

Tertiary Institution Support Programs for Aboriginal Students: The Saskatchewan Scene

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Tertiary Institute Aboriginal Science and Math Support Programs

- What “thinks and things” are already happening in tertiary institutions in Saskatchewan?

Why should more Aboriginal people study math and science?

- Saskatchewan has a high percentage of Aboriginal people, approximately 16%.
- They are not represented, population wise, in any career. There is need for more qualified people in all careers, but Aboriginal communities especially need qualified people.
- Many careers require math and science knowledge. Without backgrounds in science and math, an individual or a community is less able to participate in self-governance, less able to make career choices, less able to match people to necessary careers. Doing well in science and math is a social justice issue.

Why should tertiary institutes develop support programs for Aboriginal students?

- Social injustice and curricula have created myths that Aboriginal people:
do not exist or exist as only romantic historical figures.
cannot achieve especially in math and science.

- Science and Science education have created the myth that:

The only knowledge worth knowing derives from White males.

Science knowledge is amoral, abstract with little relation to what actually happens, logical and not emotional.

- Aboriginal ways of knowing (as opposed to “Knowledge”) involve the whole person in context. The spiritual and emotional are equally as important as the intellectual and the physical. A person coming to know will always be in relation to the environment – the built or natural, other humans or other beings.

Thus:

- Support programs must be in place for Aboriginal students to counteract the effects of social injustice brought about by colonialism. As well, Aboriginal ways of knowing must be valued by tertiary institutions.
- Tertiary institutions need to spend more time and energy on ridding themselves of systemically racist policies.

Methods

- Snow ball sampling – individuals in support programs were contacted for interviews. They mentioned other support programs.
- Five people were interviewed, representing seven different programs.
- Interviews were semi-structured, transcribed and themed. The penultimate draft with the interpretation of themes was sent to participants for their input and corrections.

Findings

- Overview of Programs

- Themes:

Funding

Academics

Kinds of support

Overview of Programs

- Cultural support services programs

Physical space

Financial and personal counseling arranged

Cultural activities

Elder service

- Academic programs

Cohort groups and/or tutoring

Special sections and/or tutoring

Hand-picked instructors

Academic advisors for programs

Theme 1: Funding for programs

- Academic programs are funded by external organizations – private and crown corporations, provincial government, INAC, bands, Gabriel Dumont Institute.
- Cultural support programs are funded from institution base funding.
- Employees working for support programs – faculty or advisors – are out-of-scope – not tenured nor tenurable. There is a tendency to hire sessionals for instructing special sections.

Theme 1: Funding for students

- Students have their tuition paid, usually, by their bands or the Gabriel Dumont Institute.
- Depending on the band, students might have a living allowance, but this will often be insufficient.
- The tuition goes to the parent institute for providing such services as sessional or faculty salary, classroom and office space, and the whole administrative structure (which would include salaries for cultural support advisors).

Theme 2: Academics

Kinds of programs:

Some programs are immersion Aboriginal programs. Others have cohorts of Aboriginal students for a time, then students choose their own paths. Others have Aboriginal students in them, with cultural support provided, but students are in mainstream sections.

Theme 2: Academics

All entering students must meet minimum qualifications.

Students are sometimes required to take no credit summer courses, prior to entering the program of choice: for example, communication and numeracy.

Students are sometimes invited to take a credit course over the summer; the course includes in its content cultural survival techniques.

Students are often invited to participate in tutorials for specific needs, such as math, computer-search, writing skills.

Question

There is a perception that the special sections are “watered down”. All faculty who teach the special sections are qualified by the department which sponsors the course. (Many of these faculty are tenured and teach mainstream sections as well.)

Students go on from the special sections to take upper level courses with no greater problems than mainstream students.

Examples of personal support

- Different ways of classifying them. In this presentation, they are classified as:
- Academic
- Cultural
- Social
- Financial
- Spiritual

Personal supports: Academic

Academic advising

Required preliminary upgrading courses

Optional special sections of credit courses
providing cultural support

Tutoring services and tutorials

Special cohort sections

Mentorships between beginning and experienced
students; and between students and employed
graduates

Appropriate summer employment

Personal supports: Cultural

- Orientation day (tertiary institution culture)
- Encouraging extra-curricular activities
- Lunch time workshops on “survival 101” (budgeting, etc.) (tertiary and urban culture)
- Medicine Walks; cultural excursions; feast days; tea and bannock talk times
- Trips to explore family histories and to connect with other Aboriginal groups
- Achievement seminars (Aboriginal leaders, role models speak to students)
- Leadership conference
- Pamphlet on personal rights

Personal supports: Social

- Social events (co-arranged by students) – barbecues, Xmas parties
- Appointments with counselors
- Life skills coach
- Taking a student to women's shelter
- Data on student's support group and advising about foreseeing a need for help
- Contacting potential employers

Personal supports: Financial

- Financial and loans counselling
- Assisting students with finding affordable housing
- Arrange for emergency loans
- Grocery store certificates
- Food at events
- Arrange for food bank trips
- Résumé writing

Personal supports: Spiritual

- Arranging for elders.
- Arranging for sweats and smudging.
- Valuing and making valid cultural backgrounds through honouring cultural backgrounds: all those things found under cultural supports.

Conclusion

- “the philosophy of the program is to address the complete student experience, and in doing so create a community of learners, where students’ concerns are addressed, where staff know ‘where the students are coming from’ and thus help students overcome the barriers erected through cultural assumptions made by the [tertiary institute], where students can go for help when in need, and where students and their instructors can engage in discussion, activities and intellectual growth. Another term that can be used is a holistic education, where academic, personal and spiritual services are available (the spiritual being addressed by [a separate support program]; an intellectual home for Aboriginal students.”