SUPPORTING INDIGENOUS POST-SECONDARY STUDENTS DURING COVID-19

The issue:

Social distancing protocols have greatly impacted how staff and faculty of post-secondary institutions can meaningfully support Indigenous students. As many colleges and universities closed their doors in response to COVID-19, supporting Indigenous students has been a challenge for many of those who play a vital role in fostering their well-being and success.
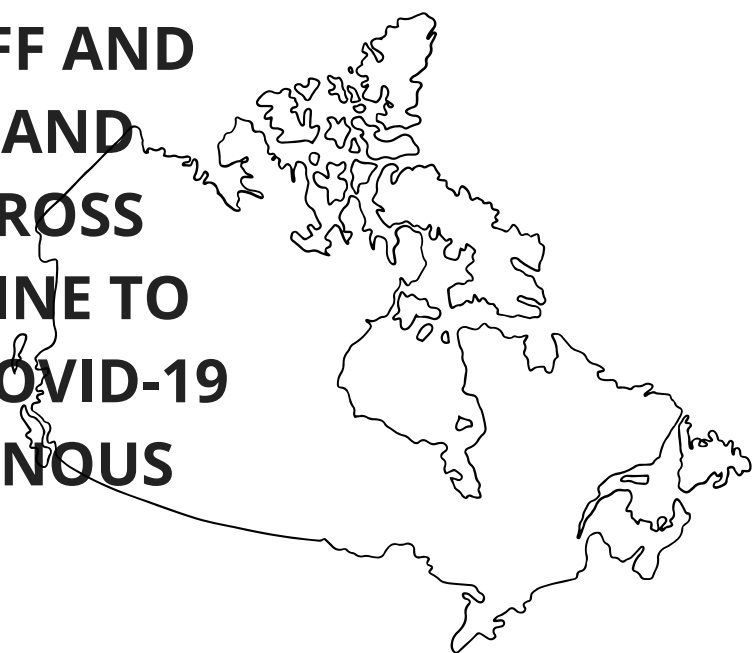
Despite the many challenges emerging from this unprecedented time, staff and faculty continue to creatively support Indigenous students in meaningful ways. Hopeful practices have emerged from the ability to adapt to meet the new demands of a more virtual world.

The changes in program delivery coupled with social distancing measures requires staff and faculty to rethink how Indigenous students will be supported in the future. It is important that universities and colleges across Canada understand how COVID-19 has impacted Indigenous students from application process to graduation.
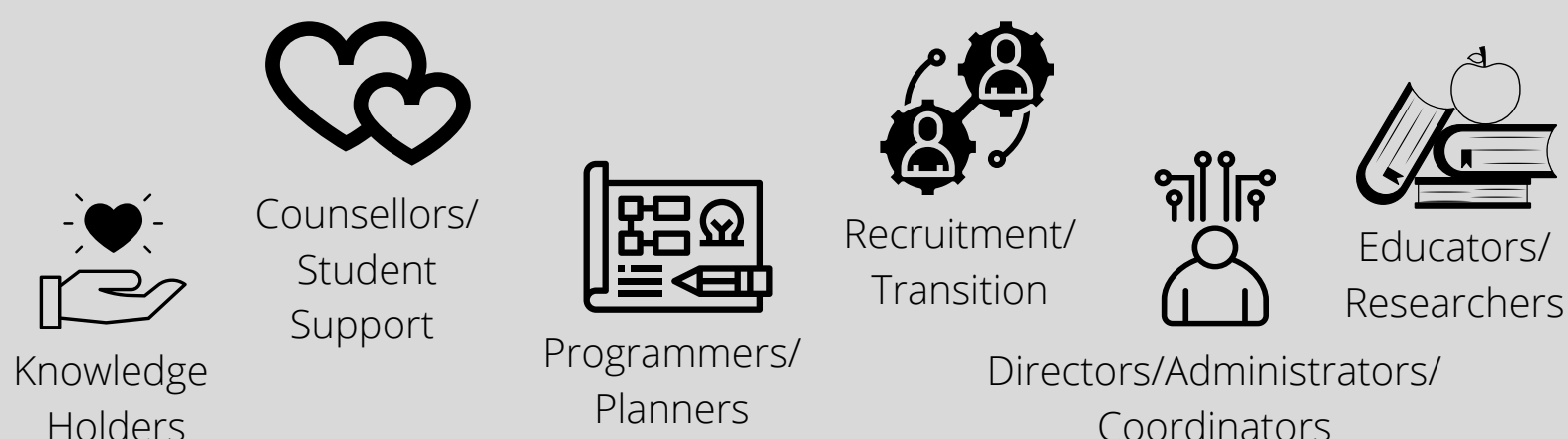
In order to identify common challenges and find ways to overcome them, staff and faculty from across the country participated in a virtual knowledge sharing event. From this event emerged recommendations for how colleges and universities can support First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students during COVID-19 and beyond.

THE VIRTUAL KNOWLEDGE SHARING EVENT AND FINDINGS

ON JULY 28, 2020, 46 STAFF AND FACULTY OF COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES FROM ACROSS CANADA GATHERED ONLINE TO DISCUSS THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON SUPPORTING INDIGENOUS STUDENTS
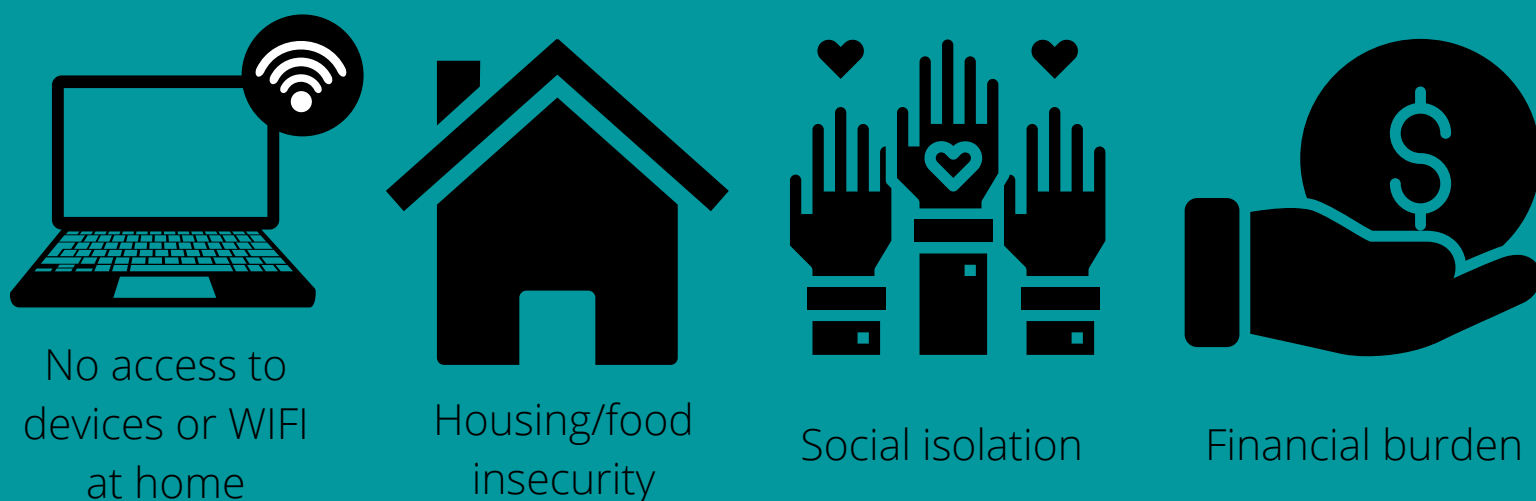
ROLES OF PARTICIPANTS INCLUDED:

Knowledge Holders

Counsellors/ Student Support

Programmers/ Planners

Recruitment/ Transition

Directors/Administrators/ Coordinators

Educators/ Researchers

THE FINDINGS:

MAJOR CHALLENGES INDIGENOUS STUDENTS FACE

No access to devices or WIFI at home

Housing/food insecurity

Social isolation

Financial burden

MAJOR CHALLENGES STAFF AND FACULTY FACE

Little to no flexibility in policy

Unable to support the unique and personal needs of each student at a distance

Financial restrictions

Difficulties with student engagement

OTHER CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED

Inability to collaborate with other departments

Travel restrictions

No face-to-face interaction

Restrictions for cultural programming

"Zoom fatigue"/ resistance to video calling

Virtual teachings
(on Zoom,
YouTube, etc.)

Reaching out to
students via
phone/video calls

Mailing
beading/craft kits
to students for
online workshops

Connecting
students with
mentors online

**HOPEFUL PRACTICES
STAFF AND FACULTY
ARE ENGAGING IN
NOW**

Hosting
Webinars open
to the public

Laptop/wireless
hotspots for rental
to students in
need

Collaboration with
on- and off-campus
partnerships

Enhanced online
presence and regular
use of social media

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR UNIVERSITIES AND COLLEGES

1. Ensure **every** Indigenous student has access to technology and WIFI capabilities to participate in online learning.

2. Help alleviate the heightened financial burden Indigenous students are facing at this time.

3. Be flexible with policies to ensure Indigenous students are being wholistically supported.

4. Continue to build stronger relationships with local Indigenous communities.

5. Continue to make Indigenization a priority.

6. Be creative in fostering collaboration and community with on-campus and off-campus partnerships.

7. Listen to Indigenous students and ensure their voices are centred in decision-making

| RECOMMENDATION	EXAMPLES OF RESPONSES TO RECOMMENDATIONS
1. Ensure **every** Indigenous student has access to technology and WIFI capabilities to participate in online learning.	- offer device rental services - provide financial assistance - support staff and faculty who work with Indigenous students to find immediate technological solutions (this includes: laptops, wireless hotspots, and headphones w/ microphone) - provide digital literacy opportunities to students
2. Help alleviate the heightened financial burden Indigenous students are facing at this time.	- provide additional bursaries and funding opportunities specifically for Indigenous students - waive initial fees and deposits - provide Indigenous students with grocery cards/UberEats gift cards - pay Indigenous students to be virtual mentors/tutors - provide additional funding necessary for cultural supports to continue (e.g. to mail out materials for virtual workshop or ensure students have sacred medicines at home)
3. Be flexible with policies to ensure Indigenous students are being wholistically supported.	- ensure policies are flexible in areas beyond academic and financial support to meet the needs of the individual mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually - ensure policies are culturally responsive - centre the voices of Indigenous student and staff/faculty in policy-making

RECOMMENDATION	EXAMPLES OF RESPONSES TO RECOMMENDATIONS
4. Continue to build stronger relationships with local Indigenous communities.	• be creative in recruitment strategies in Indigenous communities for the next cycle of students • continue to create and support initiatives that foster collaboration with local Indigenous communities
5. Continue to make Indigenization a priority.	• create, fund, and promote online opportunities for students, staff, faculty, and community members to engage in a wide range of Indigenous knowledges (through Webinars, Zoom meetings, online resources, etc.) • hire more Indigenous staff and faculty to support Indigenization initiatives
6. Be creative in fostering collaboration and community with on-campus and off-campus partnerships.	• strengthen partnership with off-campus community organizations and agencies • provide opportunities to support the relationships between colleagues and different on-campus departments
7. Listen to Indigenous students and ensure their voices are centred in decision-making	• Indigenous students know what they need to be supported along their journey from application to graduation…listen to what they say • ensure Indigenous students are always compensated for their involvement in any policy- or decision-making process

Final reflection:

It is very important that staff and faculty who work with Indigenous students are also offered supports at this time. They are the very foundation of Indigenous student success and wellbeing at every college and university. Listen for their suggestions and, most importantly, follow their recommendations.

Thank you to all those who participated.
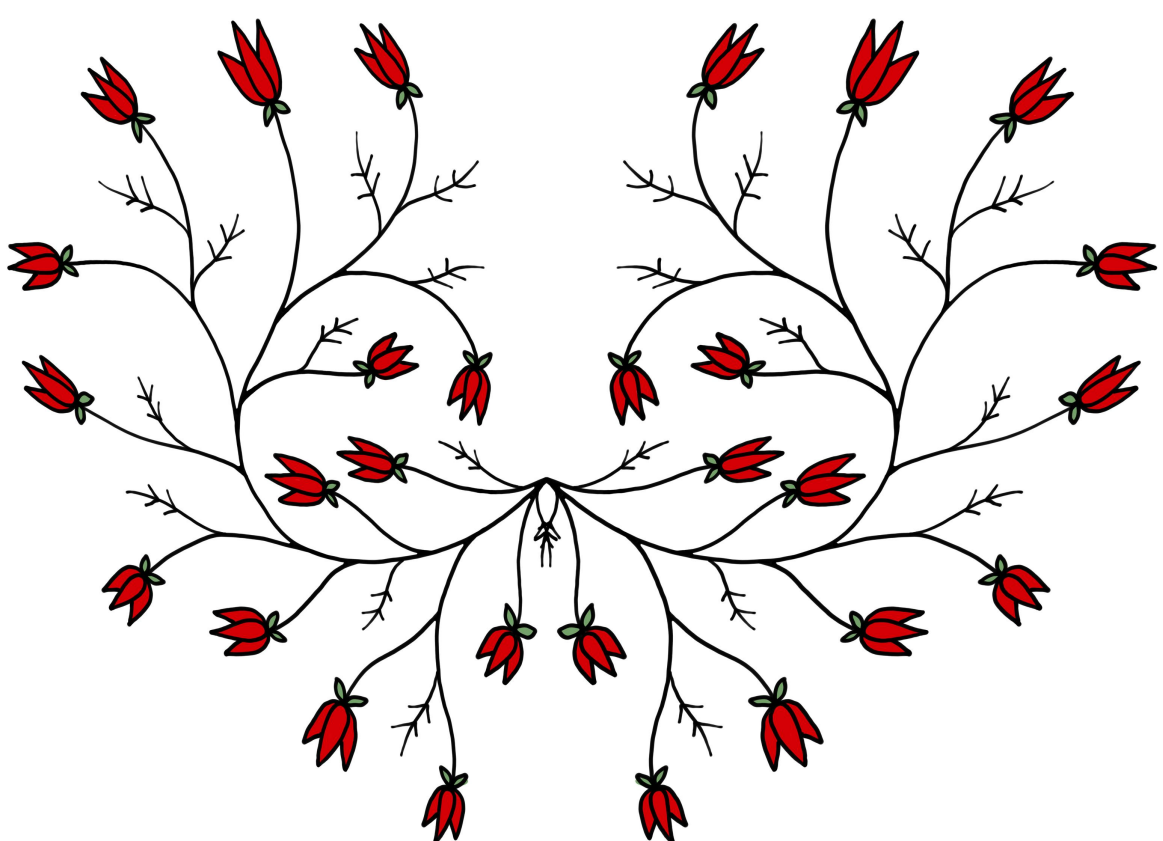
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