

The BEAR Research Project

Executive Summary

It is time to take a candid look at the reasons for why First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) students do not achieve the same levels of success in post-secondary schools as their non-FNMI peers. By tracking long-term and widespread deficiencies in the administration, funding and evaluation of FNMI education, it is clear that an astounding lack of oversight has directly impacted the quality of education that FNMI students who live both on and off reserve receive from kindergarten to grade twelve. When these students are sponsored by their communities – at a considerable expense – to attend post-secondary institutions, several issues become apparent.

Firstly, the majority of FNMI students who enroll in post-secondary programs are under-prepared, particularly in English and math. Even when these students have attained a high school diploma, their academic skills are up to two grades below the levels required for many post-secondary programs; in addition, many FNMI students speak a first language other than English and struggle with ESL issues. Within the first few weeks of classes, it is understandable that these students often feel completely overwhelmed and discouraged.

Secondly, the majority of colleges and universities do not have processes in place to work with the students' communities to follow the students' progress and provide support, particularly at the start of the semester. Even though starting a post-secondary program means the first time away from the reservation for many FNMI students, institutions expect students to understand the rules and norms and to meet expectations. The first few weeks of school are like living in a completely different country for some students; homesickness and loneliness are amplified by culture shock.

Thirdly, when FNMI cultures are represented in post-secondary institutions, the representations are often visible manifestations of culture. Very rarely, if at all, are FNMI world views and perspectives

acknowledged on a deeper pedagogical level in the way courses are developed, delivered or assessed. For many FNMI students, their post-secondary experiences are therefore contradictory and disconcerting: outwardly institutions may provide Indigenous spaces, but the same institutions require FNMI students to internalize the beliefs and values of the school by adhering to mainstream, Westernized philosophies and systems.

In ways that go beyond the reasons listed here, the deck is stacked high against many FNMI students who want to attain post-secondary schooling. Last year, a team at Algonquin College decided that the time is right to re-think the opportunities available to FNMI students, and work on a new preparatory program called the BEAR Program began.

BEAR stands for Building Empowerment, Achieving Results. Right from the beginning, the team wanted to emphasize that the goal of this preparatory one-year certificate program is to help students develop four interconnected sets of knowledge and abilities: academic skills, transferable skills, transcultural skills and career awareness. In order to build the BEAR Program, the team held discussions and meetings with a variety of stakeholders including members from the communities of Akwesasne and Pikwaganagan to understand the communities' concerns and aspirations and to begin building collaborative relationships.

Starting with a review of the projects implemented by the Algonquin College Indigenous Strategic Partnerships team, additional research and best practices were analyzed to ascertain significant challenges facing our FNMI students and to explore effective ways to support learning in the four key skills areas to best prepare them for future success college and university and/or out in the workplace. The report concludes with an overview of the BEAR Program model and with a call for further support from ONCAT and additional funding sources so that our team can proceed to the next phase and develop a practical, meaningful, replicable program that can be implemented by other institutions who share a deep desire to see our FNMI students to become empowered and achieve success.