

Providing Post-Secondary Education Programs in First Nations Communities: Lessons Learned

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Abstract

Assiniboine Community College (ACC) has been delivering community-based post-secondary programs in First Nations communities throughout the province. Many factors contribute to the success of these educational partnerships, including the incorporation of new program delivery strategies. ACC has made significant strides in the direction of Aboriginal education. This article explores ACC's delivery of programs in Aboriginal communities and identifies lessons learned. Aboriginal people are Canada's largest growing population, and providing effective delivery of higher education positions this population to better their lives, while also providing a trained workforce to meet labour market needs.

Providing Post-Secondary Education Programs in First Nations Communities: Lessons Learned

Assiniboine Community College (ACC) has been delivering community based post-secondary programs in First Nations communities for many years and has become a “college of choice” in many Aboriginal communities throughout the province. As one of three colleges in Manitoba, it would be worthwhile to identify why ACC is being sought out above other provincial colleges, including a northern college. Many possible factors may contribute to these educational partnerships, including the incorporation of new program delivery strategies that result from lessons learned in previous programs. What are those lessons learned and are they what is making ACC a “college of choice”? This article explores ACC's delivery of programs in Aboriginal communities and identifies lessons learned while exploring the available research.

Background

Based on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada publications (2013), the Aboriginal population is the fastest growing population in Canada. In addition, the number of Aboriginal people living in urban centres in Canada has grown significantly and, in some areas, the Aboriginal population has more than doubled. One example is in Winnipeg, Manitoba, where the Aboriginal population makes up 10% of the city population – more than four times what it was 25 years ago (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2013, para. 3).

According to the Association of Canadian Community Colleges (ACCC, 2012), colleges across Canada are committed to improving education outcomes for Aboriginal people. However, of the self-identified Aboriginal students in post-secondary education (PSE) in 2006, 62% were in a college or institute compared to only 16% in a university (Statistics Canada, 2006, as cited in ACCC, 2012, p. 1). Colleges may be cited as the educational path of choice because they –

- offer a diverse range of programming that includes certificate, diploma, and apprentice training
- embed traditional cultural knowledge in curriculum and offer support services to graduation, including employment readiness
- develop partnerships with Aboriginal communities in order to address specific community needs

The purpose of this article is to explore current practices undertaken at ACC in the delivery of community-based PSE programs. The focus is on ACC's models of delivery of certificate and diploma programs in various Aboriginal communities, and the evolution of the delivery based on lessons learned. I also refer to two programs currently being delivered in two very different FN communities in Manitoba, one very remote and the other more urban, and I compare and contrast the impact of these differences. ACC's experience and model of delivery are measured against the available literature in order to identify possible gaps in the research on this topic.

Aboriginal education has been a topic of great discussion and debate, with the most significant impact remaining from residential schools. Although the responsibility of education lies within provincial jurisdiction, Aboriginal education is under the auspices of the federal government, and this has resulted in some substantial inconsistencies in the delivery of education programs to Aboriginal communities versus non-Aboriginal. There is a need to go beyond who is responsible for education and how we arrived here, to identifying and modelling successful practices.

Literature Review

The Association of Canadian Community Colleges has had an active voice for Canadian colleges' Aboriginal education initiatives. In a 2010 submission to the House of Commons, ACCC made several recommendations on opportunities for the Government of Canada to enhance skills development and innovation in rural and remote communities. One of these recommendations was for the government to include provisions in the Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training Strategy (ASETS) that would allow Aboriginal organizations and colleges to plan and coordinate educational activities. In doing so, they also recommended that this planning should include the provision of longer programs that would allow for upgrading of literacy levels and a focus on essential skills development before moving to employment-oriented programs (ACCC, 2011).

King (2008) wrote of the need to increase Aboriginal enrolment and completion rates in Canadian post-secondary institutions. From a college educator perspective, it is quite striking that she referred to a "remarkable historical document involving every education stakeholder (Aboriginal political territorial organizations, Aboriginal post-secondary institutions, Canadian universities and Canadian governments)" (King, 2008, p. 1), which could shift the future of academic achievement for all Aboriginal students.

Why would this group of stakeholders exclude community colleges that are already working closely with and in First Nations communities? King (2008) spoke to what she believed post-secondary institutions should be doing, such as providing necessary support services and programming that would help improve Aboriginal achievement, but she appeared not to have done any research on what already existed. In addition, she stated that "most Canadian college and universities have a few or no staff in Aboriginal student services" (King, 2008, p. 13), but did not support her comment with any data. I was surprised by this comment, as ACC has had a strong Aboriginal presence in student services for some time.

Silver, Klyne, and Simard (2003) conducted a study of Aboriginal adult learners in Adult Learning Centres (ALCs) in Manitoba, in order to determine what keeps the learners attending school and what contributes to their success. Silver et al. identified some common factors that contribute to success of the students surveyed:

- a holistic learner-centred approach to instruction
 - strong social, emotional and practical supports
 - a warm and highly personalized atmosphere that is non-hierarchical
 - dedication and passion of not only instructional, but all staff
 - a non-judgemental and respectful atmosphere
- (p. 1)

Silver et al. (2003) also summarized that there was a “powerful and effective” approach to education in that the centres fostered an environment that was friendly, informal and personalized (p. 2). In addition, they were staffed with dedicated, warm, and energetic personnel who had a holistic approach to adult education. These characteristics are not only important to the success of the Aboriginal learners, but are also consistent with the literature on adult education (Silver et al., 2003).

Silver et al (2003) also found that a large number of the learners interviewed carried a great deal of pain. These learners had difficult lives, suffered from a lack of self-esteem, and had experienced racism in previous educational settings which, in some cases, resulted in long-standing scarring. Silver et al. surmised that the roots of this damage lay in the impact of colonialism because “they have come to believe, in a culture which constantly denigrates them, the false claims of their inferiority” (p. 44). They quoted Michael Hart as stating, “Aboriginal people start to believe that we are incapable of learning and that the colonizers degrading images and beliefs about Aboriginal people and our ways of being true” (Silver et al., 2003, p. 44). This sentiment mirrors Toulouse’s (2008) finding that paramount to the success of Aboriginal learners is self-esteem, and therefore the pedagogy in classrooms must include Aboriginal culture, language, and world views.

Cappon and Laughlin (2009) stated that that Aboriginal people in Canada have been long advocating for lifelong learning, recognizing it as a way to improve community well-being, address poor health rates, high unemployment, youth suicide, and incarceration rates. In order to improve “community wellbeing through lifelong learning,” there is a need first to identify appropriate tools that will measure and assess “what is working and what is not” (Cappon & Laughlin, 2009, p. 1). A key challenge is to define what is meant by “learning success,” as existing measures of success tend to highlight deficiencies. Moreover, there is no framework that measures or provides clear statistics on the status of Aboriginal learning in Canada. Key attributes of an Aboriginal view of learning are that it is holistic, lifelong, experiential, rooted in Aboriginal language and culture, spiritually oriented, commands activity, and integrates Aboriginal and Western knowledge (Capon & Laughlin, 2009).

In 2008, more than 50 experts came together in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, to discuss strategies for success. As with the findings of Cappon and Laughlin (2009), rather than focusing on the challenges faced by Aboriginal communities, this roundtable highlighted successful learning strategies (St. Denis, Silver, Ireland, George, & Bouvier, 2008). These strategies shared five common features: they were community-based, holistic, strength based, transformative, and anti-colonization. The purpose of the roundtable and subsequent report was to “share stories of transformation, hope and success,” in order to inform educational institutions serving adult Aboriginal learners (St. Denis et al., 2008, p. 6).

Recapping the main findings in a series of roundtables held in 2006, Saunders (2007) stated that in an economy wherein skills and technological needs are in constant change, it is imperative that Canadians have access to learning opportunities throughout their lives. Those with lower levels of education must be given the opportunity to improve their education and skills in light of concerns over adult literacy level., because “nine million Canadians aged 16 to 65 years have literacy skills below the level considered necessary to live and work in today’s society” (Saunders, 2007, p. 1). Thus, though the proportion of the population with weak literary skills varies across the country, it is highest in Aboriginal populations.

Saunders (2007) gave examples of promising practices, citing Manitoba and Nova Scotia’s dual credit programs as allowing adult learners to pursue both a PSE and high school credit at the same time. Other recommendations that came from these series of roundtables included the following:

- offering more flexible delivery in terms of course load and time to complete;
- governments should provide funding so programming can be tailored to specific community needs;

- funding for pilots on a multi-year basis with sustained funding for successful pilots;
- developing programs that foster life skills no just job skills;
- developing curriculum and delivery processes that has community input, is sensitive to the culture of the community and reinforces a sense of community (Saunders, 2007, pp. 9-10)

Motivated by a projected shortage of Aboriginal nurses, and by recurring difficulties in Canadian schools and the recruitment and retention of Aboriginal peoples, Martin and Kipling (2006) conducted a critical ethnography of the experiences of Aboriginal undergraduate nursing students in two schools of nursing. Major findings cited by the students surveyed related to inadequate funding and the lack of available childcare.

In terms of the faculty perspective, Martin and Kipling (2006) found that many nurse educators “misunderstood the gross inequities inherent in being an Aboriginal nursing student educated in an Aboriginal community” (p. 692). Faculty members expressed resentment based on a perception that Aboriginal nursing students received more resources than other students despite being “well funded by their band and ultimately, Canadian taxpayers” (Martin & Kipling, 2006, p. 693). As an educator who has provided programming for Aboriginal cohorts, I have often heard similar remarks about ACC’s Aboriginal students. These misconceptions disappoint me, because I recognize the need to provide additional resources for these students.

Methodology – ACC Model

For many years, ACC has delivered programs to Aboriginal students, both on campus and in Aboriginal communities. Are we doing a good job? Do our methods of community-based training reflect the current literature? What have we learned, and have we been able to increase our success from lessons learned? Although community-based training programs are the primary focus of this article, some of the methodologies also apply to on-campus training, and are applied to an upcoming program that will be delivered at the Brandon, Manitoba, campus.

The Beginning

The first series of programs began when ACC entered into partnership with the First Nations and Inuit Health Branch (FNIHB) to deliver seven practical nursing programs over a five-year time period in various communities throughout the province. Though I entered into these projects with experience with Aboriginal people as a home care nurse, this was my first experience with education and working in FN communities.

I recall, with a great deal of clarity, the first of seven programs delivered in Thompson. The students were recruited from surrounding communities, many fly-in¹, resulting in a cohort of students who were away from home, away from their families, and away from everything familiar to them. In addition, these were mature adult students ranging from 20 to 60 years in age, many of whom had not completed grade 12 and were returning to school for the first time. Thus, the journey began.

Misguided Assumptions

I entered this program believing that all Aboriginal people had commonalities and would therefore be able to relate to one another. I was shocked when students from FN communities ostracized a Métis student whom they resented for being in a program funded by an FN

¹ A “fly-in” community generally refers to a FN community that can be accessed only by plane, winter roads, or boat, depending on the season.

organization. I was astonished to hear that students who were attending class had no housing. Where did they sleep at night? The transition for these students, from life on reserve to life in an urban setting, created many new variables. I learned that if one did not have basic items, such as toilet paper or food, a common practice on reserve was to acquire resources from family or neighbors. When our students ran out of items and were short on funds, they had great difficulty problem-solving and often went without. Most importantly, I entered this project assuming that my main focus would be providing these students with an education. I had not factored in the social and personal variables that would interfere with their success.

In terms of student supports, I entered these programs, particularly the first, believing that my site visits and support as a coordinator, and the support of FNIHB home and community care coordinators, would engender student success. We initially did not recognize the need for ongoing student supports that were related not to academics but to the personal challenges that these students faced. As I got to know the students on a higher level, they would share challenges of being away from their children and the difficult phone calls, young children crying for mom or dad to come home, or spouses resenting their absence and devaluing the importance of education. Lastly, I entered these programs with a naivety that I, with limited knowledge of Aboriginal culture, could incorporate an Aboriginal culture component by facilitating sharing circles: that one size fits all.

Lessons Learned

After seven programs, what did we learn and how did we apply these lessons to future offerings? In the first program, the attrition rate was quite high, so the key was to determine the reasons for attrition and to build in supports to reduce the attrition rates in future programs. Once we started to apply some of the new supports, the incidence of student success became evident. According to Simpson (2002), the majority of programs are geared toward the learning needs of non-Aboriginal students, which leaves Aboriginal students with minimal knowledge that they can apply in their own communities. Once we began delivering programs in First Nations communities, we realized how important it was to listen to the communities and deliver programs that would meet their specific needs. Listed below are some methods that were incorporated to address lessons learned and improve the success of the students.

Community based. ACC has delivered programs to a central location, such as Thompson, which enables students from various surrounding communities to join, but ultimately the community-based model is by far the most successful. Though students are required to travel in order to gain full practicum experience, they have expressed that it is much easier to cope with short trips away from home versus extended trips. Community and family support is critical to student success, and many students have explicitly expressed that having the program offered in their community was the only way that they could have taken it. In the Thompson program, for example, many students said that when they returned to their communities, they were often faced with resentment and the perception that with an education came a change in who they were – perhaps adopting the western ways. When the students are educated in their own community, there is a sense of pride by the community members and the students express a commitment to be successful so that they can then serve their community as nurses. I am not saying that all Aboriginal programs should be community based, as not all Aboriginal people live in FN communities, but when considering delivery to a cohort in a remote area, taking the program to the community will yield more positive results.

Preparatory program. One very significant change to the program was the development and incorporation of a six-month preparatory program that not only provided the students with a refresher, but permitted those students without a complete grade 12 to enter the program. Manitoba is one very few provinces that have dual credits, whereby college courses can be

used as credit toward a mature grade 12 diploma. The six-month preparatory program included some basic grade 12 English and math courses, modified to be relevant to nursing. For example, math equations were based on medication dosages. Including the nursing component peaked the students' interest early, as many were eager to get into the nursing theory as soon as possible. With the dual credits, students had much to celebrate at the end of the program, because they graduated with both a mature high school diploma and a nursing diploma.

Curriculum adaptation. The first change made was to do an adaptation of the nursing curriculum so that each course outline (syllabus) had a learning outcome related to FN communities. For example, the nutrition course had a learning outcome that pertained to the Aboriginal Canada Food Guide. A medical-surgical course had a learning outcome that focused on the prevalence of diabetes in Aboriginal people. Each learning outcome had several learning activities, so that students could apply that outcome to an activity that made sense in their own community. An example of this would be to run a blood sugar clinic or blood pressure clinic in a common community venue. An example would be a blood pressure clinic that students in St. Theresa Point First Nation ran at the local northern grocery store. Not only was it a huge success for the community, with high participation from community members, but the students saw how they could make a difference as future nurses in their own community.

On-site counsellor/Elder supports. In our first few deliveries of the program, we ensured that we had a coordinator, who was employed by ACC to oversee the delivery of the program. As it was desirable to have a coordinator with an understanding of the college and college programs, the coordinator was not necessarily someone who lived in the community, but someone who would make frequent site visits and help trouble-shoot either in person or via telephone. Though the coordinator was necessary and could help with academic matters, there were student issues beyond academics that impeded student success. In fact, very rarely was a student unsuccessful because of academic weakness; personal issues had a more direct impact on their ability to be successful.

The funding formula for future deliveries now includes a counsellor who is someone from the community and, at times, also an Elder in the community. If they are not Elders, being part of the community ensures that they are aware of community supports and will bring cultural aspects to the program, a model referred to by Chartrand (2010) as "place-based training" (p. 15), which enables instructors to access cultural knowledge from community experts. Sharing circles are frequently held when students face challenges. The circles are effective because they are facilitated by a respected Elder. As students must leave their community for practicums, the counsellor will also travel with the students to ensure that supports are available while the students are away from home. In an upcoming program, this position is being referred to as a "job coach," which is relevant because this position reinforces employability skills and thus ensures readiness for employment.

Community/Stakeholder Involvement. Lastly, we found that the success of the program depended on input from all stakeholders, including Chief and Council, provincial and federal funders, and local education authorities. Involvement included student selection, student progress discussions, staffing, deliverables, and timetables. Timetables were adjusted to allow time for students to participate in community events. In the past, issues with student attendance often related to community events that the students chose to attend with their families. Incorporating breaks in the program for special events specific to those communities provided students with a better balance in their school and home lives, resulting in less absenteeism.

Conclusion

Writing this article resulted in a great deal of self-reflection on not only the growth of ACC's delivery of Aboriginal programs, but also my growth as an educator working with these groups. Though I found many articles on this topic, most were based on roundtable discussions or government recommendations and not on actual research studies. There are some commonalities in what the literature recommends, but the primary focus is on what is not working well, with repeated reference to the impact of colonization. As stated by Cherubini, Hodson, Manley-Casimer and Muir (2010), Aboriginal researchers tend to claim that student success is affected by a multitude of influences that include "linguistic, historic and cultural realities which undermine the education experiences of Aboriginal students in Canada" (p. 335). I believe that it is time now to focus on what is working and find ways to improve.

The work being done at ACC is supported by most of the literature. One gap, though, is in the use of Aboriginal instructors in the delivery of the program. We do strive to find interested Aboriginal instructors, but it is not always possible. The use of Aboriginal counsellors and Elder support helps to close this gap not only by facilitating the incorporation of cultural aspects in a program, but by educating non-Aboriginal staff about the culture.

In a 2008 discussion paper, the Coastal Corridor Consortium (CCL) wrote that accessibility to higher education is not a single issue. Post-secondary institutions need to incorporate strategies to improve accessibility, such as "leadership, awareness, community-based training, Aboriginal instructors, learner readiness, transition support and learner awareness" (CCL, 2008, p. 6). The model that has been used by ACC has incorporated similar components through trial and error, resulting in increased student success as described by CCL. In addition, there are Canadian success stories based on utilizing strategies similar to ACC, as outlined by Richardson and Cohen (2000). ACC's success is evidenced by the fact that ACC has become a "college of choice" by many FN communities throughout Manitoba.

Unfortunately, the literature has focused on barriers instead of best practices. Although the literature includes some recommendations, there is a need for more research into programs that are being successful and why. Writing this article has reinforced my belief that ACC has made some significant strides in the direction of Aboriginal education and should make future efforts to share its lessons learned. Aboriginal people are Canada's largest growing population, and providing effective delivery of higher education will position this population not only to better their lives, but also to provide the country with a trained workforce to meet labour market needs.

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