Articles

Degree Completion for Aboriginal People in British Columbia: A Case Study

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Abstract

This article presents a case study of a First Nations educational initiative in British Columbia. Simon Fraser University's (SFU) Integrated Studies Program created two unique adult education programs in response to a request from the Aboriginal-operated Nicola Valley Institute of Technology (NVIT); this request involved the two institutions establishing a partnership and then collaboratively developing degree-completion programs for Interior Salish peoples living on their traditional lands, which surround NVIT's Merritt campus. The Aboriginal Community Economic Development (ACED) Program and the Aboriginal Community Economic Development and Business Studies (ACED-Bus. Studies) Program were successfully offered at NVIT over a four-year time frame. A student's completion of either program resulted in the conferring of a Bachelor of General Studies degree from SFU. The ACED program curriculum (2002–04) was designed to enhance Native student

Résumé

Cet article présente une étude de cas d'une initiative en éducation chez les Premières Nations en Colombie –Britanique. Le programme d'études intégrées de l'Université Simon Fraser (USF) a créé deux programmes d'éducation aux adultes uniques en réaction à une demande de l'institut de technologies Nicola Valley Institute of Technology (NVIT) gérée par les autochtones. La demande représentait l'établissement d'un partenariat entre les deux institutions, et ensuite une collaboration pour le développement de programmes d'obtention du diplôme pour les peoples Salish de l'intérieur qui habitent leurs terres traditionnelles entourant le campus Merritt du NVIT. Le programme de développement économique communautaire autochtone (*Aboriginal Community Economic Development*. ou ACED) et le programme de développement économique communautaire autochtone et d'enseignement commercial (*Aboriginal Community Economic Development and Business Studies* ou *ACED-Bus. Studies*) ont connu une

knowledge of Aboriginal community economic development, while that of the ACED-Business Studies program (2004–06) added business administration courses to the overall mix. Both programs were offered in a face-to-face format at the Merritt campus, and both were a collaborative effort. Implications for establishing and sustaining Aboriginal-focused post-secondary education are identified and discussed in this article, as are the barriers to post-secondary education faced by Aboriginal students and the authors' challenges as non-Aboriginal people engaged in programming across cultures. Additionally, reflections on these initiatives are offered and linkages to key literature on the issue of Aboriginal post-secondary education are identified.

réussite lorsqu'ils ont été offerts au NVIT sur une période de quatre ans. La réussite d'un programme ou de l'autre permettait l'obtention du Baccalauréat d'études générales de l'USF. Le programme ACED (2002–04) a été conçu pour améliorer les connaissances des étudiants autochtones au sujet du développement économique communautaire autochtone, tandis que le programme *ACED-Business Studies* (2004–06) ajoutait des cours de gestion d'entreprises au mélange général. Les programmes ont tous les deux été offerts en face-à-face au campus Merritt, et les deux furent le résultat d'un effort de collaboration. Les implications pour l'établissement et la viabilité d'une éducation postsecondaire ciblant les Autochtones sont identifiées et discutées dans cet article, tout comme les obstacles à l'éducation post-secondaire auxquels font face les étudiants autochtones et les défis des auteurs en tant que personnes d'origine non autochtone oeuvrant dans le domaine de la programmation interculturelle. De plus, les auteurs présentent des réflexions sur ces initiatives et des liens à de la littérature clé concernant les enjeux de l'éducation postsecondaire destinée aux Autochtones.

Introduction

> The role of Aboriginal post-secondary education has evolved from a tool of assimilation to an instrument of empowerment. There has been a succession of policy phases proceeding from assimilation and integration to the recognition of Aboriginal rights and the struggle for self-government. (Stonechild, 2006, p. 2)

This article presents a case study of a First Nations educational initiative, which involved a request from the Aboriginal-operated Nicola Valley Institute of Technology (NVIT), in Merritt, BC, to collaboratively develop degree-completion programs for Interior Salish peoples in partnership with Simon Fraser University's (SFU) Integrated Studies Program. The goal of this article is to illustrate how a partnership was formed when a willingness to collaborate on common programming objectives by two significantly different institutions occurred in the context of community need.[1] As the authors of this article and the SFU program administrators involved

in this initiative, our struggles as non-Aboriginal people led to the early realization that we had not given enough attention to cultural differences or to the historical dissimilarities between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, and we soon came to the further realization that we had many lessons to learn.

Through carefully targeted programs, a university can effectively link with a community to provide complementary educational services that each would find difficult to provide on its own. Since NVIT had a well-established relationship with the Aboriginal community in the Merritt area, it was important to base any outreach programming offered to that constituency in the Merritt area. It was also important to work closely with First Nations representatives in all facets of program development, given that Canadian history has been troubled by efforts to impose various forms of education on First Nations children and that First Nations peoples have faced—and continue to face—considerable barriers to accessing post-secondary education. This case study discusses how key barriers were addressed and presents a selective review of post-secondary initiatives for First Nations students in Canada, including the Canadian Council on Learning's (2009) recent assessment of Aboriginal learning in Canada.

Clarification of Terminology

The terms "Aboriginal," "Indigenous," "Native," and "First Nations" are used throughout this article. All of these terms refer to persons descended, at least in part, from the indigenous inhabitants of North America. According to one source, "Aboriginal" pertains to issues related to "First Nations (Indian), Inuit, and Métis peoples,"[2] whereas "Indigenous" is associated with "peoples who are original to a particular territory." The designation of "First Nations" is now commonly used in lieu of words such as "Indian" or especially "Band" (Government of Saskatchewan, n.d; see also, Stonechild, 2006, p. 6).

Aboriginal Post-Secondary Education in Canada

Control of and input into the development and delivery of education is a logical progression in Aboriginal peoples' desire to be self-defining. Stonechild (2006) has contended that many First Nations people are simply not concerned with access to post-secondary programs as they stand; rather, "Aboriginal-controlled higher education" is the aim of many First Nations (p. 6). Education is regarded by Aboriginals as a holistic, lifelong learning process—a process that not only increases respect for their ways of life but also teaches children their heritage and provides a means for Aboriginal people to participate more fully in society. A strong connection exists between learning and well-being for Aboriginal people (Canadian Council on Learning [CCL], 2009).

The mistreatment of Aboriginal peoples in Canada has been fraught with imposed policies, such as the adopting out of their children (sometimes called "the 60s scoop"), the relocation of many of their youth in residential schools, and broad efforts to abolish their languages and customs in order to assimilate them into the Canadian mainstream. Some have emphasized even more-sinister aspects of power relations between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals, pointing to the ways in which Aboriginal peoples have been (and continue to be) subjugated and their ancestral lands and resources have been exploited (Adams, 1999, p. 6).

Over 40 years ago, the Hawthorn Report chronicled how very few Aboriginal people completed high school, let alone entered post-secondary educational institutions (cited in Stonechild, 2006, p. 34). In 2005 in British Columbia, only 4 of 10 Aboriginal people completed a post-secondary credential, compared with 6 of 10 non-Aboriginals (BC Stats, 2005). Aboriginal people in Canada are particularly underrepresented in university-level programs. Although university-completion rates for Aboriginals increased from 6% to 8% between 2001 and 2006, this is significantly lower than the completion rate of 23% for non-Aboriginal people (CCL, 2009, p. 46).

Despite such persistent and substantial educational gaps between First Nations people and the Canadian population as a whole, there are some promising countertrends in Aboriginal people's access to higher education. The University of Manitoba's Aboriginal Focus Programs, for example, help Aboriginal students address systemic barriers, as well as the personal challenges of full-time post-secondary studies. Similar programs are offered at NorQuest College in Alberta and at the University of Saskatchewan. As well, Burtch (2005) observed that

> there has been a renaissance of educational initiatives within Aboriginal communities, oftentimes in partnership with non-Aboriginal stakeholders, … [and this may involve] bilateral negotiations between college administrators and First Nations representatives. In 2003 a multilateral signing between the Canadian federal government, the BC government, and the First Nations Steering Committee recognized the value of greater influence and control by the First Nations in school matters. (p. 58)

Barriers to Post-Secondary Education for Aboriginal People

Historical Barriers

Bitter memories of residential school experiences are a significant reason why so many Aboriginal communities distrust non-Aboriginal educational institutions. In 1891, the *Indian Act* was amended to make school attendance mandatory for every First Nations child between the ages of 7 and 15; by 1930, 80 residential schools, operated largely by churches in partnership with the federal government, had been established (Battiste & McLean, cited in CCL, 2009, p. 30). Until 1996, when the last residential school closed, this method of assimilationist discipline attempted to destroy Aboriginal languages, cultures, and ways of life by imposing a European system of values.[3] American residential schools followed suit, with the denigration of "Indianness," which, as Churchill (2004) bluntly commented, was a case of "… to be discernibly Indian was to be other than human; to be human, one could not be discernibly Indian" (p. 14). Indeed, many contemporary Aboriginal writers have identified the residential school system as the worst example of assimilationist government policies (Archibald, in Battiste & Barman, 1995; Graveline, 1998; Henderson, in Battiste & Barman, 1995).

When new values are forced upon a people, the invader's view is usually assumed to be "superior" to the "inferior" view of the invaded (Freire, 1993), and the Canadian example was no exception. Residential schools in Canada emphasized religious and vocational training—religious training because church authorities believed Aboriginals were in need of such training and vocational training because Aboriginals were generally believed to be capable of nothing better.

Physical, mental, and sexual abuse were common, and many of the current challenges faced by Aboriginal communities—violence, alcoholism, loss of pride, and threatened spirituality—can be traced to the trauma experienced in residential schools (Graveline, 1998; Harris, 2002). Some commentators have pointed to these sustained and broad efforts to destroy Indianness as a form of cultural genocide that was devised to undermine and eventually obliterate the very way of life of particular groups (see, e.g., Adams, 1999; Westra, 2008, p. 174).

Social and Cultural Barriers

Aboriginal cultural values and traditions have historically received little recognition at Canada's post-secondary institutions. The long-term impact of the residential school experience and other colonizing activities (such as relocation and loss of control) often leave First Nations communities drawing on their capacities to rebuild, and some communities are working with post-secondary partners to facilitate this process. Until this process is complete, Aboriginal students must continue to find ways to fit in, a difficult task given the alienation and exclusion of many Aboriginal learners in the Canadian post-secondary education system. Although the First Nations University of Canada, a dedicated university in Saskatchewan, offers programs in three locations and has a high concentration of Aboriginal faculty (First Nations University of Canada [FNUC], 2006), such initiatives are rare in Canada,[4] and most First Nations students do not have ready access to such institutions. When colleges and universities offer little in the way of an affirmation of Aboriginal identity, Aboriginal students tend to perceive themselves as solitary individuals and as outsiders (FNUC, 2006). However, as we have learned through our SFU programming experiences, when Aboriginal world views and community needs are integrated into programs, and when a First Nations Student Centre is established with appropriate staff and the employment of Elders, the likelihood of Aboriginal learners completing post-secondary education is significantly increased.

The relative absence of university-educated role models in the Aboriginal community also contributes to a general lack of interest from prospective students in attending university. The Aboriginal population at Simon Fraser University is currently estimated at only 2% of the student body, and although the university is working to increase that percentage, there has been only a slight increase over the past 10 years (SFU, 2007, pp. 8–9). The grim reality of heavily underrepresented Aboriginal faculty and staff at Canadian universities is also a serious shortfall. At SFU, an institution consisting of several hundred faculty members, there are currently fewer than 10 self-identified First Nations faculty members (SFU, 2007, pp. 8–9). The shortage of Aboriginal faculty can lead to the loss or subversion of identity, that is, the faculty position is given priority over one's identity as an Aboriginal; this may take the form of Aboriginal faculty feeling compromised by a reward structure that promotes individuality over collective efforts and Western forms of knowledge over Aboriginal teachings. Taiaiake Alfred has cautioned against ongoing pressures to assimilate and to become pacified, instead favouring ways in which universities and Indigenous peoples might work with "the creative tension" in relationships (Alfred, 2007).[5] Even so, Alfred has emphasized that universities are hardly a "safe ground" for those seeking to transform universities while remaining true to their Indigenous culture; for Alfred, this requires profound resistance to sites that draw a colonial legacy and promote "Western academic standards" (2004, p. 95).

Institutional Barriers

For First Nation students, access to post-secondary institutions in Canada continues to be a significant impediment, and completion rates for Aboriginal secondary-school students remain low. Factors such as racism, poverty, and a seemingly irrelevant curriculum have led to high drop-out rates among Aboriginal youth attending secondary school. The 2006 Canadian census reported that 40% of Aboriginals between the ages of 20 and 24 had not completed high school, compared to 13% of non-Aboriginal adults (cited in CCL, 2009, p. 39). Without high-school graduation or the required courses for university entrance, many Aboriginal young adults simply do not meet the formal admission requirements. For those who do gain entrance, the absence of preparatory skills can result in low grades and/or failure to complete university studies. Huffman (2008) documented financial and social barriers for Aboriginal students in American colleges and universities, using examples of estrangement, marginalization, and isolation to highlight impediments to degree completion; at the same time, however, Huffman explored strategies for preserving Indigenous culture while simultaneously working within "a college mainstream level" (Huffman 2008, p. 147).

Other factors are associated with low completion rates. Traditional Aboriginal educational practices can and often do differ significantly from non-Aboriginal practices. Aboriginal people generally prefer a holistic, results-oriented approach to education, whereby students become contributing members of society (DeLoria, 1999); in contrast, the education that students receive at mainstream post-secondary institutions is mainly designed to transmit an abstract body of knowledge and is largely the product of a Eurocentric heritage and Christian/European scientific encounters with the world (DeLoria, 1999). In her study of 27 female Aboriginal students attending social work schools in Ontario, Baskin (2008) reported that all 27 of them found that portrayals of Aboriginal "world views and history" in the classroom were invariably marginalized or incorrect (p. 29). Even programs specifically designated as Native Studies often experience difficulties retaining Aboriginal students and establishing "culturally relevant and practically oriented courses" (Stonechild, 2006, p. 68). In an effort to address this issue, Simon Fraser University acknowledged that culturally relevant programming across the university was problematic and subsequently implemented a coordinated university-wide strategy on First Nations (SFU, 2007, pp. 2–3). This strategy addresses "academic programming, community engagement, student support, and equally important, research for First Nations" (p. 2); another initiative is the creation of an Office for First Nations to take a leadership role in eight areas, including "international engagement," developing academic programs, and recruiting and retaining First Nations students (p. 3).

Nonetheless, although initiatives recognizing Aboriginal culture, tradition, and values are being developed, there is an unfortunate lack of Aboriginal involvement in post-secondary institutional planning and decision making. The dearth of Aboriginal faculty and staff compounds this difficulty. There are other issues, as well; for example, a director of the Indigenous Blacks and Mi'kmaq Initiative at Dalhousie University wrote at length about the race-based barriers she experienced in the academy (Doyle-Bedwell, 2008), while Stonechild (2006) contended that there is a lingering tendency to regard Aboriginal course offerings as "inferior" to Eurocentric programs and that many Native Studies initiatives have been troubled by relatively low rates of participation (p. 118).

Geographic Barriers

Because most Canadian colleges and universities are located in large urban areas, rural-based Aboriginal students who wish to have face-to-face classroom instruction must relocate. Moving from a rural setting, where family and community-support systems play a significant role, to a university student lifestyle can be immensely problematic, however. Dislocation often means isolation and, without family support, students can become easily discouraged and/or depressed, which predictably can lead them to withdraw from university.

Financial Barriers

Almost all government funding is distributed through First Nations local governments and their administrative organizations (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada [INAC], 2005). The Band funding distribution system, while theoretically an effective way to distribute financial support to students, has been fraught with problems. Competition, favouritism, and unfairness can play a significant role (Malatest & Associates, 2004) in delaying Band funding, leaving students to struggle with tuition and cost-of-living expenses they cannot afford. Some Bands require students to register for a certain number of class hours in order to be funded; others cannot guarantee funding throughout the life of a program. Such variations and uncertainties are (often formidable) barriers for many students. A study of students funded through the Post-Secondary Education Assistance Program (PSEAP) from 1975 to 1990 identified some positive accomplishments in terms of student job placement, but it also identified how difficult it was for some students to complete their course of study in a timely way. The study found that fewer than "15% of the students had completed their year's program" in an average year; parental and other family obligations, along with a lack of money, were cited as key factors in students having to leave their post-secondary studies (cited in Stonechild, 2006, p. 88).

This overview of First Nations and post-secondary education sets the context for a more detailed discussion of the initiative undertaken jointly by SFU and NVIT, which is provided in the following section.

Integrated Studies Programs at Simon Fraser University

University Goals for Aboriginal Education

Continuing Studies at Simon Fraser University (SFU) has worked to realize the university's vision of increasing access for Aboriginal learners. One of the main goals of the *Three Year (2004-2007) Academic Plan* of the University's Vice-President, Academic, was to expand participation of First Nations students through new program development and bridging opportunities (SFU, 2004, p. 14).

Integrated Studies Programs

When challenged to offer a program that would not only provide accessible degree completion but also address the historical, social/cultural, institutional, geographic, and financial barriers faced by Aboriginal peoples in the Merritt area of British Columbia, SFU saw a unique opportunity to offer a program in Integrated Studies.

Integrated Studies has been delivering accessible degree-completion programs to communities in the province since 1995. These programs, all of which encourage critical thinking and dialogue, have two main objectives: to integrate the fields of arts and social sciences with a field of practice and to integrate academic and workplace issues. They also allow adults to complete an undergraduate degree in three years of part-time study.

By taking a cohort-based approach, Integrated Studies has been able to offer the final two years of SFU's four-year Bachelor of General Studies degree to qualified individuals who have some post-secondary schooling, along with several years of workplace experience. Initially launched at SFU's Vancouver campus, Integrated Studies has expanded its programs regionally into the Vancouver suburbs, as well as into central and northern areas of the province.

An Integrated Studies cohort may have anywhere from 15 to 40 participants, and each cohort has a set curriculum of 18 courses, drawn primarily from the disciplines of liberal arts and business (Dunlop & Burtch, 2003). Questions of access remain for many communities located outside Greater Vancouver; accordingly, these programs have been offered in communities such as Kitimat and Castlegar, where there has been sufficient interest in supporting this type of degree-completion program. Students admitted to a particular cohort register in the same classes together and, upon completion of the program, graduate together. Most students complete the entire program and graduate with their peers. However, the completion rate for Aboriginal students, even in a cohort-based program offered in their community, has been lower than the rate for non-Aboriginals.

The SFU/NVIT Campuses

Established in 1965 in Burnaby, BC, SFU is a major Canadian university, with 3 urban campuses,[6] 6 faculties, 60 departments and schools, and a student enrolment of about 30,000. In addition to its urban campuses, SFU has one small rural campus located on land leased from the Kamloops Indian Band, approximately 330 kilometres northeast of the Burnaby campus, where many of SFU's Aboriginal students are registered.

The Nicola Valley Institute of Technology (NVIT), which was founded as a private institution in 1983 primarily to offer post-secondary education to Aboriginal learners, fosters Aboriginal traditional ways and student success. Blair Stonechild cites NVIT in his 2006 book, *The New Buffalo*, describing it as a smaller post-secondary institution linked closely with a tribal/ Band council and geared to "brokering programs" (p. 103). As well as offering programs that are both practical and relevant to the Aboriginal community, NVIT employs Aboriginal instructors, uses Elders extensively, encourages the use of local languages, and uses traditional teaching practices, such as talking circles (Nicola Valley Institute of Technology [NVIT], 2005). A second campus was added in the metropolitan Vancouver area in 2007 (www.nvit.ca/campuses.htm).

Program Development

Importance of Community Economic Development (CED) in Aboriginal Communities

Rapid growth in population, below-average health and education levels, susceptibility to incarceration (Cunneen, 2009), and declining economic health are critical issues currently faced by many Aboriginal communities in Canada and elsewhere. Gaining control over their land and its resources is critical to improving the socio-economic circumstances for Aboriginals, as well as for encouraging business development. A sustainable economy is considered essential to self-determination and to a more equitable relationship between Aboriginal people and governments. With these issues in mind, community economic development (CED) was chosen as the focus for the program to be developed at NVIT; CED is an important strategy for change and a key component in the struggle by Aboriginal peoples for their rights.

Design Considerations

SFU responded in a positive and creative fashion to the decision to concentrate on CED. The new program, which was called the Aboriginal Community Economic Development (ACED) Program, would be offered in a familiar community-based institution, one that provided cultural support services to its students. Representatives from the two institutions set about designing a curriculum that would be both theoretical and practical. For example, the program's "Applied Social Research" course was placed in the curriculum not only for its practicality but also to allow students to advance their social-research skills without being limited to a specific topic. There has been long-standing criticism of non-Aboriginals researching indigenous populations, a critique that has been combined with efforts to foster research by Indigenous researchers.[7] In her 2002 book *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith argued that both amateur "travellers" and established scientists contributed to the distortion of Indigenous people's lives; thus, research was "not an innocent or distant academic exercise" but rather implicated in legitimizing the oppression of these much-studied human populations (p. 5).

The original curriculum for the ACED program was then revised and expanded into a second program: the Aboriginal Community Economic Development and Business Studies (ACED-Bus. Studies) Program. With the addition of several business courses, ACED-Bus. Studies provided a cohort program with more breadth; at least two of the courses (Aboriginal Public Finance and Aboriginal Governance and Community Development) were designed specifically for this program. After discussions between NVIT and SFU program administrators established that the content of these courses was of particular importance to contemporary Aboriginal communities, SFU course designers had to confront the difficult task of attempting to reflect Aboriginal perspectives and values while retaining the core content of SFU's conventionally offered courses. As with many courses delivered primarily to adults, the majority of the program's assignments were deliberately planned so that students could use either their workplaces or their communities as a basis for their research; encouraged by the students' interest, communities and workplaces effectively became incubators for new ideas. Field studies like these also provided some much-needed and significant positive, inclusive outreach to the community's Aboriginal youth, who previously had little or no experience with such role modeling.

Program Implementation

The partnership between NVIT and SFU was designed to encourage and enhance Aboriginal student success, but the program's concept of the adult student as a full partner in the Integrated Studies community of learning was equally important. The cohort experience offered students a strong and supportive academic environment; although individual assignments were the mainstay of many courses, participants were also encouraged to work in teams as much as possible. Thus, students who were relative strangers at the beginning of the program became friends, and those friendships continued long after the program's completion.

For the students, being offered a relevant and meaningful degree-completion program in their own community meant they could continue working and attend a university program without leaving home. For SFU, the partnership presented the unusual opportunity to work closely with an Aboriginal institution and to learn first-hand the challenges faced by such institutions, at both a financial and an academic level. For NVIT, the partnership was an opportunity to associate with a top-ranked Canadian university and for its faculty to engage with adults in a degree-completion program.

Overall, the initiative was a legitimate response to emerging trends in Aboriginal education. By consistently encouraging instructor evaluations, as well as written and verbal evaluative feedback from the students, and by engaging in ongoing consultations with NVIT's Aboriginal administrators, the SFU program administrators were able to keep the course content relevant. The result was a high-quality and academically sound program, supported by a robust database that was a compliment to both institutions.

Of the 15 students who formed the first cohort, 12 graduated in June 2004. One student went on to graduate studies, while many others returned to their communities as economic development officers (EDOs). At the program's completion, the students were asked to express their feelings about the program in a few words. Their comments included the following:

- Theory and practical experience = aboriginal community economic development. I feel empowered and ready to go out and create ripples to work towards a better life for all in [our] communities.
- I enjoyed it! I learned more about how to work with others.
- The program has impacted my life in a very positive manner and in ways I'm not even aware of yet.
- Inspired, knowledgeable, future goal-oriented.
- Gratified, confident. I am anxious to put this new information to work. I feel confident enough to continue [my] education for a Business Degree. (SFU, 2004)

A second cohort of 16 students began their studies in September 2004; 9 of them graduated in June 2006 and 2 of these students were later accepted into graduate studies. The addition of a series of business administration courses to the curriculum generated positive results: 7 of the graduates now hold a variety of appointments, including EDO positions, either with their respective Band offices or Aboriginal governance organizations. Moreover, following graduation, one EDO developed a community profile that included a summer training program for young Aboriginal students; another graduate works with the Aboriginal Peoples Family Accord; another is the EDO for her local tribal Council; and still another works with Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC). The program graduate who now works with INAC was asked to provide a comment on the program for this article. He said he had worked in the fishing industry his entire life, but when he was in his early 40s,

the commercial fishing industry collapsed and I suffered
a career-ending injury. I felt I had to set an example that if you put
your mind to something it can be achieved. CBC radio[8] has
interviewed me because of my age and past as a band councillor
and fisherman-turned-SFU-grad. This is quite an accomplishment.
People all over B.C. have heard the interview. My nephews, nieces,
children, family, and friends, especially the doubters, are now believers.

Concluding Remarks and Future Research

Post-secondary education for Aboriginal peoples in Canada has improved significantly over the last 20 years. The assimilationist policies of the residential schools have given way to institutes such as NVIT that are mainly controlled by Aboriginals. Partnerships such as the NVIT-SFU partnership can empower Aboriginal communities to work with established accredited institutions to deliver relevant and meaningful programming. By encouraging Aboriginal input into the curriculum, by offering the program at an Aboriginal-operated institution, and by providing support through the presence of Elders-In-Residence and access to personal and/or career counselling, many of the key needs of the community may be met. The program graduates, acting as role models, assume leadership positions in their communities and continue the work toward a better life for future generations.

Speaking broadly, Hendrix (2008) noted that Indigenous cultures are different from Western cultures in three substantial ways: (1) they are averse to coercion in "political life"; (2) they prize community life and "the importance of relationships rather than rights"; and (3) they have a more expansive view of humans in the context of the larger world (p. 175). These differences are not absolute, however. With a considerable investment of time and sensitivity, contemporary university programming can take the form of partnerships, some of them long-standing, others, more short-lived, but all of them useful in their own right.

SFU's joint programming initiatives with NVIT have now concluded; representatives of both institutions decided not to renew the partnership upon completion of the ACED-Bus. Studies cohort. A critical analysis of the initiatives led to the conclusion that funding issues, along with political differences, had become too pervasive and that a continuation of the formal relationship would be extremely difficult.

Rather than viewing the end of the NVIT program as simply the failure of a risky but innovative post-secondary experiment, we, as the SFU program administrators involved, prefer to think of it as a rare learning opportunity whereby other stakeholders may, through our experiences, be better able to meet the needs of First Nations communities. For example, the University of Northern British Columbia subsequently established credit-transfer arrangements with NVIT, as well as a robust set of First Nations programs (University of Northern British Columbia, 2006); thus, with the end of the SFU-NVIT partnership came the beginning of a new programming effort. And, in May 2006, SFU's Integrated Studies unit began delivering another innovative degree-completion program—Aboriginal Leadership and Administration—at its Kamloops campus. Motivated by the feedback and the learning experiences gained through the SFU-NVIT partnership, the Aboriginal Leadership and Administration Program has now successfully concluded with nine Aboriginal students receiving their Bachelor of General Studies degree.

Beyond offering a formal program, institutions considering establishing Aboriginal-focused courses of study would do well to purposefully reflect on how cultural differences might be accommodated. For example, characters known as "tricksters" are often used in indigenous cultures and world views to tell stories that usually concern the need to reflect on how cultural context can affect practices; listeners are taught to be aware of their own assumptions, as well as the importance of being open to dialogue. Tricksters deliberately exclude certain key pieces of information, because the underlying intention is for listeners to complete the story and thus gain a better understanding of culturally appropriate attitudes and behaviours. A person can save face by listening to the story and learning a lesson, without being singled out for wrongdoing (Campbell, Menzies, & Peacock, 2003).

For us, as SFU program administrators, the image of the trickster played out on several levels in the NVIT programming initiative. As we confronted our own shortfalls, we began to draw parallels between a trickster's incomplete stories and our own incomplete understanding (as non-Aboriginals) of what must occur to make education more meaningful to Aboriginal peoples. We had to accept that our ideas about Aboriginal peoples—and Aboriginal education—were often incomplete. Reflecting on the stories of a trickster's struggles to secure fire, flint, tobacco, food, and the like (see, e.g., McNeil, n.d.) yielded parallels to our attempts to work with Aboriginal peoples from within a large university setting. In light of our reflections, we paused to ask ourselves two important questions that we would rarely ask in such depth inside our own culture: Who are we? and Why are we doing this?

Although at times we were discouraged and even doubtful that we could gain a full understanding of the realm of differences that existed between our two cultures, we continued in the certainty that our program would serve Aboriginal learners well. In striving to appreciate the differences—and similarities—between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students and their learning styles, we grew to value our students as representatives of many great nations. Gradually, the cultural differences became significantly less of an issue and more of an opportunity for us to appreciate the challenges facing First Nations peoples.

Divisions and misunderstandings can often be bridged, but not without humility, humour, and goodwill. An example illustrates our limited capacity as non-Aboriginals to understand and communicate with Aboriginal peoples and their culture. The program director (RP) had several opportunities to engage in fieldwork, and the following exchange with a student (YB) highlights some of the difficulties experienced in comprehending cultural differences.

RP: You've had your hair cut recently.
YB: Yes.
RP: It looks very nice.
YB: I haven't been feeling well lately and my daughter suggested it was because I hadn't yet taken the time to grieve for a relative who passed away a few months ago. After cutting my hair, I feel better.

Here, a bit of what non-Aboriginals might see as "small talk," a simple compliment, turns into what became an embarrassing but also enlightening lesson in cultural awareness. At the time, the program director was unaware of the traditional and symbolic ritual of cutting hair as part of the grieving process in the Aboriginal community. Clearly, we risk ridicule when we open up a dialogue with people of differing traditions; however, an unassuming nature, along with the ability to laugh at oneself (as a trickster might), taught a valuable lesson about our diverse identities and the qualities of care, concern, and understanding that we seek.

We believe great opportunities exist for fostering First Nations access to post-secondary studies (including for adult students), for introducing culturally relevant courses and programs that reflect Aboriginal teachings and practices, and for working in tandem with other post-secondary institutions to overcome long-established barriers for First Nations people. Managing a collaborative partnership, however, can be a complex and challenging proposition (Spink & Merrill-Sands, 1999). Clearly, differences in goals, organizational language, cultures, and expectations around accountability can result in many misunderstandings, but by displaying a willingness to develop a collaborative relationship, institutions can build a shared ownership that recognizes, understands, and places value on diversity.

Finally, although the majority of this article focuses specifically on the SFU-NVIT partnership, the ongoing partnership that all Integrated Studies Programs enter into with adult students must also be mentioned. Integrated Studies fosters a community of learning that is largely the result of the cohort model. Indeed, the cohort experience is the most comprehensive aspect of the program, offering strong emotional and scholastic support to a community of learners by engendering good support systems for admission and continuance, innovative delivery systems, and instructional environments that reflect the needs of adult learners. Thus, although both SFU and NVIT gained from the collaboration, it was the learners in the program that were the greatest beneficiaries. They were equipped with the skills and knowledge they require to confront and critically assess the important issues they face in moving toward self-determination. There is no doubt that access to post-secondary education for adult Aboriginal learners is an area for both further exploration and innovation.

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Acknowledgement

Endnotes

1. SFU has its own tradition of radicalism and innovation. Its main campus was founded in 1965 and was quickly surrounded by controversy through a number of protests (see Johnson, 2005).

2. The Métis are people whose ancestry includes a mixture of Aboriginal peoples and people of European descent. Largely based in western Canada, what is sometimes referred to as the Métis Nation comprises upward of 350,000 people (Métis National Council, 2009).

3. For a detailed account of assimilationist school policies in the United States, see Fear-Segal (2007).

4. At the time of writing, FNUC was under censure from the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT). In a unanimous vote, CAUT delegates imposed censure, citing concerns over the governance of the institution, including issues of academic freedom (CAUT, 2009). Dr. Blair Stonechild, a professor at FNUC and a member of the Muscowpetung First Nation in Saskatchewan, was among the faculty who claimed that their academic freedom had been breached, a claim upheld by an arbitration panel and a judicial review ("Judge upholds ruling," 2007). Significantly, Stonechild (2006) argued that FNUC lacked the necessary funding from the federal government and the Province of Saskatchewan and that there were difficulties in establishing Aboriginal education programs in "a colonialist environment that produces more failures than successes…" (pp. 134–135).

5. Howard Adams, in his 1999 book *Tortured People*, puts it bluntly: "Western European culture has a predatory thrust combined with an attitude of superiority" (p. 6).

6. The three campuses are SFU Burnaby, SFU Vancouver, and SFU Surrey.

7. Emerance Baker (2008) captures the frustration of Aboriginal people who are treated as research subjects: "The workshop was not off to a promising start….until an Elder who had opened the meeting spoke quietly from a corner of the room. 'If we have been researched to death,' he said, 'maybe it's time we started researching ourselves back to life'" (p. 17).

8. CBC Radio refers to radio services provided by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, established in 1936. CBC broadcasts in Canada's two official languages (English and French) and in eight Aboriginal languages (http://www.cbc.radio-canada.ca/about/index.shtml).

Biographies

Ruth Price is the program director for the Integrated Studies Program at Simon Fraser University. Ruth was part of the team that established the program and has served as its director for the past nine years. She holds a Bachelors and master's degrees from SFU, as well as certificates in management, peer counselling, and teacher education.

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