



November 30, 2015

Indigenous Strategic Initiatives Committee
Western Student Services (WSS) building room 2120
1151 Richmond Street
London, Ontario
N6A 3K7

Re: Input to Western's Indigenous Strategic Plan

Thank you for reaching out to the University community for input to the Indigenous Strategic Plan. I provide my comments through a fairness lens and an innate desire to provide *all* students with equal opportunities for success. Although I do provide some specific, tactical suggestions as to how the Office of the Ombudsperson can support Indigenous students at Western, I am more concerned with the impact the broader Western community can have on our current and future Indigenous students and the impact an Indigenous strategic plan can have on all Western students.

Providing Access but Ensuring Persistence

Western Admissions has implemented procedures to ensure access for Indigenous applicants. Once admitted, the University “wraps their arms around the student” (L. Gribbon, personal communication, November 27, 2015). Faculties and Indigenous Services should be lauded for providing support to Indigenous students. However, there are things Western could do to help ease the transition of students into post secondary education and “eliminate educational ... gaps between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, p.1-2). For example, Western could go into schools on area reservations and provide workshops from which students would benefit currently and when they enter post secondary. Workshops could include conflict management and empathy or learning skills such as impactful writing and test-taking skills. Workshop participants may not end up at Western, but the initiative would help to establish good will with the communities, and students who do end up coming to the University would have developed valuable skills and have established connections with important services.

The entire Western community is responsible for student success. I would welcome collaboration between Indigenous Services and the Office of the Ombudsperson so that students feel comfortable approaching us before they are referred by an Indigenous Services Councilor. Perhaps we could work with Indigenous Services on a presentation to be delivered each September. The presentation would

discuss our role and how we can assist students when they have concerns at Western. Working with Indigenous Services, we can develop the presentation taking into account the unique lens with which Indigenous students may see institutional policies.

As Ombudsperson, I would also be interested in knowing if there are policies and processes at Western which do not “foster congruence between Indigenous paradigms and academic worlds” (Western University, 2015). Do institutions such as Confederation College, Camosun College, or the University of Victoria have an approach to academic and conduct policies and procedures which take such paradigms into account?

Engaging Western’s Non-Indigenous Community

Twenty one percent of individuals in Canada with Aboriginal ancestry live in Ontario and five of the 20 largest bands in Canada are located in Ontario (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, n.d.). However, unlike provinces such as British Columbia, I would argue Indigenous populations are not part of the average Ontarian’s discourse. Growing up in Winnipeg, Manitoba, I attended high school with aboriginal students and Indigenous people were part of the fabric of the community. I am not saying Indigenous populations were treated well, but they were ‘front and centre’. Western’s students come from the GTA and Southwestern Ontario. They may know more about Islamic or Asian cultures than Indigenous ways of being. We have a responsibility to ensure the next generations of leaders know about residential schools, Indigenous traditions, Indigenous language, etc. I believe we need to look at the spirit of the Calls to Action set out by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015). For true reconciliation, it is not only Indigenous students who need to have access to their language and history, but ‘everyone else’ needs to know Western sits on Indigenous land, the grandparents and perhaps even parents of students gracing our halls lived in residential schools. Where in the strategic plan is the responsibility of the University to ensure our next generations of leaders understand Indigenous issues? Indigenous Services could recommend activities that educate the student population without exploiting Indigenous peoples. For example, at Orientation Week Opening Ceremonies there could be a welcome by native elders. Throughout the year, perhaps displays of historical artifacts and information about residential schools could be placed in residences, in the USC Atrium, and libraries. There could also be an Indigenous Student Representative on the USC to ensure the USC becomes engaged in the Indigenous conversation.

Conclusion

Pockets of Western administrators and staff are doing excellent work in Indigenous Access and Support, but the entire Western community – staff, faculty and students – needs to play a role. We need to engage all offices in supporting Indigenous students and educating their non-indigenous peers.

Respectfully submitted,

Jennifer Meister
Ombudsperson, Western University

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