



Thirteen per cent of students at the University of Regina and its Federated Colleges self-identify as indigenous. *University of Regina Photography Department*

Canada 150 and Indigenous Post-Secondary Education

Vianne Timmons and Stephen King

Many in Canada's indigenous communities have chosen to boycott the country's 150th anniversary celebrations as a way of protesting our bilateral history and reminding Canadians that our national story is not free of racism, suffering and injustice. One way of beginning to redress that injustice to build a more inclusive, integrated national future is to close the gaps in post-secondary education for indigenous and non-indigenous Canadians.

As Canada celebrates 150 years since Confederation, a considerable amount of public discussion is taking place about the role and treatment of indigenous peoples in our country. Many people and communities identify the past 150 years as ones of colonization and suppression of Canada's indigenous peoples, and they are resisting the Canada 150 celebrations. A notable example of this is the #Resistance150 project, which a February 2017 CBC article described as a way "to highlight the many ways indigenous peoples have historically

resisted, and continue to resist, what many see as discriminatory and assimilationist policies of the Canadian government.”

For anyone who has read Jim Daschuk’s *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation, and the Loss of Aboriginal Life* or Charlie Angus’ *Children of the Broken Treaty: Canada’s Lost Promise and One Girl’s Dream*, it is difficult to argue with those who take a dim view of the sesquicentennial celebrations. This is the Canada in which we live, in Daschuk’s view:

While Canadians see themselves as world leaders in social welfare, health care, and economic development, most reserves in Canada are economic backwaters with little prospect of material advancement and more in common with the third world than the rest of Canada.

Daschuk does see a ray of hope, however: “Identification of the forces that have held indigenous communities back might provide insights into what is required to bridge the gap between First Nations communities and the rest of Canada today.”

A comprehensive identification of those historical and contemporary forces—as well as insight into how to overcome them—was provided by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada’s (TRC) 94 Calls to Action, released in June 2015 by Justice Murray Sinclair, now a member of the Senate. A number of these calls to action are related to post-secondary education, and later that month Universities Canada developed a set of New Principles on Indigenous Education supported by all of its nearly 100 member institutions. To their credit, many of those institutions had already been working to indigenize their campuses for many years, and that has left a positive legacy upon which to build. Today, indigenization is infusing university strategic plans, culturally appropriate student spaces are being built, and curricula are being re-envisioned to incorporate indigenous ways of knowing, for example.

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If Canada’s universities have been leaders in helping forge a new path toward reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Canadians, few have done more over the past few decades than the University of Regina. Indigenization has been a guiding principle almost since the moment the institution became an autonomous university in 1974.

By 1976, Lloyd Barber, at that time both the University of Regina’s second president and the Indian Claims Commissioner for Canada, helped realize a vision for indigenous post-secondary education in Saskatchewan. As historian James Pitsula notes in *Honouring Our Past, Embracing Our Future: Celebrating a Century of Excellence in Education at the University of Regina Campus*, President Barber “reached out to the Aboriginal community and was able to forge an agreement to create the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College, which provided the first opportunity for Aboriginal peoples in the province to take ownership of their higher education.” The Saskatchewan Indian Federated College (now known as First Nations University of Canada, or FNUUniv) was a partnership between the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations (FSIN) and the University of Regina, and came into being as a Federated College of the university—academically integrated with the university but administratively independent.

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niversary, more than 900 students were registered through FNUUniv, and hundreds more indigenous and non-indigenous students were taking FNUUniv classes as part of their programs at other institutions. More than 3,000 alumni have graduated from FNUUniv with University of Regina degrees, and many have built successful careers in a variety of fields and become leaders in their communities. Cadmus Delorme, recently elected Chief of the Cowessess First Nation, is a shining example.

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The vision that Barber and the FSIN leadership had four decades ago to indigenize post-secondary education at the University of Regina has not gone unchallenged, however. There is no post-secondary institution in Canada that has a greater number of interested stakeholders, and it



Each fall, the Glen Anaquod Memorial Tipi Raising brings together indigenous and non-indigenous students, faculty and staff at the University of Regina. *University of Regina Photography Department*

remains complicated for FNUniv to balance the interests and needs of such diverse groups as FSIN, the University of Regina, First Nations communities, and the federal and provincial governments.

The very existence of FNUniv has been in jeopardy several times, including during a governance crisis in 2010 when the provincial and federal governments withdrew their funding.

That funding was restored only when FNUniv agreed to temporarily relinquish its administrative autonomy. Still, FNUniv remains and is thriving as what former academic dean Georges Sioui described in a 2013 *University Affairs* article as “a very beautiful, great experiment.” The resilience of the institution and those who support its vision is incredible.

Decades of indigenization have had

a positive impact at the University of Regina, but a great deal of work remains to be done institutionally, provincially and nationally. A positive statistic is that number of students at the University of Regina and its Federated Colleges who self-identify as indigenous has grown by 84 per cent since 2009 alone, bringing the total to approximately 13 per cent of the University of Regina’s nearly 15,000 students. Given that indigenous people represented 15.6 per cent of Saskatchewan’s population in 2011 according to Statistics Canada’s National Household Survey, however, their provincial post-secondary participation is not adequately representative. Saskatchewan’s Provincial Auditor recently provided an alarming insight into why this is the case: only 42 per cent of indigenous students graduate from the province’s high schools within three years of turning 18, which is less than half of the non-indigenous graduation rate.

FNUniv and its four-decade affiliation with the University of Regina may not be the perfect model for the indigenization of post-secondary education in Canada, but it is one from which all of us have a great deal to learn. FNUniv’s longstanding academic mission—“to enhance the quality of life, and to preserve, protect and interpret the history, language, culture and artistic heritage of First Nations”—should be an inspiration to other institutions as they continue their work to indigenize their curricula, policy and operations in support of the TRC recommendations.

One hundred fifty years after confederation, that work to further indigenize our universities is clearly necessary. As of Statistics Canada’s 2011 National Household Survey, only 9.8 per cent of indigenous people in Canada aged 25-64 had a university degree compared to 26.5 per cent of non-indigenous people. This is an indicator of a deep-rooted and systemic problem that requires a multi-pronged approach.

Marie Smith, one of the commissioners of the TRC, has said that we can

properly indigenize our universities only if we re-imagine the entire academy. Such a re-imagining is a complex endeavour in which indigenous perspectives—particularly those of faculty, staff and students—must be taken into consideration in all policy and decision making, including hiring, student services and financial support, facility construction and renovation, and curriculum design. As is always the case, this is easier said—or mandated—than done.

Earlier this year, for example, the federal government expressed concern over the lack of diversity—including indigenous scholars—among those who make up the country's complement of Canada Research Chairs. Universities now have until December 15 to develop action plans that will enable them to put forward more diverse groups of candidates for CRC appointments in the future. This will not be a “quick fix,” as presently in Canada there are not enough indigenous PhD-trained academics to fill this growing need, and existing indigenous faculty are feeling significant demands on their time to help with their universities' indigenization efforts. So, in the coming years, there needs to be an increased focus on educating and hiring qualified indigenous faculty and staff who can bring the cultural, pedagogical and research expertise needed on campuses.

But hiring indigenous faculty and staff is only a small part of the picture. A university is nothing without its students, so working closely with First Nations communities to identify, encourage, and mentor prospective indigenous university students as early as possible is imperative. Helping these students fund their education is also crucial. Since annual funding increases were capped at two per cent in 1996, the number of students requesting support through Indigenous and Northern Affairs' Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP) has outgrown the amount of funding available. As a result, there is a growing indigenous

population, more eligible students than ever before, and fewer students receiving PSSSP support. Universities are creating more and more scholarships and bursaries designated for indigenous students, but this cannot fully fill the gap created by a shortage of federal government funding.

Other supports beyond the financial are also necessary for indigenous students. Specialized counselling services and access to elders are important supports, as are mentoring programs for students who in many cases are the first generation of their families to attend university. Building and naming culturally appropriate new facilities, and renovating and renaming existing ones with indigenous culture and history in mind, are other measures to be taken. Creating dedicated spaces for indigenous students to gather, learn and feel a sense of their identity is also crucial. The Douglas Cardinal-designed First Nations University of Canada building and the First Peoples House at the University of Victoria are two examples of such culturally appropriate spaces.

Universities have made tremendous strides in indigenizing their curriculum design, and that must continue. At an institutional level but led by students, the University of Winnipeg has been a leader in implementing a mandatory indigenous course requirement for all students. And across the country, inspired individual faculty members have had the foresight to incorporate indigenous ways of knowing into subject areas such as science.

Universities must also continually seek the advice of students, faculty and staff regarding the revision or retiring of policies that are outdated, obstructionist, and even discriminatory. The Indigenous Advisory Circle at the University of Regina, for example, has identified the need for and helped craft policies and procedures regarding practices such as smudging and engaging the services of elders—policies whose necessity

might not have been recognized only a few short years go.

Whether or not we choose to actively celebrate 150 years of Canada, it is important at the very least that we all recognize this milestone. We cannot change the past, but we can begin to reconcile ourselves with it by viewing Canada's often-aborrent treatment of indigenous peoples over the past 150 years as a difficult but necessary learning experience. Inspired by visionaries like Dr. Barber and the leaders of FSIN, Canada's universities have played an important role in this reconciliation in recent decades, and through its calls to action the TRC has helped bring attention to and accelerate the process. It is now all of our responsibility to build upon their work, leave behind the destructive path we have followed for the past 150 years, and build a far better shared future for all Canadians. **P**

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