

The Aboriginal University Education Roundtable May 24, 2007 The University of Winnipeg



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On May 24, 2007 Lloyd Axworthy, President of the University of Winnipeg, Phil Fontaine, National Chief Assembly of First Nations, and David Chartrand, representing the Métis National Council and President of the Manitoba Métis Federation, convened a Roundtable of Western universities and other interested universities to explore issues such as access, retention, and how to create a successful university experience for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students.

Canada's future economic success and the academic success of Canada's Aboriginal Peoples are intrinsically linked. The Aboriginal population is growing more quickly than any other population in the country while at the same time jobs are requiring and employers are demanding increasingly high levels of education. First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities need the skills and credentials acquired at university to achieve self-government, self-determination, and healthy communities.

At the Roundtable, each institution reported on measures it is taking to overcome barriers Aboriginal students face in completing university. The following report is an 'analytic' review: rather than summarizing the institutions' submissions, this report is organized based on the critical barriers identified. Minutes of the meeting are also available by request.

The Challenge

In his presentation to the Roundtable, Michael Mendelson analyzed data from the 1996 and 2001 Censuses (specific 2006 Census Canada information not yet available) to provide a picture of how Aboriginal peoples are actually faring in the post secondary system. Mendelson's analysis is available on the Caledon Institute of Social Policy web site <http://www.caledoninst.org/> in the paper: *Aboriginal Peoples and Postsecondary Education in Canada*. Some highlights of his report are:

- Almost 50 percent of Aboriginal working age people have not completed high school and consequently are unlikely to apply to a PSE institution.

- Even among 10 – 24 year olds, over 40 percent of Aboriginal young adults have not completed high school compared to only 16 percent in the total population. The on reserve rate of failure to complete high school for 20 – 24 year olds is even higher: averaging 58 percent across Canada, and as high as 70 percent in Manitoba and 60 percent in Quebec, Saskatchewan and Alberta.
- Among the relatively few Aboriginal students who do complete high school, about the same percent as in the total population go on to complete some form of post secondary education, but these students are much more likely to obtain a college diploma than a university degree.
- While almost the same percent of Aboriginal students as non-Aboriginal students are completing a college diploma or obtaining a trade certificate, a much smaller percent of the Aboriginal population has a university degree – 4 percent compared to 15 percent in 2001.
- In almost all dimensions of educational outcomes the worst results are in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, and the Territories. Over 40 percent of the country's Aboriginal population lives in Manitoba and Saskatchewan.

The Assembly of First Nations

The Assembly of First Nations (AFN) tabled a presentation on 'Education, Jurisdiction and Governance.' The AFN's position is that PSE is a Treaty and Inherent Right of First Nations. The presentation included a vision in which "First Nation learners will achieve their full potential supported by a comprehensive system under First Nation jurisdiction that addresses their intellectual, spiritual, emotional and physical needs through quality lifelong learning, grounded in First Nations' languages, cultures, traditions, values and worldviews." The AFN's mandate is to advance the development of quality First Nations' education systems through projects and initiatives inclusive of ECE, elementary, secondary, special education, PSE, jurisdiction, funding, accountability, languages and culture; as well as to increase educational attainment and opportunities for all First Nation learners.. The PSE Student Support Program is falling far short of needs with approximately 2,900 eligible students denied funding in 2007-08 and increasing every year after as a result of the government's 2% cap on PSE funding and the increasing costs of tuition, books, housing and other PSE related costs.

It is the AFN's position that the Canadian Census is not a source which is accurate or absolute in its data collection, analysis and reporting of First Nations educational attainment. The major concern of the AFN is that policy decisions are potentially made utilizing this data. Currently First Nations are not funded by the Canadian government to gather, maintain or analyze information and data pertaining to its educational system. It is the objective of the AFN and First Nations to establish data collection and performance measurement systems

which would allow for accurate data collection and analysis to support sound decision making.

The AFN points out that there are many successes within PSE, for example seeing the growth from approximately 3,600 students in 1977-1978 to approximately 27,500 in 1999-2000. This success continues today with approximately 4,000 First Nation PSE graduates every year, but this is in the face of tremendous disadvantage including extremely high rates of poverty and low levels of high school completion. The challenges are particularly important for the West, so Western Canadian universities have a critical role to play. The AFN looks to Western universities to support participatory and collaborative research with First Nations on issues facing First Nations, to set up support programs to assist First Nations students in successfully completing PSE, and to support a proactive First Nation public policy including increased supports such as university housing and daycare. The AFN hopes to see more universities enter into MOUs and partnerships with First Nations to address specific regional issues of priority as determined by the partnership.. The AFN proposes that there be regular meetings of Western universities to discuss and share developments on First Nations' issues, that a regular forum be set up to share and replicate 'best practices' and that the universities support the First Nations public policy initiatives.

Métis National Council and Manitoba Métis Federation

The position of the Métis National Council and the Manitoba Métis Federation (MMF) was tabled in a policy paper which noted that many Métis are part of the 'working poor' so that financial barriers are especially important. While much more needs to be done to overcome these barriers, the report noted some successes, for example, the Louis Riel Institute, in partnership with Collège universitaire de Saint-Boniface, the universities of Brandon, Manitoba and Winnipeg, has set up the Louis Riel Endowment Fund (now at \$8.0 million) to assist Métis students with bursaries. Another success is the Métis Human Resources Development Agreement with the federal government that may pay tuition for a student's final year of a university degree program. A second challenge noted in the paper is the reality that many Métis students do not complete high school or, even if they do, are still not well prepared for university or college. There have been some successes in addressing this issue, such as the adult learning program through the Louis Riel Institute, but new efforts are needed including Métis educational supports for K-12, in-school cultural programs, early learning, stay-in-school programs, childcare, family and adult literacy initiatives, mentoring and role model programs.

The MMF report stresses that Métis specific supports are needed in PSE institutions, including mentorship and tutoring services, housing, cooperative learning and working initiatives and the availability of childcare. One success

has been the formation of a Métis student group known as the CAMPUS Group. In January 2007 the group hosted a first-ever Conference on Post-Secondary Education for Métis. The report concluded that the development and expansion of programs and services to increase access, retention, and overall success of Métis post-secondary students needs to be undertaken with Métis governments and through Métis educational institutions such as the Louis Riel Institute.

Institutional Responses

Institutions have adopted a number of policies to assist First Nations, Métis and Inuit students. Broadly speaking, these policies have been designed to meet one of three broad classes of barriers to post-secondary education: social/cultural, academic and financial.

Social Barriers

The first set of barriers is social and cultural in nature. By their very nature, even the smallest universities are large and imposing to Aboriginal students from small and remote communities; very often, the university will be the largest community an Aboriginal student has ever been a part of. The sense of dislocation can be enormous – to say nothing of the larger shock of dealing with living in a large city.

As well, almost all Aboriginal students – whether from a reserve, a town or a city – will be the first in their family to go to a university or have any exposure at all to post secondary institutions. Consequently, few Aboriginal students will have anyone to turn to for advice about how to cope with university, whether in respect of important decisions such as which courses to take or more everyday issues such as how to go about discussing an assignment with a professor.

Institutions can start dealing with this alienation even before First Nations, Métis and Inuit students get to campus. Many institutions now have Aboriginal liaison officers who spend time in Aboriginal communities talking to students and education counselors, and in effect act as a face for the institution in these communities. Sometimes these outreach duties are taken on by Aboriginal students themselves, who can act as role models to younger students still in their home communities, as is the case at the University of Calgary's Native Ambassador Program Initiative and the University of Regina's Kâspohtamatâtân Mentorship Program. In some cases, institutions are reaching into Aboriginal communities to talk to potential students at a much younger age, as The University of Winnipeg has done with its Wîi Chiwaaknak Learning Centre, Eco-Kids Program and Eco-U Summer Camp targeting Aboriginal elementary, middle and high school students. The University of Alberta is connecting with Aboriginal high school students through its Summer Science Camps and Lakehead University is traveling to remote First Nations to deliver its Superior Science Program. The University of Manitoba's Curry Biz Camp, and the University of

British Columbia's Chinook Summer Biz Camp both foster entrepreneurship among young First Nations and Métis students. The University of British Columbia also hosts a Bridge Through Sport Program, Summer Science Program, Native Youth Program, and Cedar Day Camp and Afterschool Program.

Another approach is to bring first-year Aboriginal students to campus before the start of the school year for some campus orientation, as the University of Saskatchewan has done with its Summer University Transition Course and the University of Manitoba which offers transition through its Native Studies summer course. Nipissing University, through its First Generation Strategy Pilot Project, has initiated a three-credit University Success Course for First Generation students that begins prior to the start of classes in September.

The importance of First Nations, Métis and Inuit identity within the institutions cannot be overstated. This begins in the first instance with a dedicated space for Aboriginal institutions, which many institutions over the past few years have adopted. This provides both a "zone of comfort" for Aboriginal students as well as creating a focus for Aboriginal culture and activities on campus. Obvious examples of this include Trent University's First Peoples House of Learning and the University of British Columbia's Longhouse. The use of visual symbols of First Nations, Métis and Inuit cultures throughout campus is similarly important. Many institutions find it ideal to locate services for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students in or near this space so as to create a "critical mass" of Aboriginal students and administrators that will help create a zone on campus which is unambiguously "Aboriginal-friendly". However, it is important to recognize distinctions between First Nations, Métis and Inuit cultures as a "Pan-Aboriginal" approach can result in one culture dominating a campus to the detriment of others.

Perhaps the most important symbol of all is the presence of Aboriginal staff, particularly in academic positions, which perhaps more than anything signals the institution's commitment to success for Aboriginal students. Examples include Lakehead University's Vice-Provost of Aboriginal Initiatives, and the University of British Columbia's Associate Dean of Indigenous Education. Trent University and the University of British Columbia among others have had success in recruiting and retaining large numbers of Aboriginal faculty. A number of universities have also developed governing board and senate policies as well as Aboriginal governed councils within the university structure including Simon Fraser University, University of British Columbia, Malaspina University-College, Lakehead University, Trent University, Nipissing University and Yukon College.

The provision of various forms of counseling for Aboriginal students is an essential institutional service. Aboriginal counselors play a huge role in assisting students to make the transition to the campus environment; a transition which can be very challenging. They help students interface with the sometimes

daunting institutional bureaucracy, they provide assistance in creating and maintaining networks among Aboriginal students and they also provide important assistance in times of family crisis. The presence of Aboriginal Elders on campus at First Nations University, Brandon University, Malaspina University-College, University College of the North, and the Universities of Manitoba, Northern British Columbia, Regina, Saskatchewan, and Winnipeg can also be very beneficial in terms of providing needed social supports.

Institutions have paid a great deal of attention to helping Aboriginal students integrate into the campus community, though less has been done in terms of integration into the wider community, especially in large urban areas. Housing for Aboriginal students remains a critical problem in many areas, as does the challenge of sourcing the funding to create affordable student housing that works for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students living with children and extended family. A second significant challenge is the provision of affordable daycare though there are success stories such as Thompson Rivers University's partnership with Cariboo Child Care Society.

Academic Barriers

While there has been a considerable emphasis on the provision of social supports as noted above, there has been less emphasis on the provision of academic supports for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students. Some institutions hire "academic counselors" for Aboriginal students, but these people tend to act as interpreters of institutional requirements and as referral services for various types of assistance. Much less common are the dedicated academic councilors and tutors found at the University of Winnipeg and the University of Saskatchewan. Dedicated tutoring services are also available within the University of Manitoba's Medicine, Engineering and Social Work ACCESS Programs and Lakehead University's Native Nursing Access Program.

One common institutional response to Aboriginal communities seeking greater access to post-secondary education has been to create special programs in partnership with Aboriginal communities. These include programs designed to meet the human resource needs of Aboriginal communities in areas such as health, education and the environment. Many institutions provide programming in these areas, notably First Nations University of Canada's National School of Dental Therapy, Nursing and Health Studies programs and the University College of the North's Kanaci Otinawawasomwin Aboriginal Midwifery Degree. Education programs developed in partnership with specific Aboriginal communities include the University of Regina's SUNTEP program, the University of Alberta's Aboriginal Teacher Education Program at Blue Quills First Nations College and the University of Lethbridge's Niitsitapi Teacher Education Program with Red Crow Community College and Nipissing University's Aboriginal Teacher Certification Program and Native Special Education Assistant Diploma Program.

Yukon College's Environmental Officer Training Program and University of British Columbia's First Nations Forestry Initiatives were also all developed to meet specific needs within Aboriginal communities.

Another response has been to create programs designed to meet the knowledge needs of First Nations, Métis and Inuit (e.g. language and Native Studies programs), led by Trent University in 1969. The University of Alberta has developed a Faculty of Native Studies, on par with traditional universities faculties such as Arts and Science. In this vein, Indigenous studies programs now exist in almost all Western Canadian institutions, and the provision of Aboriginal language instruction is becoming more common. Simon Fraser University, for example, provides certificates of language proficiency in eight Aboriginal languages. Research into Aboriginal culture is important, such as Collège universitaire de Saint-Boniface's Canada Research Chair on Métis Identity.

Programs designed to meet the economic development needs of Aboriginal communities have yet to receive a lot of attention, but the demand for these may grow in the near future. The University of Winnipeg offers a B.A. in Aboriginal Governance with a Master's Degree to be offered in September 2008 while Trent University offers a Native Management and Economic Development Program and University of British Columbia offers a Chinook Diploma Program in the Sauder School of Business. A number of institutions provide training in Aboriginal tourism including Thompson Rivers University's Aboriginal Tourism Certificate Program; Malaspina University-College has recently developed an Aboriginal Shellfish Aquaculture Training Program and Yukon College offers a First Nations Executive Development Program.

One widespread phenomenon is the tremendous number of programs now being taught through community delivery, which is especially important in providing access to learners in their home communities. Yukon College, Simon Fraser University, Thompson Rivers University, Brandon University, University College of the North, and the Universities of Alberta, British Columbia, Regina and Saskatchewan have been particularly active in providing services in more remote communities; the University of Winnipeg and University of Manitoba have been doing the same with urban Aboriginal people by opening a new centre on Selkirk Avenue in Winnipeg's North End. South Dakota State University has experienced success by offering a college preparatory program called Success Academy at Flandreau Indian School.

Another strategy has been to provide special first-year bridging programs for Aboriginal students, as is done at the First Nations University of Canada, University of Alberta, University of Lethbridge, Lakehead University, and the University of Winnipeg. But a road less-well traveled, perhaps due to cost, is to provide this kind of bridging programs directly in those more remote communities where the available secondary school instruction may not have prepared

students well for university. The Fisher River First Nation in Manitoba recently began a project like this, and attention needs to be paid to programs like this to see if they are in fact effective in improving transitions to post-secondary education.

To assist with the transition to a fulfilling career, First Nations University offers a comprehensive career services program while the University of Regina has established an Aboriginal Career Centre. The Universities of Calgary is leading an Aboriginal Lynx Career and Employment Project with the involvement of other Western universities including Saskatchewan and Winnipeg.

Financial Barriers

Dealing with financial barriers to education has traditionally been the responsibility of the Government of Canada rather than that of universities. However, the decade-long two percent cap on increases in annual expenditures to the \$300 million/year Post-Secondary Student Support Program (the grants program to First Nations communities through which INAC supports post-secondary students) combined with an increase in demand for post-secondary education has limited this program's reach. In effect, each First Nation has had to choose between keeping per-student funding stable and decreasing the number of students who receive aid or decreasing per-student funding and keeping numbers stable. In the absence of any data on this or any collective information on First Nations funding practices, it is difficult to know exactly what effects this has had; anecdotally, it seems that First Nations have tried as far as possible to keep their payments to students constant and as a result, the number of students denied funding has risen.

Métis and non-status First Nations students do not receive federal support to attend university, although the Northwest Territories and to some degree the Yukon provide funding for these students. In response, the Manitoba Métis Federation's Louis Riel Institute, in partnership with Collège universitaire de Saint-Boniface and the Universities of Brandon, Manitoba and Winnipeg has set up an \$8M Louis Riel Endowment Fund to assist Métis students with bursaries.

In response to this situation, some institutions have put resources into institutional aid and scholarships for Aboriginal students. The University of Regina, for instance, awards a little over \$200,000 per year through its CIC Aboriginal bursary program. The University of Winnipeg recently launched a \$10M Opportunity Fund to provide children and youth from backgrounds of poverty with individual tuition credit accounts to provide the means to attend university. However, while institutional involvement is to be welcomed in this area, additional government support is needed to provide overall financing for Aboriginal students.

The Need for Better Data

To make progress in all areas, stakeholders require better information than we currently possess on the efficacy of various interventions to support First Nations, Métis and Inuit students. This is not simply a matter of better evaluation practices; at the heart of the issue is the fact that there is simply no data at all from which to base any evaluations.

Some institutions collect good data on the numbers of Aboriginal students attending their institutions and using their services and then track their progress thereafter. The Universities of Saskatchewan, Calgary and British Columbia are notable in this regard, but elsewhere progress remains uneven. Implementing these kinds of tracking systems is often seen as difficult because Canadian institutions are not – as a rule – in the habit of acquiring data on race or ethnicity when collecting administrative data on students and applicants. But a consistent way has to be found to ask Aboriginal students to self-identify, or there will be no possible way to say with accuracy which institutions – and by extension which practices – are increasing Aboriginal success in post-secondary education. This is not simply a matter for each institution to adopt, either: to the extent that inter-institutional comparisons are necessary to help uncover best practices, institutions must use common data definitions and data collection techniques in order to ensure apples-to-apples comparisons.

Beyond simply collecting data, there is a need to create a culture of evaluation regarding the effectiveness of various social, academic and financial interventions. Money for Aboriginal assistance is scarce, and everyone has an interest in obtaining an accurate and objective assessment of what works and what does not.

Finally, there is the question of how to replicate best practices. What “works” in one situation cannot necessarily be transplanted to another. A thorough understanding of the contextual factors at work in successful programs will be necessary to ensure successful program transference between institutions.

One approach to these challenges is to establish an institutional setting in which issues facing Aboriginal education may be consistently and rigorously addressed. A Centre of Excellence in Indigenous Peoples’ Education centered in Western universities could provide such an institutional foundation for this continuing work. Partnerships with organizations such as the National Aboriginal Student Services Association and the National Association of Indigenous Institutes of High Learning may prove important.

Next Steps

Chairs President Axworthy, National Chief Fontaine and President Chartrand will reconvene the Roundtable on November 7-8, 2007. At that time, a strategy paper setting out next steps will be presented to participating institutions. The paper will outline both measures which universities might consider collectively with respect to federal and provincial governments and measures which might be undertaken individually on their own initiative.

Appendix 1

Aboriginal University Education Roundtable Participants

Assembly of First Nations – National Chief Phil Fontaine
Brenda Merasty, Senior Policy Analyst for Education, Jurisdiction and Government

Métis National Council and Manitoba Métis Federation – President David Chartrand
Leah LaPlante, Education Chair

Office of the Federal Interlocutor – Cynthia Foreman, Regional Director

Province of Manitoba – Dwight Botting, Deputy Minister of Advanced Education and Literacy

Council on Post-Secondary Education - Susan Deane, Manager University Relations

Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada – Robert Best, Vice-President
National Affairs

Caledon Institute of Social Policy – Michael Mendelson, Senior Scholar

Educational Policy Institute - Alex Usher, Vice-President

Institutions

Brandon University – Dr. Janet Wright, Acting Executive Dean, Student & International Affairs

Collège universitaire de Saint-Boniface – Professor Denis Gagnon, CRC on Métis Identity

First Nations University of Canada – President Charles Pratt
Larry Gautier Director of Student Success Services

King's University College – President Harry Fernhout

Lakehead University – President Fred Gilbert

Malaspina University-College – President Ralph Nilson
Director of Aboriginal Education Sharon Hobenshield

Nipissing University – Exec Director Student Affairs Al Carfagnini

Simon Fraser University – VP Academic Dr. John Waterhouse
Dr. Lisa Sterling, Special Advisor and Director Aboriginal Affairs

Thompson Rivers University – President Richard Barnsley
Advisor to the President on First Nations Education Nathan Matthew

Trent University – President Bonnie Patterson

University of Alberta – Dr. Fern Snart, Dean of Education
Director of the Aboriginal Teacher Education program Noella Steinhauer

University of British Columbia – Dr. Richard Vedan, Director of First Nations House of Learning

University of Calgary – Dr. Maureen Wilson, Associate Dean, Academic, Faculty of Social Work
Director of The Native Centre Shawna Cunningham

University College of the North – Academic Advisor/Student Awards Gina Guiboche

University of Lethbridge – Dr. Jo-Anne Fiske, Acting Dean, Graduate Studies and Acting Associate Vice-President Research

University of Manitoba – President Eموke Szathmary
Dr. Fred Shore, Executive Director, Office of University Accessibility and Assistant Professor Native Studies

University of Northern British Columbia – Dr. Paul Madak, Dean, Student Success and Enrolment Management

University of Regina – President Jim Tomkins
AVP Student Affairs Ron Byrne

University of Saskatchewan – President Peter MacKinnon
Dr. Marie Battiste
Special Advisor to the President on Aboriginal Initiatives George Lafond

University of Winnipeg – President Lloyd Axworthy
Director of Aboriginal Student Services Dr. Mary Young

Yukon College – President Terry Weninger

South Dakota State University – Dr. Allen Branum Director for Diversity Enhancement and Coordinator of American Indian Studies
Dr. Nels H. Granholm, Head, Global Studies Program and Distinguished Professor of Biology

