

Transforming the Landscape of Aboriginal Higher Education:

Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity, Responsibility

Aboriginal people have been historically underrepresented in the ranks of colleges and universities in Canada. From an institutional perspective, the problem has been typically defined in terms of low achievement, high attrition, poor retention, weak persistence, etc., thus placing the onus for adjustment on the student. From the perspective of the Aboriginal student, however, the problem is often cast in more human terms, with an emphasis on the need for a higher education system that respects them for who they are, that is relevant to their world view, that offers reciprocity in their relationships with others, and that helps them exercise responsibility over their lives. This presentation examines the implications of these differences in perspective and identifies ways in which initiatives within and outside of existing institutions are transforming the landscape of higher education for Aboriginal people.

While universities generally have adopted the political rhetoric of “equal opportunity for all,” (UBC’s motto is “It’s Yours”) many of the institutional efforts to convert such rhetoric into reality for Aboriginal people continue to fall short of expectations. Why is this so?

If we are to address this perennial issue in a serious manner, some hard questions have to be answered:

- (1) Why do universities continue to perpetuate policies and practices that historically have abysmal results for Aboriginal students, when we have ample research and documentary evidence to indicate the availability of more appropriate and effective alternatives?
- (2) Why are universities so impervious to the existence of de facto forms of institutionalized discrimination that they are unable to recognize the threat that some of their accustomed practices pose to their own existence?
- (3) What are some of the obstacles that must be overcome if universities are to improve the levels of participation and completion of Aboriginal students?

There are no simple or single answers to these very complex questions, but all who are associated with universities in one form or another must continue to seek effective solutions, and be prepared to set aside cherished beliefs and to entertain appropriate

alternatives. Let us look at some of the issues we are likely to encounter in this quest, and some of the policy and practice options we need to consider.

Coming to the University vs. Going to the University

Let's look at what attending the university means from a couple of perspectives. One coming (the institutions perspective of the student) and the other going (the students perspective of the institution). From the vantage point of the university, students are generally viewed as "coming" to partake of what the university has to offer. From this perspective, it is presumed that the university is an established institution with its own longstanding, deeply-rooted policies, practices, programs and standards intended to serve the needs of the society in which it is embedded. Students who come to the university are expected to adapt to its modus operandi (way, method) if they wish to obtain the benefits (usually translated to mean better, higher paying jobs) of the knowledge and skills it has to offer, the desirability and value of which are presumed to be self-evident.

From this point of view, when Aboriginal students do not readily adapt to conventional institutional norms and expectation and do not achieve levels of "success" comparable to other students, the typical response is to focus on the aberrant students and to intensify efforts at socializing them into the institutional milieu.

The institutional response, when faced with these internally-constructed and externally reinforced problems of inadequate achievement and retention, is usually to intensify the pressure on Aboriginal students to adapt and become integrated into the institutions social fabric, with the ultimate goal that they will be "retained" until they graduate. Typical solutions that emanate from this "blame the victim" perspective are special counseling and advising centers, "developmental" programs, tutorials and an array of additional students support services, all of which are intended to help problem students successfully partake of what the university has to offer.

To the extent that students are willing and able to check their own cultural dispositions at the gate, these kinds of initiatives can and do assist them in making the transition to the culture of the institution, but such intensification efforts alone do not appear to produce the desired results of full and equal participation of Aboriginal people in higher education. Even with the well-intentioned support services that have been proliferating for over two decades in institutions across Canada, the

overall, “attrition” and “retention” rates of Aboriginal students remain near the bottom of all university students. The statistics speak for themselves:

...in Canada in 1986, only 1.3% of the Aboriginal population had completed a university degree, compared to 9.6% of the general population. Only 25% of the Aboriginal population completed high school compared to 33% of the rest of the population. Of those Aboriginal students who commenced university studies, 25% earned a degree compared to 55% of non-Aboriginals.

...in Manitoba, today, only ~~62%~~ of Aboriginal students complete high school. University today?????

It is clear that the many efforts to improve Aboriginal participation in higher education, by and large, do not yet provide a hospitable environment that attracts and holds Aboriginal students at a satisfactory rate.

Aboriginal students have their own distinctive reasons for going to university. Social integration into the status quo of the institution is not what they had in mind, at least not if it was going to be at the expense of the culture they brought with them. As one student who had dropped out for time pointed out, “I would like to tell them (at the university) that education shouldn’t try to make me into something I’m not. That’s what I learned when I wasn’t there – who I am. And when I learned that, then I could come back here. I sort of walked away for a while and the came back. It’s one of the best gifts I ever had. But a lot of us just walk away.

We see from this illustration that what the university has to offer is useful to the Aboriginal student only in so far as it respects and builds on the cultural integrity of the student. The university must be able to present itself in ways that have instrumental value to Aboriginal students – that is, the programs and services that are offered must connect with the students own aspirations and cultural predispositions sufficiently to achieve a comfort level that will make the experience worth enduring.

If an environment cannot be created in which Aboriginal students begin to “feel at home” at the university, all the special programs and support services in the world will be of little value in attracting and retaining them.

While job opportunities alone may provide sufficient motivation for some students to finish university, Aboriginal students aspirations are more far reaching such as bringing Aboriginal perspectives to bear in professional and policy-making arenas.

A university education can be seen as important for the following reasons:

...It can be seen as a means of realizing equality and in sharing in the opportunities of the larger society in which we live.

...It can be seen as a means of collective social and economic mobility.

...It can be seen as a means of overcoming dependency and “neo-colonialism”.

...It can be seen as a means of engaging research to advance the knowledge of Aboriginal people.

...It can be seen as a means of providing the expertise and leadership need by Aboriginal communities.

...It can be seen as a means to demystify mainstream culture and learn the politics and history of racial discrimination.

From the point of view of an Aboriginal student who is “going” to the university for any of these reasons, the problems they encounter along the way are not constructed as matters of attrition or retention, which is the viewpoint of the institution. Rather, the issues are likely to be framed in more humanistic, culturally-sensitive terms such as a desire for “respect,” “relevance,” “reciprocity,” and “responsibility,” and as such reflect a larger purpose than simply obtaining a university degree or a job. Aboriginal students and communities are seeking an education that will also address their communal need for “capacity-building” to advance themselves as a distinct and self-determining society, not just as individuals.

In an effort to sustain our own cultural integrity, there is a need for Aboriginal people to assume roles as teachers, professors, doctors, lawyers, administrators, comptrollers, architects, historians, etc. As the late Chief Simon Baker, an elder from the Squamish Nation pointed out, “having white lawyers running your Band government is not Aboriginal self-government”.

How then can the monolithic/ethnocentric institution of the university be re-oriented to respond effectively to the needs of Aboriginal people.

Respect of Aboriginal Cultural Integrity

The most compelling problem that Aboriginal students face when they go to university is a lack of respect, not just as individuals, but more fundamentally as a people. To them the university represents an impersonal, intimidating and often, hostile environment, in which little of what they bring in the way of cultural knowledge, traditions and core values, is recognized, much less respected.

The university is a literate world in which only decontextualized literate knowledge counts. As an institution that perpetuates literate knowledge, other kinds of knowledge such as traditional knowledge, oral knowledge, indigenous knowledge is not validated. Some of the salient features of the latter forms of knowledge are that its meaning, value and use are bound to the cultural context in which it is situated, it is thoroughly integrated into everyday life, and it is generally acquired through direct experience and participation in real-world activities. If considered in its totality, such knowledge can be seen to constitute a particular world view, a form of consciousness or a reality set.

Increasing the university's domain of human knowledge to include and respect Aboriginal cultural values and traditions is a formidable task, but it is a task that must begin if the institution is to become more "user friendly" for Aboriginal students. What then can be done to reduce the cultural distance between the producers and consumers of knowledge in university settings.

Relevance to Aboriginal Perspectives and Experiences

If universities are to respect the cultural integrity of Aboriginal students and communities, they must adopt a posture that goes beyond the usual generation and conveyance of literate knowledge, to include the institutional legitimation of indigenous knowledge and skills. Such a responsibility requires an institutional respect for indigenous knowledge, not derived from books, as well as an ability to help students to appreciate and build upon their customary forms of consciousness and representation as they expand their understanding of the world in which they live.

With the help of emerging Aboriginal scholars, we are beginning to see the outlines of a more culturally accommodating view of how knowledge is constructed and passed on to others. One example is the study by Dr. Jo-ann Archibald of the Sta:lo Nation, who did a contrastive study of orality and literacy in which she points to the

need “to define and create new ways of thinking and writing about literacy and its relationship to orality.”

Dr. Eber Hampton of the Chickasaw Nation, President of SIFC identified some qualities that would be important to construct an “Aboriginal Theory of Education. These include spirituality, service, diversity, culture, tradition, respect, history, relentlessness, vitality, conflict, place, transformation commitment to societal change).

Such a list of qualities begins to offer universities a set of standards against which to examine their policies and practices to see how respectful and relevant they are to Aboriginal people.

Reciprocal Relationships

One of the most frustrating aspects of the university experience is the role dichotomy between producers and consumers of knowledge in university settings. The conventional institutionalized roles of a university faculty member as the creator and dispenser of knowledge and expertise and the student as the passive recipient of the knowledge and expertise have a tendency to interfere with the establishment of the kinds of personalized “human” relationships to which Aboriginal students are most likely to respond.

There should be an emphasis on making teaching and learning a two-way process in which the give-and-take between faculty and students open up new levels of understanding for everyone. Such reciprocity is achieved when the faculty member makes an effort to understand and build upon the cultural background of the students, and the students are able to gain access to the inner-workings of the culture (and the institution) to which they are being introduced.

Responsibility Through Participation.

In the context of an Aboriginal perspective of the university, higher education is not a neutral enterprise. Gaining access to the university means more than gaining an education – it also means gaining access to power, authority and an opportunity to exercise control over the affairs of everyday life, affairs that are usually taken for granted by most non-Aboriginal people. What our students engage in is “border pedagogy” meaning they must engage knowledge as a border-crosser, as a person

moving in and out of borders constructed around coordinates of difference and power. These are not only physical borders, they are cultural borders historically constructed and socially organized that limit and enable particular identities, individual capacities, and social forms (Giroux, 1988). For universities that are seriously committed to finding ways to create a more hospitable climate for Aboriginal students, the institutional implications of such border negotiations can be far reaching.

These suggestions for comprehensive reform are not likely to spread like wild fire through campuses in Canada. For this reason, our people have been increasing their participation in higher education through the establishment of our own higher education institutions that are having a marked effect on the level of participation and success of Aboriginal students. These Aboriginal institutions address our needs and provide Aboriginal people with “access to systems of the highest quality post-secondary, academic and career/technical education in a culturally reinforced environment (NVIT, 1990).

Conclusion

What Aboriginal people are seeking is not a lesser education, and not even an equal education, but rather a better education – an education that respects who we are, that is relevant to our world view, that offers reciprocity in relationships with others, and that helps us gain control over our own lives.

The question remains, can those in a position to make a difference seize the opportunity and overcome institutional inertia soon enough to avoid the alienation of yet another generation of Aboriginal people, as well as the further erosion of the universities ability to serve the needs of society as a whole?
