



PROJECT SNAPSHOT

Formalizing Transfer Student Supports for Indigenous Learners (Phase 2)

Type: Seamless Transfer

Project Number: S2039

Project Lead: Lakehead University

Collaborators: Confederation College of Applied Arts and Technology, Seven Generations Education Institute.

Project Summary

The purpose of this project was to build on the work completed in the "Formalizing our Commitment to Indigenous Learners" project. As the first phase of the previous project came to a close, Confederation College, Canadore College, and Lakehead University had generated the first draft of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that contains actionable, collaborative items to enhance seamless transfer for Indigenous students. These actionable items have been informed by focus groups at all three partner institutions that consisted of students, faculty, support staff, and upper administration. As a result, the actionable items are primarily centred around the following four focal points:

- 1) Building policies, procedures, and mechanisms for inter-institutional wrap-around supports identified by the project teams and focus groups;
- 2) Building inter-institutional relationships between relevant departments and staff that focus on:
 - (a) applying a more relational and Indigenous worldview centred approach to support service delivery and
 - (b) providing a circle of care/support to Indigenous students to identify and transition students seamlessly between institutions as per their career and educational goals;
- (3) Exploring funding solutions to support seamless transfer with band funding officers and institutional financial support services; and
- (4) Updating and working with academic units, preferably using an inter-institutional collaborative approach, to update pathways between high-affinity credentials that have higher percentages of self identified Indigenous students. Additionally, identifying where barriers and

gaps exist that prevent desirable credentials from having higher percentages of Indigenous students enrolling.

Project Rationale

We understand that Colleges Ontario (2019), the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015), and our Indigenous researchers (Ray, 2017) all call for work to be done to make post-secondary more accessible to Indigenous learners. Within the ONCAT funded "Shifting the Landscape" report produced by the Center for Policy and Research in Indigenous Learning at Confederation College, there are four roots of action necessary to improve the academic culture and educational environment for Indigenous learners. This project is informed primarily by the fourth root, Enriching Leadership, which calls for our leadership at all levels to commit to shifting institutional culture to a more relational and Indigenous oriented approach "not just at the Indigenous centre, [but] throughout the institution" (p. 23). During the first phase of this project, our upper administrative leadership has made a formal commitment through the development of an MOU.

The process of building the MOU from the ground up and gaining full support from all levels of administration at multiple institutions was a significant success. The willingness to collaborate clearly indicates that there is a need to be met by this work and that the second phase of this project, to facilitate action and leadership at all levels, will result in tangible change through the deliverables outlined in this proposal.

Main Collaborators

- Confederation College of Applied Arts and Technology
- Seven Generations Education Institute
- Canadore College participated in the MOU signing ceremony but did not contribute to any other parts of this phase in the project.

Outcomes

The most impactful result of this project was the Memorandum of Understanding signing and Celebration Ceremony. A clear message about the importance of supporting post-secondary transitions and success for Indigenous learners was made. The impact of this ceremony spanned both internal departments at Lakehead and both provincial and regional partners. Many individuals have since reached out to build on relationships and/or join in the work associated with this project.

An internal working group was established and resources specific to Indigenous transfer students were developed and delivered to incoming students. Web-based videos and resources were implemented to serve incoming transfer students as well as Indigenous education counsellors and third-party sponsors. Each participating institution has identified credentials with higher percentages of self-identified Indigenous students and high-affinity credentials they may transfer into at each institution. A priority list of pathway development opportunities has been reviewed and approved internally by the senior administration at Lakehead University.

Key Steps

Key steps in this phase of the project included:

- (1) Collecting and summarizing feedback on the MOU document and potential action points from every individual internally and externally.
- (2) Participating in virtual meetings and focus groups to guide the development of a joint admissions agreement (lead by the Office of the Provost and the Registrar) and wrap-around supports procedures (Office of Indigenous Initiatives).
- (3) Planning an MOU signing/celebration ceremony across all stakeholders including the design and creation of the ceremonial wall hangings.
- (4) Creating opportunities to connect with incoming transfer students and connect them with supports before they transfer as inter-institutional policies are still under development.

Challenges

The primary challenge across all projects was related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The project leads at each institution were in key roles (Registrar, Director of PSE) and, despite their amazing efforts, it was a challenge to stay in consistent communication regarding grant deliverables.

Student Outcomes

The primary benefits for students include work towards a joint admissions agreement that will allow Indigenous transfer students to potentially waive certain fees and overcome barriers to third-party sponsors funding multiple credentials via transfer pathways. As we implement inter-institutional wrap-around supports, our teams can initiate financial and child care-focused applications for transferring students, particularly those who have moved to Thunder Bay temporarily for their education, to complete their credentials. Finally, increased inter-institutional communication and shared policy development will contribute to a seamless transfer experience. At every inter-institutional meeting, project partners and staff learn about new pathways, initiatives and opportunities that are subsequently shared with students and appropriate academic units.

Student Work Alignment

The process of developing policies and planning to support students using an inter-institutional lens tends to look more at credentials as a pathway to a career. Often credentials are ladderred to provide different and successive levels of access to jobs in different fields. As we build credentials with multiple sector stakeholders, our institutions can collectively become more nimble at co-creating credential pathways that meet and respond to industry and community demand.

Institutional Outcomes

A clear outcome of this process was an internal commitment to increase communication and collaboration between mainstream and Indigenous-focused services. The MOU signing ceremony resulted in immediate action and engagement and was noticed by local PSE stakeholders who have subsequently committed to joining this project for its third phase. The third phase will require that these relationships produce clear practices and policies that action the general points outlined in the MOU.

Engaging First Nations and Indigenous organizations in this process is a necessary shift in institutional culture. Indigenous transfer students communicate their lived experience and submit regular reports to Education Counsellors employed by the Indigenous communities and

organizations they represent. Developing these relationships is a key component of creating the most likely environment for seamless transitions and two-way dialogue between regional PSE institutions and First Nations.

Sector or System Implications

We encourage all Ontario post-secondary stakeholders to engage with First Nations and Indigenous organizations as key stakeholders in the transfer sector.

Tips/Advice

Embracing a relational approach to service delivery that is informed by Indigenous ways of knowing is very challenging in a system designed to operate as part of a colonial cultural system. Policy, procedure, roles, and hierarchy are embedded in the Ontario PSE sector and to truly embrace Indigenous culture the emphasis must place a priority on reciprocity and relationships. The beginning of that relationship starts with listening which leads to shared action. We would encourage institutions that are looking to develop a seamless transfer experience for Indigenous learners to build relationships and listen to their Indigenous students and the organizations and communities that represent them.

Tools and Resource

A copy of the Memorandum of Understanding as well as a general report documenting the outcomes of focus groups and feedback sessions with Indigenous stakeholders is included. Some select Indigenous transfer student information sessions are available on the Indigenous Initiatives Youtube channel.