

# CREATING OPPORTUNITIES IN EDUCATION FOR ABORIGINAL STUDENTS



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Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada  
Association des universités et collèges du Canada

## REACHING HIGHER

AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA, Aboriginal students congregate in a First Nations Longhouse. At the University of Manitoba, senior managers now travel to Aboriginal communities to recruit students. The University of Saskatchewan's College of Engineering runs outreach programs to engage Aboriginal youth well before they are of university age. At Lakehead University, the Native access program assists students in making a successful transition to university.

Canadian universities are increasingly creating resources and programs for Aboriginal students – including courses, outreach and financial assistance, as well as programs and physical spaces where Aboriginal students can find counselling, support and connection to their culture.

This year, the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada is making those resources more accessible

through a comprehensive, searchable online directory of Canadian university programs and services for Aboriginal students. The directory, a compendium of initiatives on campuses across the country, is aimed at fostering the academic success of Canada's fastest-growing demographic group, its Aboriginal peoples.

The directory grew out of a 2006 survey of services and programs available for Aboriginals at universities across Canada. Updated in 2010 and again in 2012, the survey is the basis for the new directory. It brings together in one place information on programs, activities, services, policies and financial assistance available at more than 75 universities across the country. This new resource makes it easier for potential students to find the institution that is right for them, and the support that will help them achieve their educational goals.

### The Origins of the Initiative

**“We are looking at replacing the legacy of the residential schools with a vibrant new learning culture in every First Nation, grounded in our proud heritage, identity and language. Through a new confidence, we can resume our rightful place as proud nations walking side by side with the Canadian federation and within the North American economy. To get there, we need to work with every university and college, with school boards, corporations and foundations and indeed all people in Canada.”<sup>1</sup>**

- National Chief Shawn A-in-chut Atleo, the Assembly of First Nations and Chancellor of Vancouver Island University.

Canadian universities recognize the importance of reaching out to Aboriginal students and offering programs and services tailored to their needs. This initiative began when National Chief Shawn A-in-chut Atleo of the Assembly of First Nations met with Canadian university presidents in January 2010. That year, AUCC updated its national inventory on programs and services for Aboriginal students and, along with the National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation (now called Indspire) held a working summit that led to the launch of an action plan. The new national directory, created with new data collected in 2012, is one part of that action plan.<sup>2</sup>

1 Partners for a brighter future, AUCC, December 2011.

2 Pre-budget submission to Finance Minister James Flaherty, AUCC, November 2012.



## INFORMATION IS KEY TO SUCCESS

RESEARCH HAS SHOWN THAT for Aboriginal students, having activities and services that allow them to stay connected to their identity and build a sense of community can make a huge and positive difference in their ability to successfully navigate a postsecondary education. First Nations students are most successful when their people's knowledge, history and culture are part of the curriculum, and when instruction is relevant to their life experiences and communities.<sup>3</sup>

Since the publication of the first directory of programs and services in 2006, universities have increased outreach and support programs. This includes expanding the number of programs offered off-campus, creating programs to help Aboriginal students transition to university, and designing programs and facilities specifically for Aboriginal students. Universities have also made this information easier to find and use.

A student who uses this new directory will be able to find – among many other things – the percentage of the student body and staff who self-identify as Aboriginal, the Aboriginal languages being taught at the university, the financial support available, and what programs exist and whether they are offered on or off campus.

### Success stories

**“I have received so much help and support through UWinnipeg’s Aboriginal Student Services!” said Sylvia Dueck, a second-year student in Aboriginal art history. “I started from nothing, and found out I really loved school and was getting good grades, and for the first time I realized: I can go on to university. It is something I always wanted but I didn’t think it was a possibility.”**

**“Having a place like the Native Centre on campus was not only vital but pivotal to my success,” said Yvonne Poitras Pratt, PhD in communication studies at the University of Calgary “It represented a place where I could ground and reaffirm myself as an Aboriginal, and my journey would not have been as rich without it.”**



Yvonne Poitras Pratt, PhD Communication studies, University of Calgary

<sup>3</sup> Partners for a brighter future, AUCC, December 2011.

## WHAT UNIVERSITIES ARE DOING

ALL OF THIS INFORMATION is the result of a focused and sustained effort on the part of universities themselves. They have worked hard to both create programs and services, and pull together and share information about what they offer.

Native studies – courses about Aboriginal life and culture – are one part of the mix in the programs and services that universities provide. Some universities combine Native studies with other areas of knowledge to create specific programs aimed at serving the needs of Aboriginal peoples. The University of Victoria offers a concurrent program in law and master of arts in Indigenous governance. The first of its kind in Canada, the program is a response to increasing demand for such a specific specialty.<sup>4</sup>

The University of Alberta has a faculty of Native studies. In addition to a BA in Native studies and a minor program for students in other disciplines, it has recently begun offering a master's degree.<sup>5</sup>

At Laurentian University in Sudbury, the school of Native human services offers an honours bachelor of social work that is culturally specific. The goal is to provide an accredited social work degree that offers knowledge, skills and experience to work effectively with Native and non-Native communities.<sup>6</sup>

### 2012 Survey Highlights

The data collected for the 2012 survey shows just how much progress universities have made in providing services and programs specifically tailored to Aboriginal students. Over 80% of Canadian universities responded to the survey. Of the institutions surveyed:

**78%** offer social and cultural activities such as sweat lodges and pow-wows

**71%** offer gathering spaces

**68%** have elders on campus

**71%** offer linkages with local Aboriginal communities

**62%** provide tailored academic counselling

**65%** provide general counselling

**58%** provide peer-to-peer mentoring

**45%** provide employment or career counselling

**25%** provide on-campus housing

**10%** provide day care



University of Victoria's First Peoples House

<sup>4</sup> <http://web.uvic.ca/~oar/recruiting/admissions/faculties.html> , consulted January 4th, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.ualberta.ca/NATIVESTUDIES/>, consulted January 4th, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.laurentian.ca/content/program/native-human-services/overview> , consulted January 4th, 2013.



Universities are also becoming repositories for Aboriginal history and culture. The Mi'kmaq Resource Centre, part of the Unama'ki College of Cape Breton University, houses the world's largest collection of material written about or by the Mi'kmaq in Mi'kmaki. The material is available not only to students and researchers, but to Mi'kmaw schools and educational institutions, as well as social, cultural and justice organizations.<sup>7</sup>

There is also increasing acknowledgement of Aboriginal culture in the university community. For example, McMaster University, in partnership with Six Nations Polytechnic, has established the Collaborative Centre on Indigenous Knowledge and Ways of Learning.<sup>8</sup> One of

the centre's goals is the preservation of Aboriginal languages. First Nations University of Canada is a federated college of the University of Regina. It specializes in Indigenous knowledge and provides postsecondary education for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in a culturally supportive environment.<sup>9</sup>

Even policies are being revised: At Wilfrid Laurier University, the university now officially acknowledges the use of sacred Aboriginal medicines.



Photos: University of Saskatchewan

7 <http://www.cbu.ca/mrc> , consulted January 4th, 2013..

8 <http://www.snpolytechnic.com/indigknowledgecentre.html> , consulted January 4th, 2013.

9 <http://www.fnuniv.ca/index.php/overview> , consulted January 4th, 2013.

## DEMOGRAPHICS

THERE ARE COMPELLING REASONS for the push toward more university education for Aboriginal Canadians. Unemployment rates among Aboriginal peoples are high – 13.2 per cent in 2006, compared to 5.2 per cent for non-Aboriginals – and improving their education will boost their employability and eventually their earnings. A study by the Centre for the Study of Living standards says that if the education and labour market outcomes of Aboriginal Canadians reached the 2001 level of the general population by 2026, it would allow government spending to drop by \$14.2 billion, while increasing Aboriginals' income by some \$36.5 billion.<sup>10</sup>

There now exists a broad consensus among universities that closing the education gap is the right thing to do, both to help Aboriginals reach the living standards to which they are entitled, but also to help boost the productivity of Canada's economy overall.

The massive baby boom generation is retiring, creating expected shortfalls in employment. At the same time, the Aboriginal population is growing. It rose by 45 per cent between 1996 and 2006, compared to eight percent for the non-Aboriginal population. Aboriginal youth is the fastest-growing segment of the Canadian population. Right now, there are 560,000 Aboriginals under the age of 25. In the first quarter of this century, some 600,000 young Aboriginals are expected to enter the labour market.

In a recent report on the labour potential of Canada's Aboriginal population, it was noted that "Canada's Aboriginal population ... could play a significant role in helping the country meet its labour market needs."<sup>11</sup> The implication for Canadian businesses is a potential domestic solution to labour and skills shortages."<sup>12</sup>

There are also compelling economic reasons for increasing the level of education of Canada's Aboriginal peoples.

**"If investments are not made now, Canada will pay a much higher price later. The costs of failing to act include lower productivity and higher costs to government programs such as health care and social services. Aboriginal demographics also dictate that now is the time to act. Canada cannot afford to leave such a large youth cohort behind."**<sup>13</sup>



Natasha Dreaver, Engineering grad, University of Saskatchewan

10 The Value of a Degree for Aboriginal Canadians, AUCC, October 2010.

11 The Conference Board of Canada, "Understanding the Value, Challenges and Opportunities of Engaging Métis, Inuit and First Nations Workers," July 2012, page i.

12 The Conference Board of Canada, "Understanding the Value, Challenges and Opportunities of Engaging Métis, Inuit and First Nations Workers," July 2012, page 3.

13 Moving Forward: National Working Summit on Aboriginal Postsecondary Education, AUCC & Indspire [previously NAAF], December 2010.



## BARRIERS

THE REALITY IS that a disproportionately large number of Aboriginals lack the academic qualifications needed to take on the jobs of today – and tomorrow. A survey of employers across Canada revealed that one of the main barriers to hiring Métis, Inuit and First Nations peoples is their lack of education.

The survey also identified problems with literacy. It noted that “consistently poor educational outcomes and a lack of work experience are substantial impediments to Aboriginal Peoples’ success in the workforce – therefore, efforts to increase both secondary and postsecondary educational attainment among the Aboriginal population are called for.”<sup>14</sup>

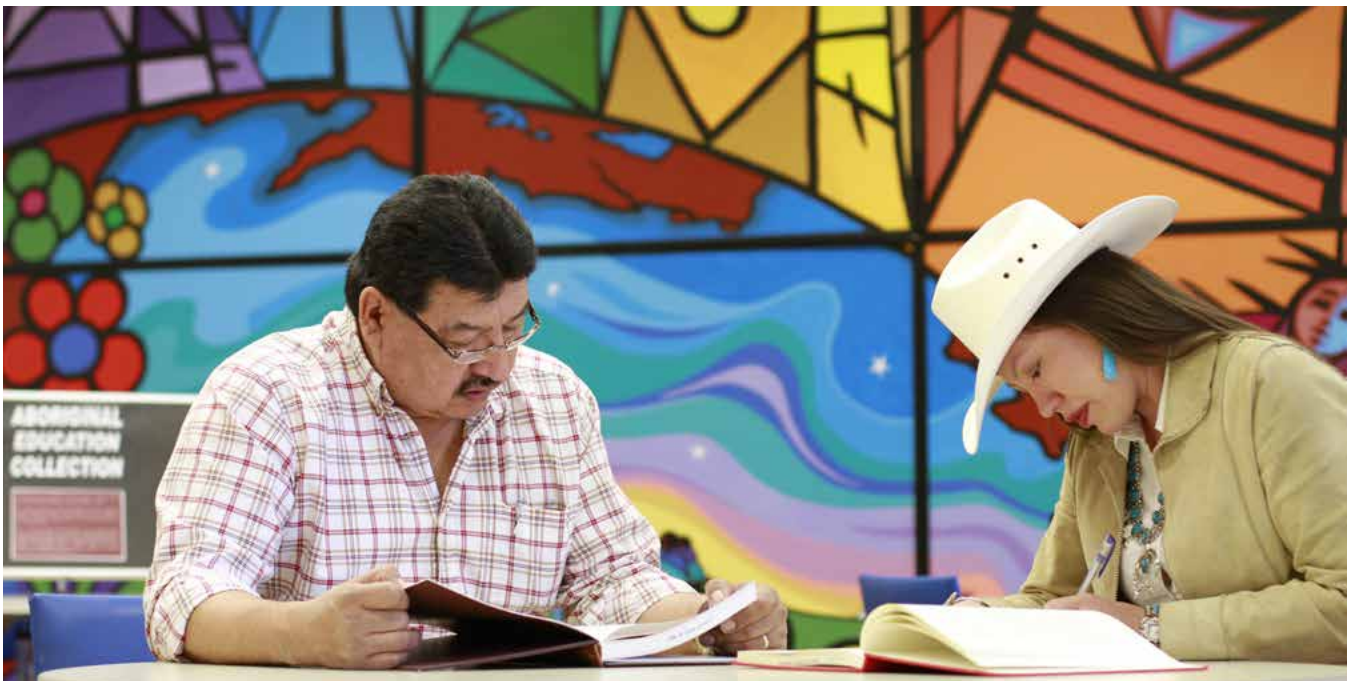
However, it is not simply a matter of asking Aboriginal students to come to university. Research has identified significant barriers to their success. A research paper prepared by the Assembly of First Nations in 2009 points to such things as having low incomes and not having family members with higher levels of education.

Research has also pointed to a lack of Aboriginal faculty and staff at universities, as well as resistance to change within institutions themselves.

Studies have determined that the best time to approach Aboriginal students about university is early, well before they have completed high school, in order to plant the seed and give them time to work on their studies and warm to the idea of a postsecondary education.

Once they get to university, retention is also an issue. Many Aboriginal students are not properly prepared to succeed at university since they lack appropriate academic preparation. In addition, the isolation of many Aboriginal communities means that students most often have to leave home and family to attend university.

Aboriginal Canadians who get to university also tend to be older, studying part-time and frequently need child-care for their families.



Joe Waskewitch and Destini Gardypie, Saskatchewan's College of Education's Indian Teacher Education Program

<sup>14</sup> The Conference Board of Canada, “Understanding the Value, Challenges and Opportunities of Engaging Métis, Inuit and First Nations Workers,” July 2012, page ii.

## SUPPORTS IN PLACE

WITH MORE THAN 650 ABORIGINAL NATIONS in Canada, there is no one solution that will fit all,<sup>15</sup> but this new online directory shows the range of what is being done. The most effective supports for Aboriginal students include having a Native student centre or some sort of central meeting space; hiring Aboriginal student services staff and counsellors; providing affordable child care; and involving elders in the university community. Universities are putting those supports into place.

Many have now set up transition programs to support young Aboriginals in university adjust to life in a community that can be much larger than their home town. The University of Northern British Columbia, for example, has a transition year studies program. This focuses on keeping young Aboriginals interested by creating a program of study that is relevant to First Nations students from smaller and rural communities; it then supports students from initial enrolment to graduation.

The program allows students to take full advantage of the educational opportunities offered at the university, and prepares them for subsequent employment. It also helps ensure that a higher percentage of students successfully complete their degrees.<sup>16</sup>

Vancouver Island University, like many other universities, has Elders in residence. They provide counselling, support and guidance to all students. The Elders are active in a variety of areas, including speaking in classrooms, teaching traditional protocols and cross-cultural sharing.<sup>17</sup>

**At l'Université du Québec en Abitibi-Témiscamingue, programs are not just one-way: The university's Projet Piwaseha educates the general population by offering sensitivity training to people of the region on the realities of Aboriginal life and culture.<sup>18</sup>**



Université du Québec en Abitibi-Témiscamingue's Pavillon des Premiers Peuples

<sup>15</sup> The Value of a Degree for Aboriginal Canadians, AUCC, October 2010.

<sup>16</sup> [http://www.unbc.ca/northern\\_advancement\\_program/](http://www.unbc.ca/northern_advancement_program/), consulted January 4th, 2013.

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.viu.ca/aboriginal/elders.asp>, consulted January 4th, 2013.

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.uqat.ca/services/premierspeuples/?m=piwaseha>, consulted January 4th, 2013.





Many universities have established Aboriginal centres, physical spaces that serve as a cultural and emotional home away from home. For example, the Université du Québec en Abitibi-Témiscamingue has built a campus in Val d'Or where services to Aboriginal students are centralized in a purpose-built building, the Pavillon des Premiers-Peuples.

More and more universities are also offering distance education opportunities. Whether it is via an online portal, by creating partnerships with Indigenous higher education institutions, having professors travelling to communities, or other arrangements, universities have made an effort to be more accessible.

The 2012 survey of programs and services for Aboriginal students at Canadian universities shows that:

**64%** of the institutions surveyed now have transition programs for Aboriginal students.

**49%** have undergraduate programs specifically designed for Aboriginal students.

**26%** offer graduate programs designed for Aboriginal students.

There are, across the country, **286** different programs designed for Aboriginal students. In addition to more than **90** Aboriginal studies programs.

**39** institutions offer programs off-campus.

More than **20** Native languages taught in **34** universities.

## MORE SERVICES, MORE UPTAKE

UNIVERSITIES HAVE MADE IMPORTANT PROGRESS in the last few years when it comes to providing services tailored to the needs of Aboriginal students.

Between 2006 and 2010, almost 50 percent of the surveyed institutions reported an increase in on-campus activities for Aboriginals. According to the data collected in 2010, universities across the country had then made available for Aboriginal students 30 meeting rooms or student lounges and had 53 social and cultural activities dedicated to Aboriginal students. According to the data collected in 2012, Canadian universities have almost doubled those spaces, and are now making available 55 gathering spaces for Aboriginal students. More than 60 institutions organize social and cultural activities. They benefit not only Aboriginal students but also familiarize

non-Aboriginals with the cultures and beliefs of First Nations, Inuit and Métis people. The increase in facilities is all the more significant since it has taken place at a time when universities are facing increasing financial challenges.

These facilities and activities catalyze communication between the mainstream university culture and Aboriginal world view, bringing the Aboriginal community off campus into a closer partnership with universities in support of student success. When creating offices for Indigenous affairs, universities have reported that they facilitate the centralization of services, therefore making it easier for students to access the services they needed. They have also provided a space to host activities and programs for Indigenous students, as well as create a central location for faculty, staff, Elders and Indigenous counsellors.

## MOVING FORWARD

THERE IS BROAD CONSENSUS that closing the education gap in Canada is essential to addressing the challenges of a changing world. Aboriginal communities and leaders, universities and governments are all looking to new structures, approaches and models to achieve real results for Aboriginals in Canada.

Canada's universities have worked with Aboriginal leaders in recent years on a series of measures that are increasing Aboriginal access and success in higher education. This new directory of programs and services for Aboriginal students is an important step forward. Many more are to come; Canada's universities are committed to ongoing collaboration and action.

A university degree is a gateway to hope and opportunity for Aboriginal students, their families and communities. Many of these graduates study in programs that Aboriginal communities need the most, such as health, education and business.

A compelling economic and demographic urgency is inspiring action. Canada is an aging society and employers are asking where they will find the people they need in the years ahead. In the next 15 years, more than 400,000 Aboriginal young people will reach labour-market age. They must be equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to be full participants in Canada's prosperity.

Bold new thinking, fresh approaches and meaningful action in key areas including education will enable Aboriginals to achieve their potential and enjoy a higher quality of life in a new kind of Canada. Universities across the country are working closely with Aboriginal leaders and communities to develop innovative programs and services to meet Aboriginal needs.



Lisa Monchalin was the first Aboriginal female in Canada to earn a PhD in Criminology (from Ottawa U). She is now an instructor at Kwantlen Polytechnic University.



More information  
on how Canada's universities are creating opportunities  
in education for Aboriginal students



Visit the directory at  
[www.aucc.ca/Aboriginal-directory](http://www.aucc.ca/Aboriginal-directory)