

Niitsitapi Teacher Education Program

A Collaborative Project Between
The University of Lethbridge
and
Red Crow Community College

Summary Report

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Cathy Campbell
Roy Weasel Fat
Kris Magnusson

Executive Summary

The Niitsitapi Teacher Education Program was an innovative collaboration between The University of Lethbridge (U of L), Red Crow Community College (RCCC), the Kainai Board of Education (KBE) and the Blackfoot-speaking communities of Southern Alberta. The program was a culture-centric attempt to graduate qualified teachers who possessed an understanding of Blackfoot epistemology, pedagogy and ideology, and who were able to apply this understanding to the development of strategies and techniques in K – 12 classrooms. This report provides a brief summary of the background, implementation and results of this innovative and highly successful program.

In the year leading up to the admission of students, the partners in the collaboration designed a program that would build upon the foundations of beliefs, values and culture of Blackfoot speaking nations. A Steering Committee with representation from each partner institution as well as Elders and community representatives was formed to guide the conceptual development of the program. Curriculum teams, consisting of content experts from the Faculty of Education and cultural experts from either Red Crow Community College or the community were established for each course in the program. Finally, a coordinator from each of the Faculty of Education and Red Crow Community College was appointed to monitor program development and implementation.

The partners agreed that Niitsitapi would not be a “watered down” program. Students would receive the same core program structure, and would be expected to demonstrate the same levels of competence as any other education students. Furthermore, admission standards for Niitsitapi students were identical to the requirements for admission to the “regular” B.Ed. program. A total of 24 students were admitted to the programme and they began their course work in July 2004. Unlike the regular program, students began course work in July with a course that was credited towards the requirements of the elective semester.

Niitsitapi was unique in that it did not simply attempt to accommodate First Nations learners within an educational program. Rather, the entire program was built upon Blackfoot ways of knowing and of being. The first course (Kiipaitapiisinnooni I and II) provided an introduction to, and grounding in, the culture, values and beliefs of the Blackfoot-speaking nations. This course provided the foundation for the rest of the program, and in addition to identifying core belief systems, introduced students to the role of Elders. Cultural supports in general, and the role of Elders in particular, were critical components throughout the Niitsitapi program. The collaboration in program design extended to the means for course delivery. Some courses were co-taught, some were taught by FE faculty members who had extensive experience with Blackfoot culture and others were taught by Blackfoot-speaking instructors. Elders were involved in all course and program components.

Of the 24 students that started the program, 19 successfully completed the requirements for the Bachelor of Education Degree within the two-year cycle for the program. Of these 19 students, 9 completed all degree requirements and graduated with joint degrees

at the June 2006 Convocation ceremonies. Eight of the nine students are employed, and all eight are working in jobs related to their degrees (5 employed as teachers in K-12 settings, 2 in adult education settings, and 1 as a liaison/recruitment officer at a university).

The student completion results, and subsequent success with finding employment are powerful testaments to the quality of the program. However, even more compelling is the testimony of the students who were Niitsitapi. Theirs are stories of personal triumph, of connecting to their culture, and of personal growth and development. They have been transformed, and in the process, have managed to transform the educational landscapes where they practiced. Most importantly, they have become teachers, in the most compelling sense of the word.

The success of the Niitsitapi program leads to 4 major recommendations:

1. That permanent funding be sought for the Niitsitapi program;
2. That a process of curriculum review be initiated so that the lessons of Niitsitapi may be brought into the general program of instruction for all Education students;
3. To expand the capacity of Red Crow Community College, particularly with regard to cultural and transitional offerings, through direct funding and through effective collaborations with other post-secondary institutions; and
4. That the U of L/RCCC collaboration provide consultation to other First Nations and educational institutions who are exploring teacher training programs.