

# DEEPENING OUR COLLECTIVE UNDERSTANDING

Redefining Success for Aboriginal University Students



**NIPISSING**  
UNIVERSITY



# CONTRIBUTORS

We acknowledge with thanks, Nipissing First Nation, on whose traditional territory Nipissing University is located.

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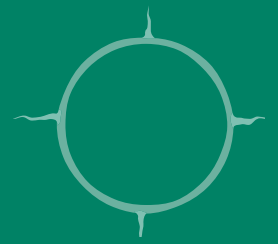
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# CONTENTS

1. Executive Summary	4
2. Background – Literature Review	6
3. Outline of the Project	15
Key Stakeholder Conversations	16
Anishinaabe Elder’s Guidance and Indigenous Protocols	17
Nipissing University Research Ethics Board	17
4. Success	18
Success for the Student	19
Identity	20
Agency/Leadership	24
Diversity	26
Success for Our People	28
Facilitating Success for our People	29
Community vs. Competition	29
Constructive vs. Unconstructive	31
Direct, Authentic Indigenous Design	32
Accessing the Indigenous World	32
Decolonization	34
Working in Multiple Worlds	36
Needs of the University vs. Needs of Students and Communities	36
5. Actions That Support Student Learning	37
Indigenize the University Environment	37
Acknowledge Our Living History	38
Traditional Teaching and Counseling	40
Teachable Moments	41
Structure Spaces	41
Improved Conditions for Communities	42
6. Recommendations	43
Conclusion	45
Nipissing University Practices	46
References	51
Appendix 1: Invitations, Participant Information Letters, Confidentiality	53
Invitations	53
Participant Information Letters and Informed Consent	54
Confidentiality	57



In the spring of 2015, Nipissing University engaged in its “Deepening our Collective Understanding” project, aimed at identifying and redefining success for Aboriginal<sup>1</sup> students attending provincial universities. For too long, success for Aboriginal students has been assessed using quantitative measures of enrolment, retention and graduation rates. Supported by funding from the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, the project gathered groups of stakeholders to develop a cohesive and comprehensive understanding of university success grounded in Aboriginal cultures, worldviews and perspectives. Over the span of eight days over a three-month period, Aboriginal graduate students, undergraduate students, senior university administrators, scholars, Elders, community members and allies engaged in reflective discussions pertaining to these three questions:

- How do you define success for Aboriginal students attending university?
- What are factors that can support this definition of success of Aboriginal students at university?
- What are obstacles that can hinder this definition of success of Aboriginal students at university?

Based on discussions, co-facilitated by an Elder and a member of the project team, the conversations, stories, experiences and comments shared by our participants were reflected on and analyzed for common themes and understandings. The result was an Aboriginal-centered understanding of success, with its contributing factors.

The second chapter of the report provides a comprehensive summary of previous Canadian reports that examine the contributing factors and obstacles for success at post-secondary institutions. This literature review demonstrates the traditional definitions of success in terms of enrolment, retention and graduation rates for Aboriginal students.

The third chapter outlines the methodology and its ethical considerations, as well as describing the methods employed in gathering the participants, facilitating the conversations and analyzing the transcripts.

Chapter four outlines the participants' understanding and definitions of success for Aboriginal students at university. From the conversations, there were two definite components of success. The components, along with their unique characteristics are:

- Success for the Student,
  - i) Identity,
  - ii) Agency/Leadership, and
  - iii) Diversity.
- Success for our People,
  - i) Community vs. Competition,
  - ii) Constructive vs. Unconstructive,
  - iii) Direct, Authentic Indigenous Design, and
  - iv) Needs of University vs. Needs of Student and Community.



<sup>1</sup> In this report, the terms Aboriginal and Indigenous refers to people who identify with First Nation (Status/ Non-Status), Métis and Inuit cultural or ancestral origins. When available and known, specific references to cultural groups will be used (ie. Anishnaabe, Omushkego, etc.)

Chapter five provides direct actions that support success for Aboriginal students. They are:

- Indigenize the University Environment
- Acknowledge our Living History
- Traditional Teaching and Counseling
- Teachable Moments
- Structured Spaces
- Improved Conditions for Communities

The sixth chapter provides a list of recommendations that university and other post-secondary institutions may choose to develop and implement to foster success for Aboriginal students. These recommendations are:

- Welcoming Environment,
- Redefining Vision, Mandate and Policies,
- Moving Beyond Aboriginal Services,
- Broadening the Measures of Success,
- Normalizing Indigenous Perspectives,
- Creating Safe Spaces,
- Engaging Gifts,
- Decolonizing Knowledge, and
- Creating Leadership Opportunities.

Chapter eight describes current practices at Nipissing University that demonstrate connections to the report's recommendations and actions that support success for Aboriginal students.





## BACKGROUND – LITERATURE REVIEW

**“...it’s important that we acknowledge that there has been a lot of Aboriginal success... we need to reflect upon that idea and improve upon what has been accomplished.”  
(Dr. Manitowabi)**

Dr. Darrel Manitowabi, an associate professor at Laurentian University, reminds us that Aboriginal peoples are succeeding not only in academic endeavors but in all aspects of Canadian society. However, traditional examinations of Aboriginal academic success are typically exemplified through comparative analyses of enrolment, retention and graduation rates between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. Although these data describe a context of success, this report will demonstrate a different understanding and measure of academic success.

### Current Statistics

The number of Aboriginal students attending university has increased from “...60 in 1961 to 13,196 in 1987...” (Stonechild, 2006) to approximately 66,000 having earned a university degree by 2011 (Statistics Canada, 2011). Since 1981, the percentage of Aboriginal peoples aged 25 to 64, who attained a university degree increased from 2% to 7.7% in 2006 (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada [AUCC], 2011).

These statistics illustrate a tremendous academic achievement by Aboriginal peoples in Canada. However, when using comparative data of academic completion rates, the success rate of Aboriginal students at the undergraduate level has consistently been lower compared to the non-Aboriginal population in Canada. The 2011 National Household Survey (Statistics Canada, 2011) indicated that only 9.8% of Aboriginal people aged 25 to 64 had earned a university degree compared to 26.5% of non-Aboriginal peoples. To further differentiate this demographic, the statistics demonstrate that the proportion of university graduates among First Nations people with registered Indian status was higher for those living off reserve, at 10.9%, than on reserve with 4.7% attaining a university degree. Métis people had a slightly higher proportion of university graduates (11.7%) than First Nations peoples. The Inuit population living within Inuit Nunagut (Nunavut, NWT, northern coastal regions of Labrador and Quebec) had a university completion rate of 1.9% compared to 13.0% of Inuit living outside Inuit Nunagut.

In Ontario, Aboriginal peoples are considered to be an under-represented group in the province's post-secondary educational institutes. In a recent empirical study, only 2.3% of the approximate 2400 respondents identified themselves as Aboriginal. Among those respondents, only 17.8% indicated that they had accessed university studies, which approximates to only ten (10) Aboriginal students (Finnie, Childs, and Wismer, 2011) in the province. Regardless of the issues pertaining to the self-identification of Aboriginal post-secondary students, it has been suggested that the Aboriginal population will never decrease the difference in academic achievement rates and achieve parity with non-Aboriginal Canadians (Mendelson, 2006).

Numerous studies and reports by academics and government agencies have been published, identifying and clarifying the factors that contribute or hinder the success of Aboriginal students in post-secondary institutions. Although this report focuses on the success of Aboriginal students at universities, most literature rarely differentiates between the varying forms of post-secondary education in Ontario and Canada (ie. college, university, apprenticeship, training). In addition, these documents typically quantify success in terms of enrolment, retention and graduation rates. As such, this literature

review mainly examines this limited understanding of success. Please note that the previously outlined statistics may not accurately reflect current Aboriginal student post-secondary success rates due to the different processes in gathering specific data in each institution. It has been recommended that the Ontario government conduct annual audits of Aboriginal enrolment and attainment rates at all its post-secondary institutions (Pin and Rudnicki, 2011) and to strengthen current tracking frameworks to establish more accurate baseline information on Aboriginal student success (Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2015). Finally, although there is a significant amount of international literature on post-secondary success of Indigenous students, the authors of this report focused primarily on Canadian references (where possible).

## Pursuing post-secondary education

In a report exploring the retention of Aboriginal students in post-secondary institutions in Atlantic Canada, Timmons (2009) identified the motivating factors for pursuing post-secondary education. They were:

- Necessity of attaining the highest level of education possible to compete for employment opportunities,
- Required an education to prevent individuals from ending up in poor social and economic conditions as experienced by peers back home,
- Gain skills and apply these skills in home community,
- Expressed the importance and value to themselves and others of achieving a post-secondary education,
- Become positive role models for family and friends in home community,
- Positive experiences with non-Aboriginal peoples, and
- Sense of pride in their Aboriginal heritage.

These factors are similar to the reasons that many Aboriginal people enroll in teacher education programs, of which many are designed specifically for people of Aboriginal ancestry. For some students, being an Aboriginal teacher allows them to give back to their community, become role models for Aboriginal youth and to promote their Indigenous culture as a means to instill Aboriginal pride in school-aged children (Duquette, 2001; Freeman, 2008; Laronde, 2000).





## Access and Enrolment

In a recent survey of Aboriginal financial award recipients (Indspire, 2013), the majority of respondents, of which 79% were enrolled in university programs, indicated that the top factors that influenced their choice of educational institution were:

- i) Program of study,
- ii) School reputation,
- iii) Faculty,
- iv) Financial aid (bursaries/scholarships),
- v) Indigenous centre services and,
- vi) Location was in close proximity to home.

The report highlighted that the respondents offered "...examples of areas where their choice of institution was based on positive factors..." (p. 8). However, for many Aboriginal students, accessing university studies presents unique challenges. Restoule (2011) identified access to university as a major concern amongst Aboriginal post-secondary students in Ontario due to the province's centralized application services. The study revealed that over three-quarters of the respondents were over the age of 25 and that more than 60% had accessed post-secondary studies through a bridging program or as a mature student. It was determined that many of these individuals did not utilize the province's centralized application processes for entrance into university studies while in secondary school. A cited reason was the lack of information pertaining to post-secondary options available to high-school level Aboriginal students, perhaps because of the perception of being 'at-risk' by school counselors or teachers, even though Aboriginal students were aware of the importance of post-secondary education. An additional obstacle for many Aboriginal students attending secondary school in more remote, northern areas of the province was the inability of their respective schools to offer the necessary pre-requisites for direct entrance into university from secondary school (Restoule, Mashford-Pringle, Chacaby, Smillie, Brunette, 2013).

For some Aboriginal students wishing to acquire a post-secondary education, some institutions have developed specific initiatives designed as 'access' programs. These unique opportunities are designed as outreach programs that build relationships between post-secondary education and K-12 systems and their students (Rosenbluth, 2011) and as important, provides higher education opportunities for individuals who have previously not enjoyed educational success (Alcorn and Levin, 1998). In some cases, the post-secondary institutions have modified the traditional admission policies to enroll in an access program, so as to broaden the entrance opportunities for Aboriginal students (Office of Aboriginal Initiatives, 2014).





## Obstacles and Barriers to Success

Once Aboriginal students reach post-secondary studies, they may face unique barriers to which non-Aboriginal students are not accustomed. It is important to recognize that Aboriginal students, especially those individuals who are the first in their family to attend post-secondary education, are considered different than most first-generation post-secondary students due to acts of colonization and the ongoing legacy and long-term effects of Canada's residential school system on Canada's Aboriginal population. Finnie, Wismer and Childs (2010) determined that first-generation students are "...not too different from non-first generation students in terms of [post-secondary education] experiences" and, "...first generation students are not more vulnerable than others when it comes to leaving [post-secondary education] without graduating" (p. 2). The results of their study strengthens the argument that the lower retention and graduation rates of Aboriginal students, when compared to non-Aboriginal students, cannot solely be attributed to those issues relating to the retention and graduation rates of first-generation students. Rather, it demonstrates the necessity of post-secondary institutions to better understand the unique factors that contribute to the academic success of Aboriginal students in their respective post-secondary institutions.

As previously mentioned, generations of Aboriginal peoples in Canada were subjected to verbal, physical and sexual abuse as victims and later, survivors of Canada's Residential School System. Although the last residential school closed in the 1990's, their impacts are still felt in contemporary society. As the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) states, "...in addition to the emotional and psychological damage they inflicted, one of the most far-reaching and devastating legacies of residential schools has been their impact on the educational and economic success of Aboriginal people" (TRC, 2015, p. 145). Apart from the devastating impacts on Aboriginal cultures, traditions and languages, survivors of residential schools also developed a distrust of formal educational systems (Malatest, 2002). This had direct and indirect impacts on primary and secondary level education, potentially diminishing an individual's academic preparedness for higher education (Malatest, 2004).

Once arriving at the post-secondary institution, the legacy of colonial educational practices creates unique cultural barriers against the Aboriginal student. For example, the historical perspective of the assimilative nature of higher education can lead to some Aboriginal students feeling that they do not belong at post-secondary institutions (Rosenbluth, 2011; Timmons, 2009). This issue, compounded with the effects of residential schools,

**"...have left many Aboriginal students lacking knowledge of their culture and identity—alienating them from their own people as well as from the mainstream culture on campus. Many students have a persistent feeling of isolation stemming from the notion that they are uniquely alone." (Rosenbluth, 2011, p. 22)**

The individual's disconnect can be further compounded with the lack of Aboriginal faculty, staff and other role models at some post-secondary institutions (AUCC, 2013). Lastly, the disconnection is further exacerbated when an Aboriginal student's program of study does not reflect her culture, history or worldview (Holmes, 2006).

A disturbing barrier that is still unfortunately prevalent in society is racism and discrimination felt and experienced by Aboriginal students in some post-secondary institutions. In a study conducted by Currie, Wild, Cameron, Schopflocher, Donald, Laing and Veugelers (2012), the report concluded that over 80% of Aboriginal university students had experienced racial discrimination in their lives which included assumptions that other students made about their academic legitimacy and exposure to racial slurs about their ethnic group. Students who considered themselves traditional or cultural Aboriginal persons were significantly more likely to experience racial discrimination at their respective institutions (Cote-Meek, 2014).

Adequate funding to enroll and pursue post-secondary education is a significant barrier for some Aboriginal students (Assembly of First Nations, 2012; AUCC, 2011, 2013; Hades, 2013; Holmes 2006; Malatest, 2004; Pin and Rudnicki, 2011; Rosenbluth, 2011; Timmons, 2009; VIU, 2013). The Assembly of First Nations (2012) reported that financial barriers was the primary obstacle to First Nation learners living on reserves in accessing post-secondary education, estimating that approximately 27% of eligible students were unable to attend because of funding limitations. One demographic particularly hit harder by financial considerations are older, female students, who typically make up the majority of post-secondary Aboriginal students (Hades, 2013; Malatest, 2010). These individuals have the additional financial burden of child care costs and other family responsibilities that younger students may not face while pursuing post-secondary education. These pressures can cause undo stress, forcing some students to apply for social assistance in order to remain in school (Malatest, 2004; Timmons, 2009).

Language can be a barrier for some students, particularly for those students whose first language is neither English nor French (Malatest, 2010). Lastly, some Aboriginal students may arrive from remote, isolated communities in northern regions of the province or country, further separating the student from his family and other supportive networks (Timmons, 2009).

## Retention and Completion

Various studies and reports have listed and described the factors that contribute to increasing the retention and graduation rates of Aboriginal students attending post-secondary institutions. In Malatest (2010), over 40 post-secondary programs in Ontario colleges and universities, specifically designed to increase the recruitment, participation and retention of Aboriginal students, were reviewed. From the interviews of key stakeholders (community members, Elders, students), six broad categories of supports were determined. This compiled list shares similar identified factors that contribute to the factors of success listed in other reports (Hades, 2013; Indspire, 2013; Pin and Rudnicki, 2011; Rosenbluth, 2011; Timmons, 2009).

- Financial supports – Tuition, books, day care, travel, living expenses,
- Academic supports – Faculty consulting, peer tutoring, academic upgrading,
- Individual supports – Personal counseling and personal health promotion,
- Cultural supports – Activities and programs that reinforce the importance of language, traditions and pride, access to Elders,
- Social supports - Student liaising and peer mentoring, and
- Employment supports – Pre-apprenticeship programs, contract training, trades readiness and work placement opportunities, resume writing.

In addition to these commonly identified supports, some reports described unique factors that contributed to post-secondary success. Rosenbluth (2011) outlined programs that provide students with strong support and cooperation with professional societies and regulatory bodies. This, in addition to faculty assistance with writing resumés, interview preparation, summer internships and work experiences, is done within a broader community context with the goal of "...closing the loop back to Aboriginal community needs" (p. 22).

In most cases, these supports and services are delivered through dedicated resources usually located at a centralized physical space on campus, most commonly known as Aboriginal Student Centres, or other variations of that title (Holmes, 2006; Malatest, 2010; Pin and Rudnicki, 2011; Rosenbluth, 2011). These Centres provide a "...sense of belonging and guidance to students who may find that the university environment is very different from, or alien to, environments in which they had previously lived" (Malatest, 2010, p 28). These Centres house various individuals with responsibilities to support Aboriginal students, usually including counselors who have specific skills in working with Aboriginal students during recruitment, enrollment, and transitioning to post-secondary studies, and finally assisting students to graduation (Hill-MacDonald, 2011).

The development, incorporation and use of Aboriginal curricula and pedagogies have been identified as supportive factors for Aboriginal students (Malatest, 2002; Pin and Rudnicki, 2011; Timmons, 2009). The inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives builds cultural continuity that assists in both the academic and non-academic aspects of the post-secondary experience (Rosenbluth, 2011). Through academic efforts to incorporate Aboriginal perspectives, relationships between faculty and Aboriginal students are strengthened, providing for greater opportunities for faculty to better understand their Aboriginal students (Hampton and Roy, 2002). Other recommendations are to include mandatory courses on Indigenous issues for all students (Rosenbluth, 2011) or to expand existing Aboriginal/Indigenous Studies programs and Aboriginal languages courses at the post-secondary institution (Timmons, 2009). Malatest (2010) provides the following recommendations when developing programs designed to retain Aboriginal students.

- Solicit the input of communities when designing programs including Elders and other role models,
- Programs should take a holistic approach (emphasis should be spread across cultural knowledge and understanding, academic skills and employability),
- Programs should minimize the time spent outside their communities,
- Students should be provided with a sense of pride in their own culture through the development of course materials that are culturally relevant and culturally sensitive, and
- Programs should be launched with a physical presence on campus.



To enact these initiatives, policy changes and processes, it is essential that support come from all levels of administration. As Rosenbluth (2011) states,

**“This requires the intentional commitment of the governing bodies and senior administrations to embed their support of Aboriginal education within the institutional structure, strategic plan, and budget. The creation of Aboriginal departments with reporting structures to the president and senior administration ensures that Aboriginal concerns are part of the governance structure of the institution” (p. 23).**

## Indigenous Perspectives of Success

In 1972, the National Indian Brotherhood (NIB) released the document, Indian Control of Indian Education (ICIE). This foundational document identified the role of education to “...give our children a strong sense of identity, with confidence in their personal worth and ability” (NIB, 1972, p.3). Verna Kirkness, a highly respected educational scholar from the Fisher River Cree Nation in Manitoba and a contributing author of the ICIE document, offers the following definition of success. “Progress is the point at which Indian people experience fulfillment in achieving personal goals, as well as the point at which overall advancement is evident in a given school, community, or other institution” (Kirkness, 1999, p. 57).

What this understanding of success demonstrates is the success of Aboriginal peoples have been previously defined through an imposed, quantifiably limiting framework. The disadvantage of limiting the definition of success to the quantifiable perspectives and factors previously described in this report, is to narrow our understanding and subsequent approaches and processes to facilitate success for Aboriginal post-secondary students. The Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (2011) also recognizes that its own mandates and objectives “...need to include not only graduation and completion rates but also more holistic measures of success” (p. 19). Malatest (2010) reports that many interviewed program coordinators described the inadequacies of current methods of reporting Aboriginal post-secondary success. As one participant stated,

**“We may start a program with 22 students and in the end only graduate 8 students. But these 8 students go on to do great things for themselves and their community so we really view it as a big success for us and them. You can’t simply look at the numbers” (p. 48).**



Adding to this issue is the unknown direct effect that previously identified factors contribute to individual success. The Canadian Council on Learning (2006) conducted a literature review of 207 documents to clearly identify factors that contributed to post-secondary success for Aboriginal students. The review concluded that "...little literature empirically examines how effectively various programs and methods actually contribute to Aboriginal student success" (p. 1).

An exploration of Aboriginal-based understandings of indicators and metrics that assessed educational success for Aboriginal learners were examined (Tunison, 2007) and developed into Animation Theme Bundles, identified by the Aboriginal Learning Knowledge Centre. They were:

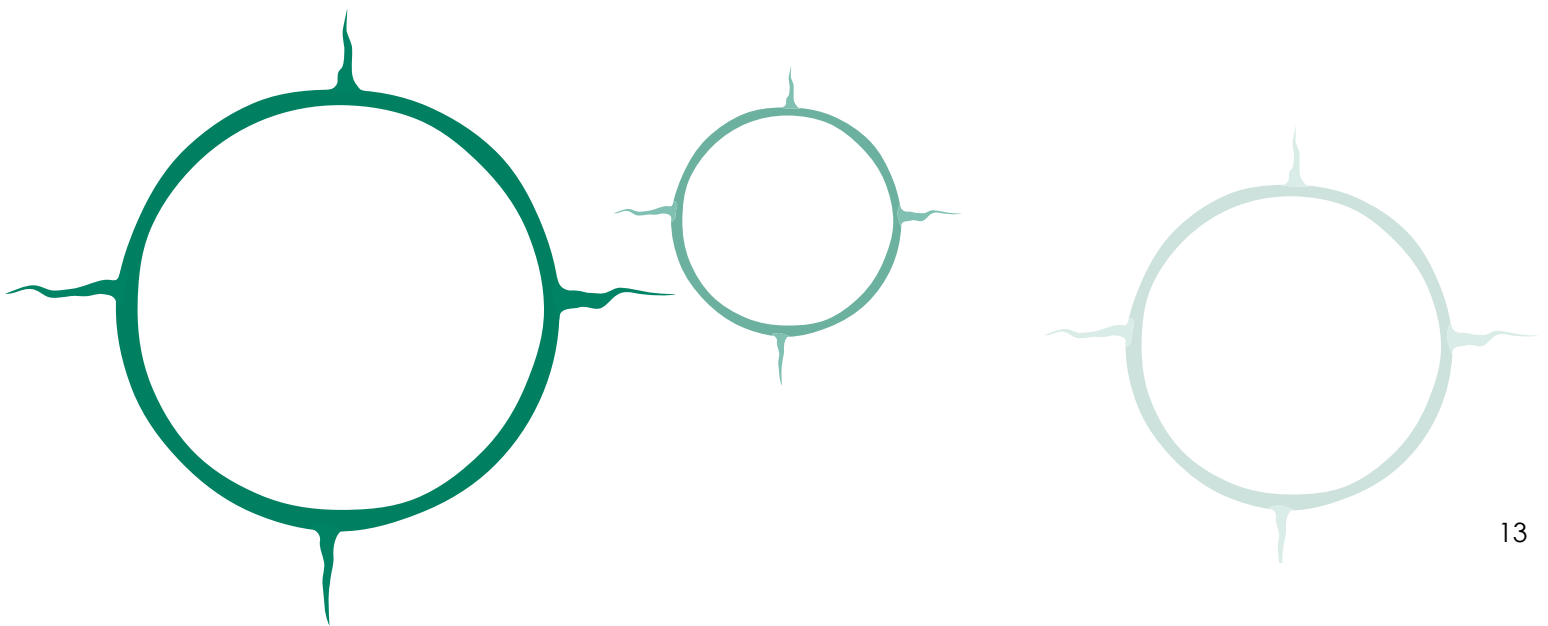
- 1) Comprehending the learning spirit,
- 2) Aboriginal language learning,
- 3) Diverse educational systems and learning,
- 4) Pedagogy of professionals and practitioners in learning, and
- 5) Technology and Learning (p. 10).

The report also provided a review of the sources that informed those measures and an analysis of the efficacy of the measures and data. The report concluded that there was an "...uneasy relationship between the educational objectives typical of Eurocentric culture (e.g., graduation from high school...)" and the "... 'culturally appropriate' outcomes typical of First Nation, Metis and Inuit peoples (e.g., ancestral language efficacy)..." (p. 28). In addition, the report indicates that "...there is little consensus as to which is more important or what form this relationship should take" (p. 28). The author concluded that although these orientations may exhibit opposite epistemologies, "...it may be possible to reconcile the knowledge systems to a place of convergence thereby creating change for all who engage in this process" (p. 29).

In 2007 the Canadian Council on Learning released *State of Learning in Canada: No Time for Complacency*. This report stated that

**"Educational indicators now widely used by governments and researchers often do not reflect the goals and values identified by Aboriginal Peoples. Indicators of Aboriginal learning must be broadened to measure more than simply years of schooling and performance on standardized assessments" (p. 81).**

In response, Aboriginal leaders facilitated community discussions to explore and develop holistic learning models for Canada's First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples. The report, "The State of Aboriginal Learning in Canada: A Holistic Approach to Measuring Success" (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009), clearly articulates the necessity of all peoples, institutions, organizations and governments to gain a "...comprehensive understanding of Aboriginal people's perspectives on learning and a culturally appropriate framework for measuring it..." or "...the diverse aspirations and needs of First Nations, Inuit and Metis across Canada will continue to be misinterpreted and misunderstood" (p. 4). Their initiative determined that it was indeed necessary to redefine success within a more holistic framework, one that recognized all aspects of life-long learning for Aboriginal peoples.



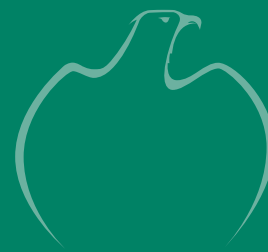
## Future Perspectives

Nipissing University recognizes, in addition to creating alternative pathways to post-secondary education for Aboriginal learners, it is necessary to support those individuals while they attend our institutions. However, Nipissing University also recognizes that traditional models of support may be based on the simple objective to move students from admission to graduation, without looking at the larger, holistic educational movements within which Aboriginal communities are engaged.

Building upon the successful programs and initiatives available to Aboriginal students in Ontario's post-secondary institutions (MTCU, 2015), Nipissing University's "Deepening our Collective Understanding" project responds to the Canadian Council on Learning's call towards developing a more holistic understanding of Aboriginal success at the postsecondary level. Through the sharing of experiences and wisdom by invited stakeholders (Elders, community members, Aboriginal scholars, Aboriginal students), the project develops an Aboriginal-based understanding of university success. By reallocating resources and focus towards redefined outcomes of success, the support services of the Office of Aboriginal Initiatives at Nipissing University will strengthen actions that facilitate Aboriginal student university success, respecting Aboriginal students' collective understanding of success at the post-secondary level and those of regional Aboriginal communities and the broader university community in Ontario. At the completion of the project, an assessment and evaluation of these specific supports will inform how the Office of Aboriginal Initiatives conducts its programs and activities to meet the redefined understandings of success for Aboriginal post-secondary students.



# 3 OUTLINE OF THE PROJECT



**“The focus of this gathering is redefining Aboriginal student success: how can universities support students in their success goals. This is an area that I have been talking about for a long time. And so the conversations today and tomorrow, about this topic, and the conversations this university will have to have, will have to look at...how can we bring an Indigenous idea of success to the ways in which we learn, including what to know and how we’re judged that we know. It’s a really big task, because it’s a conversation that can’t just happen here. It has to happen in society, and in all of education. I’m telling you that this conversation is a conversation that is of value, and not just to Indigenous students. It’s of value to all of humanity, because we’re going to address the needs of our world, and our earth ... and then we’ll be able to address this question.” (Dr. Williams)**

**“The task of educators in this round table is to move beyond defining or redefining student success to chart action in support of success. Our task is to consider and to act on ways to free students from the threat of education that separates them from themselves and their people and provokes a frozen stance that blocks learning.” (Dr. Brant-Castellano)**

Deepening Our Collective Understanding<sup>2</sup>, a project aimed at redefining Aboriginal student success at university, was planned with two objectives in mind: 1) deepening Nipissing University’s Office of Aboriginal Initiatives’ understanding of university success for Aboriginal students, and; 2) sharing this understanding with other post-secondary institutions, as a promising approach which they might wish to consider.

## **The project was comprised of two stages:**

**Gathering Wisdom:** In year one of the project, the Office of Aboriginal Initiatives facilitated strategic discussions with key stakeholders in Aboriginal university education: Aboriginal undergraduate students, Aboriginal graduate students, Aboriginal scholars and administrators, Elders, community members and allies. The discussions focused on exploring and defining what it means to be ‘successful’ for Aboriginal students who pursue university studies. The analyses from each discussion were compiled and summarized in this report, to be shared with the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities and other post-secondary stakeholders.

**Piloting New Supports:** In year two of the project, based on an analysis of these strategic discussions, the Office of Aboriginal Initiatives will develop specific activities to promote ‘success’ – as defined by the stakeholders - and to implement some of their recommendations. Recommended activities will be assessed to determine their direct and indirect contributions to the ‘success’ of Aboriginal undergraduate and graduate students at Nipissing University. The assessment will also inform how the Office of Aboriginal Initiatives evaluates and strengthens existing community-informed practices in support of Aboriginal students throughout the university.

2 The Deepening our Collective Understanding pilot project was consistent with the following priority in the Annual Business Priorities for the Targeted Initiatives Fund: gather evidence and data to support improvements in program development and delivery, and identify promising practices and/or set indicators and/or service standards. It also met many of the goals of the Aboriginal Post-secondary Education and Training Policy Framework: post-secondary education and training environments are increasingly responsive to and respectful of the needs, choices and aspirations of Aboriginal learners; and, an increasing number of Aboriginal learners achieve high levels of success in post-secondary education and training.



## Key Stakeholder Conversations

The project was divided into four Conversations, held at different times in the spring of 2015, with different stakeholders involved in Aboriginal university education; 1) Aboriginal graduate students (February 2015), 2) Aboriginal scholars and senior university administrators (March 2015), 3) Elders and community members (April 2015), and 4) Aboriginal undergraduate students (April 2015).

Invitation letters were sent to previously identified individuals from each of the stakeholder groups to participate in a two-day Conversation. The potential participants were chosen to provide the broadest sample of perspectives and experiences to the respective Conversation. This included ensuring that both genders were represented, as well as members of different Aboriginal cultural groups (ie. Anishnaabe, Haudenosaunee, Mushkegowuk, Métis, etc.) and varying years of experience within that stakeholder group (ie. undergraduates enrolled in various years of their program, new scholars and retired professors, etc.).

Each stakeholder group engaged in discussions pertaining to these three questions.

1. How do you define success for Aboriginal students attending university?
2. What are factors that can support this definition of success of Aboriginal students at university?
3. What are obstacles that can hinder this definition of success of Aboriginal students at university?

The invited individuals who chose to attend their respective Conversation arrived at Nipissing University and engaged in discussions co-facilitated by a Nipissing university faculty member and an Elder-in-Residence. Each Conversation began with the Elder leading a smudging ceremony and prayer followed by a sharing circle allowing each participant the opportunity to introduce himself or herself to the group and share his or her initial thoughts regarding the purpose of the gathering. After a small break, the respective group re-convened to continue its faculty-facilitated discussions for the remainder of the day, taking breaks for meals and refreshments. These discussions were conducted using a semi-structured interview process, permitting participants the opportunity to explore topics and ideas connected with one of the three project questions. The first day ended with thoughts being offered by the Elder.

The second day began with the Elder conducting a smudging ceremony followed by a sharing circle to allow participants the opportunity to reflect on the first day's discussions. The faculty facilitator then re-engaged the participants in further conversations for the remainder of the day. The Conversation concluded with a closing circle led by the Elder, with each participant sharing his or her final thoughts.

The discussions were recorded and transcribed for review and analysis. The transcripts were analyzed through data reduction, data display and drawing conclusions. Each data set was analyzed for tentative themes and was constantly compared to other data sets to create more meaningful categories.



## Anishinaabe Elder's Guidance and Indigenous Protocols

John Sawyer, a Nipissing First Nation member and Elder-in-Residence at Nipissing University was a constant source of ethical guidance. At planning meetings, conversations, and during follow-up meetings, the project team was reminded that people sometimes shared traditional knowledge, handed down by the ancestors through generations and therefore exempt from ownership. Each Conversation began with a smudging ceremony. A smudge is a process by which the traditional medicines of the Anishnaabe such as tobacco, sweetgrass, sage or cedar, is burned to allow the smoke of the medicine to cleanse the room and the participants of negative energies. This was followed by the Elder leading the group in a sharing circle, as this is a culturally- appropriate manner of gathering Aboriginal peoples together for discussions. A sharing circle is considered a safe space for individuals to express thoughts and ideas that maybe considered personal or intimate, and in some cases, spiritual or sacred. To respect the cultural significance of the smudging ceremony and the sharing circle, these components of the Conversation were not recorded.

## Nipissing University Research Ethics Board

In compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (Government of Canada, 2014), the principal investigator submitted a research ethics protocol (#15-01-08AB) to the Nipissing University Research Ethics Board (NUREB) and it received NUREB approval.<sup>3</sup>

Standard participant information letters and consent forms were provided, and confidentiality oaths completed by team members (see Appendix 1). All participants received a copy of the draft report and were given an opportunity to review their comments for amendment, further elaboration or removal, as well as to choose anonymity.

<sup>3</sup> According to NUREB, all research involving Aboriginal peoples and communities must be reviewed by the Office of Aboriginal Initiatives that administers Community Engagement Plans for this type of research. With OAI staff involved in this research project, a conflict of interest of interest was avoided by referring the protocol to the Chair of the Nipissing University Aboriginal Council on Education (NUACE).



As demonstrated in the literature review, Canada has witnessed a tremendous growth in the number of Aboriginal peoples attending and graduating from university programs.

**“Where there were once, in the 1970s, dozens and in the 1980s, hundreds, we now have thousands of Aboriginal students who have many, many options for post-secondary education.”  
(Dr. Mike DeGagné)**

However, we must recognize the challenges and obstacles that Canada's Aboriginal peoples had to face and overcome, in the form of government-sanctioned policies, or confronting overt racist attitudes of Canada's non-Aboriginal peoples. Most notable of these actions is the horrific legacy of Canada's residential school system, and other forms of colonial oppression, that still lingers over Aboriginal communities and Aboriginal students. As one Aboriginal graduate student explains, the colonial goals and objectives attempted by Canada's residential school systems still continues using Canada's existing education system.

**“We're survivors, we're still survivors of the education system whether you like it or not. It's not called residential school, its called higher education...we're still survivors coming though that...”  
(Bonnie Jane Maracle)**

The statement underlines the difficulty of determining the academic success of Aboriginal peoples as its assessment is conducted within the context and perspectives associated with residential schools and its perceived contemporary institutions. Mohawk scholar Dr. Marlene Brant-Castellano shares her understandings of this phenomenon based on current research done by Oneida psychologist Roland Chrisjohn.

**“Roland criticized past research on Aboriginal student learning. He said that while researchers purported to be observing student learning, what they were really seeing was Aboriginal student responses to being under assault. The task of educators in this round table is to move beyond defining or redefining student success to chart action in support of success. Our task is to consider and to act on ways to free students from the threat of education that separates them from themselves and their people and that provokes a frozen stance that blocks learning.”  
(Dr. Brant-Castellano)**

Although this sentiment maybe shared by other Aboriginal peoples, the importance of a pursuing a post-secondary education is still considered an important goal amongst our participants.

**“We're survivors of higher education and we still see the value in education just as our ancestors did.” (Bonnie Jane Maracle)**

**“There are always learning opportunities. What you do today will have a benefit or an impact on those that are yet to come.” (Angela Recollet)**

**“When we're designing the programs at the university, the program for learning...it's really important that our people get to the diploma and the credentials they study for. Because what I've seen in my years of education is so many of our people work really hard for the most minimal pay because they don't have the credentials.” (Dr. Williams)**

After an analysis of the Conversations, the project team identified two dimensions of success for Aboriginal students in university education neither readily apparent nor captured in conventional statistics. These are:

- 1) Success for the student, and
- 2) Success for our people.

## Success for the Student

**"I guess my idea for success would be to be able to support my son in all aspects of life. I'm a single mom..." (Paige Linklater-Wong)**

**"I'm sitting here trying to figure out what is success, what makes me feel successful? It's those little things that help find the bigger picture because that's still a part of the picture. It's the journey, the pathway. It becomes who you are, how you define yourself after because that's your self-identity." (Keri-Lynn Peltier)**

**"Student success is ... assessing of self for overall wellbeing. And when I think of that, I think of the four aspects of wellbeing: the physical, the mental and the emotional, and the spiritual." (Christine\*)**

**"That is what success is to me, it's life, you finally live to be who you are." (Janie Kataquapit)**

These student comments demonstrate the varied personal definitions of individual success. Each person relates his or her success to life experiences and current situations, and connects it to future endeavours and goals. For some individuals, the purpose of pursuing a university education was for its potential advantages in future employment. For others, the reasons and objectives changed as the students progressed through their respective program, leading to broader understandings of the value of a university education.

**"I'm going take to take a course or a job that relates to me and my role as a classroom teacher, because I don't want to do something for nothing unless I'm going to benefit from it. And I don't mean that in a selfish kind of way, but it's going to develop my skill set, develop my knowledge. Always ... it's always related to that. You know, how is it going to make me a better learner...a better teacher." (Lorraine Sutherland)**

**"...we go to school for so many different reasons, and I wrote a few of them . . . because I wasn't doing anything else; as a ticket out of a particular difficulty; for a better job, whether that be more high-paying or more satisfying; because it's expected; because it's a way to begin the healing journey; so that I can help my community; because I'm passionate about ideas and learning; so I can make change; to prove I can do it; to be a role model..." (Erin Dokis)**

Regardless of the definitions and personal understandings of success, it became evident that the university environment created opportunities for students to examine these ideas and understand its significance for Aboriginal peoples.

**"And I went into [law school] because I thought I wanted to try and affect some kind of change." (Christine\*)**

**"...one of things that I really appreciate about post secondary education was that it allowed me the space to think big thoughts and hearing about success... and defining that it was survival." (Erin Dokis)**

Erin Dokis, a graduate student from Dokis First Nation, explains that attending university was the next progressive step in her family's acts of survival. She explains,

**"...my grandparents' generation, for their generation, success was survival. Surviving, what could be called education, was about their survival and then in my parents' generation,...my dad was the first person from our reserve to go to university, so for my grandparents...success is survival, and for my parents, success is getting in the door and assimilating successfully... being able to jump through those hoops the university expects us to jump through. And I feel like for my generation...for us it's about options. It's about questioning that authority, it's about resurgence of Indigenous ways of knowing." (Erin Dokis)**

\* denotes a participant who wishes that his/her comments from the Conversation(s) remain anonymous. The participant(s) chose an alias to represent him/herself

For Ms. Dokis, she continues her family's work by building upon the acts of survival accomplished by her grandparents and parents. She recognizes the opportunities achieved by her family and strives to broaden and deepen the definition of success for herself and other Aboriginal students. As she states, examining and strengthening Indigenous heritage and culture is an area of exploration as it connects to success. Dr. Brant-Castellano also identifies the connections between an individual's cultural identity and success. She explains,

**“A successful student is one who carries a strong sense of identity that incorporates his or her First Nations, Inuit, or Métis origins and all that goes with that identity and heritage. A successful student is one who is discovering his or her own power. I prefer the word ‘agency’...to navigate the twists and turns on the path of life. Does that definition also mean getting a degree? I would say that, on balance, having a strong identity and a strong sense of agency is likely to lead to academic success, but not necessarily right now.” (Dr. Brant-Castellano)**

In our conversations, Dr. Brant-Castellano identifies three key aspects in understanding individual Aboriginal university student success. They are;

- 1) Identity,
- 2) Agency, and
- 3) Diversity.

## Identity

**“‘Identity’ refers to our sense of self: who we are, where we’ve come from and where we’re going. A strong, healthy sense of identity means that a person can look inward and be at ease with who she is and where she is on her life path. She can look around at the people she is connected with and take in affirmations that she is an okay person. We continue to negotiate our identity throughout life. We use the experiences from our journey, and we take in the messages or affirmations that come to us from outside along the way. We pass through shifting roles and responsibilities, negotiating who we are, what we are, and the value of that self in the context of changing circumstances.” (Dr. Brant –Castellano)**

The exploration and examination of an individual's Aboriginal identity, or Indigeneity, was a common theme expressed by many of our participants. As Dr. Brant-Castellano explains, an individual contextualizes his or her identity through the life experiences previously and currently faced by that person. For people of Aboriginal ancestry, the legacy of residential schools deeply eroded the cultural origins and foundations for multiple generations. As Nipissing University President Dr. DeGagné elaborates, this legacy still impacts the post-secondary experience of Aboriginal students today.

**“The whole problem with residential schools...beyond the abuse, and beyond the fact that it was against the will of Aboriginal people...was the problem of assimilation: the idea that the passage that you had to pay to go from a place of being uneducated to educated was to become someone else. That’s the horrible part of it, when I hear people say that they actually got a good education in residential schools. Well, yes they sometimes did, but what price did they pay? What was the cost of that education? They had to become someone else.” (Dr. DeGagné)**

A result of this ‘cultural genocide’ (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015) is Aboriginal people rediscovering, reclaiming and strengthening their cultural heritage. For an Aboriginal post-secondary student, this process is occurring concurrently with the individual negotiating the connections between his Indigenous heritage and his understanding of his Indigeneity. Compounding the potential difficulties during this journey are the stereotypes and racist perspectives that Aboriginal peoples confront on a daily basis. As Dr. Brant-Castellano explains,

**“In addition to all the challenges of working through the tasks of adolescence, and stepping out into new ventures in a foreign environment, Aboriginal youth also have to deal with stereotypes, low expectations, and incidents of outright racism in their encounters with settler society. Those negative messages, often repeated, can be internalized and feed into a low self-image and a**

**fear of trying new things or expressing and putting out for public view, more or less, what's going on with them.” (Dr. Brant-Castellano)**

As one graduate student states, the racist beliefs and attitudes, in addition to the absence of cultural practice and knowledge, had an influence on a community's positive self-image.

**“I think part of what it was for me it was, it is and continues to be learning about who I am. It went back to what does it mean to be Native. What does it mean to be Indian? I grew up on a reserve, and a lot of people at that time...because we didn't grow up with our traditional knowledge...talking about it openly and practicing it...although I do believe it's still there, it's just sleeping you know? Just...growing up and thinking that the white way was the best way. We all sort of...the community...sort of gravitated towards that idealism of the white way is the best way and not really connecting with my 'Indianness'... always associating Indianness with poverty, issues, and not being smart enough or not knowing enough.” (Robin Potts)**

This graduate student illustrates a community experience that has the potential to limit the aspirations and goals of its membership, due to negative self-images and self-blame. Based on these experiences, Dr. Darrel Manitowabi, an Anishnaabe Associate Professor at Laurentian University, references Eduardo Duran, a Native American clinical psychologist, who outlines possible future pathways for an Aboriginal student.

**“...[from] a more critical quote by Eduardo Duran, ‘the only option for young Native males is to be a drunk or a medicine man’ and that's something that really strikes to the heart of the Indigenous male experiences and that's not to speak against the Indigenous female experience from Eduardo's perspective. A woman has the gift to produce life and so motherhood is an identity option...some Native males are lost in this contemporary society that we live in and they're trying to grasp for a sense of identity and they don't always see that identity reflected in their environment in which they live.” (Dr. Manitowabi)**



Dr. Manitowabi further elaborates on identity and its direct effect on the varying definitions of success.

**“...success became ...grounded in their identity. [Aboriginal students] had no problem with student success from an academic perspective but they needed to know who they are and where they came from and they needed to heal themselves or replace their self-doubt that they had in their lives. On the other hand you had the Indigenous students who come from the students’ First Nations community who did not excel academically, who had difficulty writing, difficulty keeping on track...usually came with young families, and usually were the first ones in their family to enter university, did not have a lot of support in their home environment. Typically their parents could not make a clear connection on why they were going to university...usually on the verge on wanting to pull out of university. On the other hand they were well grounded on who they were and had a sense of identity...they understand the dynamics of First Nations communities, understand things from an urban context. Their challenge was to succeed academically. So, success for those students then became simply at the very least, graduating or improving on writing skills, or developing a better sense of self-confidence in the university environment.” (Dr. Manitowabi)**

Some Aboriginal graduate and undergraduate students shared their exploration of identity. As Temaugama Anishinabai graduate student Robin Potts indicates,

**“I wanted to know what it was to be Anishinabai. It was more than just growing up on a reserve; it was more to me than just having a status card. Like, what does that mean to me? ... I became a seeker of what I call the truth. Because I felt like things weren’t right inside of me...” (Robin Potts)**

This student is similar to others who enter the university environment from different starting points in their academic journey. For undergraduate student Janie Kataquapit, the issue of identity was compounded by the disconnect she felt with other students in the institution.

**“I feel like that when I’m out there with the students...I feel so out of place. It took me a while especially when you come from a reservation, you have this bubble and when you leave the bubble, you feel so out of place.” (Janie Kataquapit)**

This disconnection between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students is one reason for post-secondary institutions to create and support dedicated services and programs for its Aboriginal student body. These spaces allow Aboriginal students to feel comfortable through interacting with students who have similar experiences in the post-secondary learning environment.

**“When walking into the native lounge, it reminded me of many other educational institutes I have graduated from and it honestly made me feel so humble. It was a place where I could go to work on my studies, as well as, getting to know everyone who comes into the lounge. The open access to gather with friends throughout school hours, celebrating holidays with food gatherings and having a quiet space to smudge or talk with an Elder was how I graduated from Nipissing University.” (Roxanne Martin)**

However, for other Aboriginal students, they questioned their Indigeneity, potentially causing them to remove themselves from valuable support networks and relationships that these spaces provide.

**“I didn’t feel like I was Indian enough to go to [Aboriginal Services].” (Erin Dokis)**

Cheryle Partridge, an Anishnaabe Assistant Professor at Laurentian University and a graduate student, describes the irony of Aboriginal students discovering their Indigeneity at western, colonial educational institutions.

**“I think it is ironic that we are learning about our Teachings and culture in institutions; be they educational or penal! The colonization process halted the natural flow of intergenerational teaching and learning, but the decolonization process has taken over and our people are now teaching in the institutions and our people are now learning in the institutions. It is all good.” (Cheryle Partridge)**

Graduate student Amy Shawanda, describes the emotional state that some students experience while exploring their Indigenous identity. For Amy, she began to understand that a large part of her Aboriginal culture and heritage was missing from her life, or as she describes the experience,

**“ [I] sat there, sitting there, crying my first day of class. And my professor's like, ‘What's wrong?’ And I was like, ‘I don't know; I have this weird hole inside of me.’ And [the professor says], ‘You must be starting your healing journey.’” (Amy Shawanda)**

Dr. Manitowabi shares his experiences as a faculty member who is not only tasked with teaching culturally relevant material, but also engages with students during this journey of discovery.

**“...teaching Indigenous studies is like being a therapist. I don't have any human services training but we're engaging with this personal psychological engagement with difficult subject matter and in the process, people become changed. We're witnesses to people undergoing a psychological transformation in the process of being educated.” (Dr. Manitowabi)**





Elder John Sawyer simply describes this transformation as the healing process.

“...the healing process that we talk about, that’s what we’re doing. We’re healing from a system that caused us a lot of problems” (John Sawyer)

## Agency/Leadership

“So success for the student and success for our people are linked together. But I agree with Mike DeGagné that loading this on people who are struggling just with figuring out how to survive in post-secondary education - emotionally, socially, academically - and saying to them, ‘You are the future of your community. You are the first one to graduate from university’, is really putting a pretty heavy load on them.” (Dr. Brant-Castellano)

Even though this additional responsibility maybe challenging for some individuals, Aboriginal students are successfully negotiating these responsibilities through direct participation with their academic learning environment.

“I allowed myself to be true to myself through the whole process of institutionalized policies, telling me...boxing me in and trying to give me an identity, where I felt like I was still able to maintain who I am and still search for who I am and be true to myself in my process. It takes a lot of courage to do that because I had to learn about self-advocacy and learn about a policy that I have seen that wasn’t fair...” (Robin Potts)

As evidenced earlier, the long-lasting effects of residential schools have limited opportunities for some Aboriginal peoples to affect personal or local change.

“...[in] residential schools there was an atmosphere that was created, ...an atmosphere of fear, intimidation and control. And you didn’t even have to talk about it...you didn’t have to say it ... [it] was just there...like the smoke that hovered in this room. It was there, you go to the room...it was a presence...you couldn’t see it but you could feel it and the students knew it was there but they never talked about it...you don’t say nothing, you don’t tell anybody, you don’t talk about anything, you don’t tell and you don’t complain...or else you’ll get beaten or punished severely. And that legacy transferred at least three generations of that and this is what we’re dealing with...not only here in the larger society. And its become manifested in the behaviors of the students in the classroom.” (Harvey Trudeau)

Brian Hansen, a highly respected educator and administrator for a local First Nation community, observes the silence that some Aboriginal students exhibit and explains its origins from his understanding.

“It’s a difficult process to say to a seventeen year old, eighteen year old, nineteen year old, ‘you kept quiet for the last nineteen years because in a classroom you were always told to shut up and do your work!’ To say to them, ‘I value what you have to say...what you have to say is important, so let’s hear it’ ...It’s difficult trying to convince [students] because it’s such a pervasive process ...it just overpowers them for so long...it takes time to convince them that they actually have a voice, because they haven’t for centuries.” (Brian Hansen)

Through the facilitation of leadership opportunities, students can become active agents in their learning, leading to future success.

“...empowerment is a key component of student success. That was a recurring aspiration expressed by youth in research conducted by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. I am not entirely comfortable with the word ‘empowerment’ because it suggests to me that power can somehow be granted to you, or you seize it for yourself in a demonstration. I prefer the word ‘agency,’ the capacity to make things happen. I think that agency may be a better word to describe that process of achieving knowledge and putting it to use for your own safety and accomplishment, and also for the good of the community.” (Dr. Brant-Castellano)

The Master of Professional Education at the University of Western Ontario provides opportunities for community members to affect change.

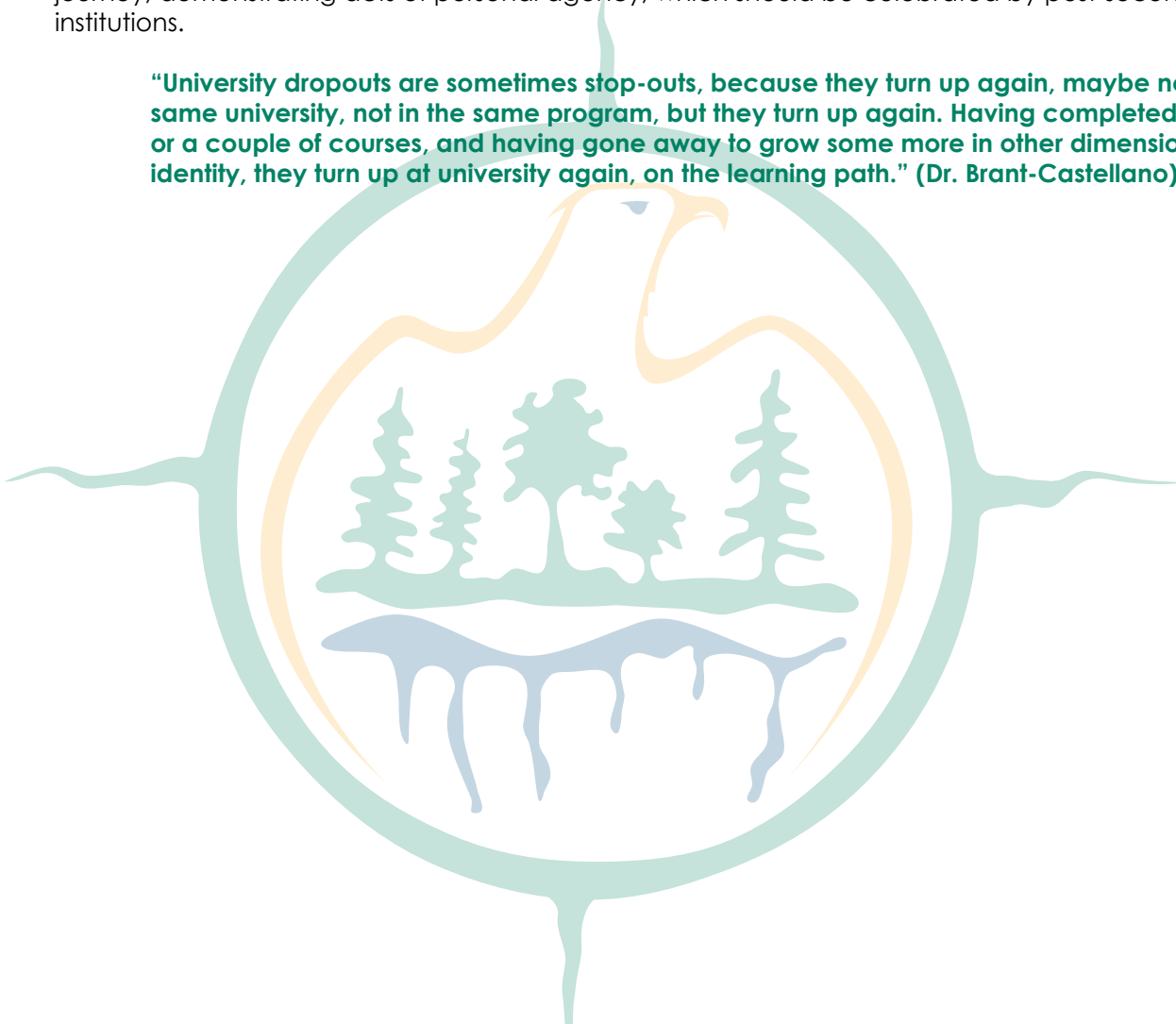
**“The master’s program has contributed to producing qualified individuals to fill leadership roles across the region. We have alumni that are now serving organizations as executive directors, principals, and teachers. Those graduates, who are mostly Indigenous, are changing the landscape of education in southern Ontario through their leadership roles and through their discussions with others across the nation.” (Dr. Debassige)**

It is also important to recognize the leadership qualities that currently exists in many Aboriginal students, yet are not identified or valued by post-secondary institutions. As Dr. Brant-Castellano explains,

**“Some students who reach university come from emotionally and economically stable backgrounds. Many others face challenges that include fragmented families, absent fathers, low income, multiple changes in residence, personal experiences with alcohol abuse, and dropping out of school periodically in their mid-teens. With few exceptions, students who arrive at university have survived elementary and secondary education in systems that gave no place to their people, their histories, and their personal identities. Aboriginal students who enroll in post-secondary education are case studies in resilience. And resilience was a theme that Aboriginal survivors talked about in the consultations, the meetings, the gatherings sponsored by the Aboriginal Healing Foundation. They say, ‘Don’t talk to us about being victims. We are survivors.’ As Mike DeGagné was saying, what they were focusing on was the resilience that allowed them to bounce back from everything and to stand up and say, ‘I’m still here.’” (Dr. Brant-Castellano)**

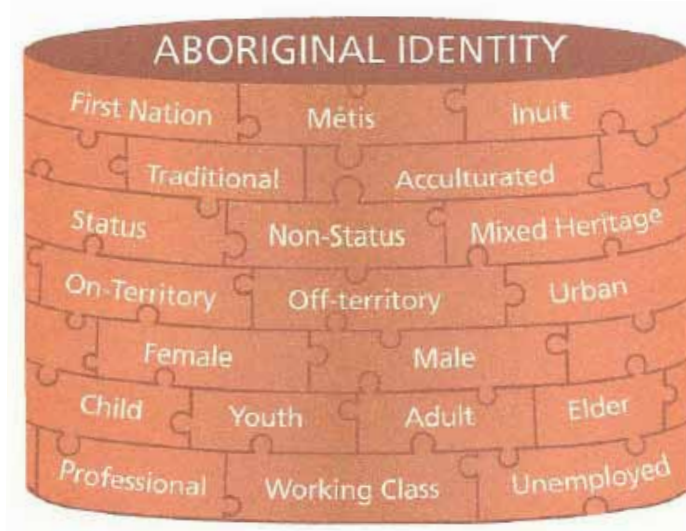
These acts of resilience create opportunities for Aboriginal students to return to formal education. As Dr. Castellano explains, the term ‘drop-out’ infers failure, and yet the student continues their education journey, demonstrating acts of personal agency, which should be celebrated by post-secondary institutions.

**“University dropouts are sometimes stop-outs, because they turn up again, maybe not at the same university, not in the same program, but they turn up again. Having completed a course or a couple of courses, and having gone away to grow some more in other dimensions of their identity, they turn up at university again, on the learning path.” (Dr. Brant-Castellano)**



## Diversity

“Diversity is a lens for viewing student success. When I was writing the article for Horizons I wanted to communicate the complexity of Aboriginal identities and I drew something like a layer cake...The top layer of this stack, this puzzling stack, is First Nation, Métis, and Inuit... but of course, we know that there are multiple variations of those three categories. Traditional and acculturated are actually a continuum with many gradations. Status and non-Status is an alphabet soup. My point is that there is no such thing as ‘the Aboriginal student.’ There are only individuals: a slice through that cake or stack of puzzles, representing a unique mix of all those components of identity, plus a couple of decades of personal experience, good and bad, positive and negative.” (Dr. Brant-Castellano).



\*reproduced with permission from aunnur

Complexities of Aboriginal identity

Dr. Manitowabi describes the situation he often experiences in his role as an Aboriginal faculty member at a university. Due to the differing life experiences of his students, he shares the dilemma of teaching Aboriginal students about Indigeneity.

**“...for example there may be a student who is from the reserve who is grounded in their identity but isn’t academically inclined and another student who comes from off the reserve who is struggling with their identity and culture, so we have these extreme spectrums in the classroom, and how do you begin teaching them about this issue?” (Dr. Manitowabi)**

Anishnaabe professor Dr. Brent Debassige and Lil’wat scholar Dr. Lorna Williams remind us to be critical of the university environment that may try to provide an identity for individuals who are processing their Indigeneity. An unintended outcome could be the creation of an identity forced onto the student that originates within the western institution, one that is based on non-Aboriginal understandings of who Aboriginal people are in our society.

**“...it’s the idea of the essentialized construct of what Indigenous peoples represent, who Indigenous peoples are to be, how they act, and how they are to behave. We’ve been represented in the dominant culture in the theatre, in the arts, commercials, television, in literature, film, and every kind of way you can imagine. We are the source static constructs that have no sense of way of being outside of those kinds of things...our own realities have been narrated on our behalf and in some ways those have been accepted.” (Dr. Debassige)**

**“That’s our reality and that’s what we have to sort through and that’s part of the decolonizing process. As we go through these institutions that have colonized us then we have to be critical of what we learn about who we are within those institutions.” (Dr. Williams)**

For universities, it is essential to understand that regardless of how a student identifies with their Indigeneity, both internally and externally, the institution must provide opportunities for this individual to explore, connect and further reflect on their Indigeneity.

**“Aboriginal students at university, if they self-identify as Aboriginal or if they show up at Aboriginal services or events, are indicating that in some way that identity is significant to them and to their learning path at university. We have no way, on the face of it, of knowing what that significance is or where the points of contact are going to be. So the question for educators, whether academics or support staff or mentors and family in the community, is how to connect with the inherent resilience and unique aspirations of widely diverse students.” (Dr. Brant-Castellano)**

**“...but also for institutions to show up as well and to connect with students where they are and really understand their experiences and to honour student voice.” (Jim Larimore)**

**“We all want our children to complete their studies in an effective way that they can but we also need to be able to do it without the loss of knowing who you are and appreciating who you are.” (Dr. Williams)**



## Success for Our People

**“What is success? We’ve got to get at the heart of this. It’s our own Anishinaabe communities” (Muriel Sawyer)**

Community is a common theme discussed amongst the participants. Success for Aboriginal peoples is not just an individual goal, but is also pursued for the collective well-being of the community. Dr. Lorna Williams, a Lil’wat scholar and educator, describes this concept in terms of community health and well-being.

**“Success in education, for our people, means becoming healthy...being well. Those who are well will be able to contribute to the life of their family, their community and their nation. They will be able to uphold and protect our responsibilities to our ancestors, to our descendants, and to all non-human beings, the water, the land, and the air” (Dr. Williams)**

Dr. Williams includes the community’s natural environment in her description. This holistic definition of ‘community’ is directly related to an Aboriginal ontology or our understanding of our world. Shawn Wilson (2008), a Cree scholar, compares western knowledge as “...being individual in nature” (p. 38) while Indigenous knowledge “...is seen as belonging to the cosmos of which we are a part..” (p. 38). This cosmological aspect of knowledge can be described as an energy that is inherent in all of existence that provides animacy to all things in the universe, which results in connections between all things. “If everything is animate, then everything has spirit and knowledge. If everything has spirit and knowledge, then all are like me. If all are like me, then all are my relations” (Little Bear, 2000, p. 78). Elder Delores Trudeau from Sagamok First Nation described her community’s initiative to share their community’s story with its youth. This initiative connects youth with the community’s history so that they contribute to the continuation of their community’s story for future generations.

**“...what we have is what’s called community story. And in that story, it talks about the youth, adults, and anything to do with the community. And from time to time we visit that and we make changes and add things to it. For the youth, we have a mentorship program where before they graduate from high school, they have to go through this program. They learn about the clan system, the creation story, the legends, and even the pictographs in our area. They learn about the family set up and talk about the eagle staff. All of those things are taking place in the community. Then we talk about healthy babies and all of the things that need to be discussed. So we still have problems, but if we have a problem we will hopefully put it in the community story so those discussions do take place and that everybody participates.” (Delores Trudeau)**

The distinct connection between success and community is an additional responsibility and expectation placed upon an Aboriginal student that may or may not be understood by faculty or other university personnel. This community responsibility may be perceived as an added pressure on the student.

**“I think we are drawn often to say that the Aboriginal student success is important because the community needs you, you are a representative of your community and your success is incredibly important to the success of your community. I think this is frightening and I don’t know if I would have appreciated that kind of burden on my own journey.” (Dr. Mike DeGagné)**

Although it is recognized that some Aboriginal students may view this pressure as a burden, Dr. Williams reminds us of the historical understandings of an individual’s responsibility in finding and developing his unique gifts to contribute to the community’s health and well-being.

**“I know that people are afraid we might be putting too big a burden on ourselves when we say that this is what education is for, but when you think back when our worlds were intact...that’s what our people ensured. The Elders always made sure that everyone was using the gifts that they were born with, when they were brought into this world, to uphold life. We can’t ask less of ourselves now.” (Dr. Williams)**

## Facilitating Success For Our People

There were many factors, both supportive and unsupportive, that were identified and discussed by our participants as components of community success. These factors were reviewed, and analyzed for commonalities and differences. The result was the determination of four themes that contribute to our understanding of the student's connection to community success. The themes are;

- 1) Community vs. Competition,
- 2) Constructive Factors vs. Unconstructive Factors,
- 3) Direct, Authentic Indigenous Design
- 4) Needs of University vs. Needs of Community.

## Community vs. Competition

**“The western world has arrived at a place in which success means that you have to prove yourself to be better than everybody else. That promotes stratification of a society, which is in direct opposition to the Indigenous world. We cannot have a goal that says, ‘I am going to develop the gifts that I was born with, to support my family, my community, my nation, and all the non-human beings ... and then to think that I have to be better than them? I am part of everything. I have to be able to work in partnership and collaboration with everything around me, in order for us to be able to live life, so that we’re healthy and everybody is healthy ... not just me.” (Dr. Williams).**

Dr. Williams describes a fundamental difference in the purpose of education between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. From an Indigenous perspective, the individual works in collaboration with others to strengthen the community, which differs from the euro-western emphasis on striving for individual achievement. Although this competitive focus has permeated many school systems that Aboriginal children attend, some Aboriginal students recognize the importance of their responsibility to the university community of which they belong.

**“[I’m] trying to do as much as I can within the university ... like volunteering, mentoring, meeting new people. It was never about the degree.” (Teri Jack)**

Other undergraduate students, who recognized the strength in working with other Aboriginal students, rather than viewing them as competitors, express the concept of community.

**“I think that is part of a successful way of how Aboriginal students survive...is that when they go to university they meet other Nations and that kind of brings them together and makes them stronger.” (James Landrie)**

Dr. Williams shares a story that illustrates the disadvantages of students working competitively rather than collaboratively.

**“I taught a course called Learning and Teaching in the Indigenous World. It was open to all students, Indigenous and non-Indigenous. My intent for this course was to get people to ‘learn in community,’ to get them to understand that I support my learning as an individual, but I also have to be aware of supporting everybody else’s way of learning. There was one class called Earth Fibers, where they had to weave. We brought in these bulrushes that we had collected, so we could weave a little piece. Everybody had to have bulrushes, and then we turned the students loose. There were 50 students, and they were in it for themselves. They were going to get the best weaves, and get all that they needed. When things calmed down, they were all sitting there with their weaves. I asked them, does everybody have what they need to weave? And of course they didn’t. Why? Because they were so busy looking after themselves, they didn’t look after each other. That was a really good source of conversation, a really good way of illustrating what we’ve done in education and how it needs to be changed and addressed.” (Dr. Williams)**

Robin Potts described the braiding of sweetgrass, a traditional medicine, as a representation of the community's collective strength relative to the vulnerability of the individual.

**“One story of many about the strength of sweetgrass is about the strength of the collective. If we were to visualize one blade of sweetgrass, it is vulnerable and easy to break. However, if we were to visualize many blades of sweetgrass, it is strong and difficult to break. Similarly, the interweaving of sweetgrass is symbolic of the collective’s shared thoughts and stories...and when put into action, we become a strong people.” (Robin Potts)**

As described by Elder John Sawyer, he reminds students that they have a role and a responsibility to each other and themselves, which provides a pathway that leads to connections with community and peers.

**“...we’re real Anishnaabe because we take care of each other. When we use those tools that show those kids what’s important,...how they’re important, then they have a purpose,...they have a meaning.” (John Sawyer)**



## Constructive vs. Unconstructive

**“We have to shift the function of the institution of education from one of being an unconstructive force to one of being a constructive force...there has to be an understanding of success for our people.” (Dr. Williams)**

The unconstructive forces that Dr. Williams is referring are the experiences of formal education by Aboriginal peoples in residential schools, as well as those schools that fail to recognize the unique worldviews and knowledges of Aboriginal peoples. This has created a suspicion of all levels of education amongst some Aboriginal peoples. In some cases, this can cause concern as to whether western-based educational programs and institutions can provide constructive opportunities for Aboriginal success.

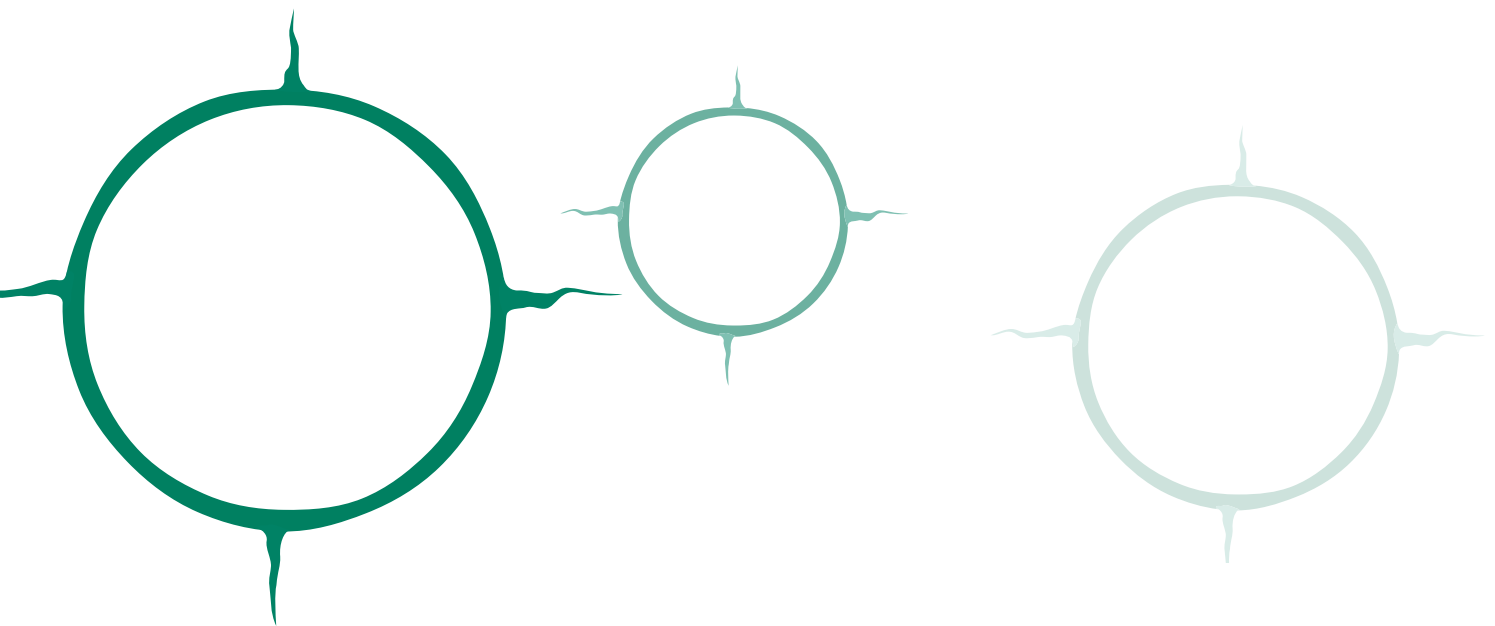
**“I do have a problem, thinking in the context of trying to improve or enhance Aboriginal community in an institution...we have no control of that.” (Doug Cheechoo)**

Due to historical mistrust of formal education institutions by residential school survivors and other Aboriginal peoples, some graduate students may perceive their post-secondary experiences as irrelevant and unconstructive to the issues facing communities. As a result, answers and solutions to issues are deferred to outside sources and individuals.

**“One of the things I found in going through this whole process was the transitioning back into the communities...validating the importance of what I did is very difficult, and when you go home... for the longest time we’ve had consultants...people from away telling us what to do...I have to wonder how and when were going to take the lead...when will that responsibility of ‘telling’ transfer to our people?” (Lorraine Sutherland)**

Although the graduate student above perceives a difficulty in sharing her new acquired knowledge and experiences with her community, Dr. Brant-Castellano reminds us, through the words of an Elder, that the individual still has a responsibility to continue and strengthen the relationships of her community.

**“I was reminded of what we wrote in the Royal Commission report, quoting a Mohawk Elder who voiced the same awareness as that university graduating student in almost the same words. The Elder said, ‘In our language we call ourselves Onkwehonwe.’ Some people say it means real people. I heard one man explain it in this way: ‘It says that we are the ones that are living on the earth today, right at this time. We are the ones that are carrying the responsibility of our nations, of our spirituality, of our relationship with the Creator, on our shoulders.’ We have the mandate to carry that today, at this moment in time.” (Dr. Brant-Castellano)**





## Direct, Authentic Indigenous Design

**“It was important to have direct, authentic Indigenous design in the development and the implementation of all of the degrees. This was something new to the university, because when degrees at universities are being developed, you’re not supposed to talk about them anywhere off campus, not talk about them outside faculty. They’re done in secret. But that’s not our way.” (Dr. Williams)**

Dr. Williams shares the story of how the University of Victoria developed its undergraduate and graduate programs in academic programming for Aboriginal peoples. She describes the initial experiences of community members and her university counterparts during the initial meetings to co-develop an academic program.

**“I approached one community that I was familiar with, and we met with the community people to talk about the design and involve the university community in that conversation... they were the ones who informed us, who talked about their experience...to talk about their challenges, so that we had an understanding of where they were at. For the Master’s in Counseling, we held meetings. It began with a group of people who were engaged in the counseling field in Aboriginal communities, along with the faculty in counseling. Those were incredible conversations, because people have to learn how to trust each other, and that’s not easy when people have been devalued, shamed, and rendered invisible. It’s hard to trust the gatekeepers.” (Dr. Williams)**

From the lessons learned during these experiences, Dr. Williams outlines three themes for universities to consider when developing future programs for Aboriginal peoples:

- 1) Accessing and Inclusion of the Indigenous World,
- 2) Decolonization, and
- 3) Working in Multiple Worlds.

### Accessing and Inclusion of the Indigenous World

**“What I’ve found culture to be is reflecting the reality of the people in the curriculum or the experience” (Dr. Manitowabi)**

It is the acceptance and respect of the Indigenous world and its knowledge that must be acknowledged by the university environment if academic success for Aboriginal students is to be achieved. The university must understand its ignorance of Indigenous knowledge and begin to consider acquiring this knowledge from new perspectives and sources.

**“The first is the Indigenous world that we relate to, and functioned in, from the beginning of time. So where is that source of knowledge? Some of us, very few now, but some of us, have been blessed with teachers who are aging. Unless a community has a place for them, they haven’t been able to share that wisdom, share their knowledge. So if we need to utilize that world, to open that world, we have to learn how to access that world. So accessing our Indigenous world is one huge area. You can’t find it in books. You can’t find it in films, although there are a few... You can find it in stories...You find it in ceremonies...You find it in songs...You find it in practice... you find it in living and in walking the land.” (Dr. Williams)**

Elders are considered the keepers of traditional knowledge in Aboriginal cultures and communities. The Elders who participated in our project shared their thoughts and wisdom regarding this topic.

**“We have to get people to understand from where we came and to understand that there [are] two histories. They have to know their history and the history they have to know is the one that affected us as Anishinaabe” (Harvey Trudeau)**

Another Elder spoke about the importance of directly connecting students with their Elders, not only as a valued source of experience and wisdom, but as a connection with community and the comfort it provides.

**“...it’s important to have Elders or traditional people visible in the institution in the universities and colleges because that’s what they see [when] they’re back home.... they see a lot of our Elders and our the people there ....so that when they’re here they feel comfortable....they feel at home.” (Delores Trudeau)**

A common criticism of universities voiced by Aboriginal peoples is the university’s lack of validating Aboriginal understandings and experience as acceptable academic knowledge.

**“We need to end the denial of excluding Indigenous content and to normalize Indigenous peoples as being a part of Canada. Once we’ve reached that stage, I think we’ve succeeded with changing the landscape.” (Dr. Manitowabi)**

**“When you’re talking with people who have spent their entire lives accruing a certain kind of knowledge, that is the accepted form of knowledge in a field, it’s hard for them to make room for anything else because the message for them is what they have spent their entire lives learning is a little bit less than what they thought.” (Dr. Williams)**

It has been suggested that some faculties and departments are not certain of how Indigenous knowledge can be incorporated into its curricula. As Jim Larimore, a senior university administrator of Comanche heritage explains, the hierarchy and structures of universities creates arbitrary obstacles to the integration of knowledge and understandings.

**“The problem is that we now live in the early 21st century, we have an industrial sorting system that treats system and knowledge in a very bizarre way divided up in our own hubris knowledge into three domains: humanities, sciences or social sciences. There’s nothing that teases out in a synthetic way ... the connections, the universality of knowledge in other ways. We also set out budgeting systems and other things that reinforce that trifurcation of knowledge into those three segments and we set each other up in conflict over fighting for resources and figuring out which knowledge system will get what resources to accomplish what types of things and I think that can be problematic for us.” (Jim Larimore)**

Ignoring Aboriginal knowledge or inhibiting its entrance into academic curricular conversations has potential direct impacts on Aboriginal student engagement and participation.

**“Students in institutions that tell them explicitly and implicitly that what they bring to post-secondary education, from their upbringing, has no value for their learning tasks may be driven to leave, to interrupt their formal learning while they work through developmental tasks. These young people may leave, to try out their own abilities to survive and cope, and not return. Dropping out may be seen by them, and by others, as failure rather than as a coping strategy” (Dr. Brant-Castellano)**

Another unexpected result of not acknowledging Indigenous knowledge is the possibility of a student rejecting his personal connections and understandings of his cultural heritage and replacing it with the knowledge learned at the university. Dr. Williams relates her experiences working with Aboriginal students enrolled in a graduate course, hesitant to engage with Indigenous knowledge.

**“Many of the students’ feel incompetent, when I’m asking them to bring their Indigenous wisdom into the classroom. They feel like they don’t know anything more. They feel like they lost out, because they went to school. They don’t realize how much knowledge and wisdom they have because, it’s never been invited in.” (Dr. Williams)**

Dr. Manitowabi would describe the practice of including Indigenous knowledge as a form of 'Indigenizing' a program's content, so as to create a pathway towards decolonizing the institution. Aboriginal scholars believe decolonization is a necessary step towards facilitating Aboriginal student success. He states,

**“That is another way of defining Indigenous student success because we need to effectively decolonize the landscape or the environment of the university. We need to be in a position where can stop defending learning about it, we haven’t achieved that stage of where we normalized it.” (Dr. Manitowabi)**

## Decolonization

**“The second area we have to take into consideration is colonization and imperialism. We must address those, and learn, and begin the process of decolonizing ourselves. Our world has now been impacted by colonization for many generations. We have to understand that, in order for us to build the kind of education in which we say we want students to be successful.” (Dr. Williams)**

For some Aboriginal students, the act of enrolling in university has a larger significance than simply to receive a post-secondary education. Erin Dokis explains,

**“ ... it’s always a political decision for us as Indigenous people, even walking through the front door every day; it’s a very political and very personal decision that we make. And decisions have power, right? And so, what was I accepting of the academy by walking in those doors? And what was I now going to accept by deciding to do a degree and what was I buying into, deciding to do another degree and another degree...?” (Erin Dokis)**

This graduate student is describing her suspicion that arises from the validation of a western education by Aboriginal peoples. To address these suspicions, Dr. Brent Debassige offers a pathway for his students to view their role and purpose at university through a political lens that focuses itself on the Aboriginal student.

**“We situate how colonization has impacted our people and invite students to think critically about the legacy of colonialism and its contemporary neocolonial formations on Indigenous knowledges, which then can be used to create decolonizing practices that are focused on their own work places. I have witnessed how that anti-oppressive model has had immediate transformative effects on a teacher’s practice and, ultimately, on the lives of First Nation students.” (Dr. Debassige)**

## Working in Multiple Worlds

**“...people really can learn to function and work in multiple worlds: the world of youth, the world of Elders, the Indigenous world, the non-Indigenous world, the contemporary world, and the traditional world. That’s a huge task for anybody to be able to do all of that.” (Dr. Williams)**

Dr. Williams describes the multiple worlds or environments that Aboriginal peoples negotiate throughout their daily lives, depending on the location and situation. As an example of how she negotiates these multiple worlds, Dr. Williams describes how she changes her style of communication, or as she phrases it, 'code switching', when moving between the academic environment and her home environment.

**“Because I’m in the university system, I use language in a way my family doesn’t use language. When I leave the university, when I leave that world and when I drive home, I have to prepare myself and I have to code switch...if I use my university voice at home, it kind of upsets the wellness in our family. Language is just an example, but it’s in the ways in...which [we] use**

**our bodies, the ways in which we present ourselves, and the ways in which we participate in ceremonies and in the functioning of a community. For our children to be able to be successful in this world out here, that's one thing ... but they also have to be successful in the life, in the world, of their homes, their nations and their communities. They have to be able to function in both. So how can an institution work and be able to help us do that? (Dr. Williams)**

Dr. Brant-Castellano recognizes the changing contexts that an Aboriginal person negotiates and connects these differing environments to an individual's self-worth.

**"We pass through shifting roles and responsibilities and we negotiate who we are and what we are and the value of that self in the context of the new circumstances." (Dr. Brant-Castellano)**

When the ability to walk in multiple worlds is achieved, it provides students with a sense of pride and accomplishment.

**"So, I like the fact that I'm urban and Indigenous and I can rock at both worlds and I can understand...I can manipulate, ...I know how it works" (Amy Shawanda)**

However, even successfully negotiating the transitions between the multiple worlds may not lead to non-Aboriginal peoples recognizing the expertise and authority of Aboriginal peoples. As one graduate student explains, others may not acknowledge the value of being successful in multiple worlds, due to the expectations blinded by prejudice and stereotypes.

**"...we're living in two worlds, people judge us. It seems that whenever we want to say something at the table, we have to qualify ourselves doubly just to speak. And then when we do speak, no one listens to us anyway, because there's a consultant in the room, or a superintendent." (Sharla Peltier)**

Community member Angela Recollet, summarizes this by reminding all stakeholders of the importance of supporting students through this journey.

**"It is my belief that we have made tremendous achievements in education. Having said that I also believe that one of the biggest hurdles has been maintaining walking in both worlds. That is the gift, that is the one thing that if you are in a position to influence and encourage...that the students have access to culturally reflective practices to enable them to walk in both worlds. That is knowing the system and knowing what is before you but still maintaining who you are and your identity."(Angela Recollet)**



## Needs of the University vs. Needs of Students and Communities

**“So how do we invite our people’s wisdom and knowledge in, in an aesthetic way, in a real, respectful way? It’s something that we have to do. We have to find alternatives, ways to reconcile the needs of the university, the learning institution, and the needs of the students and the needs of the community, because right now they don’t align.” (Dr. Williams)**

Dr. Williams shares a common criticism of western-based universities, that of creating programs or engaging in research that has no direct bearing on the immediate and future goals and concerns of Aboriginal communities. Jim Larimore offers insight into this issue.

**“I think intentionality and reciprocity as being two fundamental pillars of the experience we have to keep in mind as educators, as community members. If we’re talking about what our goals are intentionally as educators we really have to think about those things in relation to the people we are serving, to the communities that we’re serving in terms of our aspirations, in terms of our recognition of their aspirations and goals for education.” (Jim Larimore)**

As described earlier by Dr. Williams, the collaborative efforts to create Aboriginal specific programming, as was the case for the Indigenous Communities Counseling Psychology program at the University of Victoria, is an example where the needs of both university and community were respected. Another example of directly connecting Indigenous communities, knowledge and contexts to university systems is the Master of Professional Education program at Western University. Dr. Debassige, the program’s director, describes the origin of the program.

**“The program began with a colleague of mine. She was asked by members of a First Nation community to conduct a school evaluation that resulted in several recommendations. The education representatives said, ‘OK fine, you’ve done this work. Now what is the university going to do about this?’ And the evaluator responded, ‘We can’t do them all. But, if you name your top three, we’ll see what we can do to meet those expectations.’ The community members identified a graduate program that would involve a partnership with the university and asked, ‘Can you make it happen?’” (Dr. Debassige)**

The result was the development of a program that utilized the students’ experiences to inform their studying and learning opportunities. As Dr. Debassige describes, the program allows,

**“...students to tailor their assignments to relevant professional learning and research projects that they want to do...ensuring that it’s something to broaden their own horizons, both personally and professionally.” (Dr. Debassige)**

Lastly, delivering programs in the community can create possible future opportunities that could not be envisioned without the program’s presence in the community.

**“The ripple effects and the impacts of implementing these distinctive programming designs in partnership with First Nations has unintended consequences that can be quite positive for First Nation communities and students. For example, the interactions between elementary school-aged children and graduate students who are also teachers in the local host First Nation school is a form of role modeling that encourages life-long learning.” (Dr. Debassige)**

At the student level, our Aboriginal undergraduate students also recognize the importance of re-directing their university experience towards future generations.

**“...how did I learn? How did I grow? And how can I implement that for my future...for my son? And thinking about the ways that I was neglected for certain things with the language and the culture. So how can I take that success that I just gained and implement it for the future? For my son?” (Roxanne Manitowabi)**



During our Conversation with the Aboriginal graduate students, they were asked to choose an object and explain why that object exemplified the pride in their accomplishments. We share their thoughts as they demonstrate clear and direct connections with the components of success previously described.

**“I picked this because to me it represented like one year in a cocoon...and by my fourth year I emerged into a butterfly, so when I first started out I was timid, I was in my little cocoon or shell and every year I was blossoming into a butterfly...”**

**“I chose the paintbrush because I think what allowed the pride for me was I found some and also...this reminded me of my family. My family is pretty creative artistically and otherwise. So I think it was also their support. Thinking about my family’s creativity and my own...it helped me through...”**

**“The first word that came to my mind when [the facilitator] asked the question was courage ... I tried to look for something that would represent courage on the table. Instinctually, I just grabbed this plane because I think it takes a lot of courage to fly....also symbolic with that is that it takes courage to go away from your roots, to go away somewhere”**

These graduate student voices were shared to demonstrate the immense pride that our Aboriginal students feel when pursuing higher education. These students share personal stories of accomplishment and how it affects themselves and the people around them. As institutes of higher learning, we are responsible for creating and strengthening the environments and opportunities for our Aboriginal students to achieve personal and collective success. In relation to the themes discussed in the previous chapter, Dr. Brant-Castellano offers six direct actions that will “...support diverse students in the growth of their identity, their competence and their agency.” They are:

- a) Indigenize the university environment,
- b) Acknowledge our living history,
- c) Incorporate traditional teaching and counseling,
- d) Use teachable moments,
- e) Structure spaces, and
- f) Improve conditions for communities.

## Indigenize the University Environment

**“When they accept our culture then they accept who we are.” (John Sawyer)**

**“In a brief note published last year in the journal Education Canada, I proposed that every subject at every level in an institution or system be examined to consider how and to what extent current content and pedagogy reflect the presence of Indigenous people and the valid contribution of Indigenous knowledge: not just the words that are used, but the visuals, the symbols, the activities, the physical environment. How are our presence and our knowledge being honoured, being respected?” (Dr. Brant-Castellano)**

As described earlier, a number of our participants shared their thoughts on the importance of bringing Indigenous culture and knowledge into university courses and content. One pathway to Indigenize the university is to hire Indigenous faculty, who can bring personal and theoretical understandings of Indigenous culture, perspectives and worldview into their curricula. As well, Indigenous faculty members, through their professional networks and relationship within the institution, can connect with non-Aboriginal faculty and staff to broaden their understandings of Indigenous issues. Dr. Brant-Castellano and a community member speak to the changes that can occur.

**“[Dr. Manitowabi] is not making change in the institution but is making relations, and they’re like the cracks in the walls that eventually cause the wall to crumble and have an ethical space and a shared space.” (Dr. Brant-Castellano,)**

**“...well you know what...you don’t start with reaching a dozen faculty, you start with reaching one at a time. And that’s the process...” (Doug Cheechoo)**

Doug Cheechoo shares this story of learning to fish from his grandfather as an analogy of moving purposefully when changes are required.

**“I think it was my grandpa John that used to tell us that in learning how to fish, he says you first got to learn how to use the pole to catch the fish...and what he was saying by that...you would be catching the fish one at a time and you would learn how to fillet the fish before you graduate to the net where you would catch a hundred fish....you have to catch them one at a time, before we move on to the net...catching a hundred fish, that creates a lot of work.” (Doug Cheechoo)**

Dr. Debassige shares the hiring processes used in his university's community-based Master of Professional Education program, to ensure Indigenous perspectives and understandings are infused into the program's curriculum.

**“When we review applications for an instructor position, we look for expertise in Aboriginal education and evidence of an understanding of Indigenous knowledges. When hiring instructors, we expect that they will meet those standards. Criteria for having awareness and understanding of Indigenous knowledges can be integrated into the job advertisement and has an impact on whether we’re getting the right people teaching our programs so that we can maintain the quality that we’ve always maintained.” (Dr. Debassige)**

By increasing the number of Indigenous faculty, there is increased opportunity for these individuals to mentor Aboriginal students through their university experience. This can be accomplished by being role models for students, or by actively incorporating traditional knowledge and heritage into their teaching, demonstrating strong cultural pride to Aboriginal students.

**“...the Native faculty ...foster those relationships because they are bringing up the next generation...” (Sarah\*)**

**“...ceremonies were and continue to be a huge support in my life...also described as a ceremony family because I met like-minded people who were also searching for the truth...and so I could learn to trust once again.” (Robin Potts)**

**“The professor there did ask me if I got into grad school, so for me, I just took it as the Creator brings these people into my life and is encouraging me.” (Sarah\*)**

Another pathway to Indigenize the university is to strengthen the work of allies, non-Aboriginal peoples working for and with Indigenous peoples and their goals.

**“What I do at Laurentian is I work and engage with those faculty members who are proactive and they want to make change.” (Dr. Manitowabi)**

**“And I think where I ended up finding strength, kind of where I am today, is from allies that would support Aboriginal students.” (Christine\*)**

## **Acknowledge Our Living History**

**“Create opportunities in courses, or in complementary gatherings, where personal experience and learning is shared and linked to the ongoing creation of our peoples’ history. Culture is not an artifact that we dig up from the past. It is a living process. And we carry it in our hearts and in our actions.” (Dr. Brant-Castellano)**

Dr. Brant-Castellano explains the importance of Aboriginal peoples, students and communities in actively engaging and reflecting upon their respective Aboriginal culture. This active process reminds an Aboriginal person that culture is not just an object to be studied and examined, but rather to be lived and carried within the individual. As Dr. Manitowabi explains, by positioning 'culture' outside the individual, this may create a different interpretation and approach to its understanding.

**"I think that we are at times guilty of reifying, objectifying culture, making culture an 'it' that we are rescuing from disappearing." (Dr. Manitowabi)**

Dr. Manitowabi elaborates on how differing interpretations of 'culture' can result in different approaches and outcomes at his university. He explains the differences through two courses taught at his university.

**"...two different articulations of culture, it was culture as a behaviour and a way of thinking and doing versus culture as a material that you can pick up and analyze and look at." (Dr. Manitowabi)**

He describes the first course,

**"...the Indigenous culture and tradition course is very popular, it's the most popular course that we teach in indigenous studies...it fits the model of expectations of Indigeneity. People want to know about the material, cultural, ceremonial, museum aspect of who Indigenous peoples are...and I came to understand that it was so popular because it fit expectations of 'Indignation'. We want indigenous people to be fixed...we want this silo understanding." (Dr. Manitowabi)**

In comparison, Dr. Manitowabi shares his experiences when teaching an Indigenous psychology course, resulting in his students personally engaging in their understanding of their culture.

**"What I've found out with the Indigenous psychology course is that it wasn't that popular, however, it was probably the most important course in the Indigenous Studies program... [it] was a very effective...by understanding the context in which assimilation has happened, how acculturation has happened... I found that Indigenous students came to understand who they are and the place in which they were having difficulty...articulating a sense of self in the world. Many of the students confided either in writing or orally and said that the course had a very powerful impact and that they were healing." (Dr. Manitowabi)**





The impact made on these Aboriginal students demonstrates the importance for universities to encourage Aboriginal students to explore individual cultural perceptions and perspectives so as to broaden and deepen their connections to their community's culture and traditions. During the graduate student Conversation, Robin Potts reminds her peers that culture is still alive and well within each of them and they can contribute to its understanding.

**“...the Aboriginal experience is within us...not something we need to harness or strive for outside of ourselves. We are living the Aboriginal experience.” (Robin Potts)**

## **Traditional Teaching and Counseling**

**“Make traditional teachings and counseling by Elders available. Consider that those who are new to learning from Elders may need help with listening deeply. It's also known pedagogically as processing what you hear. It's about listening to Elders.” (Dr. Brant-Castellano)**

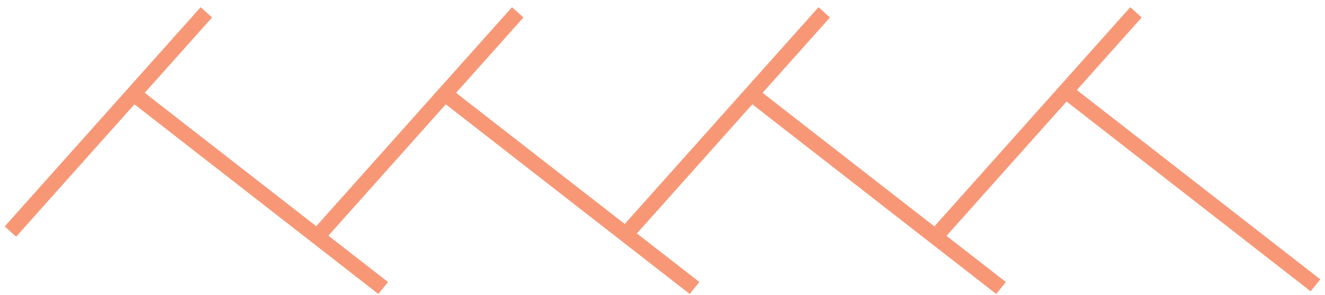
**“Experience is one thing, but the true learning comes in the reflection of that experience...and we begin to make connections that make sense to us in our own personal narrative” (Robin Potts)**

An under-utilized or under-appreciated resource of Indigenous knowledge and traditional understandings of teaching, are community members, such as Elders or knowledge keepers. These individuals carry life experiences that have direct connections with curricula, tempered with the wisdom attained through years of following the cultural practice of observation and reflection. As one Elder shares,

**“...I'm sitting here right now being quiet...its not that I have nothing to say, ...it's actually reflecting because the whole model of teaching...it means you sit there and listen and you take in and then what you do take in you reflect on that, and then that in turn forms your opinion or allows you to have an opinion to say.” (Muriel Sawyer)**

Dr. Brant-Castellano shares her understanding of the processes involved in traditional teaching and learning. In this sharing, she demonstrates that as important reflection is to the learning process for Aboriginal students, active reflection may re-direct their learning in different directions. Traditionally, Aboriginal students are encouraged to continue exploring and reflecting on how these detours connect and deepen their knowledge and understanding of the original teaching.

**“A teaching common to various traditions directs attention to the path of life which, like the sun which marks our days, follows of course from east to west. The path of life is marked by many turning points and diversions that lead to dead ends. Staying on the path, or finding your way back to it, leads ultimately to old age and wisdom before returning to the spirit world. Teachings about the path of life emphasize that every diversion from the path offers learning for the next stage of the journey.” (Dr. Brant-Castellano)**



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Another traditional behavior of Aboriginal students is to refrain from asking for assistance. Brian Hansen describes how he creates informal learning environments that removes this perception and creates opportunities for students to fully engage in their learning.

**“I ran a what we called a cultural support group because I could not run a tutoring program. The initial process was...we would go about an hour and a half a week to allow the mentors an opportunity to bring in any of the academic problems to me and we can sort them out and move on. The first night I think there was about six that showed up and instead of an hour and a half, I think it lasted three hours and that was the shortest one we had...[we] brought in pizza so they could all come in eat pizza. Everyone was happy doing that. Then rather than have a tutoring session as such, they would all be sitting around. I could talk individually with them and say ‘how is your assignment coming’ or ‘can I give you a hand’ or ‘I see your working on an essay.’ They’ll give it to you to read, and I say, ‘...did you think of this topic’ or ‘...did you think of writing it this way?’ So what happens is that you end up with fourteen or fifteen students coming in every week to get tutoring without [formally] getting tutored. It’s a big difference because a lot of students didn’t want to see a tutor because it would have meant that they had a problem. Students had the opportunity to drop in for pizza and talk about their work. You can come in for cultural support and [I] would just give ideas and thoughts and suggestions or give them a different approach to doing a problem.” (Brian Hansen)**

## Teachable Moments

**“Be alert to teachable moments. When youth reach a turning point on their own path, when they’re ready to receive advice, they are most ready to receive advice from those who are close to their own age but a few steps further along the path.” (Dr. Brant-Castellano)**

Teachable moments can occur during in-class discussion between students or with professors. At times, it may be difficult to explore these moments as the topic’s background knowledge or its significance may not be fully appreciated by the discussion participants. To better recognize and facilitate teachable moments, an Elder’s participation in the course will create opportunities for students to explore the content in a culturally-relevant context, guided by the Elder’s experience. Brian Hansen explains how having an Elder in his course is an advantage in delivering course material.

**“With [an Elder] in the class room all the time it is it allows him to step into the class and give a different opinion or a different approach to things. We could be talking about a class system, we could be talking about some of the early structures within leadership...but than he can bring in a whole different perspective...from a spiritual perspective or from a emotional perspective, which changes the dynamics in the classroom so [the students] are not just learning about leadership but they are learning about [it] from a traditional perspective.” (Brian Hansen)**

## Structure Spaces

**“Structure spaces where students can congregate with peers, take a break from having to meet external expectations, share experience, gather information, and maybe pick up some computer skills, just take time out, in spaces that speak to them of who they are.” (Dr. Brant-Castellano)**

As described earlier, dedicated spaces for Aboriginal students provide culturally-relevant supports and opportunities for assistance.

**“Having this office...because it’s really inviting and you have all of these activities like drum making...become part of a success and you feel good when you’re done. It boosts your self-esteem and makes you feel good, like you accomplished something, which is personal growth and it makes you want to keep thriving, and keep reaching for whatever big or small goals there are.” (Keri-Lynn Peltier)**

**“It would help me feel comfortable... it’s just nice to see the laughter. The food does help. I like the fact that we can laugh about it...it took us, like, a long time to get there. Lots of laughs and I think that’s a good energy.” (Sarah\*)**

**“...Indigenous services is a home away from home for [students] and [they] appreciate the access [they] have to study space with computers and printing, fellowship with other students, the kitchen, hand drumming, visits from Elders...” (Dr. Debassige)**

Apart from the activities and other supports that are available, this space provides opportunities for Aboriginal students to connect with each other at a cultural level. This network may provide assistance for students who may be feeling unsupported or disconnected with the university experience. Dr. DeGagné shares his understandings on this component of student retention based on his previous research and experience.

**“...in order to make sure they stayed in the institution they had to have a family there, a pseudo-family. The loneliness of being away from home, especially for young people from remote communities...they had to be encouraged to stay a long time in the Aboriginal center, integrate or connect with Aboriginal faculty or with other students who could help them through that.” (Dr. DeGagné)**

One undergraduate student compares the Indigenous services office to the support she would find in her community.

**“...Having that community in there is like having a home away from home.” (Teri Jack)**

## **Improved Conditions for Communities**

**“Student success, on a broad basis, will be enhanced by raising the health, education and economic status of communities. As students explore possibilities for their own future, they learn from the models available in their environment. Competent adults in charge of community affairs expand the range of positive choices available. You don’t have to join a gang in order to have a sense of belonging and accomplishment. The gang is there already, in the community.” (Dr. Brant-Castellano)**

To prepare Aboriginal students for future opportunities in community, some universities have engaged in leadership activities. Based on traditional understandings of leadership, employment opportunities and other similar initiatives provide opportunities for students to explore how their individual gifts contribute to leadership.

**“Leadership isn’t just...traditionally...past tense. We work at the beginning of the year. We hire [students] to co-create the services and programming right at the beginning. We teach them about leadership and clan styles and we talk about Indigenous role models and how they bring them to the table. We also sit in circle...monthly, and talk about what’s working and what’s not working...what can we do better. We learn each other’s gifts and ...skill building as a team...but also as an individual to understand their unique gifts and different gifts. Then we create their jobs around their gifts.” (Melissa Ireland)**





During a conversation with a number of Elders who participated in this project, we were reminded to reflect upon the purpose of universities and to reflect on the reasons why Aboriginal students pursue university success. This reflective change moved the focus from our original pursuit in identifying factors that facilitate success to purposes of success. For our participants, success is connected to a relationship that extends beyond the individual student to his or her family, peers, community and culture.

The following list of recommendations is derived from the Conversations and speaks to the many perspectives and understandings of university success expressed by Elders, scholars, undergraduate and graduate students throughout the project. By no means should this list be considered comprehensive. It should be viewed and accepted as current approaches and understandings to facilitate university success during this period in Aboriginal post-secondary education. We urge not only universities, but all post-secondary institutions to examine and determine strategies and pathways outlined and presented in this report, that complement the institutions' current and future initiatives and activities that will support Aboriginal students' and communities' post-secondary goals and objectives.

Historically, much of this work has fallen to Aboriginal Services offices and continues to be part of their mandate, practice and approach to support Aboriginal student success. However, through these conversations it is recognized moving forward that Aboriginal scholars, students and communities are calling for broader institutional commitments in addition to continued work by Aboriginal Service Centres.

- 1) **Welcoming Environment** – Aboriginal students need to see themselves within the learning environment. These students need to feel that their Aboriginal culture and heritage are welcomed in the university environment and that their individual contributions to the university are valued and respected by both faculty and staff. Universities are urged to support opportunities for faculty and staff to explore the inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives and worldviews in their respective departments.
- 2) **Re-defining Vision, Mandate and Policies** – Universities are asked to re-evaluate and better define their approach and commitment to Indigenous perspectives, cultures, and issues within the entire University structure. We ask that this review be conducted at all levels, including at the Board of Governors, Academic Senate, administrative departments and faculties. This also includes re-examining existing policies and internal processes that may hinder or discriminate against Aboriginal students and their academic pursuits.
- 3) **Moving Beyond Aboriginal Services** – Aboriginal cultures, heritage and contemporary issues are not the sole responsibility of the Aboriginal Student Centre. Although it is important that Aboriginal services are a necessary physical environment on the university campus for Aboriginal students to reconnect with fellow Aboriginal students, Elders and other cultural services, it is recommended that universities not solely rely on these services. As indicated throughout the report, some Aboriginal students do not seek out Aboriginal Service offices. It is important that all services and supports for students are welcoming to Aboriginal students.
- 4) **Broadening the Measures of Success** – Recognize that success for Aboriginal students is broadly defined, however the purpose of success is clearly understood. As described by our participants, Aboriginal students pursue university studies for individual, family and/or community success. It is recommended that universities re-examine and implement evaluative strategies and structures that will measure success within this new context.

- 5) **Normalizing Indigenous Perspectives** – It is recommended that universities approach normalizing Indigenous perspectives as a structural endeavour. When developing and implementing this recommendation as a special initiative or activity, it is important to recognize that long term, sustainable changes may be difficult to reach. It is recommended that dedicated resources and supports be committed to these endeavours so they are not reliant upon individuals or one-time funding initiatives.
- 6) **Creating Safe Spaces** – As it is important for Aboriginal students to access safe, culturally-relevant environments, it is recommended that faculty and staff also have access to safe environments and/or opportunities to explore individual and department-level Indigenization within the institution. It is recognized that many non-Aboriginal staff and faculty at universities are unfamiliar with Aboriginal knowledge, cultures and practice. These safe spaces/ opportunities, facilitated by Elders, Aboriginal faculty and other knowledge keepers will provide these individuals with a culturally relevant environment where this exploration can occur.
- 7) **Engaging Student Gifts** – Universities must recognize that Aboriginal students pursue a post-secondary education that explores and strengthens their individual gifts. It is recommended that universities shift perceptions to recognize that the program of study/degree/professional accreditation is an avenue or pathway to strengthen an individual's gift, rather than the program/degree/professional accreditation being perceived as the gift. This shift in perception refocuses the efforts of the university back onto the individual, rather than on the program/ degree/professional accreditation itself.
- 8) **Decolonizing Knowledge** – Canada's colonial history is directly connected to historical and continued contemporary acts of violence and discrimination against Aboriginal peoples. It is recommended that universities re-examine curricula and institutional policies that perpetuate these acts of violence and discrimination as well as removing the inferior perceptions of Indigenous knowledge within the institution. Through the acceptance of Indigenous knowledge and understandings, the institution can begin to decolonize its practice to eliminate all overt and subtle acts of discrimination that Aboriginal students face in Canada's post-secondary institutions.
- 9) **Creating Leadership Opportunities** – As universities engage in various pathways of decolonization/Indigenization, it is recommended that universities re-examine governance structures at all levels of the university (faculty, staff, senior administration) to provide direct communication pathways for Aboriginal post-secondary advisory councils and communities to the academic and administrative structures of the university. This can include creating more prominent roles and reporting relationships to senior university personnel (e.g., Provost, Vice-President, President) as well as hiring more Indigenous personnel throughout the university structure.

John Sawyer, Elder-in-Residence at Nipissing University, reminds us that strengthening the opportunities for Aboriginal student success will not occur over a short period of time. Rather, the changes universities make today are to lay the foundations for university success for future generations of Aboriginal students. He also reminds us that one individual or institution does not own the knowledge and experiences shared during this project. Mr. Sawyer directs us to continue to share valued and beneficial information, practices and pathways for the success of current and future Aboriginal students attending Canada's universities.

## CONCLUSION

Ontario's Aboriginal students are increasingly accessing university programs and it is anticipated that the number of Aboriginal students attending university will continue to rise. Universities and other post-secondary institutions, with the continued support of the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, are investing capital and human resources to attract, retain and assist Aboriginal students in achieving post-secondary success. Building on past and current practices and initiatives that have demonstrated their effectiveness in facilitating this success is encouraged and important in sustaining and improving on the levels of success already achieved.

The 'Deepening our Collective Understanding' initiative has demonstrated that universities and other post-secondary institutions must expand their current measures of success beyond enrollment, retention and graduation rates and explore culturally relevant understandings of success.

For Aboriginal students, success entails exploring their connections to their respective Indigenous culture and heritage. Each Aboriginal student enters his or her university experience with differing understandings of their Indigeneity, based on life experiences and cultural engagement. To facilitate this exploration, universities are encouraged to provide curricular and extra-curricular opportunities for Aboriginal students to engage with cultural understandings in safe, respectful processes and environments. Stronger connections to cultural identity facilitates leadership opportunities for Aboriginal students, strengthening their capabilities to act as agents of change for themselves and their peers. The skills and confidence that Aboriginal students may gain in their university experience can be transposed to future endeavours and careers for themselves, their families and communities.

Success for communities reflects the Indigenous perspective of the importance of relationships and connections that individuals have with their immediate and extended family, their fellow community members and with other Indigenous peoples. It is recommended that universities examine how their programs and initiatives facilitate stronger connections to Aboriginal communities, expanding opportunities for Aboriginal students to connect their learning with community enhancement and involvement. This can be achieved through direct involvement of Aboriginal community members and Elders to ensure culturally relevant and culturally significant knowledge and understandings are respectfully infused within the mandates and objectives of the respective programs. In addition, universities are urged to reflect on their role in reducing or eliminating policies and content that perpetuate colonial perspectives and attitudes towards Aboriginal peoples. Through these acts of decolonization, Aboriginal peoples will have greater opportunities to engage and participate in the university experience.

The purpose of this study was to define university success from an Aboriginal perspective and to identify those factors that facilitated or hindered this success. With these new understandings, a number of recommendations, actions and promising practices have been suggested for reflection and implementation. Future research that examines the Aboriginal student university experience will provide additional insights on the impact that these recommendations either correlate with or affect success. With these new understandings, post-secondary institutions can evaluate and potentially modify or develop future resources and initiatives that will strengthen Aboriginal student success at Ontario's universities.

# NIPISSING UNIVERSITY PRACTICES

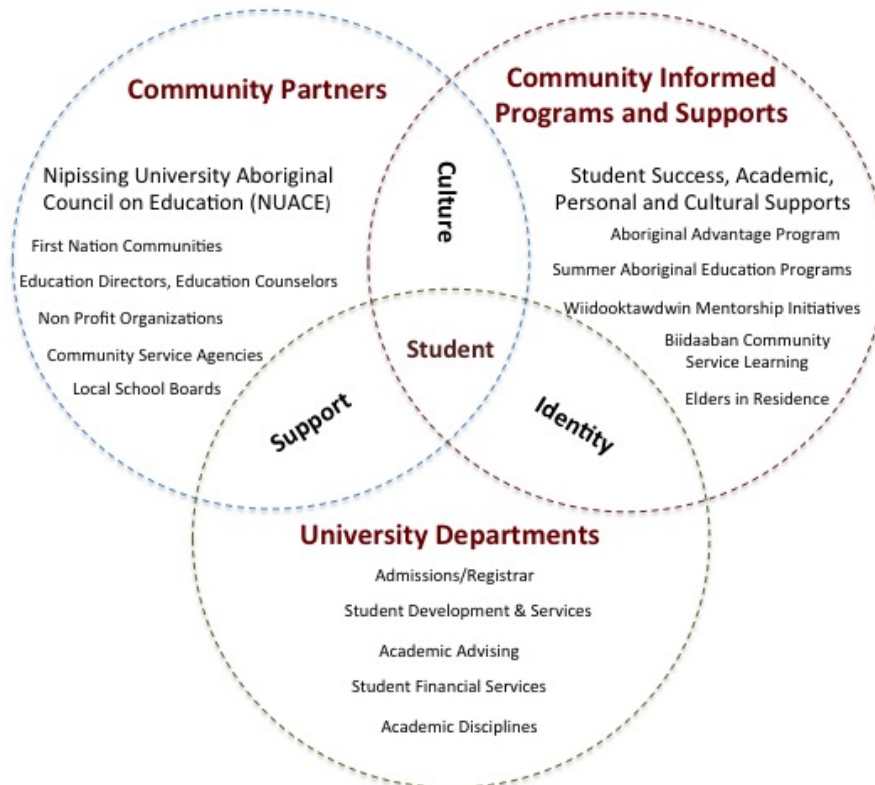
## Approach

The Office of Aboriginal Initiatives (OAI) or Enji Giigdoyang is the central location of programs and services for Aboriginal peoples and communities at Nipissing University. Enji Giigdoyang is an Anishnaabe word meaning “where we come to meet, discuss and talk about things.” Enji Giigdoyang’s practice of support is guided by the following four principles:

- 1) Enji Giigdoyang centers its practice and approach on building respectful and reciprocal relationships with Aboriginal communities and within the university as a whole.
- 2) Enji Giigdoyang honours the reclamation of Indigenous cultures, lands, voices and ways of knowing. We support the ethical inclusion of Indigenous knowledge in classrooms and curriculum.
- 3) Enji Giigdoyang recognizes reconciliation as an ongoing process, a way of understanding history, community, and action. Reconciliation frames our collaborative endeavors with academic faculties, administration, support services and other sectors.
- 4) Enji Giigdoyang recognizes the historical under-representation of Aboriginal peoples within post-secondary institutions as learners, staff and faculty. Enji Giigdoyang supports increased Aboriginal representation on campus within a welcoming, culturally supportive environment.

Through these guiding principles, Nipissing University welcomes Aboriginal students, families and communities and commits to making a difference in the lives of Aboriginal peoples and to contribute to Aboriginal student success by:

1. Providing supports for Aboriginal students to thrive;
2. Expanding access to and facilitating culturally supportive academic and research opportunities; and
3. Building meaningful partnerships with Aboriginal communities.



The staff of Enji Giigdoyang are accountable to students and their communities. This commitment and support, embedded in their lived experiences and traditional values, is consistently demonstrated through assisting all Aboriginal students regardless of their current and future educational journeys.

**“We work to both promote our programs specifically and to promote education generally with Indigenous peoples inside and outside of office hours and office spaces.” (OAI Staff)**

Staff recognize the importance of building respectful and reciprocal relationships with students and community. Each staff member establishes and cultivates relationships through their work, whether it is through direct student support services, mentorship initiatives or community outreach. The relationships between students, programs, communities and Enji Giigdoyang share the common understanding of the unique needs of Aboriginal students and the shared responsibility to meaningfully support Aboriginal student success.

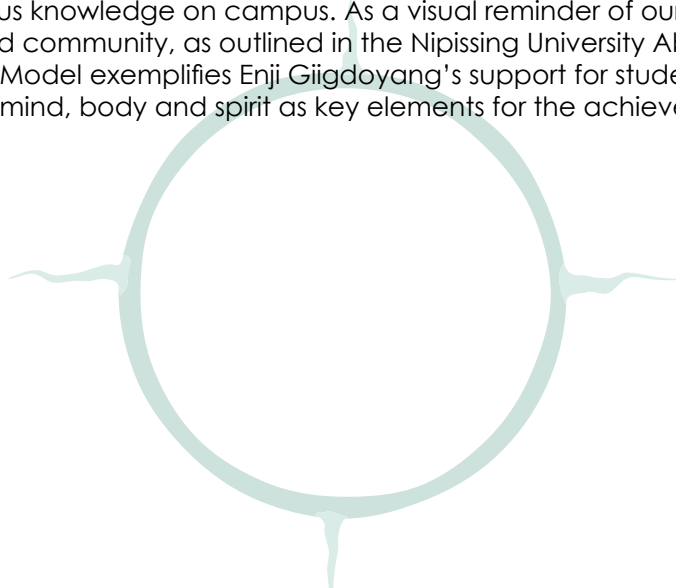
The network of supportive relationships includes the Nipissing University Aboriginal Council on Education (NUACE), comprised of regional representatives of First Nations and Aboriginal service organizations. NUACE advises the university on Aboriginal programs, services and students and provides ongoing feedback regarding community education goals, success stories and concerns. NUACE has representation on the Nipissing University’s Board of Governors and Academic Senate and includes Elder and student membership. Collectively, the impact of this network of relationships is significant and long lasting. This relationship-centered approach to developing and implementing programs and support services is visualized below.

## **Holistic Support**

It is through this network of supportive relationships that the Office of Aboriginal Initiatives holistically supports students, supporting a student’s balance of mind, body and spirit. This includes fostering an intergenerational, culturally-responsive learning community on campus through academic, personal and cultural supports.

**“One story of many about the strength of sweetgrass is about the strength of the collective. If we were to visualize one blade of sweetgrass, it is vulnerable and easy to break. However, if we were to visualize many blades of sweetgrass, it is strong and difficult to break. Similarly, the interweaving of sweetgrass is symbolic of the collective’s shared thoughts and stories...and when put into action, we become a strong people.”**

Robin Potts, a graduate student explains how sweetgrass, a traditional medicine for many First Nation cultures, is a model for collective, holistic strength. For this reason, the image of sweetgrass was chosen to illustrate the Office of Aboriginal Initiatives’ acknowledgement of the importance of taking a collective and holistic approach to supporting Aboriginal student success. Rooted in a shared vision, mission and guiding principles, the OAI has proposed the Sweetgrass Model that demonstrates the important connections to local and regional living histories, voices and lands and the ethical inclusion of Indigenous knowledge on campus. As a visual reminder of our approach and our commitments to students and community, as outlined in the Nipissing University Aboriginal Strategic Plan, the proposed Sweetgrass Model exemplifies Enji Giigdoyang’s support for students by establishing wellness through the balance of mind, body and spirit as key elements for the achievement of academic success.





# SWEETGRASS HOLISTIC APPROACH TO ABORIGINAL STUDENT SUPPORT



## Safe Spaces

The Enji Giigdoyang Student Lounge is a welcoming central location where students and their families gather in an intergenerational community to share stories, engage with staff, Elders and community members through participation in culturally-based activities grounded in traditional knowledge. The Office of Aboriginal Initiatives staff acknowledges the importance of the Student Lounge as a communal student space and their role in this space is focused on being available to all students. Every door is open and essentially the concept of 'no wrong door' is in practice. In addition to the student lounge, Enji Giigdoyang offers a Sacred Space for quiet reflection and contemplation, visits with Elders, counseling and traditional smudging with sacred medicines.

## Initiatives and Programs

The Office of Aboriginal Initiatives coordinates events, lectures, and workshops with Indigenous professionals, scholars, and community leaders who bring their experiences, perspectives, knowledges and pedagogies to the campus community. These programs support lifelong and experiential learning in initiatives directly administered by the OAI or programs administered by other university faculty offices. These include the following:

- Aboriginal Advantage Program,
- Aboriginal Education Programs,
- Wiidooktaadwin Aboriginal Mentorship Initiatives (WAMI),
- Biidaaban Community Service-Learning (BCSL), and
- Research with Aboriginal peoples and communities.

## Aboriginal Advantage Program

The Aboriginal Advantage Program is a first-year Arts and Science program for Aboriginal students. In this program, students have the opportunity to earn university credits in an environment that encourages growth and learning while respecting cultural diversity. An integrated staff of Elders, faculty and a dedicated Student Success Coordinator recognize and celebrate the learners' identities as Aboriginal people. When students successfully complete their first year in the Aboriginal Advantage Program, they will have earned first year credits towards their university degree and developed a strong foundational basis of academic and personal skills to help ensure their continued success in their studies at Nipissing University.

## **Aboriginal Education Programs**

For over 30 years, the Schulich School of Education at Nipissing University has offered professional education programs for people of Aboriginal heritage. Students without any previous post-secondary experience can enroll in the Native Classroom Assistant Diploma Program (NCADP), providing the necessary skills and knowledge to assist qualified teachers in classrooms across the province. The Aboriginal Teacher Certification Program (ATCP) and Teacher of Anishnaabemwin as a Second Language Program (TASL) meet Ontario's new teacher certification requirements. As a graduate of the either program, students earn a certificate of Qualification and Registration from the Ontario College of Teachers with the necessary pedagogical skills and personal understanding of traditions, culture and heritage to build a strong learning environment for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children.

This low-residency model allows students to be at Nipissing University for several weeks in the summer for coursework, returning to their home communities to complete practicum requirements in the fall and winter. This approach ensures that students and their families still reside in their home communities for much of the year while they obtain their teaching qualifications. To support students in their goal of achieving academic success, the Aboriginal Education Programs have developed a number of daily and weekly activities for the children of enrolled students. The programs include the Youth Experience Program for children aged 3-8 years and a Science, Engineering and Mathematics Camp for older children.

## **Wiidooktaadwin Aboriginal Mentorship Initiatives**

The Office of Aboriginal Initiative's Wiidooktaadwin Aboriginal Mentorship Initiatives (WAMI) program centers on "Wiidooktaadwin" (pronounced wee-doke-tahd-win), an Anishnaabe word that means "helping one another." The program connects upper-year Aboriginal Nipissing University students and Elders with Aboriginal secondary school students to create a network or learning community that fosters the building of meaningful relationships with one another. Mentors lead weekly in-school experiential learning sessions that consist of small, culturally-based projects and activities that promote the development of leadership and life skills while reinforcing the notion of working together. A secondary goal of the program is the promotion of university studies with Aboriginal youth.

## **Biidaaban Community Service-Learning**

Nipissing University's Biidaaban Community Service-Learning (BSCL) centers on an Anishnaabe word that means "the point at which the light touches the earth at the break of dawn," symbolizing the beginning of a new partnership designed to enhance the lives of Aboriginal university students and communities. BCSL is an educational approach integrating theory taught in the classroom with real-world experiences in the community. Students are immersed at not-for-profit organizations and other community settings. In return, the organization receives an opportunity to guide student learning while gaining volunteer assistance.

A specialized focus of BCSL at Nipissing University is increasing literacy and numeracy rates for Aboriginal learners in the North Bay and surrounding communities. Regionally, the mentorship and community service-learning programs support Indigenous learners in grades K-12 in partnership with 55 community partners and schools, and over 110 university students who volunteer for the programs annually.

## **Research Ethics: Aboriginal Community Engagement**

The Office of Aboriginal Initiatives supports faculty understanding regarding ethical research with Aboriginal peoples and communities through public talks with Indigenous scholars and community partners. The OAI administers the Community Engagement Plan for Research Involving Aboriginal Peoples and Communities in Canada, providing support, assistance and guidance, where appropriate, when faculty and staff engage Aboriginal peoples and communities in research. Based on the objectives and policies outlined in Chapter 9 of the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans, the OAI requests and encourages researchers to engage with Aboriginal peoples and communities through initial and continued dialogue to build and strengthen relationships for collaborative research endeavours.

## **Future Practice**

The following pilot activities were developed and implemented in response to the Actions that Support Student Learning and the Recommendations outlined in chapters five and six respectively.

### **Indigenous Higher Education and Research Circle**

Student success can be supported through the creation of a welcoming environment where Indigenous culture, heritage and worldview are recognized, respected and normalized within all areas of academic disciplines. The Indigenous Higher Education and Research Circle is a peer-directed exchange and meaningful yet informal professional development opportunity where faculty from various disciplines, meet regularly over the course of the academic year to discuss and share ideas about introducing, enhancing and normalizing Indigenous content and pedagogy, contributing to normalizing Indigenous understandings in the University academic environment. To support this project, the Office of Aboriginal Initiatives organized the Indigenous Scholar-in-Residence program, a week-long series of presentations, classroom visits, individual meetings and workshops addressing topics of decolonization and Indigenization on campus for students, staff, faculty, senior administration and community members.

### **Traditional Land-Based Teachings**

To reflect Indigenous worldview and work towards normalizing Indigenous perspectives on campus, this activity offered students, staff and faculty an opportunity to engage with local and regional Elders, traditional teachers and knowledge keepers to explore and highlight Indigenous worldview and relationality. A series of workshops and gatherings were organized to explore local Aboriginal culture in relationship with land, water, animals and humanity, while promoting experiential learning.





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# APPENDIX 1: INVITATIONS, PARTICIPANT INFORMATION LETTERS, CONFIDENTIALITY

## Invitations

Graduate Students, Scholars and Community Members

Dear [name]

In response to the Canadian Council on Learning's call towards developing a more holistic understanding of Aboriginal student success, Nipissing University and the Office of Aboriginal Initiatives will engage in a pilot project throughout 2015-2016, "Redefining Aboriginal Student Success."

With the objective of deepening our collective understanding of how we define Aboriginal Student Success, The Office of Aboriginal Initiatives will be hosting a series of conversations with regional Aboriginal community members and knowledge keepers, Aboriginal graduate students from across Ontario, and Aboriginal scholars. These conversations will address a key focus within a larger project to strengthen existing services to better support the success goals of Aboriginal students.

I am pleased to invite you to participate in the conversation at Nipissing University, North Bay campus. If you would like to participate or would like to receive more information please contact me by email or telephone at ...

## Undergraduate Focus Groups

Thank you for participating in Nipissing University's "Redefining Aboriginal Student Success" project. As a participant of the \_\_\_\_\_ (focus group) scheduled on \_\_\_\_\_ (add date and time), we have provided the following questions that will focus our conversations and discussions.

Please reflect on these questions in preparation for the upcoming conversation.

- a) How do you define success for Aboriginal students attending university?
- b) What are factors that can support this definition of success of Aboriginal students at university?
- c) What are obstacles that can hinder this definition of success of Aboriginal students at university?

## Participant Information Letters and Informed Consent

This letter is to inform you about the research in which the Office of Aboriginal Initiatives have asked you to participate.

In response to the Canadian Council on Learning's call towards developing a more holistic understanding of Aboriginal student success, Nipissing University and the Office of Aboriginal Initiatives will engage in a pilot project throughout 2015-2016, "Redefining Aboriginal Student Success."

To participate in this study we ask you to take part in a focus group / conversation to discuss your experiences and ideas about Aboriginal student success. The focus group / conversation will be held over two days and divided into four, three hour sessions. Compensation will be offered to participants through travel and accommodation costs and honorarium.

By sharing your ideas, you will contribute to helping Nipissing University and the Office of Aboriginal Initiatives to deepen our understanding of how we define Aboriginal student success and how we can strengthen existing services to better support the success goals of Aboriginal students. You will also have the opportunity to contribute to the growing field of Indigenous post-secondary education research.

Over the course of the project, you will have the opportunity to review and provide feedback on a transcript of what you have shared before the information is used in any form.

The findings from this project will be shared in a final report and recommendations for a holistic support model. The final report will be shared with the Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities and potentially the Council of Ontario Universities Aboriginal Reference Group. The final report will also be available for viewing on the Nipissing University website.

Participation in this project is completely voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time without reason. You will not be obligated to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable or that you find objectionable.

[For students] Participation in this project will in no way impact the support you receive through the Office of Aboriginal Initiatives.

Because you are participating in a focus group or conversation with other people, complete anonymity and confidentiality is not possible. If you prefer, we are happy to schedule an individual interview. In both focus groups and conversations and interviews you are identifiable, however, we will protect your identity in the writing of the research in accordance with your wishes. While some participants may wish to include their names in the research, others may wish to use pseudonyms (a pretend name) or to restrict the use of material that could be used to identify them in any presentation or publication. We have presented several options on the consent form for you to choose from. Please choose whichever level of confidentiality you wish.

The information and wisdom gathered directly from the focus groups and conversations will be assessed by the project coordinator and researcher. This data, which may be in the form of notes and audio recordings as well as signed consent forms, will be under our possession for the duration of the research in a secured location. All electronic data will be encrypted and stored in a secure password protected files on a password protected computer. This material will be destroyed after five years following the completion of the project.

There are minimal risks associated with participation in the focus groups and conversations. If the conversations raise any difficulties for you, you can find support at the following sources.

### **Undergraduate Students:**

Elder in Residence (705) 474-3450 Ext. 4899  
University Counselling Services (705) 474-3450 Ext. 4507  
Office of Aboriginal Initiatives Student Success & Development Coordinator (705) 474-3450  
Ext. 4252  
Talk4Healing 1(855)-554-HEAL  
Good2Talk 1(866)-925-5454

### **Visiting Graduate Students:**

Elder in Residence (705) 474-3450 Ext. 4899  
Talk4Healing 1(855)-554-HEAL  
Good2Talk 1(866)-925-5454

### **Visiting Scholars, Elders & Community Members:**

Elder in Residence (705) 474-3450 Ext. 4899  
Community Counselling Centre of Nipissing (705) 472-6515  
The Lawrence Commanda Health Centre (705) 753-3312

To demonstrate that you have read and understood this information, I ask that you please sign and date the Consent and Confidentiality Form attached to this letter.



## Informed Consent for Focus Groups / Conversations

### Redefining Aboriginal Student Success

This form is intended to serve as a part of the information letter that you have also received. The research in which we have asked you to participate focuses on the defining of Aboriginal Student Success.

To participate in this project, we ask that you take part in a focus group / conversation , which will be recorded on a digital audio recorder, to discuss your experience and ideas about defining Aboriginal student success. If you prefer not to be recorded in digital audio, you are welcome to participate in a one-on-one interview where your stories and ideas will be recorded in writing.

You can refuse to answer any question(s) that you do not wish to answer. You may withdraw your consent at any time.

Use of your information: (Please choose one of the following by signing your initials in the space provided.)

You may use my name and information. I share without restriction.

You may use only the information. I share but not my name.

You may use the information I share with a pseudonym (a pretend name).

#### **Acknowledgments**

(please let us know if we may use your name in the acknowledgements section of the report):

Yes, You may use my name in the acknowledgements section of the report.

No, you may not use my name in the acknowledgements section of the report.

As a participant in this research project, I understand what I am being asked to do and that I am free to decline involvement or to withdraw at any time and that steps are being taken to protect me and any information I share. I understand that due to the nature of focus groups, my confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, but every effort to respect my wishes regarding how my information is shared will be respected. I understand that a digital recorder will be used and that I will receive a copy of the stories and information that I have shared before it is used in this study. I have read this information and consent form and I have had any and all questions and concerns answered to my satisfaction. I have been provided a copy of this form. I also understand that this research has been approved by the Nipissing University Research Ethics Board.

Name (Print) : \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Please select your preferred method of contact and provide information in the appropriate space below:

Telephone: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

## Confidentiality

As a member of this research team I understand that I may have access to confidential information about the project participants. By signing this statement, I am indicating my understanding of my responsibilities to maintain confidentiality and agree to the following:

I understand that the names and any other identifying information about participants are completely confidential.

I agree not to divulge, publish or otherwise make known to unauthorized persons or to the public any information obtained in the course of this research project that could identify the persons who participated in the project.

I understand that I am not to read information about the participants, or any other confidential documents, nor ask questions of the participants for my own personal information but only to the extent and for the purpose of performing my assigned duties on this project.

I agree to notify the principal investigator immediately should I become aware of a breach of confidentiality or a situation which could result in a breach, whether on my part or the part of another person.