



# Conceptualizing the Role of a Strategist for Outreach and Indigenous Engagement to Lead Recruitment and Retention of Indigenous Students

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## Abstract

A number of universities have introduced Indigenous student-specific programming to improve recruitment. These programs target the needs of Indigenous students and often impart a sense of comfort or belonging that may be more difficult to obtain in a mainstream program. The University of Saskatchewan, College of Nursing, implemented a Learn Where You Live delivery model that challenged the university community to think differently about outreach and engagement. This is best described by redefining distance such that student services and supports would no longer be localized to a main campus but redesigned for distribution across the province. Sustaining this model meant the College leadership had to find new ways to support faculty to engage in teaching and learning opportunities that would be context relevant and aid student recruitment and retention. The new position of Strategist for Outreach and Indigenous Engagement was created to lead opportunities for faculty and staff to gain knowledge and expertise in policy development, negotiation and implementation for success in the distributed delivery model. The framework of Two-Eyed Seeing was adapted to guide the introduction and ongoing implementation (Bartlett et al. 2012).

**Before the 1970s, Canadian** universities offered very little to support accommodation of, or services for, Indigenous students, with the predictable consequence being a dearth of representation of First Nation, Métis and Inuit students. There is still an oft-touted argument that all students should be treated equally, with no special treatment for any student based on gender, ethnicity, religion or sexual orientation (Pettigrew 2010; CBC 2016). However, it has become widely accepted more recently that strictly equal treatment is not in practice equitable treatment, as many societal and economic barriers prevent marginalized students from participating equally (Henry et al. 2017). Advancements in research and policy in Canada, Australia and New Zealand have developed and continue to create unique approaches to Indigenous education that recognize and address the inequities created as a result of colonization (Battiste et al. 2002; Bolton 2017; Frawley et al. 2017).

Beginning in the 1970s, a number of programs were developed specifically for Indigenous students. Many of these programs originated at the University of Saskatchewan (U of S), including the Program of Legal Studies for Native People (U of S 1973), the Native Access Program to Nursing (U of S 1985) and The Indian Teacher Education Program (U of S 1972). For the past 40 years, access programs, dedicated programming, advising, financial support and equity seats have been the primary means for recruiting and retaining Indigenous students. Recent trends have seen the proliferation of prominent dedicated space for Indigenous students, such as the Longhouse at the University of British Columbia (opened in 1993), the Ojigkwanong at Carleton University (opened in 2013) and the Gordon Oakes-Red Bear Student Centre at the U of S (opened in 2016).

The College of Nursing launched a new delivery model to provide a four-year Bachelor of Science in Nursing degree at distributed sites across the province. In response to a request for help in developing a northern health human resource plan, two sites were opened in northern Saskatchewan using remote presence technology (Thompson 2008). The total capacity of seats allocated for admission across the two sites was fifteen. Key to the needs of the north, these seats were designated for northerners defined by place of residence for ten years, north of a geographical marker called the Northern Administrative District (NAD) (Government of Saskatchewan 2017). While allocations were not specific to Indigenous, the majority of students were from First Nations and Métis communities. This delivery model is referred to as Learn Where You Live. Other U of S programs have also ensured a certain number of equity seats for Indigenous applicants, which can be filled when an Indigenous candidate meets the minimum requirements for a program, without competing with the wider applicant pool. This approach is common in professional colleges at the U of S, including medicine, veterinary medicine, nursing and law, where there is a seat capacity and a competitive process. Based on a review of Canadian university professional program admission

websites, the College of Nursing has what may be the highest percentage of equity seats of any Canadian university program, at 16.6%, or approximately 58 of the 345 seats allocated in the program annually (U of S 2017a).

Based on the most recent Canadian Household Survey (2011), within the Canadian healthcare system, 59% of all health professionals are Registered Nurses (RNs). There are 7,945 Indigenous nurses in Canada, comprising 2.9% of the RN workforce. Table 1 presents the distribution by province/territory with the majority of RNs identifying as Métis (50.1%). There are fewer Indigenous males (6.0%) as compared to all male RNs (7.3%). The age of RNs who identify as Indigenous is younger with 50.8% under age 44 as compared to all RNs in Canada (44.5%). In terms of the overall health human workforce, there are 10,260 health professionals identifying as Indigenous of which 77% are RNs (Table 1). This includes physicians, dentists, veterinarians, pharmacists, occupational therapists, optometrists, chiropractors, speech pathologists, dietitians, nutritionists, physiotherapists and audiologists (2011).

## Table 1.

Distribution of Indigenous nursing workforce in Canada in 2011

Area	Number of nurses	Indigenous		First Nations		Metis		Inuit	
		<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Canada	332,680	7,945	2.9	3,630	48	3,815	50.1	145	1.90
NU	165	40	24.2	0	0	0	0	35	21.20
NWT	380	90	23.7	45	11.8	25	6.6	10	2.60
YK	270	30	11.1	20	7.4	0	0	0	0
BC	44,100	1,150	2.6	530	1.2	525	1.2	0	0
AB	39,195	970	2.5	440	1.1	500	1.3	0	0
SK	12,535	760	6.1	270	2.6	485	3.9	0	0
MB	14,440	1,040	7.2	320	2.2	700	4.8	0	0
ON	120,010	2,315	1.9	1,195	1.0	960	0.8	30	0.02
QC	72,785	745	1.0	415	0.6	265	0.4	25	0.03
NB	9,045	145	1.6	100	1.1	35	0.4	0	0
PEI	1,960	35	1.8	0	0	0	0	0	0
NS	11,050	290	2.6	100	0.9	190	1.7	0	0
NL	6,740	340	5.0	190	2.8	100	1.5	25	0.40

Source: Adapted from Statistics Canada, Special Tabulation CRO0141100 based on the NHS 2011.

Note: "To ensure confidentiality, Statistics Canada values, including totals, are randomly rounded either up or down to a multiple of '5' or '10.' Each individual value is rounded. As a result, when these data are summed or grouped, the total value may not match the individual values since totals and sub-totals are independently rounded" (Statistics Canada 2016).

More than 80% of people living in northern Saskatchewan self-identify as Indigenous with the majority as First Nations (>60%) while 85% of the total population of Saskatchewan is non-Indigenous. Northern Saskatchewan has a

younger population with 32.1% under age 15 as compared to the provincial population of 18.9%. The population of northern Saskatchewan is expected to increase by 17.7%, from 35,490 to 41,773 individuals by 2020 (Irvine 2011). These statistics demonstrate the need for a forward-looking approach by post-secondary education to proactively address the social, economic and political well-being of the north and the province.

Aboriginal Advisors from within the College of Nursing provided input on developing a new staff position and participated in the hiring of a Strategist for Outreach and Indigenous Engagement, a position created in 2012. The incumbent would lead opportunities for faculty and staff to gain knowledge and expertise in policy development, negotiation and implementation in anticipation of the transformations that would need to occur for the delivery model to be successful. The Strategist role would be key to demonstrating the interwoven and interdependent issues of these determinants to support safe, healthy communities.

### **Dedicated Indigenous and Community-Based Programming**

A significant number of institutions have introduced Indigenous student-specific programming to improve recruitment including the University of Victoria Indigenous Language Revitalization Program, the U of S Kanawayihetaytan Askiy program and the Carleton University Indigenous Policy and Administration program. These programs target Indigenous student needs and often impart a sense of comfort or belonging that may be more difficult to obtain in a “mainstream” program. At the U of S, the most prominent example of this has been the establishment of three unique teacher education programs: the Indian Teacher Education Program (ITEP), designed for First Nations students and offering ad hoc cohorts on reserve; the Northern Teacher Education Program (NORTEP), delivered in La Ronge, northern Saskatchewan, and the Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program (SUNTEP) designed for Métis and non-status Indigenous students and delivered in partnership with the Gabriel Dumont Institute in three Saskatchewan cities: Regina, Saskatoon and Prince Albert (U of S 2017b).

Various programs offered by the U of S, such as the Kanawayihetaytan Askiy program, which is focused on Indigenous Land Management, offered by the College of Agriculture & BioResources, and the Masters in Northern Governance offered by Johnson Shoyama School of Public Policy, provide for contextually relevant and accessible programming through various blended learning models (e.g., mix of campus-based, online, experiential and video-conferenced learning) (U of S 2010).

While the U of S offered programs specific to Indigenous students, typically they were in addition to the complement plans and curricular offerings of the colleges, and there was little expectation for the broader university to be engaged or fund

support services. Nursing's delivery model by contrast was not a separate program but was embedded within the curriculum and the faculty complement plan, and there was an expectation that the same university-level support services would be provided to all students registered at the U of S regardless of geography. To embark on a model that expected students to be treated equitably would challenge the status quo within a traditional academic environment.

### **Beyond Culture and Integrated Planning**

Faculty and staff of the College of Nursing became very conscious about the language used to describe the educational delivery model, identifying it as “distributed” as opposed to “distance” learning (Pennock 2012). As part of a larger institution that is geographically concentrated with most Colleges delivering programs only at the main campus, this poses many challenges. An immediate concern was ensuring a comparable level of services across sites despite the fact that programs are generally offered only at the university's primary campus. In terms of the institutional culture of the College, one of the more challenging and impactful changes has been the avoidance of categorizing the six College of Nursing provincial sites as “on” or “off” campus. This terminology was viewed as problematic, creating an impression, however unintended, that “off” campus was being less involved in the campus community, or less important in planning decisions. The Strategist helped to position the Learn Where You Live model as an opportunity for the academic community to think differently about outreach and engagement with communities in rural, remote and northern regions of the province that were otherwise hard to reach. While it was recognized that physical location was not essential for teaching, there was a need for continuous inclusion and recognition of the contributions of the distributed learning sites to the landscape of both the college and the broader academic community (Adams Moon 2017).

In addition to existing student support and advising, the Strategist created a pathway for Indigenous students to transition from high school to university and to the workforce. It became obvious that many students needed a higher standard of academic preparation, particularly in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics subjects (STEM), to be successful in programs such as Nursing. Science scholarships for tutors and funding for Science Ambassador programming in high schools were implemented to assist students to qualify for the nursing program (U of S 2007). To promote the nursing program in communities where the K-12 school system did not provide the requisite courses for post-secondary education was unacceptable. The onus was on the university to share responsibility with communities to build capacity for post-secondary education. Rethinking a recruitment strategy that could align with the K-12 system rather than targeting the final year graduates was new and met with resistance, as story taglines and marketing accolades of the on-campus experience were no longer the foci

for attracting prospective students. It became clear that long-term sustainability of the model would require the leadership of the Strategist to also help university support units to find new ways to provide services and learning opportunities that would be context relevant and aid student recruitment and retention in a distributed environment.

### A Guiding Framework

The Strategist was responsible for combining and balancing the understandings and ways of knowing that represent a Western, academic view of health with the peoples' insights of health within the context of Indigenous communities. The framework of Two-Eyed Seeing was adapted to guide the introduction and ongoing implementation (Bartlett et al. 2012). "Two-Eyed Seeing reinforces the interconnectedness of both worldviews ... placing one's past actions 'in front of ourselves like an object for examination and discussion'" (Bartlett et al. 2012: 333) for a "co-learning journey" to be experienced (Martin 2012: 33).

The Two-Eyed Seeing framework is built on eight lessons learned over several years of collaboration in creating the integrated science initiative at Cape Breton University (Box 1). Three of the lessons highlighted by the authors are key to successful outcomes: lessons 1, 2 and 7. Lesson #1 is viewed as central to the integration of differing worldviews or a sense of togetherness, #2 is integral to creating a co-learning environment and #7 suggests that flexibility is necessary to move in and out of differing ways of knowing based on context and circumstances. The authors cite that in their experience, educators and researchers need to recognize and acknowledge that Two-Eyed Seeing is a process that takes time, respects differing values within a given context or community and is predicated on relationships that share differences without placing one as more important than the other (Martin 2012).

## Box 1.

### Two-eyed seeing framework

The lessons learned:

1. Acknowledge that we need each other and must engage in a co-learning journey;
2. Be guided by Two-Eyed Seeing;
3. View "science" in an inclusive way;
4. Do things (rather than "just talk") in a creative, grow forward way;
5. Become able to put our values and actions and knowledges in front of us, like an object, for examination and discussion;
6. Use visuals;
7. Weave back and forth between our worldviews; and
8. Develop an advisory council of willing, knowledgeable stakeholders, drawing upon individuals both from within the education institution(s) and within Indigenous communities.

Source: Adapted from Bartlett et al. 2012 (p. 334).

It was important that working with communities not be deferred or become the sole responsibility of the Strategist. Rather, the Strategist would interpret the expectations of the Learn Where You Live model as an engaged approach with shared responsibility by faculty and staff to position outreach as part of – not an addition to – the existing infrastructure of the college and the university. The strength of being engaged was predicated on the accomplishments of a community to contribute to post-secondary education given the support of the Strategist. The impact of these relationships would be realized, as the programs developed together were about the community, by the community, and for the community. Particular to this context, the Strategist was responsible for strengthening the visibility and attractiveness of the College such that prospective students could experience a sense of community that was welcoming, culturally aware and had a nurturing environment. The Two-Eyed Seeing framework helped develop a process of co-learning that was essential for the Strategist to work with communities to support Indigenous engagement for academic programming, student recruitment and retention initiatives.

### **Community-Engaged Teaching and Learning**

The approach advanced by the College of Nursing moved beyond the two dominant methods of Indigenous engagement touted by the U of S of (1) improving student services on campus and (2) encouraging individual faculty members to incorporate Indigenous issues and perspectives into their teaching and research (U of S 2003). The College of Nursing's strategy involved delivering the actual programming in a way that made it more accessible for those living in rural and remote First Nations and Métis communities. With this approach, community-engaged teaching and learning went beyond service or ad hoc community experiences, to delivering entire baccalaureate-level programs in the community and for the community. This is not intended to suggest that campus-based services or individual research are more or less important to goals and mandates for Indigenous inclusion, but that community-based offerings are a further step along a continuum of institutional engagement

### **Conclusion**

Implementing programs that lead to success for Indigenous students in nursing and other professional programs requires many different services and approaches. Traditionally the focus has been on providing intensive academic and personal supports to Indigenous students and incorporating Indigenous content into curricula. While the importance of these approaches cannot be underestimated, the need to develop different and more integrated approaches is equally critical. Such integration cannot be left to academic advisors' relationships with students, or even to academics in the planning and delivery of curricula. In the case of the U of S College of Nursing, it involved a shift in the

way programming was envisioned, the terminology used and the way in which a university relates to their communities.

Perhaps the ultimate goal is to achieve integrated programming at the University – programs that are equally appealing and accessible to Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, and that balance different ways of knowing. Concepts such as “decolonization” and “Indigenization” are often elicited to describe such a mission, though a consensus is lacking on what that means and what is aspired to in practice (Battiste et al. 2002; Korteweg and Russell 2012; Sium et al. 2012; Tuck and Yang 2012). The role was envisioned before the release of the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission; however, this role directly supports the principles outlined in recommendation 10, specifically “ii. Improving education attainment levels and success rates; iii. Developing culturally appropriate curricula and vi. Enabling parents to fully participate in the education of their children” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015: 2).

In 2016–2017, the College of Nursing had a total of 190 self-identified Indigenous students in its Bachelor of Science of Nursing program, making up 18.9% of its total undergraduate student body (College of Nursing 2017b). While recruitment and success of Indigenous students in nursing education is the result of many factors, both within and beyond the control of post-secondary educational institutions, at least some of this successful recruitment can be attributed to the initiatives led by the Strategist in several Indigenous communities (U of S 2017c). Another sign of the developing culture of success for Indigenous nursing students at the U of S is that almost half of these Indigenous students were admitted as part of the competitive pool of admitted students, and did not need to rely on the equity seats reserved for Indigenous students who met the minimum entrance requirements. This is the ultimate desired outcome of successful outreach and engagement.

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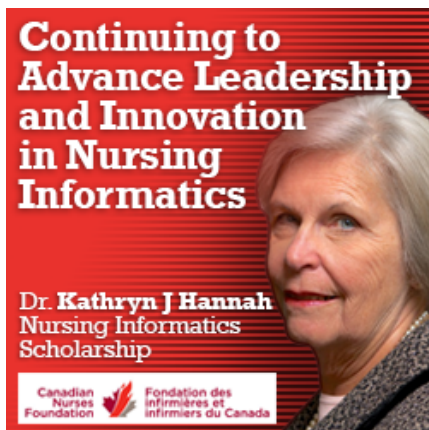
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