What Can We Do at Canadian Universities to Make Our Indigenous Students Truly Welcome?

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A first point, of course, in answer to this question is to ask our indigenous students (First nations, Metis and Inuit) what we might do as a university to make them more welcome and help them to thrive. Any suggestions I might make in relation to my own sense of what is needed should be subject to an indigenous veto. But it seems to me that we all have to engage in the dialogue. So, while encouraging our aboriginal students and professors to tell us themselves how we might be better hosts and more welcoming colleagues, here is my small attempt at answering a bit of this very important question. It seems to me that the universities might rethink the topics of admissions, curriculum, research activities and socializing so as to encourage and include our valuable aboriginal students and make them welcome.

Admissions

One place we might look at first, to see if it has been successful, is the approach to admissions of our (University of Calgary) Cumming School of Medicine to indigenous students who want to study medicine. Clearly health is a priority for us all, aboriginal and non-aboriginal alike. For a number of years I had the privilege of being on the medical admissions committee as a representative from our then faculty of education (now the Werklund School of Education). And during that time we admitted a high percentage of the indigenous applicants who wanted to enter the undergraduate medical program as I presume we still do. The Cumming School of Medicine is, I suppose, much like most Canadian medical schools. For roughly 100 new medical places each year some 4000 applicants that appear initially are whittled down, by a process of elimination and discussion among the admissions committee to something like 200 of the most impressive who are then offered the opportunity to come in for an interview. But importantly all the applicants from the indigenous communities in Canada who can show the appropriate identification and basic qualifications are invited to the interview. In these interviews the indigenous applicants

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characteristically do very well, as they do in medical school generally. In this fashion a much higher probability for admission for indigenous applicants obtains. We should now look to see if this also led to a nearly universal graduation rate for those so admitted and to find out what their subsequent medical careers have been.

Such an approach could be undertaken with all the faculties in a university with benefits for all. It is probably not a distortion of the truth to say that aboriginal applicants are underrepresented in scientific and engineering areas and the kinds of skills they need for their own communities are often drawn from these areas. One hears frequently of difficulties with water clarity, safety or availability as a central problem for many aboriginal communities in the Canadian north and sometimes more generally. Sometimes these are related to problems of mineral or oil extraction on or near indigenous reservations. It would seem natural for aboriginal youth to be interested in how to both provide work and income for their people by continuing such activities in a safe and sustainable manner. But at the moment we have no similar admission programs to those of medicine and no direct encouragement for indigenous students to apply to and be integrated in the scientific and engineering and architectural areas that ought to be of central interest to them and their communities. This is probably equally true in the arts and in the social sciences and humanities generally as well as in a variety of other professional areas such as nursing, veterinary medicine, social work, education and law.

Often the aboriginal communities that become of interest to the main stream media are isolated communities of perhaps 2000 or less people, communities that bear no relation to their counterparts across the country that were developed initially by people of European origin. The indigenous communities often do not have any of the normal, organic features that one would usually take for granted in any other Canadian town of such a size. Often, at least when they come to the attention of the national media, such communities have difficulties that involve alcoholism, drug problems, domestic abuse difficulties and most strikingly high levels of youth suicide. In these communities there is a school, or schools, paid for by Federal funds. There may be a general store or a supermarket. Perhaps there is a garage selling gas or diesel and perhaps offering automobile repairs. But there are no restaurants, no hotels, no hospital facilities, no Main Street with its multitude of retailers selling everything from jewellery, men's, women's and children's clothing, furniture, hardware, electrical appliances, baking goods, a butcher shop or two, one or more

theatres, an indoor curling rink, an indoor ice arena, two or three banks or savings and loan companies, lawyers' offices or medical offices or pharmacies or surveyors, house builders and so on. Nor are there likely to be a multitude of churches, social clubs, choir groups, sporting clubs, a golf course or any such leisure activities. This means that there is no natural work for any of the young people going to or graduating from the Federally funded school or schools. The "idle no more" campaign clearly was based on this kind of truth. And the reason there are no such facilities normally found is most Canadian small towns is that among the indigenous people, through no fault of their own, there is little or no expertise to plan, organize and create such normal features of a modern Canadian town. Nor is the capital available even if the expertise were there in order to develop and build as necessary. The people who migrate to most Canadian communities either from within the country or from abroad come with such interests and skills and sometimes the capital that enabled them to create their own work opportunities. But our indigenous communities, whether on or off reserves, often lack this range of abilities, facilities and the work opportunities that go with them. Generous and thoughtful admissions policies in our universities could make a great difference in such contexts were such students to return to their communities having graduated.

Curriculum

What about the present day curricula offered in our university faculties and departments? Do these cater directly to the interests of aboriginal students? There appears to be among the Assembly of First Nations consisting of chiefs from the hundreds of indigenous communities scattered across Canada a considerable understanding of what is needed to interest aboriginal youth who might make a contribution to their own people and to Canada more generally. Often this might take the form of interest in traditional ways and thinking applied to the land. Caring for the land, the forests, the mountains, the waterways in a sustainable fashion would appear to be central to the thinking of our indigenous peoples and certainly these are topics which their public discussions have emphasized and something that we can all in principle support.

But what would the youth of such communities find if they went to our universities? Our varied landscapes and mountains contain great riches of tree and coal and oil and minerals. Our prairies may no carry Buffalo any more, but they do grow excellent foodstuffs, especially grains. Agricultural knowledge is bound to

be of interest to our indigenous peoples who happen to live in such contexts. And caring for the Canadian forests after the fashion personal and efficient manner of say Swedish farmers is something that they might well be interested in. But such caring is not centrally understood or taught in our universities. This is an issue of university curriculum and our emphases around what is important. Here with a little effort we could make a great contribution by recognizing such relevant interests and by adapting our curricula that would not only interest many of our indigenous students but be of value to us all. So with the help of our indigenous peoples we can begin to rethink our university curricula in directions of central interest to them, assuming we have already solved the admissions question.

Research

Many aboriginal people are already employed in agriculture and in the oil and gas sectors of the economy. But we need to engage those whose traditions include caring for the environment, most obviously our indigenous peoples, in research into the matters that make agriculture and oil and gas less threatening endeavours to the environment. There are many areas of largely untapped practical research that ought intrinsically to interest out aboriginal peoples and in which they might happily engage with energy and delight. To take one industry of great interest to Alberta and the University of Calgary, oil and gas, one would have to develop in the university a serious variety of research on how we might better capture the excess carbon dioxide or other greenhouse gases that are produced in the extraction or use of oil and gas. It is true that our vast boreal forests do this quite efficiently, turning carbon dioxide into gaseous oxygen that we can breathe and the carbon into tree branches and leaves or to plant life in general. But how might we augment such natural carbon sinks? For this research is needed. And as our permafrost melts and leaks methane we need to understand how we might capture the methane and use it to some societal use. One ought to look at ways of more effectively burning such fuels in engines that are much more highly efficient than our present ones. We need to find ways of turning the exhaust generated in our automobiles into harmless forms rather than into airborne gases that pollute our planet and aid in the warming of our planet unnecessarily. Such research programs involve long term research commitments by the universities, by government and by businesses. But were we to go in such a direction surely many of our aboriginal youth would be potentially interested in making their own research and development contribution to what amounts

to caring for the earth while caring for our people. So we first have to look to our curriculum and then match out research to it if we are to interest and develop the knowledge and research capability of our indigenous people.

Socialization

Finally, there is one more thing for our universities to consider in a fresh and original manner. How are we to enable our indigenous people to live and work together with ease and enjoyment at the university with one another and with the rest of the university population during the time they are with us? This is especially important when they are with us on the campus and not just part of a distance education program presupposing the Internet and its many uses. Were their numbers greater, of course, there would be more opportunity for them to naturally interact among one another. Universities could easily become places where many of the weekly events have an indigenous cast, where traditional ceremonies are honoured, where there is indigenous leadership to events where all are potentially invited. Here, however, my imagination falters. But I would encourage our university leadership to enlist our aboriginal students in the planning and executing of communal activities of interest to them and to the university community at large.

This journal would be delighted to welcome articles by authors who wish to write on this and related topics over the course of the next year as part of our celebration of 50 years of the University of Calgary and of this journal.

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