

Introduction: From Student Access to Community Engagement

Catherine Taylor

The University of Winnipeg is committed to excellence in post-secondary education In pursuit of our mission, we are guided by the knowledge that our primary responsibility is to our students, to whom we strive to offer a community which appreciates, fosters, and promotes values of human dignity, equality, non-discrimination and appreciation of diversity. We view both accessibility and excellence as important goals, and will endeavour to make the University as accessible as we can while maintaining high standards of quality in our academic programs.

–University Mission Statement, 2017

Introduction: From Student Access to Community Engagement

It has now been 50 years since The University of Winnipeg (UW) was first chartered by the Province of Manitoba to offer undergraduate degrees. Much of that time has been characterized by efforts to become an institution that lives up to its mission by enabling marginalized youth to flourish and enjoy the benefits of a university education. Understandings of what it means for the University to commit to both academic excellence and meaningful access have changed in the course of learning how best to engage students who are underrepresented in university admissions and graduation rates. Given its inner-city location in a city with the largest Indigenous urban population in Canada, the University has been in a key position to focus on engaging with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit youth, along with youth from other communities that are disproportionately likely to experience poverty and unlikely to pursue university education.

In anticipation of its 50th anniversary, and the occasion it would afford to reflect on what has been accomplished and how to reshape our efforts, the University successfully applied for a SSHRC research grant¹ to undertake a study of a representative range of the institutions' many initiatives to engage educationally marginalized students: those who for a variety of reasons (most often socioeconomic) have not had other students' opportunity to flourish in their K–12 educations, making them less likely to seek a university education and less likely to succeed when they do. A multidisciplinary research team of ten professors from Arts, Education, and Kinesiology was assembled to lead studies of various initiatives using a range of methods, but focusing especially on interviewing and surveying the youth who participated in one or more of the initiatives and the university personnel who developed and implemented them.

As the chapters in this volume will show, the institution's understandings of how best to engage educationally marginalized youth have evolved with changes in broader society (such as the LGBTQ rights movement) and international events with local impact (such as civil wars and political persecution leading to an influx of immigrants and asylum seekers). Chief among these changes between 1967 and 2017 has been the far greater attention on a national scale to the situation of Indigenous people, culminating in the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and its calls to action in all spheres of society, and especially those that are implicated in colonization, including higher education. Among the many benefits of the TRC process has been its provocation to think more deeply about what is required to create a respectful, inclusive, and equitable society.

Thus, there has been a shift in discourse—the way we think about and speak about how to engage educationally marginalized youth—in recent decades:

¹ SSHRC Aid to Small Universities Program, 2014 competition, Grant 681-2014-0024.

- *from a discourse of “access” in the 1980s*, where a largely untransformed UW would open its doors to “underprepared” individuals and give them the supports needed to succeed in the university-as-it-is. This was the era of the “democratization” of universities nationally and internationally, where universities were adjusting from serving a smaller, mainly “straight white male [and more recently, male and female] middle-to-upper-class Christian” student population, to admitting a much bigger and more socioeconomically diverse student body. University administrations may not have foreseen that the same societal pressures that had motivated expansion and diversification of the student population would have an impact on the university itself—but they did. Despite opposition from traditionalists who feared an erosion of academic excellence in the challenge to “the canon,” identity-based programs of study such as “Native” Studies and Women’s Studies emerged at this time, and traditional Humanities departments such as English Literature and History began to diversify their curricula in ways that would, in effect even if not by design, reflect their more diverse student bodies. (See, e.g., Menand 2010.) Still, UW could not be said to have committed to reinventing itself, and its relationship to non-dominant communities or social justice issues seems not to have become central to its ethos. Dr. Robin Farquhar (1999), President of the UW in the 1980s, would describe the key strengths of universities in very traditional terms (academic freedom, institutional autonomy, etc.) that would have been endorsed by university leaders from earlier eras.
- *to a discourse of “community engagement” in the Axworthy years (2004–2014)*, when contribution to social justice and community development was central to the purpose of the university. In this discourse the emphasis was not only on providing supports for individual students but on becoming a university where students from socioeconomically disadvantaged communities could flourish. Dr. Axworthy struck an Access Task Force that still used the language of access but was charged with answering a much deeper question than is suggested by that discourse: “How does the University of Winnipeg become an agent of change?” The task force concluded that removing financial barriers was only part of the challenge, and was secondary to the bigger problem of low-socioeconomic status (SES) youth disengaging from school and never aspiring to enter university. They also observed, crucially, that the university was itself structured to favour “the middle class student coming directly from high school” whether in student service schedules or in teaching methods. One of their recommendations was to develop a robust community engagement strategy by expanding on its partnerships and service contracts with community organizations (Access Task Force, 2007). There was concern among some faculty members in these years that there was too great a gap between the academic and community engagement, and that the latter was being pursued at the expense of the institution’s capacity to maintain excellence in teaching and research. UW developed programming for children and youth at this time, together with an administrative infrastructure for community engagement, including a Director of Community Learning and Engagement position reporting to the President, an Associate Vice-President of Indigenous Affairs, and an Indigenous Advisory Circle. In 2011, the University adopted a “Community Learning Policy” that committed the institution to “the active integration of the University into the social, cultural, and educational life of the community” in order to provide innovative learning opportunities for specific underrepresented communities in the University, namely “Indigenous students, visible minorities, students with

disabilities, new Canadians, students who are the first in their family to attend university, students from rural communities, and those who work full-time while attending university” (Community Learning Policy, 2011).

- *and to an expanded discourse of community engagement in the current administration of President Trimbee (2014–),* who has reaffirmed the importance of sustaining the fundamental academic mission and collegial governance model of the University while consolidating, and in some ways expanding on, the university’s commitment to community engagement. Thus, “Academic Excellence and Renewal” and “Indigenization” are both pillars of the University’s 2015 Strategic Directions document. Dr. Trimbee’s focus on charting an academically and financially sustainable course, where academic and community engagement interests are brought into mutually beneficial connection, can be seen in decisions about which engagement efforts to support. Under Dr. Trimbee the University has maintained the key community learning programs initiated in the Axworthy era to engage inner-city youth, and committed the institution to acting on the TRC’s calls for universities to contribute to reconciliation. The expansion of the meaning of community engagement can be seen in UW’s efforts at an institutional level in recent years to actively include the previously unacknowledged community of 2SLGBTQ* students and staff.

Some of the initiatives to engage marginalized youth examined in this volume go back decades to the Access era. The University made a major commitment to pursuing the goal of access by establishing the University’s Writing Program in 1988. It was meant to raise the calibre of academic writing among all students, but particularly among “access students” who begin university with lower academic qualifications. University leadership at the time was particularly concerned with avoiding the phenomenon of “revolving-door” access, where underprepared students are welcomed into a university but not offered the supports required to succeed. See Jennifer Clary-Lemon’s chapter on the University writing program.

The Faculty of Education has, since 1998, offered several highly successful education programs for Indigenous and inner-city residents through their Access Program: the Winnipeg Education Centre program (WEC), Canadian Aboriginal Teacher Education Program (CATEP), and International Teacher Education Program (ITEP), which have prepared hundreds of teachers to work in inner-city schools. The Faculty has had the mandate from the inception of its B.Ed. program to prepare all of its students to teach in the inner city. Thus, the B.Ed. degree includes a variety of relevant courses, including mandatory Aboriginal Education and Service Learning courses, and a range of other courses including Mentoring and LGBTQ-Inclusive Education. Paul DePasquale’s chapter examines the WEC B.Ed. program that prepares inner-city residents to teach in inner-city schools. Lee Anne Block’s chapter on Service Learning addresses one of the key components of the Faculty of Education’s long record of engagement with educationally marginalized youth (for other Faculty of Education initiatives, see the appendix).

Many initiatives date from the ten-year presidency of Dr. Lloyd Axworthy (2004–2014), who brought with him a passionate commitment to contribute to socioeconomic development in the inner city by working vigorously at an institutional level to engage students from Indigenous and war-affected communities. See

the chapter by Axworthy, Linda DeRiviere, and Jennifer Rattray for an examination of several key programs and their benefits. During this period there was additionally an emphasis on engaging inner-city children and youth in sports and recreation and providing them with access to University facilities; see Nathan Hall and David Telles-Langdon's chapter on the University RecPlex and its community charter. One of the final achievements of the Axworthy years was the proposal of a student-initiated, Senate-approved Indigenous Course Requirement (ICR) for every degree program to ensure that every graduate has taken a course offering the opportunity to learn from Indigenous knowledge and challenge colonial misrepresentations of Indigenous peoples, histories, and cultures. The aim was both to contribute to national reconciliation efforts and to foster a respectful campus climate for Indigenous people.

Since President Annette Trimbee began her term in 2014, the University has consolidated its commitment to engaging Indigenous students and other marginalized groups. Notably, the University has made significant progress in implementing the ICR, establishing it by unanimous support of University Senate in 2015, with over forty courses now in the calendar and others in development. Helen Lepp-Friesen's chapter discusses the impact of ICR courses on Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and faculty members. The institution has made additional efforts to extend this work on an institutional level to 2SLGBTQ* students. Although 2SLGBTQ* youth are not a group particularly likely to experience educational marginalization arising from poverty or racism (although of course some do), research at the high school level has shown that 2SLGBTQ* students do experience a hostile school climate and are at higher risk of dropping out. The University made a major commitment to engaging particularly marginalized 2SLGBTQ* communities in its historic 2017 "C2C" conference which brought together Two-Spirit Indigenous people and Queer and Trans People of Colour from across Canada in dialogue with other LGBTQ people and allies to develop calls to action for institutions and communities. See Heather Milne et al.'s chapter for an examination of 2SLGBTQ* inclusion and exclusion at the University.

Much of the focus in media coverage of changes at the University focus on major building projects such as the Richardson science complex, the Buhler Centre that houses the Faculty of Business and Economics, the mixed-use apartment building behind it, and the RecPlex. Generally, the discussion focuses on how such projects contribute to downtown revitalization; what is less often noted is that many of the architectural changes on campus over the years, large and small, have been fueled by the need for physical spaces to accommodate the University's community engagement goals and its growing understanding of what respectful inclusion requires. We can see this in the migration of the Aboriginal Student Centre from its inadequate space in the basement of Bryce Hall with a staff of one thirty years ago, to its current facilities in Lockhart Hall; in the construction of the RecPlex, a facility built for community engagement and required by Charter to offer it; in the establishment of the Helen Betty Osborne Centre on Ellice Avenue and Urban and Inner-City Studies North End location on Selkirk Avenue to provide the facilities needed for meaningful access for educationally marginalized inner-city students.

The thirty years of community-engagement efforts at the University discussed in this volume are flanked by two bold decisions that affect every degree taken by every student: in 1988, the Writing requirement, and

in 2014, the Indigenous Course Requirement. That both these decisions were unanimously approved by Senate after intense campus-wide dialogue speaks to the evolution of the institution's understanding of what is possible in, and required of, a university committed from its inception to the twin goals of meaningful access and academic excellence. We hope that this volume will help to take the conversation back to the educational goals behind the building projects, as we reflect on our past efforts to become an inclusive institution that supports academic excellence in and through engagement with a socioeconomically and culturally diverse student population, and make decisions about how best to pursue that goal in future.

Note:

We have focused on a representative selection of community-engagement initiatives in this study, and there are a great many other important initiatives at the University of Winnipeg that have not been included here. A more comprehensive annotated listing of these programs can be found in the Appendix at the end of this volume.

References

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