
Direct (613) 533-6217; Fax (613) 533-2135
<http://www.queensu.ca/sps/>

Contents

	Page
Preamble	4
Background: The Case for Change	6
Strategies for Success	9
Setting the Context	9
Improving Access	12
Kindergarten to Grade 12 (K – 12)	12
Teacher Education	16
Admissions	17
Financial Support	18
Transitional Support and Programs	19
Improving Retention	22
Creation of Institutional Commitment, Content, and Space	23
Cultural Compatibility: Indigenization of the Curriculum	26
Role Models	29
Community Partnerships	30
Research	33
Recommendations	36
Selected Resources	39

Preamble

... to inspire those avenues of hope for a better future for Aboriginal children—even for things they cannot imagine ...

Bob Watts, Conference Co-chair

Post-secondary education is widely recognized as a powerful equalizer in Canadian society in many aspects of life—from health to economic security to general well-being. Nevertheless, Indigenous peoples in Canada are poorly represented in post-secondary institutions across the country relative to other Canadians. And despite significant efforts to address the problem, the gap is growing. Aboriginal participation in post-secondary education has not kept pace with the growth experienced by the rest of the population.

Attention to the issue has gained momentum in recent years. Educational institutions, governments, business, national Aboriginal leaders, and students themselves have come to recognize the demographic, social, health, and economic challenges facing Aboriginal peoples in Canada. To that end, there has been greater attention paid to this issue at the institutions and through conferences and meetings. These gatherings and discussions have focused largely on the problems faced by Aboriginal students, families, and communities, and not on the specifics of what can be done to improve the access, retention, and success rate of Aboriginal students in post-secondary education in Canada. The Queen's Conference on Indigenous Issues in Post-Secondary Education: Building on Best Practices was organized to promote discussion on exemplary strategies and programs, how those initiatives can be improved, and how they can be applied broadly in institutions throughout the country. Encouraged by a perfect storm that sees a coalescing of politics, policy, and awareness, the conference was organized to build on this momentum in order to inspire avenues of hope for a better future for Aboriginal young people.

Over the course of two days, 175 leaders in education grappled with the barriers to higher education faced by Aboriginal peoples and shared ideas about exemplary practices. The representation, which was national in scope, included institutional leaders responsible for Aboriginal education and support services as well as senior administrators from Canadian colleges and universities. There were representatives from Aboriginal communities as well as federal and provincial governments. Most importantly, many Aboriginal students participated in the gathering, demonstrating that the challenges of the past can be bridged to raise hope for a better future.



The conference was designed for participants to understand, elevate, and broaden knowledge of best practices involved in educating Aboriginal students at the post-secondary level across Canada. It began with a panel of students who shared their personal stories about the difficulties they faced in pursuing higher education, how they overcame those difficulties, and the fulfillment they have experienced as a result. Keynote addresses by Mary Simon, President of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, Roberta Jamieson, President and CEO of the National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation, and Shawn Atleo, National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, underscored the historical, political, economic, moral, and social imperatives for improving the educational attainment of Aboriginal peoples and presented broad policy frameworks for change. Specific strategies and examples of best practices were presented and discussed in panel presentations and breakout sessions involving



more than 20 panelists and facilitators. Presentations focused on improving outreach, increasing access and enrolment, and improving retention rates of Aboriginal students. A concluding panel presented institutional models that put the various strategies together through holistic approaches.

This report summarizes plenary and small group discussions on the issues, best practice approaches, and perspectives and recommendations presented at the conference. It is our hope that participants and presenters alike learned about new approaches that they will be able to apply in their own environments and that the richness and depth of the conversation will inspire renewed commitment to Indigenous students on the part of educational institutions across the country. Given the breadth of discussion and the quality of programming presented, we invite institutions, governments, communities, and others to utilize this report as a resource for change and for hope.

Thank you, Miigwech, Nia:wen

Don Drummond and Bob Watts, Co-chairs¹

Conference on Indigenous Issues in Post-Secondary Education: Building on Best Practices
School of Policy Studies, Queen's University

¹ Don Drummond is the Matthews Fellow in Global Public Policy at the School of Policy Studies, Queen's University, and former Chief Economist and Senior Vice President, TD Bank. Bob Watts is a Fellow at the Queen's School of Policy Studies and former Chief of Staff and CEO, Assembly of First Nations.

Background – The Case for Change

Education has been an instrument of oppression used against us, emphasizing the removal of our identities, the fracturing of our families, and the elimination of our ways of communication, thinking and being... Our challenge today is to work together to overcome the past, to set about a commitment to reconciliation, respect and prosperity, mutual hope and opportunity, and to forever turn education from an instrument of oppression to a tool of liberation.

Shawn A-in-chut Atleo, National Chief, Assembly of First Nations

The historical legacy of the residential school era within the broader context of colonization has had profoundly negative consequences for Aboriginal peoples in Canada. With many Aboriginal people living in third world conditions, the Aboriginal population is the fastest-growing demographic group in the country, growing almost five times faster than the rate of other Canadians. By 2017, the population of Aboriginal people between the ages of 20 and 29 will rise to 242,000, representing a 41.9 percent increase in a relatively short time, compared to a projected growth rate of 8.7 percent for the total Canadian population. The growth rate in Manitoba and Saskatchewan is even more significant. By 2026, Aboriginal school-aged young people will be close to 30 percent of the population in both provinces. Commenting on the convergence of demographic growth and the socioeconomic realities experienced by Aboriginal peoples, Mary Simon, President of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK), told the gathering that the status quo is not acceptable; she called it “a recipe for social disorder.”

There has been a constant and aggressive erosion of our economies. Today, we suffer exponentially the poorest socioeconomic conditions of all Canadians. While Canada consistently ranks within the top ten countries on the UN indexes, First Nations fall well below, ranking among developing and third world nations. Statistics tell the tragic tale of an infant mortality rate twice as high as the Canadian average, rates of TB 30 times the national average, an education gap that will take over two decades to close, and a reality that our children are more likely to end up in jail than to graduate from high school... Public policy relating to our peoples has resoundingly failed—failed to achieve its objectives and failed our peoples.

National Chief Shawn Atleo, Assembly of First Nations

In her June 2011 report, Sheila Fraser, former Auditor General of Canada, indicated that the situation for First Nations people is getting worse and warned that the education gap between them and other Canadians is growing. Census data indicate that the overall high school graduation rate for Aboriginal students is just 41 percent compared to 77 percent for the population as a whole, and the high school dropout rate among Aboriginal people is 22.6 percent compared to 8.5 percent for non-Aboriginals. Problems related to high school completion and graduation

present obvious barriers with regard to post-secondary attainment. Calling it “a story of missed potential and missed opportunity,” Roberta Jamieson, President of the National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation, indicated that 25,000 Aboriginal students reach the age of 18 each year. Yet there is an enrolment loss (in post-secondary education) of 17,000 of those students annually. One in five Canadians will get a post-secondary degree whereas only one in 33 Aboriginals will do so. Although Aboriginals are the fastest-growing demographic group in Canada, “they are unlikely to get out of high school, let alone post-secondary education.”²

Notwithstanding the gaps and challenges, education remains the most powerful tool for improving the future of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. Higher levels of educational attainment correlate directly to important socioeconomic indicators including improved health, employment, and general well-being. Our society values education for the benefits it holds not only for individuals but also for communities and the country as a whole; it is a necessary tool to survive in the modern age.³ A recent study by the Centre for the Study of Living Standards reported that closing the education gap between Aboriginals and other Canadians would result in savings of \$115 billion over 15 years and that \$401 billion would be added to Canada’s cumulative gross domestic product if Aboriginal education and labour market outcomes were to match those of the non-Aboriginal population. Moreover, it is ironic, if not perverse, that just as Canadians are becoming increasingly concerned about future labour shortages, there is a large and growing population of young Aboriginal people who could be an invaluable source of workers to meet Canada’s future labour market needs. Nevertheless, they are not as engaged in the workforce as they might be because they lack the required education.

Improving Aboriginal education, said Queen’s Principal Daniel Woolf, “is, therefore, critical to the fabric of Canadian society today.” It is a moral and economic imperative that would benefit Aboriginal peoples and is in the interest of the nation as a whole. As Chief Atleo commented, “The failure must not continue. We cannot afford to lose another generation to poverty and despair.”

While keynote speakers identified myriad problems, they also spoke of “the slow emergence of a new era in Aboriginal education”—or what Mary Simon called “the sound of the rolling thunder.” This new era began three years ago with Prime Minister Harper’s apology to and compensation for survivors of the abuses in the residential school system. Last year, the Canadian government



2 Roberta Jamieson, National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation.

3 Chief Don Maracle.



endorsed the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples; the Association of Canadian Deans of Education signed an Accord on Indigenous Education containing important voluntary recommendations for post-secondary institutions; and in June 2011 the Canadian government and the Assembly of First Nations signed the Canada – First Nations Joint Action Plan. Important educational summits have taken place in recent months. Corporate Canada has recognized that it too has a role to play, and there has been a renewed commitment and consciousness on the part of Aboriginal leaders, communities, and students. Census data also indicate that for Aboriginal students who complete high school, the college diploma / trades certificate attainment rate is similar to that of other Canadians (33 percent for both), although it is significantly less so with regard to completing university. Only 8 percent of Aboriginal people attain a university degree, compared to 23 percent for the general population.⁴

Inspired by what Bob Watts called “the perfect storm that we are witnessing in politics, policy, and among the national Aboriginal leadership,” the Queen’s Conference on Indigenous Issues in Post-Secondary Education: Building on Best Practices was conceived as an opportunity to build on this momentum in response to the “greatest social policy challenge of our time.” Speakers called for a paradigm shift from the thinking of the past, which focused on deficits, discrepancies, and problems, to a new approach that focuses on Aboriginal needs and successful avenues for change. The conference was designed to be part of the balanced dialogue that deals with barriers and problems but focuses on the strengths and positive assets of individuals, communities, educational institutions, governments, and the private sector in order to nurture and broaden educational attainment and success for Aboriginal peoples across the country.

4 Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, “Aboriginal People,” in *Indicators of Well-Being in Canada* (2011), http://www4.hrsdc.gc.ca/3ndic.1t.4r@-eng.jsp?iid=29#M_4.

Strategies for Success

Setting the Context

Understand us, talk to us, stand beside us, share with us, be honest with us, and hire us, believe in us ... Raise up the Indian in the child.

Brent Stonefish, Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres

A panel of five Aboriginal students opened the conference. They provided the human face to the challenges confronted by Aboriginal peoples in their pursuit of post-secondary education. Representing various educational stages, they included a Grade 12 student on his way to college, a fourth-year science student, a recent graduate of a BSW (social work) program, a graduate student, and a business executive who continued her studies while working full-time. They discussed how the school system had failed them. It did not incorporate their interests and beliefs, it did not reflect who they and their people are, it did not welcome or encourage them, and it did not appear to be relevant to their futures. Some of them had left high school early, some had children, and some were working. They described the absence of educational role models in their lives and a sense of loneliness and disconnection from their families and communities as well as from the colleges and universities they attended. They spoke of the alienation caused by racism and of financial barriers, especially when they had been away from school for some time. They spoke of despair; they also spoke of resilience and hope.

For most of the students, reflecting the reality for Aboriginal students generally, the path to post-secondary education took place over a number of years. Most did not enter college or university immediately after high school, confirming the data suggesting that Aboriginal students entering post-secondary education tend to be older than non-Aboriginal students.⁵ Although they had financial difficulties, personal challenges and responsibilities, and did not feel welcome in or connected to the formal education system, they managed to reconnect with education, sometimes by chance and sometimes through the outreach of post-secondary educators. Despite the barriers they faced, they put proof to the belief that there is much untapped interest among and enormous potential for Aboriginal students in post-secondary education. They also confirmed that attracting Aboriginal students to post-secondary education and helping them to succeed requires unconventional approaches and innovative strategies that take into account their particular paths, their life experience, and their unique and often difficult circumstances.

5 Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, "Aboriginal Students at Colleges and Institutes," in *Pan-Canadian Study of First Year College Students – December 2008*, http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/publications_resources/learning_policy/sp_890_12_08/page07.shtml.

Brent Stonefish, Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres, highlighted the importance of providing community support and financial assistance, addressing racism, improving access to programs, strengthening identity and a sense of purpose, and providing support services for Aboriginal students. Urging institutions to understand that “Indian people are the same and different, at the same time,” he highlighted the need for respect. He upended the colonial policy of “kill the Indian in the child,” and called on educational institutions, instead, to “raise up the Indian in the child.”

The educational challenges facing Aboriginal students are inextricably bound to a complex sequence of historical, social, economic, health, and political realities. These issues do not lend themselves to a one-dimensional approach that involves the education system alone. National Inuit leader Mary Simon, in her keynote address, argued that “we must take a wider look at other equally important contributing factors, such as health gaps and income gaps, among others, that directly impact student outcomes.” She spoke of the need to reframe the discussion and called for a fundamental reconstructing of the educational system “not as an achievement gap but as an education deficit worthy of a national stimulus plan.”

Canada's large universities in particular have come to operate almost in factory-like mode. They wait for applications to come from Grade 12 graduates with really high marks... They take the chosen and stuff them into huge auditoriums to hear lectures. The rejected become someone else's issue. The accepted won't hear about the history of Canada's or the world's Indigenous populations or their approaches to learning. They will receive very little support. And most won't need support because they came with a sound education and they have financial backing.

Nothing in this model works to serve the interests of a large segment of Canada's Aboriginal population. It was telling that none of the people on the conference's student panel followed this traditional route from high school directly to college or university. Some struggled in high school. Some had children at a very young age. Some drifted for a long period after they left school. They did not send off their applications to colleges and universities with a shiny Grade 12 transcript attached. They would not have been at school had those colleges and universities gone to the high schools to recruit.

Don Drummond, Conference Co-chair

While the purpose of the Queen's conference was to deal with Indigenous issues at the post-secondary level, it was understood that the post-secondary system alone cannot provide the solutions necessary to address that education deficit. All aspects of the education system—the foundational role of early learning, the elementary and secondary systems, and post-secondary institutions—have an equal and interconnected part to play in addressing the academic as well as the financial, health, social, and cultural needs of Aboriginal students. The issues and the possible responses are fluid and overlapping, rendering conventional approaches to education in



general and at the post-secondary level in particular insufficient to help improve the educational paradigm for Aboriginal students.

Conference discussions thus acknowledged the ultimate need for a continuum or web of support outside the conventional way school systems and post-secondary institutions usually operate. This paradigm served as the basis for the many strategies presented to reach out to Aboriginal elementary, junior, and high school students, to show them the possibilities of a post-secondary education, to ease their transition to college or university, and to help them thrive and succeed once they are there.

Improving Access

The biggest problem for post-secondary educators is that not enough Aboriginal students graduate from high school with the marks that colleges and universities traditionally use to determine entrance requirements. So they could say they will do their best to educate the small number of Aboriginal students who find their way to the door in the usual way. Fortunately, Canada's colleges and universities are ... crossing preconceived boundaries in every direction to make a difference in the lives of Aboriginal people today. They recognize they must make changes in order to do this. What have we heard in terms of what has to change? Everything!

Don Drummond, Conference Co-chair

A panel of five institutional and organizational representatives discussed strategies to overcome barriers and thereby increase Aboriginal student access to post-secondary institutions. They presented outreach strategies for K–12 students, teacher training, and support strategies, and discussed issues related to admissions, community partnerships, and funding for students. During the facilitated breakout sessions, participants delved deeper into outreach and access issues and discussed exemplary approaches.

Kindergarten to Grade 12 (K–12)

The foundations for learning are laid and nurtured during the K–12 experience when students develop the necessary skills, approaches to learning, and the desire to continue to learn throughout their lives. Too often, Aboriginal children lack the academic skills and readiness that are necessary for higher learning as well as the sense of expectation and possibility of a college or university education. The experience of their parents and grandparents in residential schools has left many young people with negative associations with formal education, and young Aboriginals often lack academic and career role models to foster the desire to go to college or university.

Moreover, schools in Aboriginal communities, especially those in remote areas, often lack adequate staff and resources to provide the supports and quality of education necessary for students, who are often challenged by distance and poverty, to succeed. In her 2011 report, Auditor General Sheila Fraser drew attention to the funding gap for education between Aboriginal students and others. Referring to the magnitude of this discrepancy, Shawn Atleo indicated that an Aboriginal child going to school may be funded \$2,000–3,000 less per year than a child in a neighbouring school and that in some regions the disparity climbs to \$7,000. He stated, "Every school must have the ability to plan, to recruit and train good staff, to monitor and track progress. This simply is not possible given the current instability. This issue must be addressed in order to build the cohorts we require for post-secondary education."

Ministries, departments, and school boards across the country are looking at ways to address the education deficit for Aboriginal students. The Toronto District School Board has established an Aboriginal initiatives unit that works in 200 schools in Toronto with a focus on student support, engagement, curriculum, community partnerships, and professional development. In Ontario, approximately 300 high schools now offer courses on Aboriginal themes, with approximately 4,000 students taking them. Notwithstanding these and other impressive programs in rural and urban communities across the country, substantial improvements are necessary at all educational levels to reduce the educational deficit of Aboriginal students and to ensure that more Aboriginal students succeed and are prepared for post-secondary learning.

Post-secondary institutions are reaching out to high school and junior high school students through programs that create awareness of post-secondary education, that help students academically, and that provide a positive, and enjoyable, first point of contact with the college or university. These initiatives are designed to nourish in young students the motivation to learn and succeed, to appreciate the value of a post-secondary education, and to see that they belong.

Building relationships is widely viewed as the critical component to get Aboriginal students onto the college or university campus. Presenters described a variety of outreach programs, most of which focus on building relationships with junior and senior high school students to help them become familiar and comfortable with the college or university experience, as follows:

- Math and science readiness is often a barrier for admission of Aboriginal students to post-secondary education and demands greater attention at the K–12 level. To address this challenge, educational consultant Corrine Mount Pleasant-Jette has taken numerous Aboriginal students, some as young as eight years old, to campus for field trips to help them feel at home by recognizing that a university is “just a big school” and to inculcate in young children the view that they could return to campus in the future. This approach has resulted in very positive outcomes.
- Colleges and universities in Winnipeg (specifically, Red River College, the University of Winnipeg, and the University of Manitoba) travel collectively as an outreach team, rather than individually, to Aboriginal communities to provide information on post-secondary education options and programs. Communities now prepare for the institutions’ visits, and strong relationships have begun to develop between the institutions and the communities.
- A number of colleges have organized canoe trips for Aboriginal and Métis high school students and other prospective undergraduates with a twofold purpose: (i) to recruit students and (ii) to create a support network for those who decide to attend. The effects have been very positive.



- Individual university faculties (e.g., law, social work, medicine, physical education and health, engineering, education, Aboriginal Services) run programs such as camps and tutoring to provide positive role models, and to help Aboriginal students graduate from high school and access post-secondary education, all from their faculty-specific access points. The University of Manitoba's effective "Stay in Secondary School" outreach initiatives include Biz Camp, the Inner City Science Centre, Kid-Netic Energy Science and Engineering Camp, Career Trek, and an Aboriginal Student Recruitment Office (U Crew).
- Red River College has a large team of support workers who provide admissions support for students who lack traditional entrance requirements. They help students determine the appropriate path for college and beyond. Their annual event, Red River Rocks, brings high school students to campus for a fun-day to introduce the students to the college in a positive way.
- To improve high school graduation rates, Roberta Jamieson underscored the importance of increased educational funding for programs and pilot projects that are community driven.

Holistic Approaches

Access and excellence are not mutually exclusive. Within the academy, there's sometimes concern that by opening up the door, you're diluting, you're lowering the standard, and we know that that's not true. When you open the door, you actually raise everybody up because you give richness and texture, and history and culture, and beauty to the rest of the academy.

Jennifer Rattray, University of Winnipeg

The University of Winnipeg's holistic approach includes an outreach component to break down the academic, social, cultural, and financial barriers to post-secondary education for K–12 students. The initiative began with input from the community, and the university continues to view building community partnerships as a pillar of this approach. Recognizing that students make the decision to attend college or university before they even enter junior high, the university seeks to work with students long before they get to high school. When the program began in 2004, Aboriginal students living near the University of Winnipeg did not know there was a university in their own neighbourhood. Today, more than 3,200 young people and their families go through the Aboriginal Learning Centre every month.

The Innovative Learning Centre, also part of the initiative, seeks to motivate Aboriginal and other inner city students to learn and stay in school. The Centre offers after-school, weekend, and summer camp activities to promote traditional and Indigenous knowledge and culture in a positive, engaging, and environmentally respectful way. ECO Kids on Campus promotes Aboriginal learning and identity through a 12-week program during the school year for mid-level elementary school children (and has yielded greatly improved school attendance rates during the time of the program); ECO Youth on Campus is a summer camp for older youth that involves Indigenous leaders from the community.

Responding to concerns that these programs create unrealistic expectations for students who cannot afford university, the University of Winnipeg established an Opportunity Fund. The university contributes up to \$4,000 toward university education for every program participant with annual payments for staying in school and for raising their grades. To date, for the 653 student Opportunity Fund participants, the retention rate is the same as for students from wealthy families.



Teacher Education

Role models, be they parents, Elders, or other community members, provide young people with positive examples to become productive adults. Teachers are also important role models. They show young people the possibilities of education as well as the breadth of possible career paths. Too often, however, elementary and high school teachers are ill-informed about the Aboriginal students in their classrooms; they lack Indigenous knowledge and approaches, and do not engage the Aboriginal students in their class. In remote communities, they often lack the educational experience or resources to meet the educational challenges of their students. Educational opportunities are therefore lost for many Aboriginal students.

Good teacher training is the necessary underpinning of an educational system that understands the needs of students and responds effectively. Among others, the conference discussed the following programs:

- *Queen's University Aboriginal Teacher Education Program (ATEP)*. This program was started 20 years ago when local Aboriginal community leaders approached the university. A community-university partnership provides a community-based delivery system that has been continued by local management committees involving community Elders, distance learning, and collaborative decision-making with the university. Hundreds of Aboriginal teachers have graduated, and a vast majority of courses taught in the communities have Aboriginal teachers.
- *Dream Catching*. A program of Corinne Mount Pleasant-Jette, Dream Catching teaches teachers to make math and science relevant to students by incorporating Indigenous ways of knowing into the curriculum. This approach engages Aboriginal students and helps non-Aboriginal students to become familiar with and appreciate Indigenous knowledge. (For example, the concept of dynamic loading is demonstrated not only as a teeter-totter but also as the effect of a squirrel landing on the leaves of branches weighted with snow as it tips the balance.)

Admissions

Increasing the representation of Aboriginal students in post-secondary education calls for institutions to develop admissions approaches that take into account the realities of potential Aboriginal students. The barriers they face are substantial and far-reaching. In addition to historical, socioeconomic, and educational barriers, many Aboriginal people live far from post-secondary institutions; they may have been out of school for long periods, may be working full-time, may have children, or may be living with dependent parents. Aboriginal post-secondary students tend to be older than other students.⁶ Some may have Grade 12 but need to upgrade their education, whereas others may have dropped out of high school. Many have developed valuable skills and knowledge in the intervening years.

Institutions are recognizing the need to veer from conventional approaches and develop admissions approaches for a broad range of students including those who meet the standard admissions criteria as well as those who do not. They understand that formal and informal access routes, at various stages of the educational process, are necessary to open doors to prospective, non-sequential students who may have been away from school for a significant time and/or may not have fulfilled the traditional admissions requirements. Yet, recognizing the need for such approaches does not diminish the challenges they present. Institutions are being called upon to create alternative mechanisms for the admission of students with atypical qualifications without watering down institutional standards. They are being asked to show flexibility in admissions criteria and, at the same time, to somehow determine whether an applicant will ultimately be successful and graduate. Nobody wants to set up the student or the institution for failure. Presenters discussed a number of strategies available to colleges and universities to assess the potential of such students and help prepare them for success at the post-secondary level.

Institutions must build relationships and create a personal connection with prospective students and their communities prior to the application process. They need to understand the applicant's experience and recognize that individuals often have deep knowledge from life and work experience. Such an approach requires a personalized admissions process in which institutions develop relationships with prospective students, hear each applicant's story, and provide a continuum of supports that includes the application process as well as funding, academic bridging, and housing.

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) was cited as an effective mechanism for facilitating the entry of Aboriginal students to post-secondary education through non-traditional admissions processes. PLAR is "a process that involves the identification, documentation, assessment and recognition of learning acquired through formal and informal study. This may

6 Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, "Aboriginal Students at Colleges and Institutes," in *Pan-Canadian Study of First Year College Students – December 2008*, http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/publications_resources/learning_policy/sp_890_12_08/page07.shtml.

include work and life experience, training, independent study, volunteering, travel, hobbies and family experiences.”⁷

Presenters argued that community-based admissions solutions are better than “top-down, abstract solutions from governments and academics.”⁸

Financial Support

Many of our people come from deprived backgrounds but have a thirst for learning... Funding is the major barrier to post-secondary education.

Chief Don Maracle, Tyendinaga Territory

Education is important to Aboriginal students and their families.⁹ Yet, Aboriginal students are significantly underrepresented in post-secondary institutions and universities in particular, relative to other Canadians. The reasons are complex and varied, but funding is seen as the most significant barrier.¹⁰ In his opening remarks, Chief Don Maracle argued that the underfunding of post-secondary learning for Aboriginal students represents the denial of a fundamental human right as education is a necessary tool to survive in the modern age. While there have been positive developments, including the serious commitment of resources announced in the recent federal government Economic Action Plan and increased awareness and action on the part of communities, governments, corporations, and educational institutions, limited funding remains a significant issue at the elementary, secondary, and post-secondary levels.

Improving educational outcomes at the elementary and secondary levels is essential to reducing the access gap to post-secondary learning between Aboriginal students and other Canadians. Yet, there is a significant funding gap between First Nations and other Canadian K–12



7 First Nations Technical Institute, “Prior Learning (PLAR),” <http://www.fnti.net/prior-learning-overview/>.

8 Paul Chaput, Queen’s University.

9 EKOS Research Associates, with Anishinabek Consultants, *Survey of First Nations People Living Off-Reserve, Metis and Inuit* (2006), http://knet.ca/documents/OFF_RESERVE_SURVEY_E1.pdf.

10 Roberta Jamieson, National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation.

students, and it is growing. As indicated above, Shawn Atleo said that the gap means that a [First Nations] child going to school may be funded from \$2,000–7,000 less per year than other children. To achieve funding equity and stability, he called for a clear, fiscal guarantee for First Nations education that addresses the current gap in funding, rather than a “mere program line [that is] subject to reallocation, reduction, and changes every year.”

At the post-secondary level, funding is available for individual students through bursaries and loans, programs and scholarships from governments, organizations, educational institutions, and the corporate sector. Despite these initiatives and public assumptions that Aboriginal students have access to significant educational funding, conference speakers and participants spoke of the inadequacy of this funding to meet the growing needs of students. They also addressed the specific problems of Métis students who have even less access to funding than others. Métis students are not eligible for targeted government funds, such as the Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP), which provides financial assistance to First Nations and Inuit students who are enrolled in eligible post-secondary programs, nor do they have access to band funding. Specific initiatives to provide additional funding include the National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation (NAAF), which has provided \$42 million to Aboriginal students for access and retention through bursaries, loans, and scholarships.

Recognizing that government funding was insufficient, the Membertou First Nation community in Nova Scotia established a program that provides funding to students who fulfill the program’s academic criteria. The community provides an average of \$17,200 per student. It has sent an average of 46 persons per year to university and witnessed a graduation rate of roughly 70 percent.¹¹

At the elementary and secondary level, the British Columbia Ministry of Education supports First Nations, Inuit, and Métis student achievement through Enhancement Agreements with individual school districts and their local Aboriginal communities. The Ministry also provides funding of \$1,160 per student per year to districts (within the parameters of Ministry policy) for services to students who self-identify as Aboriginal.

Transitional Support and Programs

To ease the transition to college or university, a full range of support is needed for Aboriginal people who are considering further study or who have been recently admitted to a post-secondary institution, especially if they have taken a non-traditional route. These “non-sequential students”¹² may lack the formal qualifications for university admission or may have been away from formal education for some time and require upgrading and orientation to meet academic demands and requirements. They may require subject support in writing, math, or science. Many

11 Darren Googoo, Membertou First Nation, Nova Scotia.

12 Jamie Richard, Red River College of Applied Arts, Science and Technology.



of these students are away from home for the first time and, in addition to academic upgrading, may need support and resources in the areas of housing and the negotiation of leases, transportation, and child care. They may also require emotional support.

Often called transition and bridging, such programs involve Aboriginal Elders and advisors and include access to counselling, peer mentoring, academic upgrading, degree and non-degree credit courses, soft-skills training (e.g., test-taking) as well as planning advice with regard to course selection and future employment. Some institutions have a first-year transition program that functions as a second stream for Grade 12 equivalency (e.g., Red River College, University of Toronto, Ryerson University, University of Manitoba). These programs, in which Aboriginal students spend a full term together to become accustomed to the university experience, allow students to establish personal relationships, build personal support networks before beginning their formal education, and find the right academic fit, regardless of the institution.

Creating personal connections is a pillar of transitional programming. Institutions increasingly recognize the importance of creating relationships with these students and their communities long before their application to post-secondary education as part of the continuum of support that includes the application process, the post-secondary experience, and beyond.

Transitional support services are often provided under the umbrella of a First Nations House where Aboriginal students have the opportunity to gather in a culturally familiar and supportive environment and engage with Aboriginal counsellors who support student cultural awareness and knowledge. Roxane Manitowabi of the Ontario Native Education Counselling Association (ONECA) observed that it is “important for students to rediscover traditional knowledge and tribal identity ... in order to feel secure in their identities and sense of belonging.” Enhancing cultural awareness and identity is a significant transitional component. ONECA President Cindy Fisher indicated that the organization’s surveys demonstrate the importance of introducing career pathway tools that are culturally meaningful to Aboriginal students and the value of Aboriginal counsellors who bring an Aboriginal component to the guidance approach.

Transitional initiatives provide the opportunity for increased college-university collaboration and partnership, an important initiative in light of the greater number of Aboriginal students

attending college compared to university. At some post-secondary institutions, students can obtain an undergraduate degree with a combination of one year of college, a transitional year program, and then two years of university. Because Aboriginal students tend to be older than others, many colleges and some universities use adult learning approaches that incorporate flexibility, distance learning, and learner-focused strategies. Red River College provides transitional supports that include education about employment opportunities, adult education, and keeping track of transfer students.

In some institutions, access programs (outreach, bridging, and transition) for Aboriginal students are provided through a centralized Aboriginal support office. Others, particularly some large universities, provide access and retention programs through decentralized faculty-centred programs, enabling them to provide faculty-specific bridging support. The University of Manitoba, with its many faculty-specific programs, is looking at ways to ensure common programming standards and to provide supports common to all programs, such as general transitional supports, mentorship, and faculty training, under one organizational roof.

Improving Retention

For Aboriginal students, institutions need to build a comprehensive web of support; they need to find ways to support them, push them, work with them, build relationships.

Linc Kessler, University of British Columbia

The need for a continuum of support extends from outreach through to access, admissions, and retention. Barriers for Aboriginal students do not disappear once a student has been accepted to a post-secondary institution. Although they may have overcome the initial hurdles to get into college or university, the challenges of leaving home for the first time, feeling lonely, confronting a different language and/or culture, being an adult learner with additional family responsibilities, being unfamiliar with city life, and dealing with racism can affect a student's ability to stay in school and succeed. The barriers are enormous. As Bob Watts stated, "Within institutions, we need to think how we adjust our systems for students who face all of the same issues and more ..."

The programs that support transition to post-secondary education are often necessary throughout the student's learning experience. At the University of Manitoba, in addition to faculty-specific developmental or bridging courses in nursing, social work, education, management, law and engineering, for example, faculties also have personal retention supports within the program context. They provide students with connections to the larger practice community, access to Elders and mentors, and strong support from and cooperation with professional societies and regulatory bodies. Faculty supports provide help in writing resumés and preparing for interviews, and they facilitate summer internships and work experiences. This is all done within a broader community context with the goal of "closing the loop back to Aboriginal community needs" (e.g., community wellness, environmental stewardship).

Compounding the academic challenges are the psychological and cultural remnants of colonization, which have left many Aboriginal students lacking knowledge of their culture and identity—alienating them from their own people as well as from the mainstream culture on campus. Many students have a persistent feeling of isolation stemming from the notion that



they are uniquely alone. Retention supports must, therefore, develop and support Aboriginal student identity and culture. “Student services and support programs are an important aspect of any Aboriginal student retention strategy, but they are only part of the picture,” UBC’s Linc Kessler indicated. “Curriculum and instruction play an equally critical role, and are more closely tied to the intellectual purpose of the institution.”

The following summarizes retention strategies and approaches discussed at the conference, focusing on the creation of institutional commitment, establishment of cultural compatibility and indigenization of the curriculum within the institution, the role of community partnerships in the promotion of retention, and the importance of research.¹³

Creation of Institutional Commitment, Context, and Space

Institutional indigenization ... [the] process whereby educational institutions incorporate and adopt Aboriginal ways of knowing and culture ... [is essential because] wherever you are located in Canada you are in Indigenous territory; part of your identity as an institution is informed by the land and our people.

Roberta Jamieson, National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation

While many institutions have made impressive strides, post-secondary institutions across the country must become, as Roberta Jamieson stated, “even more proactive in committing to fundamental change.” This requires the intentional commitment of the governing bodies and senior administrations to embed their support of Aboriginal education within the institutional structure, strategic plan, and budget. The creation of Aboriginal departments with reporting structures to the president and senior administration ensures that Aboriginal concerns are part of the governance structure of the institution. In addition, the creation of Aboriginal Studies programs, with the capacity for students to major in Aboriginal Studies, helps to promote the



13 While some transition programs were discussed during the retention panel and related breakout sessions, transition initiatives are addressed in the previous section, Improving Access.

field as a legitimate area of academic study (see Curriculum section below). Other approaches to enhance and demonstrate institutional commitment include:

- ensuring Aboriginal representation on the Board of Governors;
- creating opportunities for senior leadership, including presidents, provosts, and others, to hear and understand the experiences and goals of Aboriginal learners;
- providing resources to ensure that staff who oversee Aboriginal student success are full-time staff, rather than part-time or contract staff;
- identifying and collaborating with allies and champions within the institution (e.g., admissions);
- consulting with students and their representatives, as they constitute an important resource on what will make a difference. At one institution, the student government held a community event for the university community to learn about Aboriginal culture;
- sharing research and best practices among colleges and universities;
- providing a community for the students within the institution;
- treating students and staff respectfully by attempting to understand the unique needs of Aboriginal learners, including who they are, their goals, and what success means to them;¹⁴
- acknowledging Indigenous peoples' territory at every opportunity, including every convocation address by the president;¹⁵ and
- encouraging Aboriginal students to submit their work to journals and other publications to help develop student confidence in their learning ability.

All students need to feel welcome on campus in order to take full advantage of the learning opportunities available to them. Aboriginal students, many of whom have not felt part of the mainstream institutional culture, need a place to be themselves and to feel welcomed, nurtured, and supported within the institution. They deserve, and have begun to expect, culturally secure places on campus—for smudging, meeting with Elders, conducting talking and healing circles—where their cultural needs are embedded into the learning environment. Indigenous faculty are increasingly demanding such resources as well.¹⁶

Aboriginal Houses help create a sense of community on campus, providing students with the comfort of cultural familiarity and the confidence to feel part of the broader institution. They provide a venue for speaking Aboriginal languages with bilingual staff and other

14 Monica MacKay, Ryerson University.

15 Linc Kessler, University of British Columbia.

16 Larry Chartrand, Faculty of Law, University of Ottawa.

Holistic Approach

Lakehead University has made tremendous gains within the past two decades ... having laboured so long in the stony but fertile field.

Beverley Anne Sabourin, Lakehead University

Aboriginal students represent 12 percent of the student enrolment at Lakehead University. The institution's long-standing experience with Aboriginal students and current educational research have given Lakehead an understanding that Aboriginal learners need culturally supportive space, peer mentors and role models in faculty and staff, cross-cultural awareness, Indigenous content in the curriculum, financial support (bursaries and scholarships), flexible—although not lower—admissions procedures, and, most important, the commitment of the institution to Aboriginal learners. In addition, shared responsibility, whereby every faculty includes Indigenous knowledge as part of its curriculum, helps educate non-Aboriginals about Indigenous culture and history.

To be effective, this commitment must be reflected in the mission and vision as well as the academic plan and key strategic objectives of the institution. Lakehead has an Aboriginal governance council that represents the interests of Aboriginal communities, makes decisions, and has a parallel plan for Aboriginal academic and program development. An Elders Council provides cultural advice related to values and sensitization. The university has also established an Aboriginal senior management position (vice provost). Multiple partnership agreements have led to new professional degree programs (Medicine) and new programs and courses including a Department of Indigenous Learning and required courses in Aboriginal history, philosophy, and culture. There is a Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Education as well as 33 Aboriginal employees, including 13 faculty members.

students, and offer supports including peer mentors, role models, orientation for new students, and family programming during holidays. General activities for all students that take place at the Aboriginal centre help to instill pride in Aboriginal students through the opportunity to demonstrate their culture to others.

While an Aboriginal House, or space dedicated to Aboriginal students, is an important component for Aboriginal students to feel welcome, safe, and comfortable on campus, the student panel emphasized that the Aboriginal House should not be the only place on campus where Aboriginal students feel they belong. It is also necessary to find a way to make the university (or college) safe and comfortable for everyone—including Aboriginal students—and to make them feel they belong to the broader campus community.¹⁷

17 Kyle McClintock, University of Manitoba.

Cultural Compatibility: Indigenization of the Curriculum

To stay in school or at a job, people need to feel recognized and validated and to see themselves reflected in the landscape of their institution or workplace. In the case of students, they also need to see themselves reflected in the curriculum and in the faculty.

Janice Hill, Queen's University

An investment in cultural continuity or compatibility can go a long way in promoting academic retention.¹⁸ Cultural compatibility between students and their college or university assists the formal and informal aspects of post-secondary learning. Margaret Brigham, from Centennial College commented, "It has a lot to do with personal identity [and] how you identify with what you're learning. You will not internalize learning that you cannot identify with." Chris Lalonde from the University of Victoria referred to his emerging research on high school dropout rates and



cultural continuity in communities. This research provides strong support for cultural continuity as an important retention tool, with early results suggesting very strong positive correlation between high school retention and the number of cultural factors present in the community.

Larry Chartrand, from the Faculty of Law at the University of Ottawa, discussed the legal obligations that flow from the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples regarding the right to participate in education, the right to dignity of cultural knowledge, and the right to cultural compatibility and inclusion. He spoke of students who are becoming more aware of its importance. "There is a growing Indigenous cultural and political revitalization movement. Students are arriving with a greater critical understanding of colonialism and with stronger cultural attachments to Indigenous beliefs, traditions, and institutions. Expectations become increasingly more demanding of cultural inclusion." In this regard, Linc Kessler, from the University of British Columbia, stated that activism or getting students to be proactive and to develop a "sense of agency that the work they are doing ... will actually have an impact on society" is a powerful retention tool.

In addition to the creation of Indigenous or Aboriginal Studies departments, with opportunities for students to major in the field, presenters demonstrated that there is much a university or college can do in the areas of law, language, culture, and spirituality.

18 Paul Chaput, Queen's University.

Paula du Hamel Yellowhorn called for the implementation of mandatory courses that demonstrate respect for and understanding of Indigenous learning and values for all students. She argued that contemporary economic development continues to affect Indigenous communities socially, spiritually, mentally, physically, financially, structurally, and environmentally. Mandatory courses would help Canadians understand Indigenous knowledge and help guard against the negative impact of contemporary economic development on Indigenous communities.

Linc Kessler discussed strategic initiatives at the University of British Columbia and provided different routes to curriculum development as it relates to retaining Aboriginal students.

- Aboriginal experience and concerns tend to be underrepresented in university curricula. As mentioned above, a curricular centre or a department, such as UBC's First Nations Studies Program, gives Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students the opportunity for intellectually rigorous investigation of this field.
- Aboriginal concerns need to be accurately and visibly represented in a number of curricular areas such as Canadian history and Canadian society. One challenge is the absence of adequate Aboriginal curricular material in most K–12 systems. "Students typically lack information that would allow a post-secondary engagement even with basic issues." UBC's Indigenous Foundations website is an information resource that was "developed to support students in their studies, and to provide instructors, researchers and the broader public with a place to begin exploring topics that relate to Aboriginal peoples, cultures, and histories."¹⁹
- Instructors throughout the university often lack basic skills in managing cross-cultural conversations. "The results, especially for Aboriginal students, can be devastating." UBC has established training programs for current and incoming faculty to develop capacity in this area.

Faculty-specific courses also provide opportunities to address issues of cultural compatibility at the post-secondary level. At the University of Toronto, science courses taught from an Aboriginal perspective help bridge the gap for students, enabling them to fulfill the science course requirements for graduation. Math and science preparedness is a particular barrier to Aboriginal students who often are unfamiliar with or intimidated by western concepts of knowledge.²⁰ Transitional Year Programs, in collaboration with other faculties and departments, help ensure that courses taught from an Aboriginal perspective are rigorous and respectful.

In the Faculty of Law at the University of Ottawa, which is on traditional Algonquin territory, orientation for all new law students begins with Algonquin teachings and an introduction to Algonquin spirituality. Indigenous legal principles have also been incorporated into the traditional common law curriculum.

19 <http://Indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/>.

20 Eilene Antone, University of Toronto.

The need for reciprocity in the area of cultural compatibility was also acknowledged. Commenting on institutional indigenization, Roberta Jamieson underscored the importance of adopting Aboriginal ways of knowing, not just for Aboriginal students but for all Canadian students as everything in Canada is informed by the land and its Indigenous people. Paul Chaput, a graduate student at Queen's University, emphasized the need for all Canadians to appreciate how Aboriginal cultures and mainstream Canadian cultures fit together in order to be able to work together moving forward. The New Brunswick Community College hosted an inclusive midwinter gathering, according to Mi'kmaq traditions, to talk about tribal history and ceremonial customs, generating awareness among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. Jennifer Wemigwans of Invert Media, a creative company dedicated to Aboriginal culture and education, discussed strategies for using media to support the application of Indigenous knowledge.

Holistic Approach

It is very important to think about our work as originating in the community because it is those kinds of processes that will take root and will effect long-term change for the overall social justice needs of our communities.

S. Brenda Small, Negahneewin College

The work of Negahneewin College of Academic and Community Development, which is part of Confederation College in Thunder Bay, Ontario, originates in the community, allowing for social change. Deriving strength and direction from those who came before, Negahneewin College took shape in the 1980s with the goal of becoming an educational hub. The college's Aboriginal Outcomes Program ensures that every program, including science, English, business, art, architecture, and languages, will have some Aboriginal outcomes. The college also has a concurrent certificate program in Aboriginal and Canadian Relations.

The premise of the college underscores the need for all students to understand Canadian and Aboriginal history and the importance of collaboration as part of an inclusive world view. Canadians need to understand that they have traits that are Indigenous, and that the respected notions of responsibility and relationship-building are part of a reciprocal process that is meant to be shared.



Role Models

The presence of role models in any educational environment is an important factor in instilling the will to learn and in helping students to realize the possibilities available to them through education. While role models are critically important for Aboriginal students during their elementary and secondary school years, as discussed above, they also enhance a student's educational experience in the college or university environment. The presence of Aboriginal role models at the post-secondary level in the areas of academics and support increases cultural compatibility for the student, especially when coupled with the increasing awareness, sensitivity, and knowledge of administrative staff and faculty throughout the college or university. Role models help students "see themselves reflected in the landscape, curriculum, and faculty of the institution."²¹

Elders can play an important role on campus as educators, mentors, spiritual advisors, and counsellors. Many institutions have Elders on staff, often working in First Nations Houses. Post-secondary students can also serve as role models for Aboriginal high school students, a relationship that benefits the role models as well as the younger students. They can be the links between post-secondary institutions and Aboriginal communities and can connect local role models with high school students.

Increasing the number of Aboriginal faculty and staff members provides important and valuable role models for Aboriginal students. It is not a solution, however, that can happen immediately. Margaret Brigham, Centennial College, underscored the need for a change in the culture of post-secondary institutions in their attitudes toward Aboriginal students and culture. Existing and new non-Aboriginal faculty and staff require training to understand the Aboriginal student experience, to reflect that understanding in their teaching, and to make the curriculum

21 Janice Hill, Four Directions Aboriginal Student Centre, Queen's University.

relevant to their Aboriginal students. S. Brenda Small with Negahneewin College of Academic and Community Development noted that instructors must first understand that the premise from which they are teaching is often inappropriate and not culturally relevant to Indigenous students. She also acknowledged the challenge of asking educators to change their approach.

The University of Victoria has developed a cultural sensitivity training module for staff and faculty who are working with Aboriginal students. While the training program is time-consuming and potentially repetitive for some, it is an important and valuable model.²²

Courtney Nevin, a student attending the conference, talked about the significance role mentors played in retention at her university, indicating that it is important for teachers and mentors to have an appreciation of Aboriginal culture and of the contributions Aboriginals can make to the rest of Canadian society.

Community Partnerships

Post-secondary institutions must walk together [with Aboriginal communities] on the path.... They have an opportunity to lead and mislead—but walking together reduces the risk.

Darren McKee, Saskatchewan School Board

A recurring theme of the conference was the importance of collaboration between institutions and communities in recognition of their complementary but different strengths. Darren McKee, with the Saskatchewan School Board, spoke of the need to “awaken the spirit in Aboriginal communities to work with post-secondary institutions.” Most presenters and participants focused on the need for institutions to develop and sustain formal and informal partnerships with their local communities for outreach, access, and retention of Aboriginal students. Collaboration enables institutions to understand the Indigenous communities in their area and to work with communities to develop local approaches that take into account the nature of the communities and the strengths of the institution.

Roberta Jamieson underscored the need for universities to become more proactive in reaching out to Aboriginal communities and associations. She advised patience, however, indicating



22 Chris Lalonde, Department of Psychology, University of Victoria.



that communities often have multiple and urgent demands and may not have the capacity to respond immediately. Corinne Mount Pleasant-Jette echoed the need for patience in working together. She indicated that people must open their minds and hearts to hear each other and leave their “baggage at the door” in order to come to the discussion for real and open dialogue with respect and humility.

In order to be effective, collaboration must be equal, shared, and integrated into the core activities of the institution. Community partnerships may involve institutions working with Elders as supports and mentors and including parents in the interview process to ensure that the whole family “has a stake in the outcome.” Monica Mackay, Ryerson University, stressed the importance of visiting and engaging with communities in the development of services; understanding their calendars and creating safe space; and opening institutional gatherings ceremonially by acknowledging the Indigenous territory and relationship with the Creator, and by providing food to nourish all aspects of the person. She also discussed the need to find partners and champions, including admissions departments, within post-secondary institutions themselves.

Working with communities is a pragmatic as well as a moral imperative that recognizes “the right of Indigenous families and communities to retain shared responsibility for the upbringing, training, education, and well-being of their children, consistent with the rights of the child.”²³ An important beginning for such a partnership is the creation of an Indigenous Community Advisory or Governing Council that is representative of the communities being served, works cooperatively with university personnel at the senior level, and is well-resourced with staff and an operating budget.

Participants at the conference shared a number of ways in which specific institutions and communities are working together.

23 Larry Chartrand, Faculty of Law, University of Ottawa.

- Joan Greyeyes, University of Saskatchewan, discussed the 38-year success of the university's Aboriginal program. She indicated that the program works because it was initiated by First Nations people. Similarly, the 30 faculty-specific programs at the university also "came from the [First Nations, Métis, and Inuit] communities themselves." Nevertheless, when communities do not approach the University of Saskatchewan to work together, the university approaches communities to deal with such issues as water and soil quality and to provide alumni mentors for the schools. She reinforced the need for institutions to recognize that what works for one community does not necessarily work for another and that the communities themselves must decide what they need and want.
- North Island College on Vancouver Island is a rural community college covering the territories of 35 Aboriginal peoples. Vivian Hermansen described efforts on the part of the college to foster a new relationship with its local communities through increasingly formal agreements and Memoranda of Understanding. An education-community working group has addressed Aboriginal standards and ways of learning with academic and health-related professionals, which led to curriculum revisions for nursing and to community control over standards and resource allocation. An island-based collaboration on issues of retention involved regularly mandated meetings. While such collaboration is often easier in a smaller community, it provides a valuable role model for others as well.
- From her experience at New Brunswick Community College, Pam Ward observed that "it takes a whole community for a student to be successful." In an effort that began with a provincial government Aboriginal education plan, the college and Aboriginal communities worked together to address the lack of interest in the college on the part of Aboriginal young people. In just two years, applications from Aboriginal students more than doubled. There was a 65 percent increase in self-identification, and the college developed strong and positive relationships with the communities. The communities were the necessary source of information on what to do.
- Chris Paci of the Métis Nation of Ontario spoke of the agreements the Métis community is working on with Lakehead University, College Boreal, and others in an attempt to work with many partners to address the needs of Métis students.
- In the 1990s, the Membertou Nation in Nova Scotia recognized the need for major change in response to the community's poverty, low morale, and high unemployment. As part of an integrated strategy to address these problems and attain a greater role in the mainstream economy, they initiated education and career-related training programs for citizens of Membertou to leverage the employment opportunities associated with new partnerships and initiatives that had been generated by other aspects of the strategy. The socioeconomic and educational results have been most successful.

Holistic Approach

Now I have more work to do—to demonstrate that Nipissing, through its commitment to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and our many initiatives for Aboriginal students, has become an agent of social change.

Laurie McLaren, Nipissing University

Since the inception of an Aboriginal roundtable in the mid-1970s, Nipissing University has developed a governance structure in which Aboriginal affairs play an integral role. Nipissing's Aboriginal Council, with community representatives, directors of education, and employment and training counsellors, is the "voice of the community." The council provides advice and vision directly to the chancellor, president, and board of governors of the university, enabling the university to "make real" the vision of the council. The Office of Aboriginal Initiatives, which began as part of student support services, is now its own department formally reporting to the chancellor and president.

Nipissing's Leadership Program is based on the premise that "knowing who you are will help you get there." It trains Aboriginal student leaders who work with 200 high school students on an individual basis for a total of 20 hours over the academic year. About 1,200 students have participated over the past ten years. The university also set up a tutoring program for students whose parents had dropped out of university. Once the local schools recognized the success of the program, it moved from its original location in a hockey arena to the schools. The university has witnessed an increase in graduation rates for the high school students as well as greater retention of parents.

Research

A new generation of scholars needs to turn their attention to the critical factors underlying success in Inuit education. Understanding what is working would help post-secondary institutions understand what improvements are required to attract and support Inuit students.

Mary Simon, President, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami

Although there has been growing interest in Aboriginal education, and notwithstanding the valuable information that has emerged from this and other conferences due to the contributions of knowledgeable professionals, there is insufficient empirical research and data on the factors necessary to improve the access and retention of Aboriginal students. National census data provide useful but incomplete





information, as not all bands participate. Commenting on the need for investments in research on Inuit education, Mary Simon said,

“There is so little data on Inuit education today that we don’t even know precisely why our students aren’t graduating. In recent years we have seen an increase in the number of Inuit in post-secondary studies. But what is less clear to us are the paths Inuit are taking to these programs, how they are faring, what programs are most successful and where the gaps exist. There is virtually no published evidence on what is working and why.”

Practitioners and leaders from First Nations and Métis communities echoed Mary Simon’s concerns on the need for investments in research and expressed the need to know about best practices from other institutions. Calling for ongoing knowledge exchange about best practices, Joan Greyeyes of the University of Saskatchewan explained that “best practices” is not a static concept because practices are always changing. “What we, at the University of Saskatchewan, do today is not what we did yesterday. And tomorrow will probably be different again. Better ideas come out of experience and evidence on what does and doesn’t work.” Similarly, participants and

Holistic Approach

We cannot just look at retention and graduation rates to understand success. We also need to look at the students' definition of success.

Christopher Lalonde, University of Victoria

The University of Victoria's LE,NONET Project is the result of a two-year consultative investigation with Aboriginal students, faculty, staff, and representatives from local First Nations communities. It was developed to determine best practices and to evaluate program models in supporting the success and retention of Aboriginal students in post-secondary education. LE,NONET (pronounced le-non-git) is a word in SENĆOŦEN (sen-chaw-then), the language of the local Straits Salish people, that means "success after enduring many hardships."

The project was designed to help create a space at the university where Aboriginal students would feel welcomed, be successful in a community environment, and have a positive educational experience. A team of researchers and community representatives created six complementary student-focused programs and one program designed for staff and faculty. LE,NONET includes a bursary program, emergency funding, a peer-mentoring program, a preparation seminar, community internships, research apprenticeships, and a staff and faculty training module.

The student-centred evaluation research of LE,NONET found that the program had a significant impact on the retention and graduation rates of Aboriginal students. Students indicated that building a sense of community among Aboriginal students was the program's most important achievement and that the program helped them feel connected to the general university community. The current challenge is finding financial sources to continue the program beyond the original research funding.

speakers found the conference to be a valuable opportunity to share perceptions on approaches that work and expressed an interest in having more such opportunities in the future.

The speakers also discussed other initiatives that are making a valuable contribution to academic knowledge concerning what works. The National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation is taking on research projects and the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada recently completed an inventory of programs and services to support Aboriginal success on campus, providing an important resource for students and institutions alike.

Recommendations

We know what the problems are; the hard work [is] prioritizing how to close the gap at each institution.

Monica McKay, Ryerson University

Canadians

Public awareness is an important component to improving the education deficit of Aboriginal people.

- Canadians must understand that improving educational access and retention for Aboriginal students is in the nation's interest; it is a practical and moral imperative. Canadians must also understand that they have an important role to play to ensure success.
- Non-Aboriginal Canadians must learn about Aboriginal cultures and knowledge, their history and their needs, and about the connections they have to Aboriginal culture and identity.
- Aboriginal communities and educational institutions must work together to create awareness and knowledge of Aboriginal history and culture among all Canadians.

Governments

All levels of government need to work together with Aboriginal communities to make educational initiatives more coherent, more appropriate, and more successful. Governments should pursue the following:

- Collaborate more with Aboriginal communities, with Aboriginals taking the lead in project conception and design.
- Develop an education stimulus package to support an era of educational catch-up and to enable Aboriginal communities to build the educational communities they need and want.
- Provide funding arrangements enjoyed by the rest of Canada that keep pace with the interest in and demand for post-secondary education on the part of Aboriginal people.
- Develop investment strategies for Aboriginal learners.

Aboriginal Communities

There are many steps that Aboriginal communities, organizations, and families can take to improve access to post-secondary education for young people:

- Create community-driven pilot projects to close the gap in high school completion.
- Reach out to universities and colleges to develop complementary relationships and build partnerships to meet the needs of Aboriginal people.
- Create partnerships with post-secondary institutions to develop a new vibrant learning culture that involves curriculum, training, special services, language and cultural instruction.
- Develop a community learning approach that enables children to be engaged in the idea of post-secondary education from a young age.
- Create mechanisms to improve band accountability in the administration of funding for education.

Colleges and Universities

There is progress in the emergence of promising practices at colleges and universities that support access and retention for Aboriginal students. More still needs to be done to improve upon existing practices and to ensure that they are applied more broadly across the country. Participants suggested the following actions:

- Develop governance mechanisms at senior levels through which institutions can understand and work collaboratively with Indigenous peoples.
- Ensure that initiatives for Aboriginal students are embedded in the mission and core operating budget of the institution and that they are sufficiently resourced.
- Include an Aboriginal enrolment officer in registrar / admissions offices.
- Build proactive partnerships with Aboriginal communities.
- Develop formal and informal access routes to university and college for Aboriginal learners.
- Create mechanisms that enable smooth transitions between colleges and universities as a means of enabling access to university.
- Create campus environments that are safe and comfortable for everyone, including Aboriginal students (e.g., provide physical space for cultural practices, such as smudging; provide support services for Aboriginal students, including transition and bridging programs; indigenize curricula for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students; hire more Aboriginal faculty and staff).
- Provide foundational training of all faculty, staff, and students about the Aboriginal experience.
- Conduct rigorous program evaluation, support research partnerships, and facilitate research to enable scholars to understand what works for Aboriginal students.

We are looking at replacing the legacy of the residential schools with a vibrant new learning culture in every First Nation grounded in our proud heritage, identity, and language. Through a new confidence, we can resume our rightful place as proud Nations walking side-by-side with the Canadian federation and within the North American economy.

To get there, we need to work with every university and college, with school boards, corporations, and foundations and indeed all people in Canada... But with trust, we can and will achieve great success—uniquely Canadian success grounded in the true history and real potential of this land.

Shawn A-in-chut Atleo, Assembly of First Nations

- Provide supports to Aboriginal schools at the K–12 level, for example, through service learning, developing relationships with students, mentorship programming, and specialized camps.
- Facilitate sharing of best practices through task forces, events, and conferences.
- Create a (virtual) network of Aboriginal House workers to discuss best practices and provide for informal professional support and knowledge sharing.

Elementary and Secondary Schools

Significant changes are necessary to meet the needs of Aboriginal learners and to “inspire avenues of hope for a better future” for Indigenous children. All aspects of the education system, including early learning, elementary, and secondary education must embrace the following:

- Teach the Indigenous reality of Canada for all students as part of the core elementary and secondary school curriculum (e.g., in courses on Canadian history and society).
- Develop an institutional mandate to support and recognize the needs and potential of Aboriginal students.
- Collaborate with post-secondary institutions to provide the necessary supports and programs to instill in young people a belief in the possibility of higher education.
- Develop partnerships with colleges and universities to improve the transitions from K–12 to post-secondary education.

The Private Sector

The private sector has made significant strides in providing funds and opportunities to support Aboriginal students. Opportunities for further support include the following:

- Develop partnerships with post-secondary institutions and Aboriginal communities to provide support to students including scholarships, career development, and co-op and intern positions for students during their studies.
- Strengthen relationships with post-secondary institutions to facilitate transitions to jobs upon graduation.
- Invest in books, computers, capital, and cultural programs.

Selected Resources (identified by speakers during the conference)

Aboriginal Education Office, Ministry of Education. *Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework: Delivering Quality Education to Aboriginal Students in Ontario's Provincially Funded Schools*. Queen's Printer for Ontario, 2007. <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/Aboriginal/fnmiFramework.pdf>.

Association of Canadian Deans of Education. *Accord on Indigenous Education*. June 1, 2010. <http://experience.congress2010.ca/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/Congress-Indigenous-Accord.pdf>.

Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, and National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation. *Moving Forward: National Working Summit on Aboriginal Postsecondary Education*. Report on summit participants' views and recommendations, December 15, 2010. http://www.aucc.ca/_pdf/english/reports/2010/Aboriginal-report-summit-Aboriginal-pse-12-15-e.pdf.

Canada – First Nations Joint Action Plan. June 2011. <http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ai/mr/nr/m-a2011/cfnjap-eng.asp>.

Hunt, Sarah, Chris Lalonde, and Yvonne Rondeau. *Supporting Aboriginal Student Success: Report of the LE,NO~~NET~~ Research Project*. University of Victoria, 2010. http://web.uvic.ca/lenonet/documents/UVic_LENONETreport_2010.pdf.

Mendelson, Michael. *Aboriginal Peoples and Postsecondary Education in Canada*. Ottawa: Caledon Institute of Social Policy, 2006. <http://www.caledoninst.org/Publications/PDF/595ENG.pdf>.

National Committee on Inuit Education. *First Canadians, Canadians First: National Strategy on Inuit Education*. Ottawa: Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, 2011. http://www.itk.ca/sites/default/files/National-Strategy-on-Inuit-Education-2011_0.pdf.

Office of the Auditor General of Canada. "Programs for First Nations on Reserves." In *2011 June Status Report of the Auditor General of Canada*. http://www.oag-bvg.gc.ca/internet/English/parl_oag_201106_04_e_35372.html.

United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. September 2007. <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/en/declaration.html>.

Usher, Alex. *The Post-Secondary Student Support Program: An Examination of Alternative Delivery Mechanisms*. Toronto, ON: Educational Policy Institute, 2009. <http://www.educationalpolicy.org/publications/pubpdf/INAC.pdf>.



TD Bank Group

**Faculty of Engineering and Applied Science,
Queen's University**

Colleges Ontario

Association of Canadian Community Colleges (ACCC)

Association of Universities and Colleges Canada (AUCC)

School of Policy Studies, Queen's University

Matthews Fellowship, Queen's University

Four Directions Aboriginal Student Centre, Queen's University

Queen's Native Student Association

First Nations Technical Institute (FNTI)