



PROJECT SNAPSHOT

Fostering a successful transition: Formalizing our commitment to Indigenous learners

Type: Innovative Transfer

Project Number: 2019-23 or I1923

Project Lead: Lakehead University

Collaborators: Confederation College, Canadore College

Deliverables for website (if applicable): Project Summary: Formalizing our commitment to Indigenous Learners

Project Summary

Learners, support staff, influencers, and community members have called attention to the barriers to uptake present in current articulation agreements for Indigenous learners focused only on awarding academic credit. This project will support Lakehead University, Canadore College, and Confederation College in the development and implementation of a formalized commitment, in the form of a signed Memorandum of Understanding, to collaborate and synchronize supports for Indigenous learners across institutions. By generating a formalized agreement to foster collaboration across institutions, wrap around supports can connect and provide inter-institutional communication and laddered transitions for Indigenous learners.

Project Rationale

The need for the project resulted from the work done during the ONCAT funded Pathways for Indigenous Learners project lead by the Centre for Policy and Research in Indigenous Learning (CPRIL) at Confederation College. The collaborators who worked on this project recognized that Lakehead University, Confederation College, and Canadore College had many articulated pathways credentials related to Indigenous learning however these pathways were under utilized. The Office of Indigenous Initiatives (formerly the Office of Aboriginal Initiatives) had anecdotal reports of the transfer related challenges faced by Indigenous learners and this

project was a response to those reports and a coordinated effort to hear and respond to the students and support staff serving these learners.

Main Collaborators

Confederation College: Don Duclos (Registrar) was the primary contact for this project.

Canadore College: Micheline Demers (Transfer Officer) was the primary contact for this project.

Gerard Peltier (Recruiter) played a key role.

Collaborator Contributions

Confederation College: Attended in person and video conference based meetings on a monthly basis.

Arranged and conducted transfer student focus groups. Created and shared a database of credentials that contain the highest percentage of self-identified Indigenous learners to structure supports. Hosted Lakehead University information/discussion sessions in the Apiwin student lounge to discuss issues around transfer.

Participated in the development of the Memorandum of Understanding. Contributed to relationship building between all partnership institutions at a student, administrative, faculty and upper administrative level. Canadore College: Attended in person and video conference based meetings on a monthly basis. Engaged their Indigenous Student Advisory Council to consult and participate in multiple phases of the project (focus groups and campus visits/feedback sessions). Created and shared a database of credentials that contain the highest percentage of self-identified Indigenous learners to structure supports. Facilitated student and staff travel to both Thunder Bay and Orillia as a component of the "Charter Class." Participated in the development of the Memorandum of Understanding. Contributed to relationship building between all partnership institutions at a student, administrative, faculty and upper administrative level.

Key Steps

1) Human Resources and Team Formation: During this project time was spent on identifying the key project staff and also communicating with each department that provides supports for Indigenous learners. Significant time was put into communicating the purpose of this project and also into opening the project and ensuring that all the stakeholders/voices at the university and its partners were heard.

2) Coordinate Meetings of Steering Committee: In person meetings were very productive and having monthly and sometimes bi-weekly online check-in meetings was useful as well. Roles and duties associated with ONCAT funded projects are often layered on top of other job responsibilities for many project partners and having regular online meetings was a good prompt to keep momentum going. It was interesting to see how each institution addressed their roles in their own unique way and produced results that served the project.

3) Develop the Memorandum of Understanding: The Associate Vice Provost Academic (Special Projects) drafted a Memorandum of Understanding that both reflected the outcomes of the project and contains a realistic call to action with timelines. Some of the project partners, particularly boots on the ground staff, were concerned that an MOU would be too vague and not result in actual change (hence putting significant time into communicating with all the front line staff). The project team has ensured that the MOU contains items that will require action.

4) Recruit/Invite a Charter Class: We were able to host students and visit partner institutions throughout the project to meet with front line staff, air their concerns and questions, and also share their own unique stories to contribute to our growing body of knowledge on seamless transfer experiences. Canadore College's strategy of hiring their Indigenous Student Advisory Council to contribute was effective.

Outcomes

There were two main outcomes associated with this project.

Primary Outcome - A signed Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)

With the exception of a signing ceremony, an MOU has been produced that balances action items generated from focus groups and student feedback with high level administrative guidance and direction. Once we have conducted a signing ceremony between the Presidents (and/or a designate) from all participating institutions, we intend to share the MOU template with ONCAT and the province as a template.

Secondary Outcome - Establish a list of communication protocols between relevant student supports at partnering institutions. Our original intention was to have a Gantt chart style list of sequenced supports across all institutions that would span that the lifetime of the student experience across all their studies and potential transfers. This outcome was overly ambitious within the time span of the project and also required re-framing. As the project evolved some of the team members challenged this overall approach to student services, particularly with Indigenous focused cultural and academic supports. The initial vision involved a Euro-centric engineering style approach to student services for Indigenous students across multiple institutions.

Ultimately, in the process of connecting with students, faculty, support services staff, Elders, and education counsellors from First Nations it became clear that a cultural shift to a more relational approach was necessary.

To move towards achieving this re-framed outcome, we made a clear and definitive acknowledgement that individual relationships are the foundation for the success and longevity of this MOU. The development of new transfer pathways and communication between wrap around supports relies on fostering 'personal yet professional' style relationships. However, these relationships take time to establish through meetings and gatherings. The extent to which our project has made strides towards this outcome includes:

- 1) Multiple one to one and group meetings (both online and in person) between faculty members, support staff, and First Nation representatives in the Thunder Bay and Orillia regions with a focus on relationship building and listening to student perspectives. These relationships are truly the foundation for seamless transfer. During the writing of this report, senior administration members who connected over the course of this project are planning to expand transfer pathways and create more innovative transfer mechanisms. Faculty members have reached out in person on behalf of their students who are interested in transferring instead of referring their students to the automated Student Central phone line. The fundamental substrate of trust and relationship building is probably the biggest outcome of this project and is currently benefiting students directly.

2) Data sharing between Institutional Planning and Analysis departments at all three institutions to identify the most active transfer pathways and credentials for self identified Indigenous learners.

3) Focus group data from transfer students at all three partner institutions was reviewed by the project team. The outcomes of this analysis will be shared internally during an in person meeting as the initial component of the extended project. This will be completed when the pandemic allows for staff to return to the university. If the pandemic lasts for the entire spring/summer semester, we will then have to find an alternative method of sharing. Once these research outcomes have been reviewed both internally and by all partners, we would be willing to share with the province.

4) Project partners have held Indigenous focused transfer education sessions in their own physical spaces and in spaces at the partner institutions. The value of breaking the ice and starting to spend time supporting students across institutions is a move towards the secondary project outcome.

Challenges

The primary challenge this project faced was the onset of a global pandemic at a critical phase of our project (MOU signing and Charter Class visits as outlined in the work plan). This delayed our final Charter Class visit and the final MOU review and signing process.

Student Outcomes

The project benefits students in numerous ways:

1) Increased awareness. Within the focus groups and one-to-one staff meetings, it was clear that key people were not aware of all transfer opportunities or updates to transfer agreements that would benefit their students. Key staff members now know who to talk to when information is necessary and also know that they can bring people into their classrooms and collective spaces for transfer information sessions.

2) Procedural Awareness and Navigation. Students indicated that the application and enrolment process is intimidating and filled with technical jargon that is difficult to interpret for first generation post-secondary students. For example, one Academic Calendar related to the health profession programming indicates that the third and fourth year of a program are "Professional" years. A couple of the students in a campus visit group interpreted this as meaning that they needed to be a full fledged professional before they were allowed to enter into the third year of the program. As a result, they would not apply to that program because they believed they were ineligible.

3) Financial Savings. With the joint admissions policy proposed in our MOU, students will save application fees. We are also hoping to explore applying for education funding for two sequential credentials (particularly two for two style block transfers) so that students do not need to apply twice for funding to get a degree/diploma combination. Finally, we have discussed Indigenous specific scholarships and bursaries which are being reviewed by senior administration. mature and learn more about what they would like their own individual pathway to look like.

Student Flexibility

Students are aware of transfer opportunities at the beginning of their first post-secondary credential and have access to transfer supports and information throughout their time in post-secondary. Exploring how students may be able to waive certain fees associated with application and registration that previously acted as significant barriers to post-secondary. If students decide to transfer they will have personal relationships with support staff, peers, and also have completed many logistical processes before arriving at the receiving institution.

Institutional Outcomes

The primary changes to institutional practices as a result of the first phase of this project were:

- 1) Strengthening of inter-institutional relationships and building trust that will lead to increased collaboration and communication.
- 2) Collected a qualitative and quantitative data set from three institutions that will allow for a more relational and culturally appropriate approach to student supports across the student experience.
- 3) The Memorandum of Understanding generated references exploring changes to admissions policy, potential increase financial support, and also inter-institutional wrap around supports and campus visits.

Sector or System Implications

In light of ONCAT approving a year long extension of this project, we hope to provide an exemplar model of how a group of regional partners can collaborate to support student mobility from the moment the student arrives at the first institution in their post-secondary journey. This project demonstrates that the process of developing a Memorandum of Understanding and the relationship building that underlies this document is a good first step towards a more collaborative and therefore seamless system.

Tips/Advice

We benefited from the guidelines published by the Centre for Policy and Research in Indigenous Learning (CPRIL) at Confederation College to guide our approach to this project. One meeting that stands out was having Elder Gerry Martin open the project and when asked what our primary focus should be he recommended that we "Listen". The theme of listening was really well received by the primary representatives of each institution and guided the project. Spending time at partnering institutions talking with students and support staff, essentially experiencing their institutional culture and building a relationship, was the key to developing collaborative policy from the grassroots that is actionable and designed to help the people who need it the most. For any institution considering developing a seamless transfer model for Indigenous Learners, we recommend reviewing the CPRIL research documents and taking a relational approach to policy development.

Tools and Resource

The primary resources that was developed in this project is the Memorandum of Understanding. We will share this document once we have completed the signing ceremony.

