



Final Report 2015/16

“Pathways for Aboriginal Learners:
Collaborating across Aboriginal Institutes,
Colleges and Universities”

(Project Number: 2014-28)

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This research project entitled “Pathways for Aboriginal Learners: Collaborating Across Aboriginal Institutes, Colleges and Universities” came out of a series of conversations among a community of graduate students, researchers, faculty/professors and administrators working in the field of Indigenous Studies. These individuals shared their lived experiences as Indigenous Peoples, as learners, scholars and educators/advocates who have encountered the public education system across several jurisdictions including Canada, the United States and New Zealand.

As we shared stories about our own experiences and journeying through numerous educational systems there were several points at which our individual accounts converged. The revelations that we shared were often about journeying alone, with few institutional supports that recognized our Indigenous identities and a consistent denial of Indigenous Knowledge(s). While we are certain that these experiences are not unique to us we know that threads in these stories would resonate with Indigenous learners today (personal reflection).

While the landscape in Indigenous postsecondary education has evolved whereby Indigenous Knowledge(s) and ways of being are part of the academy there is more that must be done. In this light, creating pathways for Indigenous learners where they are able to navigate the system and improve their access to education is imperative. We wish to thank our colleagues who provided their advisement so that we could take the steps to pursue this project in a good way:

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Based upon the successful partnership between the First Nations Technical Institute, Confederation College and Trent University the “Pathways for Aboriginal Learners: Collaborating across Aboriginal Institutes, Colleges and Universities” was developed to increase academic success for Indigenous learners in their post-secondary education. The creation of pathways through transfer and articulation for Indigenous learners enrolled at these institutions was the overarching purpose of this initiative. Environmental Studies, Indigenous Studies and Social Work were the affinity programs that were identified in this Project. In the fall of 2015, a cohort of students who graduated the Aboriginal Community Advocacy Diploma Program (June 2015) at Confederation College transferred into the third year of the Bachelor of Arts in Indigenous Studies Program at Trent University as a result of this initiative. They are expected to graduate in 2017.

Indigenous learners were supported via a number of comprehensive “wrap around” strategies including reciprocal outreach between Confederation College and Trent University faculty and staff. As a transition component these learners attended a summer bridging initiative titled “Bishkaa” at Trent University where students engaged in a variety of transition and skill building activities. This cohort of learners were teamed up with Trent University mentors/learning partners and will continue their relationship moving forward.

It was anticipated that identified affinity programs would proceed without difficulty as alignment appeared logical and contained to the field of study. It was clear that the language used in these programs was similar but alignment was not readily found. When the research team decided to try an Indigenous Knowledge(s) approach to the programming by applying the Aboriginal Learning Outcomes (ALO) framework developed at Confederation College the programs lined up immediately. The Aboriginal Learning Outcomes provided the crystallization of these affinity programs in a curriculum mapping exercise so that the articulation agreements could be drawn up. Currently, two other articulation agreements between the College and University are pending.

The research process has provided the partnering institutes with information and data that can be used to develop more pathways with other institutions across the province. In fact, the research must be shared widely to enable other learning institutions to contemplate this work in order to provide Indigenous learners with opportunities. It is important to review this Pathways project as a process that required all partners to become engaged in utilizing all of their individual and collective resources to create seamless pathways. The integration of student support services with academic programming made for a wholistic treatment of pathways. The partnering institutes shared a vision to provide Indigenous learners, no matter where they go to school, with the best opportunities to advance their learning. It was about access to learning and this remains the priority.

The relationships that were developed throughout this partnership grew as a result of open dialogue, common ground and commitment to Indigenous learners. Formal documentation such as the Letter of Intent, Memorandum of Understanding and ceremonial recognition by partnering institutions underscored the substantive work that was the focus of collaboration. There is more work to do

although the foundation has been set. There will be pathways and program accreditation to pursue through Indigenous Leadership courses and curricula that is held among the partnering institutions. There will be ongoing relationship building as full implementation of these initiatives become sustainable as part of the offering of programs and services in postsecondary learning.

Finally, there is a model to create pathways for Indigenous learners that is based on the successful combination of Indigenous Knowledge(s) and ways of knowing that have been utilized to provide assessment and evaluation of academic programs across Aboriginal institutes, colleges and universities. There is engagement whereby Indigenous learners will be asked to provide their advisement on what is working for them as they pursue their studies. It is imperative that this process continues as more Aboriginal institutes, colleges and universities express their interest in expanding this model. This has simply been the first step towards providing Indigenous learners, educators, and communities with a chance to be heard in the wider conversations about pathways.

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The Project

“Pathways for Aboriginal Learners: Collaborating across Aboriginal Institutes, Colleges and Universities”

The Centre for Policy in Aboriginal Learning (CPAL) at Confederation College (CC) in partnership with First Nations Technical Institute (FNTI) and Trent University (TRENT) have undertaken a project to create distinct Pathways, rooted in Indigenous Knowledges, for Indigenous learners (preferred term as opposed to Aboriginal) as they transfer between institutions. Articulation Agreements, academic bridging and comprehensive “wrap around” supports for these learners are key components in the creation of this Pathways model. This research project, funded by the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer (ONCAT), marks the first Indigenous-centred transition Pathways model for Indigenous transfer students in Ontario.

Project Design

CC/CPAL and its partners, FNTI and Trent are committed to an applied and collaborative approach to research. This first time partnership process resulted in pathways for Indigenous learners. Through engagement, consultation and collaboration the partners developed such opportunities to support Indigenous learners as they continue to move amongst Aboriginal institutes, colleges and universities in Ontario.

This Project relied upon relationship building processes to open doors so that pathways for Indigenous learners could be created amongst three distinct postsecondary learning environments. As the Project is called “Pathways for Aboriginal Learners: Collaborating across Aboriginal Institutes, Colleges and Universities” the prospect of collaborating across three different systems, where Indigenous learners are enrolled, was a challenge with promise. The scope of the work to be carried out was significant as each institution has its own history, identity and mandate with respect to Indigenous education.

Project Benefits and Outcomes:

Prior to the start of this Pathways project for Indigenous learners, among the three postsecondary institutions, the development of seamless pathways for transfer and transition did not exist. The initial Proposal identified the need for these established learning institutions, with demonstrated leadership in Indigenous education, to explore the possibilities of creating pathways that addressed the specific needs of First Nation, Metis and Inuit learners. This was clearly an access initiative.

The Proposal identified the goal of creating pathways for Indigenous learners because of the need to improve access to postsecondary education for Indigenous learners at Aboriginal institutes, colleges and universities in Ontario. This targeted initiative was designed to promote access, transition and

bridging that is strength-based as opposed to a deficit-based approach which marginalizes Indigenous learners.

The launch of this Project began against the backdrop of a relationship building process that pre-dated the funding by ONCAT. For several months prior to the application for funding the partners had been having exploratory discussions about collaborating on the basis of their work with Indigenous communities. Upon receiving funding from ONCAT the partners began with the Steering Committee made up of administrators, educators, counsellors, and researchers representative of each partnering institution. This process would rely on Indigenous methodologies and strategies to build common ground among the partners.

Developing and facilitating culturally centred pathways was a highly collaborative process because each institution has its own history, identity, and mandate in terms of its role in Indigenous education in Ontario. Each has a proven track record in providing Indigenous Studies programming along with extensive experience in advancing Indigenous postsecondary education. While each has their own story in working with Indigenous learners and communities this was the first time that the partners would work together.

Indigenous learners in these postsecondary environments reflect the continuum of learning that is found in Indigenous communities. These learners attend community-based programs at FNTI, and are attending CC and TRENT (among other Aboriginal institutes, colleges and universities in Ontario).

Given the landscape of each institution the programs and courses for credit transfer required the involvement of a team of educators, faculty/professors, administrators, counsellors and advisors in order to provide the best options for learner mobility. Further, the rich dialogue that became integral to this process reflected community education partners across diverse Indigenous communities in northwestern Ontario, central and eastern Ontario.

Affinity Programs:

This Pathways project identified affinity programs in Social Work, Environmental Studies and Indigenous Studies as part of the initial plan across the institutions. The expectation was that these areas of study would be aligned to contribute to improvements in learner outcomes. The affinities found in Indigenous Studies reflecting Indigenous Knowledge(s) across the institutions became fundamental to the pathways model. In fact, when Indigenous Studies courses and programs were analyzed through the lens of Aboriginal Learning Outcomes (ALOs) that were developed at CC the affinities were crystallized (Appendix A).

The need for “wrap around” services for Indigenous learners defined this project as a wholistic pathways model. The design of the model was led by Indigenous Student Services counsellors and advisors who had been working directly with these learners for many years. There were consultative

discussions about what would be needed in order to provide positive transitional supports. Throughout these conversations Indigenous cultural advisors and elders provided guidance and support. This reflected a customary way of communicating among Indigenous peoples by applying Indigenous “ways of knowing” which had been clearly stated in the Proposal (Appendix B).

In identifying these supports the partners discussed approaches to creating or aligning existing self-management/personal development courses, mentoring learners throughout transfer and transition periods. This relied upon engaging staff across the institutions so that their ongoing relationship building would continue as a component of sustainability over the implementation of the pathways. The need for bridging courses or supplementary learning opportunities to provide transition supports to learners was explored by academic counsellors, advisors and faculty/professors. Providing Indigenous learners with the confidence and the academic skills necessary to achieve their learning goals was the priority. The combination of these various approaches would contribute to an Indigenous centred “wrap around” model that focused on providing learners with culturally centred “best practices” to succeed through pathways (Appendix C).

This project has improved student mobility and transfer towards improved access for Indigenous learners. The result of this process is enhancing the agency of Indigenous learners to become fully engaged in charting their own learning. Self-determination is a fundamental principle of autonomy among Indigenous peoples and is connected to overarching principles of sovereignty. Therefore, on an individual and collective basis this pathways model is aligned with these principles that are fundamental to Indigenous Knowledge(s) (Appendix D).

This Project gave rise to the formation of an Indigenous-centred approach to articulation agreements and transfer credit policies for colleges, universities and Aboriginal Institutes. It was imperative that Indigenous ways of knowing were foundational to this work. Since this was the first time that Indigenous Studies became the focus in creating pathways each partner’s expertise, experience and knowledge in the field was integral to the outcomes.

This collaboration has created baseline data to support Indigenous-based approaches to postsecondary education. While Indigenous Studies is a recognized discipline it is not well-researched in the area of pathways, articulation and wrap around student support services. In fact, research about these particular aspects of Indigenous learning are limited. The results of this collaborative research project has generated interest among Indigenous educators across the spectrum of Aboriginal institutes, colleges and universities in Ontario. Further, other Ontario colleges and universities are interested in joining the partnering institutes to adopt the Pathways model that has been developed.

The Partners

Confederation College is a provincially funded college of applied arts and technology located in Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada. It was established in 1967, and has area campuses in Dryden, Fort Frances, Geraldton, Kenora, Marathon, Sioux Lookout, Red Lake and Wawa. The college, with its area campuses, serves an area of approximately 215,000 square kilometres. It is one of the twenty four Ontario provincial colleges serving Northwestern Ontario.

The Centre for Policy in Aboriginal Learning was established at Confederation College in 2013, the Centre's role is to advance and improve Aboriginal learning through public interest advocacy, research and policy development conducted with First Nation, Métis and Inuit communities. Founded on the Indigenous principles of responsibility, relationships, reciprocity and respect, this Centre is focused on bringing exemplary practice, leadership and resources to find solutions together.

www.confederationc.on.ca

FNTI (First Nations Technical Institute), an Indigenous owned and controlled post-secondary institute, was created in 1985 through innovative and dynamic partnerships between the Tyendinaga Mohawk Council, FNTI Board of Directors, Indian & Northern Affairs Canada, and the Ontario Ministry of Education & Training, to provide access to post-secondary programs for Aboriginal people. FNTI has pioneered a unique, culturally-rich curriculum and approach to post-secondary education which allows for flexible schedules and locations across the Province. (www.fnti.net)

Trent University is a liberal arts and science-oriented institution located along the Otonabee River in Peterborough Ontario.

Trent University's Indigenous Studies Department and the First Peoples House of Learning are central to the long-established tradition of Indigenous Studies and Indigenous centred Student Support Services. The Indigenous Studies Department offers undergraduate studies and a PhD program designed to meet the needs of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Trent University offers a program in Indigenous Environmental Studies in addition to a specialized Indigenous Learning Program that provides access for people of Indigenous heritage. The First Peoples House of Learning also houses Nozhem, a First Peoples performance space.

Trent University ranked #1 in Ontario in Maclean's University Ranking (2015) in the Primarily Undergraduate Category and #2 in Canada. www.trentu.ca

Relationship building

It is important to recognize that the relationship building process among the partners began in a customary way. Among Indigenous communities there are informal connections made over a period of time that facilitate reciprocal processes that bring people and ideas together through a process that is a combination of partnership protocols and ceremonial engagement. This is based on customs

related to friendship, communication which is essentially “a meeting of minds and hearts” and a negotiated relationship. In terms of explaining this to others outside this customary practice it may be described as creating “common ground” by talking and sharing stories and experiences. There is also an aspect of serendipity that allows for these evolving relationship processes to have flow and meaning.

Formalized agreements among the partners such as the Letter of Intent and the Memoranda of Understanding were signed over a period of months (Appendix E). The formal partnership was affirmed when the presidents at Confederation College, First Nation Technical Institute and Trent University signed the Memoranda of Understanding (Appendix F). This was an occasion that was also ceremonial whereby the partners declared their intention to work together along with the presentation of beadwork panels in Tyendinaga territory in April 2015 (see photographs attached).

The process around decision-making was based on the customary practice of consensus which is a traditional method among Indigenous peoples. As this was an Indigenous centred project it was important to have face-to-face meetings for the most part. Teleconference opportunities were viewed as follow up processes to augment the working meetings by the Steering Committee. On a day to day basis the Project management was held at CPAL in Thunder Bay where the Vice President, CPAL, was responsible for the implementation of this research.

Successful communication is essential to any form of collaboration. The cohesion that was required for the duration of the research and the implementation of this Project was reinforced by regular face-to-face meetings, extensive follow up by staff assigned to the project, and regular written (email) and telephone/conference calls. The communication was built upon Indigenous principles such as those contained in the Seven Grandfather Teachings of the Anishinaabe (Appendix G). Further, the guiding principles by the Haudenosaunee (Appendix H) and the Eeyou Peoples (Appendix I).

The Pathways Steering Committee held regularly scheduled meetings. Since CPAL is located in Thunder Bay, Ontario, FNTI is on Tyendinaga Mohawk Territories and TRENT is situated in Peterborough, Ontario there were efforts to meet at these various locations on a regular basis. There were a total of 11 face to face meetings held from July 29, 2014 through to March 21, 2016. These opportunities allowed for the introduction of various representatives from each partnering institution to attend and to contribute to the Pathways project. For example, early meetings at Trent University allowed for staff from the Partnership office who worked on articulation agreements to meet with the group in anticipation of the eventual agreements that would emerge.

Curriculum analysis

Through the expertise of a Curriculum advisor, faculty/professors and academic administrators began the assessment of program offerings to examine potential laddering opportunities early on in the project. This was an effort to determine where the affinities might be found in the identified areas of Indigenous Environmental Studies, Social Work and Indigenous Studies.

A comprehensive curriculum mapping process was conducted analyzing course credits, course descriptions, vocational outcomes, essential employability skills and intended learning outcomes from all available course outlines and syllabi. Faculty members were consulted, where applicable, to provide insight into specific details of the content. This ensured a thorough investigation into what the students were learning and provided a clearer picture of preparation for transfer and ultimately success going into Year 3 (Appendix J).

Indigenous Learning Outcomes:

Initially, there were significant gaps found between the Confederation College Community Advocacy program and the Trent University Indigenous Studies Program using the respective institutions program specific outcomes and course outlines to map the elements of each program. Upon further analysis these programs were then mapped by assessing the intended learning outcomes from both the Confederation and Trent programs using the lens of the Aboriginal Learning Outcomes (ALO) which serves as a framework.

This ALO approach was first developed in 2007 by educators at Negahneewin College of Academic and Community Development and the Aboriginal Education Council known as Negahneewin Council at Confederation College. This application of the ALO framework was a much more comprehensive examination and revealed a significant depth of analysis that provided critical information regarding specific requirements for in the courses that created immediate pathways. It was the Indigenous Knowledge(s) contained in the ALO's that aligned with the same principles of knowledge contained in the Aboriginal Community Advocacy Diploma Program at Confederation College and the Bachelor of Arts Degree in Indigenous Studies at Trent University (Appendix K).

Pathways realized

The creation and implementation of pathways from Confederation College to Trent University began with the aforementioned programs. The first time that learners from the College entered Trent was September 2015. These learners are enrolled in their third year of studies towards a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Indigenous Studies as the articulation agreement was based on a two plus two pathway.

Currently, there are two separate articulation agreements being finalized in the area of Environmental Studies at the College and at Trent. These initiatives are in the Environmental Technician Diploma Program at CC and the Bachelor of Arts Program in Indigenous Environmental Studies and another with the Bachelor of Science in Environmental and Resource Studies and the Bachelor of Arts Program in Environmental and Resource Studies at TRENT.

In preparation for a new Indigenous Bachelor of Education Degree at Trent there is a pending articulation agreement between the Aboriginal Community Advocacy Program and this program expected for the fall of 2016.

FNTI and TRENT are presently reviewing their respective curriculum in Indigenous Leadership programming particularly the Haudenosaunee leadership courses that have been developed through the Aboriginal institute. The goal is to create pathways between these courses and Trent University in the form of a diploma program which will include contributions by Confederation College. It is worth noting that Confederation College had a previously approved degree called 'Indigenous Leadership and Community Development' (2003 – 2008) which has since lapsed in its availability for offer so this curriculum has been shared with FNTI and Trent. The initial part of this process was completed when the Pathways project began with a comprehensive review of the curriculum assets.

Student Success

The relationship building processes between the partnering institutions continues to develop whereby the faculty and recruitment staff at Trent have visited Confederation College to discuss pathways with departments across the College. The *first cohort* of transfer learners are described as being part of a 'soft launch' as they began their studies at Trent in September 2015. The original intention of this Project was that this pathway would formally begin for September 2016.

Throughout the past year Trent Faculty and Student Support administrators/staff from the First Peoples House of Learning at Trent have been engaged in conversations with Confederation Faculty and staff about the pathways that have been developed. It is important that these processes are owned by the deans, directors and faculty at the College and that their association with Trent representatives are sustainable at an operational level. CPAL is not an academic office nor is it responsible for the academic management of the College's numerous schools/departments. CPAL has been able to facilitate these meetings however the in-depth discussions about pathways are being held across the College's School of Community Services, Negahneewin and Health, and the School of Engineering, Trades and Technology.

Trent University has developed a preparatory and orientation program that provides introductory lessons to new Indigenous learners every August. This program is known as the "Bishkaa Program" and has assisted learners in their first year transition to the university (Appendix L). The first cohort of Confederation College learners took advantage of this program and participated in the ongoing learner supports in the fall of 2015.

Transition Courses:

An online transition resource is currently under development in collaboration with the Ohahase high school, housed at the First Nations Technical Institute, First Peoples' House, Trent University and Confederation College. As these entities offer diverse learning management systems such as Orbund

and Blackboard, it is our intention to allow portions of the online resource to remain as open access while other elements would be specific to the respective institutions. The content of the transitions courses will span the continuum of learners needs from high school to post-secondary; within post-secondary (College to University); and from school to work. Each of the partners has been contributing to the development of the content which will be consolidated and ready by September 2016. Three courses are being developed as phases of “the Meaning of Work” with the final course as a ½ credit from Trent University. The delivery will be a blended approach with both asynchronous and coaching methods employed.

The three courses are framed as follows:

1. Course one: entry to college level from high school. This level will stimulate conversations about identity and professional goals, involvement of family and community and identify learning needs.
2. Course two: entry to university and will stimulate conversations about issues in the learning environment such as reading, writing and research skills as well as professional goals.
3. Course three: the meaning of work is university level and stimulate conversations about the workplace.

Building Communities of Practice

The emergence of “promising” to “best practices” in this Pathways project have helped to de-mystify the challenges of working across three distinct learning institutions. There has been tremendous will and demonstrated commitment to making this project work. The joint process has enabled open and honest dialogue to grow among the partners due to authentic relationships based on trust. This collaborative relationship model has been remarkably straightforward without tension and conflict. In fact, the process and the issues that arose have been addressed without contention. The Steering Committee and staff at these three institutions have reflected on the work process throughout with a high level of confidence that this will continue to be the practice.

The “lessons learned” are such that the collaboration is rich, that it is mutually supportive, and that it has the Indigenous learners at the centre of everything that is being done throughout the implementation. There is an ethic of care that extends from the individual learner, their families, and to their communities. In other words, there is the recognition that the learner is connected to their family and their community in profound ways that are integral to their learning journey. There is a ceremonial thread that is interwoven in this collaboration that reminds the partners that this process is vulnerable and that mindful attentiveness is essential to the long term goals of learner mobility. There is a meaningful dialogue that occurs at every face-to-face meeting so that “hard” conversations are respectful. The authentic nature of the dialogue makes for a rich exchange of ideas, strategies and approaches that are fully discussed, questioned and evaluated by the group. There have been occasions where guests or resource persons have been at the table without a need for ‘in camera’ or

side-bar conversations. This illustrates an open and transparent process that is respectful, reciprocal and restorative.

Going Forward

This collaboration has been a learning journey. Every one of the interactions among the Steering Committee, staff and community members which includes Indigenous learners have taught the partners that this work is sacred. In other words, this Pathways project has brought tremendous resources, particularly people, together to bring about change that was necessary to help Indigenous learners gain greater autonomy in their education. As a result of this Pathways project these learners can plan ahead for the long term. They are able to pursue their aspirations towards advancing their credentials, and imagining themselves differently.

Historically, an individual Indigenous learner would have to investigate options for transfer on their own. There was no process to follow. There were no resources or staff for them to seek out in order to access diploma and degree programs through specific pathways in the postsecondary environment. The individual learner would have to pursue their academic aspirations with a fortitude that would require them to convince learning institutions that their own credential was worthy of consideration towards another accredited program. If an Indigenous learner was able to access the assistance of a sponsoring agency or an advocate then transferability was a distinct possibility. Upon completion of this Pathways project there is greater awareness across the partnering institutes that Indigenous learners are seeking out increased flexible and supportive learning opportunities. These are committed learners who have the requisite skills, tenacity and strength to complete pathways to learning. Learning institutions are responsible to open doors and honour the learners, where they are.

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