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Supporting Indigenous Student Success in Post-Secondary Education

Thriving from Application to Graduation

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In Partnership with TakingITGlobal and the Connected North
Program
August 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As more Indigenous students across Canada enter post-secondary education, colleges and universities are making institutional commitments to support these students. However, First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and Afro-Indigenous students are still confronted with many barriers along their educational journey. What are the barriers that Indigenous students face in post-secondary education? What are the hopeful practices that successfully support Indigenous students to thrive at every phase of their journey from application to graduation?

Goal

The purpose of this research is to identify the barriers that First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and Afro-Indigenous students face in post-secondary institutions by analyzing the policies, practices, and resources of post-secondary institutions across Canada. It also explores the already existing supports that allow Indigenous students to thrive in college and university. Recommendations for post-secondary institutions are based on the findings.

Methodology

This research project involves both qualitative and quantitative data. Online surveys were completed by 24 staff and faculty that work with Indigenous post-secondary students in different capacities. Follow-up interviews were conducted with 11 of the participants who completed the survey. Additionally, an online community engagement of 46 staff and faculty from across Canada provided information about barriers specific to COVID-19.

Key Findings

The survey and interviews with staff and faculty illuminate two factors: what colleges and universities are currently doing to support Indigenous post-secondary students, and barriers that continue to impact Indigenous students despite these supports in place. Barriers specific to COVID-19 are also addressed. Most frequently mentioned in both the survey and interviews are challenges with inadequate funding towards Indigenous student services and the lack of Indigenous staff and faculty in full-time positions throughout the campus. Other key challenges are explored.

Recommendations

The recommendations based on the findings are organized into the following categories: Recruiting, Applying, Transitioning, Studying, Graduating, and Recommendations Specific to COVID-19.

INTRODUCTION

Each year, more and more First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and Afro-Indigenous students are entering through the doors of the many colleges and universities across Canada. They are there to obtain diplomas, degrees, and certifications in hundreds of diverse credential programs offered to them. Post-secondary education is one path individuals may choose to develop life skills and expertise in preparation for the workforce. For Indigenous students who have travelled from their home communities in hopes to obtain a higher education, Indigenous services, staff, and spaces often provide a sense of belonging; a home away from home.

Since the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Calls to Action,¹ post-secondary institutions have increasingly embraced culturally responsive policies and practices that support Indigenous students' sense of belonging. The growing number of Indigenous students enrolled,² coupled with a growing interest to advance reconciliation means that Indigenous education has become a priority at many colleges and universities. However, Indigenous students still experience challenges that impact different stages of their journey from application to graduation.

The driving force at the core of this research is to explore the current policies and practices that support Indigenous students before, during, and after their educational journey. In order to identify these factors, a survey was sent to staff and faculty who work with Indigenous students in colleges and universities across Canada. An optional

¹ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Volume One: Summary* (Toronto: Lorimer, 2015).

² "First Nations People, Métis and Inuit in Canada: Diverse and Growing Populations", Statistics Canada, last modified March 26, 2018, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-659-x/89-659-x2018001-eng.htm>.

follow-up interview with those that completed the survey provided additional meaningful insights into the challenges Indigenous students face as well as the supportive measurements currently in place. Recommendations for colleges and universities emerging from the research draw from the findings of the survey and interviews.

UNDERSTANDING THE ISSUE

The challenges that First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and Afro-Indigenous students face in obtaining post-secondary education are a culmination of both historical and contemporary factors. Prior to the establishment of the westernized educational system prevalent across Canada, Indigenous people engaged in land-based and experiential education that has existed for thousands of years. Assimilative policies, like the Indian Act, greatly impacted traditional forms of education as government-funded Indian Residential Schools removed generations of Indigenous children from their families and communities, and, therefore, from their culture, language, and ancestral knowledge.³

In response to the recommendations outlined by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada,⁴ many contemporary schools have progressed the agenda of reconciliation that supports Indigenous student success. Although the federal government is responsible for policies that pertain to Indigenous people, higher education falls under the jurisdiction of Canada's provinces and territories. Colleges and universities are fairly autonomous in how they engage in academic matters and each

³ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. "Final Report."

⁴ Ibid.

educational institution across the country varies greatly on their responsiveness to reconciliation.⁵

Education for Indigenous people is considered a treaty right.⁶ Imperative to this right is the obligation of the Canadian government to provide adequate funding. As it stands today, the treaty right to education is not always upheld. This is evidenced by the insufficient and capped funding levels that contribute to the backlog of Indigenous students awaiting post-secondary education.⁷

Once enrolled, Indigenous students face a variety of barriers presented in the early stages of their journey that can have long-term consequences to their future learning and completion rates.⁸ The barriers include inadequate financial assistance, inequitable academic preparation, and policies and practices on campus that are not reflective of their diverse cultures and contexts.⁹ Experiences of racism, social isolation, and marginalization on campus are also experienced by many Indigenous students.¹⁰ For some students, obtaining education means having to travel from geographically distant or fly-in communities, which poses its own challenges.

For Afro-Indigenous students, challenges specific to their unique experiences as being both Black and Indigenous may also arise in post-secondary spaces. Generally,

⁵ Sarah Trevelevan, "How Canadian Universities are Responding to the TRC's Calls to Action," *Macleans*, December 7, 2018, <https://www.macleans.ca/education/how-canadian-universities-are-responding-to-the-trcs-calls-to-action/>.

⁶ Sheila Carr-Stewart. "A Treaty Right to Education," *Canadian Journal of Education* 26, no. 2 (2001): 125-143.

⁷ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. "Final Report."

⁸ Jacqueline Ottman, "Canada's Indigenous Peoples' Access to Post-secondary Education: The Spirit of the 'New Buffalo'," in *Indigenous Pathways, Transitions, and Participation in Higher Education*, eds. Jack Frawley, Steve Larkin and James A. Smith (New York: Springer Nature, 2017), 95-117.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ "Post-secondary Experience of Indigenous Students Following the Truth and Reconciliation Commission", Indspire, September, 2018, <https://indspire.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/PSE-Experience-Indigenous-Students-Survey-Summary-Sept2018.pdf>.

Black students confront many forms of anti-Black racism on campuses across the country.¹¹ Despite intersectional histories, anti-Black racism due to settler colonialism can also be experienced within Indigenous communities. This can happen when Indigenous community members question the Indigenous ancestry of a mixed-race person or does not validate both their identities simultaneously.¹²

Colleges and universities have made institutional commitments towards Indigenous education, including infusing Indigenous content, establishing Indigenous-specific services and spaces, seeking partnerships with Indigenous communities, and fostering an inclusive and respectful environment where First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and Afro-Indigenous students can thrive.¹³

Thus, the driving force behind this current research emerges: How *are* colleges and universities doing in supporting Indigenous students? What supports are in place for each phase of the students' journey? What could colleges and universities do to remove the barriers imposed on Indigenous students? In order to further explore these questions, it becomes necessary to seek the perspectives of staff and faculty from across Canada who work with Indigenous students.

¹¹ Kristin Moriah, "How Anti-Black Racism on Canadian University Campuses Robs Us All," *The Conversation*, July 2, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/how-anti-black-racism-on-canadian-university-campuses-robs-us-all-140927>.

¹² Shelby Lisk, "Rallying Against Racism: How Black and Indigenous Communities can Come Together," *TVO*, June 12, 2020, <https://www.tv0.org/article/rallying-against-racism-how-black-and-indigenous-communities-can-come-together>.

¹³ "Indigenous Education", Colleges and Institutes Canada, accessed August 1, 2020, <https://www.collegesinstitutes.ca/policyfocus/indigenous-learners/>; "Universities Canada Principles on Indigenous Education", Universities Canada, June 29, 2015, <https://www.univcan.ca/media-room/media-releases/universities-canada-principles-on-indigenous-education/>.

KEY FINDINGS

Twenty-four staff and faculty from 20 post-secondary institutions completed the survey. Of those 20 post-secondary institutions, 9 are in Ontario, 3 in Nova Scotia, 2 in British Columbia, 2 in Saskatchewan, and 1 is in each of the following: Quebec, Manitoba, Alberta, and Newfoundland. Eleven follow-up interviews were also conducted. The roles of the participants included: administrators, directors, and coordinators; counselling and student support; recruitment and transition; educators and curriculum specialists; and programmers and planners. Outreach was conducted using pre-existing relationships TakingITGlobal has developed in recent years as well as additional outreach to new contacts.

The survey and interviews with staff and faculty focussed on two factors: what colleges and universities are currently doing to support Indigenous post-secondary students, and the barriers that continue to impact Indigenous students despite these supports in place. The following is a synthesis of the information they provided.

What Post-Secondary Institutions are Doing to Support Indigenous Students

Most participants could identify strategies at their college or university that support Indigenous students in the following areas: recruitment, applying, transitioning, and accessing housing. Many of these strategies are carried out by staff and/or faculty that have positions dedicated to supporting Indigenous students specifically. Many participants also identified cultural, mental, emotional, financial, and academic supports available to Indigenous students once enrolled. Again, these supports are mostly implemented by those with positions dedicated to Indigenous students.

All participants identified an Indigenous student centre at the college or university, although not every campus may have one. These spaces are crucial in carrying out a variety of cultural events and activities that take place such as feasts, ceremonies, traditional teachings, craft workshops, and hosting Indigenous guest speakers.

Creating specific roles that support Indigenous students through the various stages of their educational journey is something many colleges and universities within this research seem to be doing. Indigenous-specific supports, spaces, and resources seem to be present at most of these colleges and universities.

Barriers that Continue to Impact Indigenous Students

Some participants noted that their institutions have declared Indigenous education and reconciliation a priority without adequate action to support these aspirations. Not all participants were able to rate their colleges and universities favourably in the following areas: making Indigenous learning a priority; representing Indigenous perspectives, knowledges, and worldviews throughout the campus; and supporting a sense of belonging between Indigenous students and the college/university. Although there is evidence of this at some colleges and universities, these are all areas that could be improved on.

Participants identified challenges that continue to impact Indigenous students. Most frequently mentioned in both the survey and interviews are challenges with inadequate funding towards Indigenous student services and the lack of Indigenous staff and faculty in full-time positions throughout the campus. Additionally, other challenges include lack of resources to support students with housing and childcare and

an absence in Indigenous representation throughout the campus in course content, programs, art, languages, placenames, and spaces. Another area that could impact Indigenous students is the lack of opportunities for non-Indigenous staff and faculty to learn about Indigenous history and contemporary circumstances.

COVID-19 Specific Challenges

COVID-19 challenges emerged from an online community engagement that involved 46 staff and faculty who work with Indigenous students across Canada. This engagement identified the major challenges Indigenous students face including social isolation, no access to devices or WIFI capabilities at home, housing and food insecurity, and an increased financial burden.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

The recommendations that emerged from this research are organized into the different phases of Indigenous students' educational journey.

Recruiting

Some participants noted positions at their institution that focus specifically on Indigenous recruitment. Post-secondary institutions who do not have an existing Indigenous recruitment plan should create thoughtful and extensive strategies for recruitment that specifically focus on Indigenous communities. This can be done by creating an Indigenous recruitment team that can plan and implement strategies while also liaising and collaborating with Indigenous communities. Funding for materials, travel, and attending events would be needed for staff and faculty. Creating and maintaining reciprocal partnerships with local, remote, and urban Indigenous communities would be a necessary function of the recruitment team.

Applying

The complex application phase can be confusing for any student. The recruitment team (as previously suggested above) could provide the first point of contact for Indigenous students who need extra support during this process. Additionally, tutorials, workshops and/or resources should be created that walk Indigenous students through the process. Indigenous students in at least their second year as well as Indigenous alumni can be hired on short-term contracts to support new students through this process. This work should always be compensated.

Transitioning

Although there might be some strategies in place for transitioning mainstream students (such as orientation, student handbooks, etc.), the unique circumstances of Indigenous students mean transition tools and strategies should be culturally and contextually relevant. Creating a student handbook or online resources (i.e. welcome videos from the Indigenous community on campus) could make them feel more at home. The institutions should also fund a welcome feast and cultural events specifically for Indigenous students each term.

Financial assistance should also be provided to support students with travel expenses and initial costs required to get situated (school supplies, first-and-last month's rent, etc.). Support in accessing housing and child care should be one of the top priorities as identified by a few of the participants in this research. All of these supports could all be provided on a case-by-case basis and supported by an Indigenous transition team. As suggested previously, Indigenous students in at least their second

year as well as Indigenous alumni can be hired on short-term contracts to support new students through this process. Again, this work should always be compensated.

Studying

As the findings of this report imply, colleges and universities should focus on hiring more Indigenous staff and faculty in full-time positions and in all departments and at all campuses. There is also a need for more funding towards Indigenous student services in general as Indigenous students will be more likely to access services and support through that department. Indigenous students should be represented throughout the institution in course content, programs, art, languages, placenames, and spaces. This could foster a stronger sense of belonging for students when they see themselves reflected throughout the entire campus and not just in designated spaces.

The push to advance Indigenous education in all aspects requires commitment from the entire community. Non-Indigenous staff and faculty should be provided with more opportunities to learn about Indigenous history and contemporary circumstances so they can deliver Indigenous content and service Indigenous people appropriately. All areas of the campus should be considered in the infusion of Indigenous perspectives, stories, and histories.

This all could be planned, implemented, and assessed by a committee dedicated to Indigenous education success. Such a committee should be established with Indigenous staff, faculty, students, and members of surrounding communities to ensure Indigenous perspectives are not just the *voice* that contributes to decision-making but also the *decision makers*. Institutions should still continue to ensure non-Indigenous staff and faculty are doing the work required of them in this process.

Graduating

Indigenous students should celebrate their successes with each other. Each university or college should ensure Indigenous students have another graduation separate from the mainstream graduation. On a case-by-case basis, financial assistance should be provided to ensure proud family and community members can see their loved ones graduating, whether in person or through technology. Colleges and universities should provide paid opportunities for Indigenous alumni to work with future students through mentorship, so they can inspire and uplift them in their own educational journeys.

COVID-19 Specific Recommendations

These are some of the recommendations that emerged from an online community engagement that hosted 46 staff and faculty who work with Indigenous students across Canada. Colleges and universities have been impacted by COVID-19 and, therefore, how much they are able to support these initiatives may vary. Nonetheless, the findings of this study still emphasize the importance of prioritizing Indigenous education during COVID-19 and beyond.

The findings from this event reinforced the need to ensure every Indigenous student has access to technology and WIFI capabilities to participate in online learning. This can be done by offering device rental services, providing financial assistance, and support staff and faculty who work with Indigenous students to find immediate technological solutions. Colleges and universities need to help alleviate the heightened financial burden Indigenous students are facing at this time by providing additional bursaries and funding opportunities, waiving initial fees and deposits, and providing

additional funding necessary for cultural supports. In order for Indigenous students to continue their studies remotely, there is a need for financial support to afford technology, housing, and utility costs. Indigenous students also need to be mailed cultural materials (e.g. craft materials for online workshops, traditional medicines, etc.) that additional funding would be required to support.

Overall, Indigenous education needs to remain a top priority. This includes building relationships with local Indigenous communities, being creative in infusing Indigenous perspectives through digital learning opportunities, listening to Indigenous students, and centring their voices in decision-making.

IMPACT

The findings of this research not only provide guidance for colleges and universities, but also organizations that advocate for Indigenous people and education generally, such as the organizations that made this research possible.

The Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness (SCSC) is a non-profit dedicated to research and advocacy in overcoming social isolation and building social connectedness.¹⁴ In research and advocacy, the perspectives of Indigenous people in how they define social isolation and social connectedness must be considered. By using their platform to share these research findings, they can influence specific actors and stakeholders. Future research carried out by SCSC Fellows should continue exploring the possibilities within post-secondary institutions to foster social connectedness for First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and Afro-Indigenous students. Opportunities to specifically

¹⁴ “About Us”, Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness, accessed August, 2020, <https://www.socialconnectedness.org/about-us/>.

explore the experiences of Afro-Indigenous students should be considered as this is an area with little research. Representation also matters in these endeavours involving Indigenous people; having their voices uplifted is important but to have their voices behind decision-making would be ideal.

As an organization that designs and delivers youth engagement programs through creativity, technology and community, TakingITGlobal (TIG) should continue advocating for enhanced education outcomes for Indigenous people and communities. Their programs Connected North and Future Pathways prepare Indigenous students for post-secondary education and the workforce. The findings within this research can be used to enhance their programs that already positively impact how Indigenous youth see their potential to thrive in post-secondary education. The findings could provide further guidance in how to focus their commitment to removing barriers so that Indigenous youth can thrive in higher education and beyond.

CONCLUSION

One of the most noteworthy findings from this research endeavour is that staff and faculty who work with Indigenous students are profoundly aware of what would be required to better support them. As staff and faculty who work with First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and Afro-Indigenous students are continuously advocating for their success, it is important that colleges and universities actively listen to their concerns, suggestions, and hopes for the future in order to engage in meaningful change. Social connectedness in this context means upholding Indigenous students' ability to feel valued, seen, and heard;¹⁵ colleges and universities must commit themselves to

¹⁵ Ibid.

providing more opportunities for Indigenous students to feel this sense of connectedness and belonging on campus.

It is important to understand that Indigenous people are in charge of their own successes so long as the systemic and structural barriers in their way are removed by those responsible for upholding them. Indigenous people are succeeding in many aspects within and outside of academia. For Indigenous students, higher education means more than the ability to contribute to the economy but, rather, an opportunity to feel empowered along their journey to achieving self-determination both individually and collectively.¹⁶

As colleges and universities provide more opportunities for Indigenous students to realize their dreams of post-secondary education attainment, the possibilities for their futures become increasingly abundant.

¹⁶ Jacqueline Ottman, "Canada's Indigenous Peoples."

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