

DISCUSSION AND DEBATE

CREATING CULTURAL CONNECTIONS THROUGH MAWI'OMI: THE ABORIGINAL STUDENT CENTER AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

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Abstract / Résumé

The establishment of the first ever Aboriginal Support Program at the University of Prince Edward Island led to the development of the Mawi'omi Centre. This Aboriginal Lounge became a welcomed home to support and encourage Aboriginal students on campus. Students, themselves, speak to the value of this lounge and what it means to their education and development.

L'établissement du premier Programme de soutien pour les Autochtones à l'Université de l'Île-du-Prince-Édouard a mené à l'aménagement du Centre Mawi'omi. Ce salon autochtone est devenu un centre d'accueil où on soutient et encourage les élèves autochtones sur le campus. Les étudiants eux-mêmes soulignent la valeur du salon et discutent de ce qu'il signifie pour leur éducation et leur développement.

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To know that many people have worked to create an Aboriginal Student Centre to be part of the UPEI Family demonstrates to me, and Islanders that PEI First Nations continue to be integrated to the social-economic fabric of our province. Throughout the past number of years, PEI's Aboriginal population have made many positive strides. More and more of our children are having success in school, and more and more of them are realizing the importance of the opportunity to further their education. The very fact we are opening an Aboriginal Student Center here today demonstrates that we are seizing these opportunities.

This was a quote taken from a speech prepared by Chief Brian Francis of Abegweit First Nation at the grand opening of the Maui Omi Aboriginal Student Center at the University of Prince Edward Island (UPEI) on January 20, 2009. He brought greetings on behalf of himself and Chief Darlene Bernard of Lennox Island. This center was part of a greater new and innovative educational approach to recruit and retain Aboriginal students at UPEI. The project entitled Aboriginal Education at The University of Prince Edward Island: Transitioning Toward a Positive Future, comes as a result of the Aboriginal Health Human Resources Initiative (AHHRI), which is a commitment made by the federal government at a special meeting of First Ministers and Aboriginal Leaders in September 2004. The commitment builds on a previous health accord of 2003 which directed provincial, territorial and federal governments to work together with Aboriginal people to advance a health care system that is more responsive to the needs of Aboriginal peoples. It also comes from a personal commitment from The UPEI School of Nursing to recruit and retain Aboriginal students in its program.

Chief Francis concluded his opening remarks by saying, "Having an area inside a growing university such as UPEI will only encourage more and more Aboriginal people to choose a post secondary education. When they do that, our citizens, our communities and our province is better for it."

The Aboriginal Support Program at the University of Prince Edward Island

The Aboriginal transition program was developed at UPEI to implement a bridging, access and mentorship program designed to help increase Aboriginal students' support and ensure their success in completing their studies in health related fields. This transition program is a support program that will help ensure that Aboriginal students receive the non-monetary supports they need while enrolled in the School of Nursing and other health related studies. These supports include cultural support, tutoring, guidance, counseling services and mentoring programs. A full-time project coordinator, educated at a Master's level and pursuing a PhD in Aboriginal ethics has been hired to organize the services to students. The program will also reach provincial junior high and high school students to address systematic barriers that may prevent students from being admitted to post-secondary education health programs. Two Aboriginal nursing students have been hired on a part-time basis to implement a student mentoring program in these schools.

The Aboriginal transition program complies with Dr. Alan Siedman's formula for student retention. Dr. Siedman is the Executive Director of the Center

for the Study of College Student Retention and Editor of the *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice*, and has developed a formula which he advocates post-secondary institutions adopt to promote retention of minority students (Seidman, 2005).

Retention = Early Identification + (Early + Intensive + Continuous) Intervention

Seidman (2005) argues that successful retention is a result of early identification coupled with early and continuous intervention (availability of support) throughout the university experience. He puts the onus on the universities, stating institutions cannot assume that students will take the first step and seek help. The university must be proactive in its approach to students, to look at its programs and services, and to ask the following questions:

1. Do they help bond students to students?
2. Do they help bond students to the university?
3. Do they identify areas in need of assistance (academic or social)?
4. Do they remediate areas in need of assistance?
5. Do they continue throughout the post-secondary experience?

The program objectives are very much in line with those established by the AHHRI.

The Importance of an Aboriginal Student Center In Educational Institutions

In January, 2009 UPEI established its transition program to help ensure Aboriginal students receive non-monetary supports they need while enrolled in the School of Nursing and other health related studies. The overall purpose of the program is to implement changes and improvements at UPEI to significantly improve the number of Aboriginal students in the health care professions. This will then improve the availability of culturally competent health care providers and move toward attaining a sufficient supply and mix of health care workers in Aboriginal communities on PEI.

The Aboriginal people of Canada are attending post-secondary institutions in increasing numbers (Government of Canada, 1997). However, their level of educational attachment still falls well below that of other Canadians (Russell, Gregory, Care & Hultin, 2007). The post-secondary enrollment rate among the general population between 17 and 34 years of age is approximately 10%, as compared with that of Aboriginal people at 6%. According to Voyageur, "this causes grave concern to First Nations leaders who wish their people to be more integrated into the mainstream economy. Education is seen as a means of achieving this goal" (2001, p. 103).

Aboriginal students have many barriers to overcome in pursuit of a post-secondary education (NWT Dept. of Education, 1998). Accessibility and affordability present difficulties largely due to the capping of funding from the federal government at 1989 rates. Many post-secondary institutions are far from Native communities and this necessitates students leaving the community and living often on their own with little or no Aboriginal supports. All too frequently this proves to be too great a barrier to overcome and results in students dropping out (Blade, Duncan & Sokel, 2003). A study conducted by Ryan (1995)

found Aboriginal students to be successful in their qualifying year for admittance to a professional degree. However, the majority experienced significant difficulties in the first year of the degree program with all but a few failing one or more courses.

The Opening of Mawi'omi and Events that Have Followed

Officially opened on January 20, 2009, the Mawi'omi Aboriginal Student Centre has become a home base for many Aboriginal students at UPEI. Other than the obvious reasons of studying or hanging out, both students and community members are also starting to really feel comfortable and at home at Mawi'omi, and more so, at UPEI. As students, community members and their children gather in this humble space to share with one another, there is a certain element of community that is witnessed. Where once Aboriginal people felt unwanted and unwelcomed, they now feel embraced and integral to the future development of the UPEI campus, socially, culturally, economically, and educationally. The successes of the Mawi'omi are in the words of those who have come to call the centre home. As Stephanie Jadis, a third-year nursing student says, "Having the centre means a lot to me – to have a space to come to that feels like a piece of home and knowing that someone is there to help you through any challenging times allows you to focus on your studies instead of your struggles."

The value of Mawi'omi cannot simply be quantified by the number of students who use the facility nor can it be evaluated based on the number of graduates from UPEI. The value is in what it means and represents to Aboriginal students. This sentiment was echoed by second-year Arts student, Michelle Jadis, who said: "In my first year, university was very scary, but thankfully, I had the Aboriginal Resource Centre to support and guide me through. Now, I will go back in next year with confidence by just knowing that someone is there to help me when I need it the most." As a graduate from UPEI, Brandy Googoo says that "the Mawi'omi student center here at UPEI is a relief to see in the campus now. It is a place that makes the Aboriginal student population feel more secure, and it can also be an avenue for the non-Aboriginal people to come to learn and understand about the culture. I wish it had of been here when I first started university."

In the period from January 2009 to January 2010, the Mawi'omi Centre has hosted and partnered with various local and regional Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organizations to help foster a sense of belonging for Aboriginal people at UPEI. This highly complex and important component did not come easily. Significant time and effort is required to establish and maintain collaborative relationships that facilitate positive environments for change. Through Mawi'omi, several events have taken place on and off campus, bringing together Aboriginal people of all ages to share and celebrate. Such events have included mural painting, powwow on campus, career fair, professional development seminars, and new scholarships for Aboriginal students

Success that the Center has Brought to Aboriginal Students

Aboriginal students at UPEI continue to excel in nearly all programs that the university offers. From Arts to Education to Veterinary Medicine, Aboriginal people at UPEI are making a mark for themselves. Having Mawi'omi on campus has fostered even more success than students could have imagined. Through building a community with the university campus, Aboriginal students are learning from each other, engaging non-Aboriginal people and challenging them to think about their own biases and perceptions, and learning about new opportunities to be involved in. In the one year since Mawi'omi first opened, students have been receiving scholarships and awards, graduating from programs, and beginning their career paths in areas of their study.

It is not just the students who recognize the tremendous impact the centre has for Aboriginal people. "The Mawi'omi Aboriginal Student Resource Center is a great addition to the campus of UPEI. Here Aboriginal students can find academic, as well as personal supports and services to help them succeed," says Allan Gillis, Mi'kmaq Confederacy of PEI Education Advisor. As a community member who did not always feel welcome at UPEI, Patricia Bourque, member of the Abegweit First Nations, says that "I had a wonderful visit and felt welcomed and for the first time wasn't so afraid of the whole university campus world. I am a First Nation woman and have avoided and even feared the whole university setting. One visit and I am no longer afraid of this world, and would attend UPEI proudly."

Conclusion

January 20, 2010 marked the first year anniversary for the Mawi'omi Centre at UPEI. It was celebrated in the midst of Diversity Week with the Aboriginal community present. The Honorable Carolyn Bertrum opened the celebration by stating, "Diversity is an important element to have in society. It allows for different views and beliefs, and the inclusion of varying opinions, perspectives and ideas." The day also celebrated and recognized three students as the first recipients of the John J. Sark Memorial Scholarships. Monies for these scholarships are now given annually by the Government of Prince Edward Island, in the name of the distinguished Islander John James Sark.

Amanda Malley, one of the recipients of the John J Sark awards, concluded the ceremony with these words.

I'm a fourth-year biology student here at UPEI and my first year here there was very little offered for Aboriginal students. Now only three short years later, we have Mawi'omi, the Aboriginal Student Resource Centre, we have the Aboriginal Student Association, we have a Dancing Circle being created and we have the John J. Sark Memorial Scholarship for which everyone is here today. As we continue to work together, I know that UPEI will continue to attract more Aboriginal students who will go on to become a greater part of the economic fabric of the province. As a member of the Mi'kmaq First Nation and as a student, I just want to say how much receiving this scholarship means to me. Being either of these things can be difficult at times and being both makes it that much harder.

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