

First Nations and Métis Initiatives

Promising Practices and Challenges in Saskatchewan's Post-Secondary Sector

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Preamble

The Government of Saskatchewan is committed to improving outcomes for First Nations and Métis people. The Ministry of Advanced Education contributes to this goal by working to enroll more Indigenous people in post-secondary education and training. Several groups have provided valuable guidance on the subject, including the Joint Task Force on Improving Education and Employment Outcomes for First Nations and Métis People, Universities Canada and College and Institutes Canada Indigenous education protocols, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's final report and Calls to Action.

From April to June 2016, officials from the Ministry of Advanced Education engaged in conversations with Saskatchewan public post-secondary institutions on their initiatives for First Nations and Métis students. There were three goals:

- 1. Improve public reporting:** Saskatchewan's post-secondary institutions are engaged in innovative practices for First Nations and Métis students. A more comprehensive inventory of these activities can improve public reporting.
- 2. Open lines of communication:** Improving ongoing dialogue and engagement helps institutions to share and learn from new and interesting ideas and strategies for First Nations and Métis students.
- 3. Develop a promising practices document:** Compiling promising practices from across the sector to share with institutions can promote collaboration.

In November 2015, the University of Saskatchewan hosted the forum, "Building Reconciliation" national forum. Saskatchewan's post-secondary institutions made a public commitment to close the education gap for First Nations and Métis people. They acknowledged that First Nations and Métis people must be able to see themselves reflected in Saskatchewan institutions and that the changes should include the people working there, the physical space itself and the values of each institution.

Building on this commitment, the Ministry is sharing this promising practices document of leading-edge work underway across Saskatchewan's post-secondary sector. These ideas, strategies and initiatives will broaden the discussion and facilitate greater collaboration. This document will help us meet the goal of improving First Nations and Métis educational outcomes in Saskatchewan.

Introduction

More First Nations and Métis students than ever before are taking post-secondary education and skills training in our province. There were nearly 15,700 learners enrolled in 2014-15, a 29 per cent increase since 2007-08. However, enrollments tell only part of the story as an attainment gap remains. A 2011 Statistics Canada report looked at both First Nations and Métis people and non-Aboriginal people aged 25-64 in Saskatchewan. It found that 40 per cent of First Nations people and 23 per cent of Métis people did not have a post-secondary certificate, degree or diploma, compared to just 13 per cent of non-Aboriginal people.

The report also found that those without a post-secondary credential have lower-than-average employment rates:

- 31.1 per cent among First Nations; and
- 50.2 per cent among Métis.

The employment rate for members of the same population with a post-secondary credential is considerably better:

- 68.2 per cent among First Nations; and
- 80.4 per cent among Métis.

Increasing post-secondary educational attainment is good for Saskatchewan and the connection between education and improved outcomes is well established. Improving these outcomes makes a difference in people's lives. A recent publication by the Conference Board of Canada shows that higher levels of education lead to higher wages, higher rates of employment, shorter periods of unemployment and better health outcomes. The challenge is finding ways to meet the needs of students so they can pursue and be successful in post-secondary education.

People and communities have diverse and unique needs and therefore must have an innovative and responsive post-secondary sector. While institutions are at different places in their work supporting First Nations and Métis learners, each institution says providing support is a priority. They also recognize improving outcomes is a shared provincial and national priority.

There is still more to do. These discussions demonstrate that the Saskatchewan post-secondary sector possesses considerable knowledge and expertise. Institutions know how to support First Nations and Métis learners, and they know how to increase the proportion of students who graduate. The immediate challenge is sharing that knowledge, expertise and practice, which is a primary goal of this document.

What follows is a discussion of some of the promising practices across Saskatchewan's post-secondary sector. This is not intended to be a comprehensive list, but a brief discussion of leading-edge initiatives. These promising practices have been organized into five categories: relationships with First Nations communities, indigenization, flexible education and training options, customized supports and elders.

Relationships with First Nations Communities

Strong, collaborative relationships with First Nations and Métis communities are critical to student success. Institutions have found the greatest success when they work closely with communities. That means asking them what training they need and then responding with appropriate programs.

Institutions typically approach community engagement in two ways (see sidebar examples). Many build relationships with First Nations communities and then offer programs within those communities. Students go to school where they live, and their community provides them with valuable supports which can range from money and training space to child care, elder support and transportation.

Alternatively, some institutions create space for First Nations and Métis communities both on campus as well as within governance and advisory structures. There may be a formal process to ensure Indigenous perspectives are considered during institutional decision-making. Formal approaches may include establishing advisory circles, councils or committees. Some advisory bodies meet directly with the Board and president. Institutions are also working to hire more First Nations and Métis faculty and staff, and improve First Nations and Métis representation on Boards.

FNUniv is connecting with local communities to increase awareness and promote reconciliation through their work building Reconciliation Park. The site is aligned with the University of Winnipeg and its digital archive for the Reconciliation Project. This park will serve as a physical space to honour reconciliation.

St. Thomas More College has established an endowed chair in Indigenous Spirituality and Reconciliation. The position will explore Indigenous spirituality in Canada, interact with Elders and community leaders, and analyze the interaction between Indigenous spirituality and Christian traditions to advance reconciliation.

Carlton Trail is succeeding in connecting with First Nations communities by offering programs in the town of Punnichy. This central location is a convenient gathering place for a number of surrounding First Nations communities.

Campion College is building relationships with the Peepeekisis First Nation. The President and members of the faculty regularly visit and engage with members of the community, which has helped establish connections between the community and campus.

Southeast College has identified relationship building as a priority. It is still in the early stages of its work with First Nations communities. The College is working to establish relationships with communities throughout the region to identify training needs.

As a Métis institution, GDI provides expertise to K-12 schools and post-secondary institutions on the development and delivery of Métis-specific resources that help students succeed.

Sask Polytech has established the position of Aboriginal Strategy Coordinator, responsible for promoting Indigenization. The coordinator supports faculty to include Aboriginal content in the curriculum and within the broader academic model.

The University of Regina and Cumberland College have each developed Indigenization strategies to better support Indigenous students. Some of their strategies focus on the use of Advisory Councils and creating a learning environment that is reflective of Indigenous students.

The University of Saskatchewan recently opened the Gordon Oakes Red Bear Student Centre. The gathering place helps coordinate student services for Indigenous students. It builds relationships with Indigenous people within and outside the university.

Indigenization

Institutions are working to create post-secondary environments that are meaningful to and reflective of Indigenous students. Many institutions say they need to fundamentally change the way they do business in order to better include Indigenous people and culture, and to create a more meaningful experience for Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners.

Saskatchewan has several Indigenous institutions (First Nations University of Canada, Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies, Gabriel Dumont Institute). Other institutions have programs and long-standing approaches that supports First Nations and Métis students (North West College, Northlands College), and may not need an Indigenization process. They are Indigenized already and are able to share their knowledge and expertise with other institutions and the community. They have experience designing programs and services for First Nations and Métis students and are valuable resources to institutions looking to become more welcoming and inclusive.

Post-secondary institutions want all students reflected in their environments. Institutions work to create meaningful experiences within the *physical space* as well as the *program content*. Institutions are working to embed Indigenous content in curriculum. They are also creating specific gathering places on campus and are incorporating First Nations' languages in institutional documents, building names and signage. Several institutions acknowledge Indigenous or Treaty land in print and before meetings or events.

Flexible Education and Training Options

Institutions respond to the specific needs of learners with unique strategies to help students enroll and succeed in post-secondary programs. There are a wide range of options offered across the province including Indigenous-focused programs, course offerings and curriculum, alternative delivery models, and community-based programming.

Studies have shown that more students succeed when there are opportunities to move between training and employment. Students need options that allow them to fulfill family and community responsibilities, while also allowing the flexibility to complete their program. Institutions also say that community-based training increases student engagement and interest.

At the same time, rural and northern institutions tell us students and prospective students are not inclined to leave home for training. This tells us that there is an important balance between access to education and training programs, and opportunities to remain in local communities. Institutions know programs that train for jobs in the region have higher success rates.

Institutions say it is critical to engage and work with local First Nations and Métis communities. These partnerships ensure training programs are responsive to regional needs. Students succeed when both institutions and First Nations and Métis leaders are involved and supportive, and this support results in community involvement. Often, a First Nation will provide important assistance like daycare and transportation. Such programs help students stay in school and complete their education.

Dumont Technical Institute offers its *Flex Program* which makes it easier for adult students in Adult Basic Education and General Education Development programs to balance school and personal commitments by allowing students to complete their programs at their own speed.

North West College engages students through its *Workforce Exposure Strategy*, which ensures all learners receive work placements and have access to job coaches and workplace supports, familiarizing students with employment environments and expectations.

Parkland College's *Retail Management* course helps develop essential skills and has been effective in connecting many students, including First Nations and Métis, to the labour market.

The *Indigenous Peoples Industry Partnership Program* at the U of S allows Indigenous students to work as summer employees with participating corporations. Their earnings help pay for tuition and living expenses, while their work supports local businesses and the community.

The in-class and in-car driver training offered through Great Plains College has proven valuable to members of Nekanet First Nation located in Southwest Saskatchewan. The program helps bridge the challenge of transportation for many people in rural and northern communities.

The U of R's *nitôncipâmin omâ* Student Success Program (the OMA program) supports first-year Indigenous students by connecting them with other first-year students. The program offers sessions where students can review class material in detail. It gives priority access to tutors. It also provides scholarships and cultural and social events.

Northlands College supports Indigenous students with workshops on a number of topics including career decision-making, time management, study skills, résumé writing, job search skills and budgeting.

FNUniv offers a tutor mentor program at their northern campus. Students are trained in skills that will help them succeed in their professions. Tutors also teach new skills in a supportive environment.

SIIT's *Access and Success* model targets vulnerable transition points in the student experience. Individual advisors provide direct support to individual students from recruitment to employment.

Sask Polytech's *Aboriginal Student Achievement Plan* is an institution-wide plan designed to support students. Services include a summer transition program, access to Aboriginal activity centres, and advisors who build relationships of support through personal connection.

Customized Supports

Students have complex needs; and in response, Saskatchewan's post-secondary institutions provide a variety of approaches to ensure students are successful. Institutions say programs and services must be holistic, specific and targeted as students require different types of assistance depending on their needs. While some require help completing high school (e.g., Adult Basic Education), others need programs that increase workplace literacy or prepare them to enter university. Some need specialized programs to help them succeed after they've enrolled.

Institutions say students are more likely to succeed with appropriate housing, transportation and child care. Until basic needs are met, it is difficult to encourage people to go to school. A student who does not have access to transportation, or a reliable daycare, finds it harder to attend and graduate.

The type and range of supports can be different in each community. Supports can be designed for an individual student or for many. With experience, institutions have learned what works and what does not, and those lessons are leading to new strategies. Many institutions point out students in rural and northern areas may need different supports than students in the city.

Institutions say specialized supports require substantial time and money. Many institutions talk about the importance of one-on-one assistance which comes in many forms. While some schools employ student advisors, others have entire programs designed to provide customized supports. This can put smaller institutions at a disadvantage as they are often unable to provide the same access to supports. Staff members with other responsibilities try to fill that gap by helping students connect with services in the community.

Elders

Elders play an important role in many of the promising practices already listed. They provide customized support to students within institutions and they help Indigenous students see themselves reflected in their learning environments. Elders are often the key to building relationships with First Nations communities.

Many institutions say Elders are critical to increasing First Nations and Métis educational attainment. Institutions take one of two general approaches. Some have Elders-in-residence or on-site which creates an environment that is more welcoming and reflective of Indigenous learners. Institutions that take this approach rely on Elders to provide counselling and cultural supports to individual students. Elders also advise on Indigenous content in curriculum, and in some cases, teach components of specific classes, or even serve to provide strategic direction to boards and senior administrators.

Some institutions leverage the knowledge and experience of Elders within students' home communities. In this model, Elders support learners in a familiar environment. This approach is usually less formal. Elders often attend portions of training and consult with teachers, students and staff as required.

As an alternative to setting up an Elder-in-residence, North West College works with Elders in their home communities to support learners in a familiar environment.

SIIT and St. Thomas More College have developed Elder advisory circles to support and promote student success. The advisory circles provide advice on the strategic direction for the institution. In some cases, SIIT engages Elders in specific communities to provide local students with needed support

Luther College has formed relationships with Elders from the community who have been teaching faculty and students about Aboriginal protocols. They also teach people about the impact of residential schools.

St. Peters College plans to begin a sponsored speaker's series on First Nations and Métis education. It will have, visits from Elders to promote dialogue and engagement with First Nations communities.

FNUniv's *Indigenous Access and Transition Education Certificate* is an eight-month program intended to prepare Indigenous students for post-secondary success. Students build their skills and abilities while earning transferable university credits.

North West College has found success with its *Level III Project*. Students from Adult Basic Education (Adult 10, which is 98% Aboriginal) design and implement a business plan. They learn all aspects of working in a small business, gaining valuable workplace experience.

Lakeland College's *Heavy Oil and Gas* program reaches many First Nations learners on-reserve. It teaches them skills needed to work in the oilfield. Once they have a certificate, students can pursue specific industry training through the *Heavy Oil Operations Technician* program to become a Fourth Class Power Engineer.

Challenges

The promising practices shared by many institutions are improving educational attainment for First Nations and Métis learners. Saskatchewan's post-secondary institutions have the knowledge and expertise to reduce the education and employment gap. However, progress can take considerable time and there must be a collective ongoing commitment to affect lasting change.

During the course of the conversations, many institutions indicated genuine challenges that remain, including the following.

Transitions

More work is required to help students move from high school into post-secondary and from post-secondary into the labour market.

Some institutions tell us that many First Nations and Métis high school graduates are not prepared academically for post-secondary studies. Post-secondary institutions are looking for ways to help more students participate, and many say that this is a shared responsibility with the K-12 sector. They also say the sector needs to do better keeping students in school until they complete their programs.

Institutions are also challenged to support students as they move from post-secondary into the labour market. They say it is difficult to provide the wide range of supports students need including specific education and skills training, as well as more essential skills such as workforce exposure strategies or life-skill training.

Funding

Institutions also talked about challenges with funding. They mentioned that supports usually cost more than institutions can provide, so additional operating and capital funding could be used to create new opportunities for students. They also talked about the need for better coordination between federal and provincial funding programs and that they would benefit from increased flexibility in how they can use federal and provincial funding.

Demographics

Some institutions are making connections with secondary schools to encourage First Nations and Métis students to continue their studies beyond high school. For others, this remains an area where more work needs to be done.

Additionally, institutions say they need to have more First Nations and Métis faculty and staff. At the same time, post-secondary institutions, especially universities, report growing competition across the country to attract more Indigenous employees

There is a relationship between these two areas. Indigenous students are more likely to pursue post-secondary education if they see Indigenous staff and faculty. And if more Indigenous students go to school, more will likely end up working in those institutions.

Intolerance

Racism is an enduring problem that negatively impacts First Nations and Métis people in Saskatchewan. The Joint Task Force on Improving Education and Employment Outcomes for First Nations and Métis People aptly describes the challenge of confronting intolerance.

“Racism is a deeper systemic challenge rooted in the history of colonization and it affects individuals and communities in real ways. It affects the sense of place and belonging.”¹

We must all confront racism. Institutions highlighted the importance of their work in tackling racism and indicated they would like to see an increased role for government in challenging intolerance across the province.

¹ *Voice, Vision and Leadership: A Place for All*. (2013). The Joint Task Force on Improving Education and Employment Outcomes for First Nations and Métis People. 26.

Concluding Remarks

This document outlines some promising practices for First Nations and Métis learners in Saskatchewan's post-secondary sector. It is necessarily selective in its scope and use of examples. All of Saskatchewan's post-secondary institutions have demonstrated a commitment to improving outcomes.

Sharing these promising practices helps us understand where we are and how we got here. The challenges represent the future. They tell us where the Saskatchewan post-secondary sector needs to go. The next step is to find ways to combine our collective experience and expertise as we all work to improve educational attainment and outcomes for First Nations and Métis students in Saskatchewan.

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- Northlands College
- North West College
- Parkland College
- Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies
- Saskatchewan Polytechnic
- Southeast College
- St. Peter's College
- St. Thomas More College
- University of Regina
- University of Saskatchewan