

# Chapter 7

## Canada's Indigenous Peoples' Access to Post-secondary Education: The Spirit of the 'New Buffalo'

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### Introduction

As educators and school leaders we have been taught about child and human development, which included the stages of growth and the general milestones of each stage. We also learned the importance of supporting student learning and development within environments that are safe and caring, of stimulating student engagement with creative, fun, innovative activities, of inspiring students so they are motivated by learning. In addition to this, we have been introduced to foundational educational theories (e.g. constructivism, constructionism, ecological theory, etc.) that help develop our educational philosophy, a philosophy that determines how we take decisions, interact and behave in our classrooms and schools. With all this knowledge, educators should be fully equipped to navigate through and meet the challenges that are presented on a daily basis in their classrooms and schools by students, parents and colleagues. Every child should be learning and progressing from grade to grade in a systematic, predictable manner and finishing school on time – never 'failing' a test or a grade. Unfortunately, this is not the case. On their first day of teaching, teachers' ideals may be challenged by reality. They learn that teaching and learning cannot be fully captured and placed into neat and tidy theories and fix-all strategies – that the educational landscape is very complex. Many teachers learn that students are as diverse and sometimes as distant as the stars and that the education profession is an adventure that presents more questions than answers. In time, some teachers learn that clarity to complexities emerge when one actively listens and astutely observes, when one is open, responsive and humble, rather than being an executor of prescribed solutions and being consumed with unfolding possibly outdated curricula and implementing poorly developed (i.e. without community input) policies.

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So, with this in mind, in this chapter I focus on a people group that contributes to the complexity of the educational landscape, people who are indigenous to the land but often not recognised as such, people that continue to confound many researchers, educators, leaders and policy-makers at all levels of education (elementary, secondary and post-secondary) – Canada’s First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples. As an Anishinaabe person, I reside within this circle. In essence, I am asking the following questions: Why do significant educational gaps still exist and why do many First Nations, Métis and Inuit students disappear from the halls of our learning institutions, particularly in times of transition (i.e. from grades 6–7, 9–10, and 12–post-secondary)? How can educational leaders and teachers equip themselves to support students that see and experience the world differently – students that, in general, have not been responsive to traditional Eurocentric educational approaches? Do foundational educational precepts (i.e. philosophies, theories, methodologies and strategies) need to change to resolve long-standing issues (i.e. the education gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in Canada) to make way for inclusive, innovative, caring and supportive spaces in education?

In reading this chapter, transition and access should be recognised as change processes that function in constant flux (Little Bear 2002) and a terrain that is inclusive of the Trickster’s playground. Constant flux is fluid change, a reality where the dynamic relationship between order and chaos, and is the birthplace of creativity and innovation. As complexity theory teaches, this zone is the liminal space between the old and new way of being and doing, an energy-filled place that holds the potential for profound discoveries in the midst of time – past, present and future – that is definitely not linear but woven into each other. Little Bear states, ‘If everything is constantly moving and changing, then one has to look at the whole to begin to see patterns ... For instance, the cosmic cycles are in constant motion, but they have regular patterns that result in recurrences such as the seasons of the year, the migration of the animals, renewal ceremonies, songs, and stories’ (p. 78). This can be volatile domain. In consideration of Little Bear’s explanation, educational reform should include intentional reflection in- and on-action (Schon 1983), learning from past patterns and renewal of essential elements. It could be said that this space is also where the Trickster plays havoc. Jo-ann Archibald (2008) explains:

First Nations, Indigenous stories about Coyote the Trickster often place her/him in a journey mode, learning lesson the ‘hard’ way. Trickster gets into trouble when he/she becomes disconnected from cultural traditions teachings. The Trickster stories remind us about the good power of connections within family, community, nation, culture, and land. If we become disconnected, we lose the ability to make meaning from Indigenous stories. (p. ix)

Archibald also describes the Trickster (also known as Raven, Wesakejag, Nanabozo and Glooscap) as a ‘magician, an enchanter, and absurd prankster, or a Shaman, who sometimes is a shape shifter, and who often takes on human characteristics’ (p. 5). The Trickster is a ‘transformative figure’ (p. 5) who falls into dire situations because of ‘vanity, greed, selfishness and foolishness’ (p. 5), and he teaches through ‘humour, satire, self-mocking, and absurdity to carry good lessons’ (p. 5). Ultimately, a mission of the Trickster would be to draw people to truth. It is through the awareness of flux, acceptance of the uncertainty that stepping into new

territory encompasses, and being open to the Trickster's lessons that learning institutions can better prepare for transition and access to various levels of education for Aboriginal students.

## The Educational Landscape for Canada's Indigenous Peoples

In 2013, I wrote an article entitled 'Indigenizing the Academy, Confronting 'Contentious Ground''. The article explored the concepts of Indigenisation and decolonisation within the context of Canadian post-secondary institutions. I began the article with a scan of the state of higher education statistics primarily for First Nations students. I noted the following:

In terms of post-secondary education, First Nations and Inuit enrolment rates have slowly increased between 1987–88 (15,572 funded students) and 1998–99 (over 27,157 funded students) (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) 2000); however, more recent statistics indicate student enrolment decline: in the 2002–03 academic year, 25,075 students were enrolled and in 2008 approximately 23,000 students were funded on an annual basis (INAC). However, between 2001 and 2006, because of federal post-secondary under-funding, approximately 10,500 First Nations students who are eligible to attend post-secondary education were on waiting lists. Overall, it appears that the number of post-secondary students has been declining in recent years. [...] Furthermore, the Canadian Federation of Students (2012) reported, 'Only 8 percent of Aboriginal persons hold a university degree compared to 23% of the total population' (n.p.). As a result of statistics like these and the dramatic disparity in the quality of living between segments of the general population and the Aboriginal population, identification of barriers and initiatives to improve Aboriginal educational success, and consequently quality of living, have emerged. (p. 8)

Not surprisingly, the education gap for Indigenous students begins in elementary school and continues into the realms of higher education. The Auditor General of Canada's 2011 Report indicates that the education gap continues to widen for First Nations students, and "efforts to close the education gap have yet to yield results" (n.p.). The Report states that 41% of First Nations over the age of 15 that live on reserve, versus 77% of the Canadian population, have graduated from high school. Students are opting out of schooling at specific times of transition – in between elementary and middle school, middle school and high school, high school and higher education, and undergraduate and graduate school. Unfortunately, students have tremendous difficulty accessing and remaining in higher education without strong foundations. Mendelson (2008) explains:

Education is the bootstrap which First Nations communities must use to improve their social and economic conditions. Like all others in Canada, Aboriginal children need to acquire an adequate education to have a chance in succeeding in the modern economy. An adequate education is more than a high school education – a post-secondary diploma or degree, or a trade certificate, is required – but high school graduation is the door through which most students must pass to go on to post-secondary schooling. (p. 2)

Although it's important to strengthen higher education for Indigenous students, a multilevel approach to supporting Indigenous students is required since students are leaving school at an early age. Change has to happen at every level of schooling – from

early childhood to higher education. This can be made possible through collaborative dialogue that includes Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators and educational leadership that represent schooling from each ‘division’. We have to believe that what is good for Indigenous students is good for all students, that what is good for Indigenous people is good for all society. Therefore, the changes that emerge from a constructive collaboration whose aim is to impact Indigenous education positively will benefit education and humanity as a whole.

## The Barriers

What is the research saying about the typical journey for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students? Studies such as those by Restoule et al. (2013) indicate that First Nations, Métis and Inuit students are frustrated, confused by and suspicious of education systems, particularly post-secondary education. In Canada, there continues to be a general education gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students (Office of the Auditor General of Canada 2011). Systemic barriers (e.g. policies, programming and curricula that do not authentically and respectfully include Indigenous peoples – their histories, knowledge, teachings) are presented early and sustained in learning institutions causing long-term challenges for Indigenous students. Restoule et al. (2013) list the barriers in accessing post-secondary education that Canadian Indigenous people encounter; these comprised of ‘inadequate financial resources, poor academic preparation, lack of self-confidence and motivation, absence of role models who have post-secondary education experience, lack of understanding of Aboriginal culture on campus, and racism on campus’ (p. 1). Restoule et al. (2013) also described the profound intergenerational legacy of mistrust that Indian Residential Schooling and Eurocentric educational practices has left on the Canadian Indigenous population (p. 1).

In their study on Ontario access programs, Restoule et al. (2013) found that Aboriginal students pursuing post-secondary institutions were generally mature students over the age of 25 and that the majority of the students gained university admittance through a bridging program. Restoule et al. (2013) explained: ‘When they were younger, these students were not able to access or chose not to access post-secondary education through the so-called “regular way”’ (p. 2) (i.e. right after high school). This schooling journey can be described as a ‘start-stop’ repetitive approach, a walk down an unknown winding road, or a fearful saunter through a maze of experiences. So, what were the barriers or factors that contributed to the decision not to attend schooling after high school?

A 2003–2004 study was conducted in four Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology (SIAST, now Saskatchewan Polytechnic) campuses to learn the reasons that students left the program before completion. The study revealed significant findings on Aboriginal students once they gained access into SIAST. In this study, a third of the ‘early-leavers’ were Aboriginal, and overall ‘only 47.9% of Aboriginal students completed their programme’ (2005, p. 5). The findings

are staggering but synonymous with other post-secondary institutions. Of the Aboriginal students that left early, '57.8% were discontinued from their studies by SIAST for not meeting programme expectations such as academic performance and attendance' (p. 5). Similar to the Ontario study (Restoule et al. 2013), the reasons for leaving SIAST included: family demands, transportation challenges, childcare issues, family health issues, employment attainment and financial and funding challenges (p. 5). The *Aboriginal Student Success Strategy: Final Report to the Committee* (2009) indicated that the barriers to post-secondary access for Aboriginal students also included: 'low awareness of training-related career paths at the prospective student stage; complex admission processes; difficulties in relocating to an urban environment; academic preparedness; and, lack of support for English language learners' (p. 4). Through surveys and focus groups, the SIAST study revealed that Aboriginal students experienced discrimination and insensitivity and felt misunderstood, segregated and on the periphery of the larger student body. The students expressed the need for further implementation and 'validation of Aboriginal ways of knowing and acknowledgement of Aboriginal cultures' (p. 6). They wanted to exercise their voice and to create a sense of belonging and a 'need for a transition programme between secondary and postsecondary studies' (p. 6).

Restoule et al. (2013) found that the post-secondary admissions application process confused and frustrated many Aboriginal students. The form that contributed to this confusion was Form 105 that asks students to consider self-identifying as an Aboriginal person. Form 105 had most students wonder about the implications of revealing their race, and asking whether the institution would be provided with additional funds for culturally specific support and programming if they chose to check the box. Many students also thought that self-identification would have a 'bearing on decisions of admissibility' (p. 3). Resoundingly, the answer was no. Once students 'self-declared', the information was sent from a university's Applications Centre to Aboriginal Student Services offices. The authors noted the importance of informing and educating everyone concerned about the purpose of self-declaration and the implications of disclosure. Namely, students would receive information about the support available to them through the Aboriginal Centre and it would provide universities with accurate data on Aboriginal student populations, which may positively impact funding for Aboriginal student service support.

Hudson (2009) explains the snowballing effect that occurs when schools do not make the meaningful and necessary links between classroom concepts and lessons to students' reality and future applications: 'The outcomes from unequal opportunities in public schooling have the potential to stem throughout life. If schools are not offering students with the skills to attain their aspirations, and limit their post-secondary opportunities, then public schools are not offering equality of opportunity for equality of outcomes' (p. 63). How can elementary and secondary schools better prepare Indigenous students for post-secondary schooling? How can they inspire Indigenous students to reach for and realise their goals? As Hudson has pointed out, if this is not done well, then individual lives and society are impacted. The income-gap between non-Indigenous and Indigenous people continues (Wilson and Macdonald 2010), therefore, the wide-reaching implications of poverty. The

cost to support Indigenous students through all schooling, this including post-secondary education, is significantly less than it is to support poverty and its social support systems (i.e. economic, healthcare and criminal justice systems) (Canada Without Poverty 2016).

## Systemic and Systematic Roots

The complexity for non-Indigenous educators may stem from how education and schooling are perceived by Indigenous peoples. Cajete (1999) noted that ‘there is no word for education, or science, or art in most indigenous languages.’ ‘Coming to know’ is the best translation for education in most Native traditions. ‘Coming to know’ is a process that happens in many ways’ (p. 78). Schooling which is more structured, siloed (i.e. subjects and grade levels), confined within a space (i.e. building) and limited to a construct of time (from 9 to 3:30) was a foreign concept in most Indigenous contexts. ‘Coming to know’ is an educational process that involves self, community, creation and cosmos alongside the Creator. The clash between Indigenous and Eurocentric worldviews began as soon as the first European stepped onto Turtle Island (an Indigenous term for North America) when it became evident that the land was valued and viewed in stark contrast – as stewards or as owners. To some degree little has changed over the last 500 years; clashes of ideologies, philosophies and pedagogies still occur.

Many of the issues that have been identified as stressors by Indigenous students are systematic and systemic and the origins can be located in history. In Canada, educational barriers for many First Nations people began with education policies that significantly differed from the general population. In 1871, First Nations leaders and the Crown negotiated and secured the first of 11 treaties. In each of these treaties, education was identified as one of the rights. Ironically, in 1876, contrary to the established nation-to-nation treaty processes, and while still in the midst of treaty negotiations, the Dominion of Canada unilaterally implemented the Indian Act, which essentially placed the federal government in the role as guardian over all ‘Indian’ people. The Indian Act defined Indian people as firstly, any male person of Indian blood reputed to belong to a particular band; secondly, any child of such person; and thirdly, any woman who is or was lawfully married to such person (Indigenous Affairs and Northern Development Canada 2016).

Those that were registered by Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) were labelled ‘status’ Indians and identified by a status card. A First Nations person could be both Treaty and status, and Treaty but not status if their leadership were only a part of Treaty negotiations but were not engaged in INAC registration; or a First Nations person could neither be Treaty nor status. A change to this definition of ‘Indian’ has not changed, until recently. On April 14, 2016, the Supreme Court of Canada unanimously recognised Métis and non-status Indians as ‘Indian’ people under Section 91(24) of the Constitution Act of 1867 (CBC 2016). However, the implications of this ruling for educational funding have not been determined.

The dichotomy of the federal action should not go unnoticed. Both the treaties and the Indian Act were made possible because of the Royal Proclamation of 1763, which outlined how First Nations peoples should be treated; they 'should not be molested or disturbed' by settlers and the Indian department would be the primary liaison between the Crown and First Nations people (Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada 2013). The British North America Act of 1867 also declared 'exclusive Legislative Authority of the Parliament of Canada extends to ... Indians and lands reserved for Indians' (Canada 2016). In both cases, the Crown then Canada has the primary role in determining how Canadian Indigenous peoples were to be 'governed' over.

This snippet of history is important as it sets the tone of schooling today for First Nations ('Indian' and Inuit) status students. First Nations students' elementary and secondary schooling is funded and monitored by Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, rather than by the provincial governments as for all other students. Local First Nations governments manage and execute the policies and student funding and often negotiate tuition agreements with the school divisions that their students attend. Interestingly, the tuition rate that the federal government provides for each First Nation student is well below what the provinces provides for tuition. For example, researchers and authors of *The British Columbia Funding Analysis: 2003/04 School Year found*, 'Overall 83 schools, provincial allocations exceed federal allocations by \$8,936,844, an average of \$2,126 per student. Federal funding would need an increase of 20% to equal provincial funding' (p. 23). First, it can be observed that 70% of the schools (58 of 83) [...] would require an increase in federal funding between 0% and 75% to match provincial allocations. They represent the norm, the typical pattern that includes most schools and students. An increase of 23% in federal funding would be required to match provincial funding for these 58 schools' (Postl, p. 24). Interestingly, there continues to be confusion about student funding due to the complex formulae (Drummond and Rosenbluth 2013) and opposition and dispute remain regarding the disparity in funding for First Nations students (Bains 2014).

The complexity increases with post-secondary funding. Post-secondary funding is perceived as a treaty right by First Nations people – a right that has never been fully realised. On the other hand, the federal government sees First Nations post-secondary schooling as a policy, one that can be eradicated at any time. As Canada's Indigenous leaders continue to fight for the treaty right of education, Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada continues to implement post-secondary education through policy – the Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP). PSSSP has had a 2% funding cap since 1996, which is not reflective of inflation and the increase in student population. The Assembly of First Nations (AFN) (an organisation that represents 634 First Nations communities in Canada) notes that in 2008 the PSSSP 'supported an estimated 22,303 students at a total cost of \$300 million ... \$724 million was needed to support the number of First Nations learners qualified to attend post-secondary' (AFN 2012, p. 13). The First Nations Education Council (2009) argues: '[Indian and Northern Affairs Canada's] overall PSSSP funding has been historically inadequate, resulting in a backlog of 10,589 First Nations students who



could potentially enrol in post-secondary programs today, but have been denied PSSSP funding due to INAC's imposed 2% cap' (First Nations Education Council 2009, p. 41). AFN highlights that 'approximately seven in ten First Nations youth aspire to complete a post-secondary degree' (p. 13). These tensions create an unstable environment for First Nations students, and many have cited insufficient funding as a stressor and the primary reason for leaving a post-secondary program before completion (Timmons 2013; AFN 2012).

## The Purpose of Higher Education

Many Indigenous students pursue higher education for reasons beyond economic gain. For many Canadian Indigenous people, education is the new buffalo (Christensen 2000). Stonechild explains:

In the past, the buffalo met virtually every need of the North American Indian, from food to shelter; this animal was considered to be a gift from the Creator, intended to provide for the peoples' needs. Today, elders say that education, rather than the bison needs to be relied upon for survival. (2006, pp. 1–2)

From this perspective, education is the new means of survival, and it is also the means to achieve individual and collective self-determination. Pidgeon (2008a) posits that many Indigenous students pursue higher education as a 'tool of empowerment' (p. 55) and 'to actualise their goals for self-determination' (p. 24), and she states that self-determination, rather than financial gain, is the definition of success for many Indigenous students. Pidgeon cites Linda Tuhiwai Smith's framework to describe self-determination. From this perspective, education is an act of social justice that encourages movement from survival to recovery to development, and this requires individual and collective processes of mobilisation, healing, decolonisation and transformation (Tuhiwai Smith 1999, p. 116). Archibald et al. (2010) explain: 'The challenge of incorporating these perspectives into institutional structures aimed at student success and persistence is evident in the disconnections between retention theories and Indigenous students' (p. 11). Pidgeon (2008b) states that Astin's 'involvement theory' and Tinto's 'theory of persistence' (p. 344) exclude or do not fully consider the differences in worldview, socioeconomic circumstances (i.e. poverty), age (more mature) and the array of background experiences that Indigenous students bring to the higher education landscape. At the University of British Columbia, Archibald et al. (2010) explain: 'Improving retention in this view meant providing institutional supports to help students with the transition rather than altering the institution to accommodate different cultural perspectives, values, and practices' (p. 15).



## The Role of Indigenisation and Decolonisation Practices

Meaningful transition and access to post-secondary programs for Indigenous students begin with processes of decolonisation and Indigenisation. Mohawk activist Taiaiake Alfred defined Indigenisation as:

[I]t means that we are working to change universities so that they become places where the values, principles, and modes of organisation and behaviour of our people are respected in, and hopefully even integrated into, the larger system of structures and processes that make up the university itself. In pursuing this objective, whether as students attempting to integrate traditional views and bring authentic community voices to our work, or as faculty members attempting to abide by a traditional ethic in the conduct of our relations in fulfilling our professional responsibilities, we as Indigenous people immediately come into confrontation with the fact that universities are intolerant of and resistant to any meaningful 'Indigenizing.' (Alfred 2004, p. 88)

Indigenisation of access and transition programs begins with understanding Indigenous systems of transition. Transition and access to a new stage of life for many Indigenous youth in Canada was marked with rites of passage ceremonies where the whole community was involved in mindful preparation. In the midst of this collective activity and celebration, it could be assumed that youth were filled with excitement, anxiousness, and anticipation of the transition and access to new learning and responsibilities. As a result of the collective embracing of a natural development process, the rites of passage preparation and ceremony strengthens both the individual and community. Belonging, the importance of place, strength, courage and purpose are cultivated in times like this. This is an example of a renewal process that meets and embraces transition for the purpose of gaining access to wholeness and wisdom. How do Indigenous students currently feel during developmental change? Is there mindful community preparation of youth? Celebration? How can educators apply similar practices in schools today?

Transformation can only begin when university leadership and educators acknowledge that change needs to happen; when it is acknowledged that higher education and consequently society can be made stronger inclusive of Indigenous voices and knowledges; when the hard 'truths' of past and current systemic discrimination and racism are confronted within all learning institutions. Indigenisation is a positive process that involves acknowledging, legitimizing, valuing and celebrating Indigenous Knowledge systems (this including languages, traditions and cultures) and their inclusion in spaces and places where they have historically been silenced. Decolonisation involves intentional and concerted action to challenge divisive and destructive colonial entities that harm and separate people. Decolonisation practices have the power to bring people to meaningful reconciliatory relationships where voice and the respectful hearing of perspective and story are enabled.

Increasingly, Canadian universities are working at Indigenising the Academy and striving to become integrative and respectful of Indigenous peoples – their histories, knowledge and pedagogies and practices. There are increasingly more examples of mobilisation, healing, decolonisation and transformation of policies,

programs, curricula, pedagogy, overall climate and culture of institutions. The depth (first- and second-order) and the pace of change do differ from institution to institution.

## Access and Transition Programming

Jody Wilson-Raybould, while she was Regional Chief, BC Assembly of First Nations, stated:

Transitioning can certainly be a difficult time. For many of you, this journey is an even more challenging one as you balance family responsibilities. Many of you will be leaving your community to pursue your education. It is important to stay connected with your family and with your community and to surround yourself with a positive support system. This will go a long way in achieving success. While the transition can be tough at first, remember that this is a journey and an adventure. (Indigenous Adult and Higher Learning Association and University of Victoria 2011, p. iv)

In November 2015, Wilson-Raybould became the first Indigenous woman to become the Minister of Justice Canada. She has demonstrated strength in the midst of the adversity that change and transition presents.

There is so much to consider in supporting transition and improving access to post-secondary institutions for Indigenous students. First, since '[m]any Aboriginal youth are unaware of the education requirements of jobs they aspire to; are inadequately prepared for postsecondary pathways in terms of course selection, credits earned, and study skills; and are disadvantaged by the lack of role models' (Bruce and Marlin 2012, p. 68), then, or in addition to post-secondary institutions, access and transition programs should be located in high schools (Hudson 2009). When it comes to access and transitional support, both Hudson and Restoule et al. (2013) emphasise the importance of beginning these initiatives in high school, if not earlier. Restoule et al. (2013) contend:

The transition issues begin much earlier than the point of access. Establishing relationships with Aboriginal students in high school or earlier is clearly important as is developing these relationships in the context of community, not just to the individual. Many students did not feel supported in high school or that they belonged in post-secondary institutions. (p. 8)

Creating spaces where students feel that they belong is important, and initiatives that promote climates and cultures of belonging work towards decolonising the learning institution. Career counselling, mentor and role-model programs, family and community partnerships in program creation and implementation, financial, scholarship and infrastructure information, localised and contextual, culturally supportive curricula and programming, and cross-organisational partnerships contribute to bridging secondary and post-secondary transitions for Indigenous students (Bruce and Marlin 2012). The *Aboriginal Post-Secondary Education and Training Policy Framework and Action Plan: 2020 Vision for the Future* (2013) document also highlights the importance of 'continuous improvement based on research,

data-tracking and sharing of leading practices' (Ministry of Advanced Education, Innovation and Technology 2013, p. 3). Finally, the First Nations Education Steering Committee (2014) encourages personal counselling 'to prepare Aboriginal students for the tensions and conflicts associated with the change of environment and expectations of higher education' (p. 6).

Universities across Canada have been implementing institution-wide 'actions' that support access, transition, retention and completion of higher education programs for Indigenous students. Many of these universities have been tracking Indigenisation and decolonisation initiatives through research, and this includes access and transition programs.

From the findings of their Ontario study, Restoule et al. (2013) provided the following recommendations for access programs located in secondary schools: 'information about "everyday issues" that relate to Aboriginal youth: funding (band funding, scholarships...Student Assistant Program), housing (single parent, on and off campus), food banks, childcare, and part-time jobs or job training opportunities' (p. 6); 'posters of successful post-secondary education graduates from their communities' (p. 6); elder and cultural access information. Restoule et al. also suggest having: Aboriginal youth speakers 'who can talk about more than just how important it is to go into post-secondary education' (p. 7); 'post-secondary education information made specifically for Aboriginal youth that includes a "what to expect" section, which takes applicants step-by-step through the first year process. This would include information about preparing to apply to post-secondary education' (p. 7). For some youth (as was in my case), the application process is perceived as a barrier as it may be the first time they have seen a detailed application form, and completing it alone may seem insurmountable. Finally, the authors emphasise introducing information materials and having a pointed dialogue about post-secondary requirements as early as Grade 9.

Gakavi's (2011) research study at the University of Saskatchewan found 'that students would benefit from interventions which provide opportunities to improve academic self-efficacy and skills (e.g. writing skills, time management skills)' (p. 157), which would ultimately support academic, social and personal-emotional adjustment. Gakavi also found that attributional retraining (i.e. the reframing of negative rumination) interventions would help to affirm student abilities and strengthen their commitment to schooling. Also, the students in this study posited 'skill-building workshops, mandatory advising sessions, and peer support/discussion groups would help to increase academic self-efficacy' (p. 158). The strong connection 'between family support, adjustment and persistence suggest[ed] that involving the family in the post-secondary experience may also be beneficial' (p. 158). A community-based, integrated (wrap-around), holistic and inclusive approach to post-secondary schooling would support this recommendation. Gakavi concluded that it is important to help students feel that they belong in the school, and one way of doing this is to embed Aboriginal knowledges and cultures within university programming and curricula. The author strongly encourages the 'continual growth and improvement of the Aboriginal Student Centres, the Aboriginal transition programs and consultation with Aboriginal communities' (p. 159), and that

‘Canadian post-secondary institutions should directly seek the opinions of Aboriginal students as these individuals bring a form of knowledge and expertise to the table that administrators typically do not’ (p. 159). Again, the importance of Indigenous representation in decision-making circles was highlighted.

The University of Manitoba has found that access programming has led to increases in First Nations enrolment and successes (AFN 2012). The University of Manitoba’s access program is situated in the university, and the three primary components include academic support, regular academic advisor consultation for access students, and individual and family counselling. The students begin their post-secondary experience with an extensive summer pre-university orientation, and they are expected to take an ‘Introduction to University’ credit course. As outlined by Restoule et al. (2013), the students are offered housing, childcare, university/urban adjustment assistance, communication and personal development workshops, and academic counselling (Assembly of First Nations 2012, pp. 45–46).

SIAST strengthened their access and transition programing by first establishing an ‘Aboriginal student success strategy implementation steering committee and [by] hiring a coordinator’ whose mandate was to determine ‘key performance indicators for Aboriginal participation and completion, giving priority to those programs with the lowest rates of Aboriginal student success’ (SIAST 2009, p. 5). SIAST then worked at ‘proactively supporting Aboriginal students through the application process, developing specialised information about finances and funding for Aboriginal students, increasing early intervention for Aboriginal students experiencing difficulties, establishing a post-secondary summer transition program on each campus, developing a marketing and communications plan to raise awareness about SIAST among Aboriginal people’ (p. 5). In addition, the institution ‘offer[ed] student support modules in key personal and academic skills, develop[ed] discipline-specific post-secondary preparatory programs, implement[ed] a strategy to help English language learners, address[ed] barriers created by attendance practices, develop[ed] targeted student recruitment activities’ (p. 5). Finally, SIAST ‘establish[ed] an Aboriginal alumni network, intensify[ed] SIAST’s representative workforce efforts’ and ‘integrat[ed] Aboriginal knowledge and learning into programmes’ (p. 5). Like SIAST, the University of Calgary has implemented an early intervention program for all students using a software program that is responsive to dramatic dips in student grades. If grades suddenly change then protocol is followed which includes contacting the student (i.e. a student is sent a general e-mail and if they respond, a member from the student service office follows up). In every case, an integrated, wrap-around, prevention-intervention approach is recommended.

Even though these examples are from three different contexts (secondary, post-secondary and polytechnic institutions), the recommendations they provide are comparable; emphasising that Indigenous students, regardless of the form of higher education, experience similar challenges and are responsive to similar approaches. All three studies found that it is important to provide quality culturally relevant, integrated, holistic and intensive programs. Each institution chose to implement Indigenous education initiatives that were evidence-based, context-specific and were inclusive of Indigenous peoples in decision-making, research and implementation processes from the outset. In each case a director was hired for

accountability – to ensure that the action items that were developed for each recommendation were realised.

To prepare for times of transition, an understanding of the general human responses to change is critical (e.g. the disorientation and fear that change may cause). Times of transition are liminal spaces – doorways that lead a person from one place to another. They are filled with incredible potential and the promise of transformation and of immense personal and professional growth, but with the condition that proper preparation, support, care and love is present to sustain one before, during, and after the decision to move into the unfamiliar has been made. Transition or change may be disruptive emotionally, physically, intellectually and spiritually, and therefore require courage and conviction to move into the unknown. Holistic and integrated approaches, an ethic of care, and enduring leadership (Ottmann and White 2010) go a long way in supporting students through these times.

## Beyond Undergraduate Programs

Aboriginal Transitions: Undergraduate to Graduate (AT: U2G) is a program at the University of British Columbia and was included in this chapter because it provides a transition strategy that can be adapted for younger or more mature students new to a higher education program. AT: U2G supports Indigenous students during a time of liminality: transition from undergraduate to graduate school. Archibald et al. (2010) found that there were four categories that students considered before committing to a graduate program: ‘the decision to pursue graduate studies, access and admissions, first-year experiences and completion of a graduate programme’ (p. 16). Through research findings (a literature review, institutional scan, focus groups and interviews), Archibald, Pidgeon and Hawkley categorised transitional support for Indigenous students into three categories: access, relationship and digital technology. The strategy supporting Indigenous students is outlined as follows.

### I. Proposed [access] programs include:

1. Orientation/workshop sessions that provide general tips and information. Topics in these sessions include:
  - Factors to consider in selecting and applying to graduate programs
  - How to plan for graduate education
  - Admissions information and assistance
  - Financial planning
  - Expectations for applying for Tri-Council graduate fellowships such as SSHRC, CIHR and NSERC [in this case, relevant grants, funding opportunities]
  - Applying for Aboriginal-specific fellowships
  - Identifying potential faculty advisors/research supervisors
  - Writing letters of intent for applications
  - Balancing academic and personal life

2. Research internship/assistantship initiative. Students work with faculty members on their research, receive tutorials on research methodology, and become familiar with graduate programs and their requirements. Students will be paid a stipend. They will also develop materials for the other aspects of this transitional framework.

## II. Proposed relationship-oriented initiatives include:

1. [In locations with large Aboriginal populations] a SAGE-like [Supporting Aboriginal Graduate Enhancement] initiative for undergraduates with pods/sites located at various universities in BC (for now, it is called SAGE-Undergrad):
  - Each pod would require a faculty mentor and a student coordinator.
  - A provincial student coordinator and a provincial faculty mentor are required to ensure coordinated communications and sharing of information among the SAGE Undergrad pods.
  - Another function could be to develop and offer the access activities.
2. A province-wide symposium, to be held with faculty members (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) who are identified by Aboriginal graduate students as being effective mentors; they will discuss their mentoring approaches and suggest ways that faculty can be encouraged and prepared (in-service) to be mentors for Aboriginal undergraduate students who show promise and interest in graduate education. Their discussions will be videotaped and documented for future mentoring activities.

## III. Proposed uses of digital technology include:

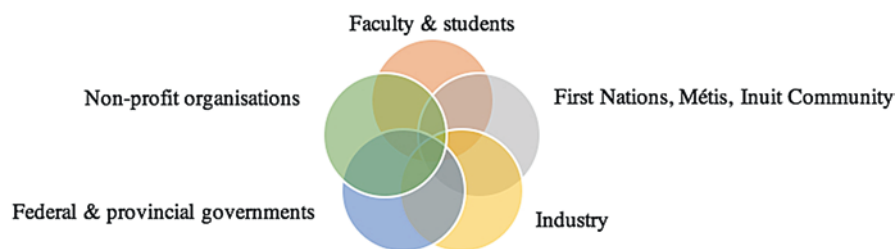
1. Record, display and archive activities through technologies such as video recording, podcasting, text and presentation formats
2. A website which would be a portal of information for graduate students
3. Developing modules about key areas of support, such as:
  - Specific disciplines or graduate programs
  - Completing a research ethics form
  - Getting ready for a thesis defence
  - What to consider in applying to a graduate program
4. Social networking applications such as blogs and wikis. (2010, pp. 60–61)

To meet the three AT: U2G goals, the UBC developed an informative and user-friendly website for students (<http://www.aboriginaltransitions.ca/>). The website includes detailed and institution-specific information on access, admission, first year and completion; and student stories, mentoring networks, and ‘survive and thrive’ points are presented to engage the student. Much can be learned from the UBC research and implementation of the findings that were aimed to support Indigenous student transition.

## A Case Study

As noted in the earlier examples, the barriers to post-secondary access for Indigenous students are similar across Canadian learning institutions; and the actions to eradicate the barriers are contextual and responsive to local people – their needs, traditions and practices. In the fall of 2013, the Werklund School of Education (WSE) Indigenous Education Task Force was struck at the University of Calgary's faculty of education. The mandate of the task force was, 'to prepare recommendations to the Werklund School of Education on our future development concerning Indigenous Education, and also to recommend how we might productively align with, support, partner with and/or lead outside the School in areas/activities related to Indigenous Education' (WSE 2015, p. 10). In February 28, 2014 the (WSE) Indigenous Education Task Force sought to identify the barriers and possibilities (i.e. supports) to post-secondary education by bringing together a diverse group of approximately 300 people that represented faculty members, students, industry, the non-profit sector, Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators and leaders and provincial and local government officials from across Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and the Yukon.

The purpose of the one-day symposium 'was to identify tangible measures that could be taken in [WSE] programs to break down barriers that exist for Aboriginal students, as well as ways to better honour Indigenous perspectives within the School' (Alonso-Yanez and Paulino Preciado 2014, p. 3). Participants were assigned table groups (Fig. 7.1) that would draw upon the diverse perspectives and experiences, in essence creating ethical spaces. According to Ermine (2007) ethical spaces arise when competing for worldviews or 'disparate systems' come together for 'engagement' purposes. The connecting space, the overlapping space between the groups, is the binding ethical space. Ermine notes that the convergence of these groups 'can become a refuge of possibility in cross-cultural relations and the legal order of society, for the effect of shifting the status quo of an asymmetrical social order to a partnership model between world communities. The new partnership model of the ethical space, in a cooperative spirit between Indigenous peoples and Western institutions, will create new currents of thought that flow in different directions and overrun the old ways of thinking' (pp. 202–203). With table facilitators



**Fig. 7.1** WSE symposium ethical space table arrangements: Dialogue on Indigenous education. With permission from Maori Law Review



guiding the dialogue and note-takers documenting the conversations, attendees were asked to consider the following questions:

- What is standing in the way of weaving Indigenous perspectives into the [WSE]?
- What barriers exist for Indigenous people and perspectives in the [WSE]?
- What needs to be done to weave Indigenous perspectives into the [WSE]?
- In what ways can we break down existing barriers and more meaningfully weave Indigenous perspectives into the [WSE]?

The first two questions revealed the following four themes:

1. A lack of resources such as financial support (this including grants and scholarships) and institutional support to manage the bureaucratic procedures for accessing the financial support was highlighted. The importance for mentorship or Aboriginal networks for Aboriginal students was mentioned and categorised under this theme. These relationships would mitigate the adverse effects of contemporary forms of racism and discrimination, and the historical discriminatory treatment of Aboriginal peoples.
2. The participants identified mistrust in the ‘western’ format of education, or the ‘westernised’ curriculum.
3. An emphasis on a distinction between ‘Indigenous education’ and ‘other types of education’ was a barrier itself. The notion of ‘Indigenous’ education became a cognitive barrier for a genuine inclusion of Aboriginal students.
4. Another barrier discussed by participants was ignorance, articulated as the incomprehensiveness and unawareness of Aboriginal language and cultural practices by non-Aboriginal people. Some participants referred to the lack of knowledge and connections with Aboriginal communities as one reason for their ignorance about Aboriginal ways of knowing and being. (Alonso-Yanez and Paulino Preciado 2014, pp. 4–5)

Five themes emerged from the afternoon dialogue on the possibilities for Indigenous education. First, it was suggested that Aboriginal students, academic and support staff be offered opportunities to learn about Aboriginal issues, perspectives and culture. Second, it was suggested that Aboriginal presence be promoted by ‘increasing partnerships with high schools with high Aboriginal enrolment ... Participants also suggested promoting Aboriginal student success by identifying Aboriginal “role models” to serve as examples of success’. Third, it was important to increase collaborative research with Aboriginal communities. Fourth, the facilitation of alternative learning opportunities for Aboriginal students was perceived as important. Finally, it was stressed that ‘the history of confinement experienced by Aboriginal people’ be acknowledged. Many participants believed that ‘knowledge of the policies and history of colonialism, both of which are deep root level causes of Aboriginal confinement, could lead to increased understanding about Aboriginal experiences by non-Aboriginals and ultimately to larger systemic change’. (Alonso-Yanez and Paulino Preciado 2014, pp. 5–6).

Overall, three recommendations emerged for the Werklund School of Education from this symposium. Alonso-Yanez and Paulino Preciado (2014) recommended that WSE ‘engage in an exploration of the contemporary Aboriginal aims, issues, and

contexts.' The authors explained, 'The focus here is to engage openly with the tensions that arise from attempting to integrate Aboriginal perspectives into the WSE' (p. 7). Next, it was recommended 'that traditional knowledge and stories have space and are shared within the WSE' (p. 7). The final recommendation was '[t]o critically examine how research methods and educational theories are being taught and practised within the WSE, and articulating and discuss assumptions about the role of Aboriginal knowledge, epistemologies, and methods in the production of knowledge' within the institution. Alonso-Yanez and Paulino Preciado stated that it is important to compare 'the underlying assumptions of Western, as well as Aboriginal, research approaches [that] could reveal the value of applying Indigenous knowledge methods, and merge Indigenous and Western methods when appropriate' (p. 7).

This research was valuable for the Werklund School of Education (WSE) Indigenous Education Task Force as it contributed to research that leads to the *Moving Forward in a Good Way: Werklund School of Education Indigenous Education Task Force Recommendations and Report* that was presented and unanimously accepted for institutional implementation by the WSE faculty council meeting on March, 2015. The tone of the WSE Recommendations and Report is set with a Blackfoot story that was 'gifted' to the WSE. The story, *This Place*, describes significant places within the vast Blackfoot (traditional stewards of the land) territory which is shaped like a buffalo across the land. According to this story, the University of Calgary, because it is situated near Nose Hill (a protected park), is near the nose of the buffalo (the breath of life) and the head (the intelligence) of the buffalo. After this story, an extensive literature review of theory and practices related to Indigenous education, a scan of what universities across the globe are doing regarding Indigenous education strategic planning, and the following ten recommendations for WSE implementation are provided:

1. Engage in open and extended conversations of contemporary Indigenous aims, issues and contexts about the Werklund School of Education. The focus here is on openly engaging with the tensions that arise from attempting to incorporate Indigenous perspectives into the Werklund School of Education, in such a way as to recognise and pay respect to the protocols and ceremonies of Aboriginal people and cultures. The aim is to create and sustain respectful and welcoming learning environments that instil a sense of belonging for all learners and will in time assist in creating a habitus of mutual respect [...]
2. Ensure that traditional knowledge and stories are valued and shared within the Werklund School of Education. Narratives, stories and storytelling are significant in building a communal culture and in understanding contemporary Indigenous contexts (Compton-Lilly and Halverson 2014).
3. Critically examine how research methods and educational theories are being taught and practised within the Werklund School of Education, and articulate and discuss assumptions about the role of Aboriginal knowledges, epistemologies and methods in the production of knowledge within the Werklund School of Education (Simmons and Christopher 2013; Medin and Bang 2014). Such discussions and following actions would enable the Werklund School of Education community to develop signature pedagogies and programs.

4. Critically examine the current and future courses within the undergraduate and graduate programs to ensure that each course is designed as a networked, patterned, living field of knowledge that is bounded generously so to encompass Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing. This orientation to curriculum represents a departure from many current policies, structures and practices.
5. Establish community partnerships with Indigenous communities to ensure that Indigenous students registered in the community-based Bachelor of Education Program, as well as other programs in the school, are fully supported in achieving success... Indigenous community partnerships can also lead to the development and review of school-community collaboration of Aboriginal education, research and leadership policies and curricula. Such collaboration also has the potential to develop the capacity for knowledge and understanding for each stakeholder about the key areas and various perspectives in the process.
6. Create a series of research-focused community conversations across the province, inviting in Aboriginal community members, industry and other interested stakeholders that focus on various historical and contemporary phenomena and experiences of Aboriginal communities. These events could constitute a continuation of the Kindling Conversations series.
7. Act as an advocate and leader, listen to the educational needs of Aboriginal communities and work collaboratively with these communities to respond to their community-identified needs.
8. Collaborate with the various Indigenous initiatives across campus to ensure that initiatives are specialised, sustained and systemic.
9. Collaborate with select teacher education programs across western Canada, and beyond, on targeted initiatives with specialised programming.
10. Create an implementation committee to lead the recommendations contained in this report (Werklund School of Education 2015, n.p.).

Since the formal implementation of the Report and Recommendations, WSE has secured a Director of Indigenous Education Initiatives to ensure accountability. In other words, to ensure that action items are created for each recommendation and they are implemented within the institution.

It should be noted that in February 2016, the University of Calgary, as a whole, began an Indigenous Strategy process. In both cases (WSE and U of C), the task forces were co-chaired by an Indigenous faculty member and a non-Indigenous senior leader, were informed by traditional Indigenous Knowledge Keepers and Indigenous and non-Indigenous leaders from various sectors and communities. In each context, the steering and working groups had on- and off-campus representation. Furthermore, each Strategy was guided by Indigenous methodologies, and in each case a commitment was made to engage in 'parallel systems'. The WSE Indigenous Strategy document begins with a Blackfoot story that was gifted to the faculty, and a pipe ceremony led by Blackfoot Elders began the U of C Indigenous Strategy. For the U of C Indigenous Strategy, the Journey Towards an Indigenous Strategy (an Indigenous framework) document was created. This Indigenous framework document, which validated and outlined the change process from an Indigenous perspective, paralleled

the western Terms of Reference that defined the roles and responsibilities for the steering and working committees. The intention is to transform every aspect of Indigenous education in this post-secondary institution: access, policy, programming, curricula and content.

## Conclusion

In writing this chapter, I am reminded of my schooling experiences. What memories emerged? I remember the small yellow school bus that our bus driver drove each morning to pick us up from our First Nation community to attend half-day kindergarten in a nearby town. I was 4 years old, not fluent in the English language and at the time, the oldest of three children. I was scared but excited for the learning that I would experience. Literally and figuratively that little school bus was transporting me from one reality to another, and there were no strong connectors nor a solid bridge in between. I remember stepping into the school for the first time and feeling so far from my home. Even though the walls had the colour of student work, the building seemed sterile and cold. A half-day seemed unbearable, and I remember feeling the ache in my chest and the strength it took not to cry. Judging from the lunch that my mom had packed (one that I could have shared with my whole class), it appeared that I was going to be away from home for more than part of the day. Thank goodness I had a caring teacher and a bus driver who was non-threatening.

Interestingly, each time I moved from one phase of education to another (i.e. grade 3 to 4, grade 6 to 7, grade 9 to 10 and from grade 12 to university), I have felt similar emotions. I was fortunate to have parents, grandparents and family that encouraged schooling success, and a supportive teacher at each of these transitional times. My high school English teacher, who was also my career guidance counselor, was my bridge to university. She helped me gain access to post-secondary education by presenting the possibilities based on my academic and personal accomplishments, my skills and gifts, and she helped me fill out the university applications. My parents and my high school English teacher did their best to prepare me for the move from the tiny reserve and town community, with which I was familiar, to the changes that would occur in the city and the university. I did gain access to university the 'regular way', on time and with a strong grade point average, but I did not survive that first year as I could have and my transcript is evidence of this. The changes and the experiences were bigger than me. I can also say that I could not have gone back to university if it was not for the innate desire to affect positive change for the First Nations community, and if I had not had the unconditional support of friends and family. They believed in my potential and the story of my destiny. My second attempt at post-secondary education was different. There still was a small Aboriginal student population and few supports, the place still seemed large and cold, but this time I believed in what others saw in me. My parents also visited more often, a trip that they could not afford. They overextended themselves for a greater good. This is what we need to do now.

How little things have changed? As I mentioned in the introductory paragraphs, we know so much about teaching, development, leadership, change theories and practices; but there are still ineffective practices that need to be laid to rest to make way for policies and practices that are responsive to, and supportive of, all students. It is clear that learning and capacity-building is required by everyone involved – early childhood, elementary, secondary, post-secondary educators and leaders, Indigenous communities, parents and students – to mitigate resistance and halt perpetual patterns of harm, conscious or unconscious. There need to be creative solutions to long-standing issues, a focus on respectful relationships that are reciprocal in nature, authentic reconciliation efforts and the realization of an educational system that is truly inclusive of Indigenous Knowledge systems. To some degree, the Trickster (a character who entertains and teaches by challenging predictability, structure, comfort) has been involved in guiding post-secondary institutions in the desire to make order out of chaos, or bring chaos to the existing order, so something new can emerge. There are encouraging signs on the horizon; the spirit of the new buffalo is in our midst.

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