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FIRST NATIONS AND HIGHER EDUCATION: The Four R's — Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity, Responsibility

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American Indian/First Nations/Native people have been historically under-represented in the ranks of college and university graduates in Canada and the United States. From an institutional perspective, the problem has been typically defined in terms of low achievement, high attrition, poor retention, weak persistence, etc., thus placing the onus for adjustment on the student. From the perspective of the Indian student, however, the problem is often cast in more human terms, with an emphasis on the need for a higher educational system that *respects* them for who they are, that is *relevant* to their view of the world, that offers *reciprocity* in their relationships with others, and that helps them exercise *responsibility* over their own lives. This paper examines the implications of these differences in perspective and identifies ways in which initiatives within and outside of existing institutions are transforming the landscape of higher education for First Nations/American Indian people in both Canada and the United States.

There is a story of a tribe of people in Indonesia that has an ingenious method for capturing monkeys alive. They cut a hole in a hollowed out coconut shell, just large enough for a monkey to stick its hand through. They then place a peanut inside and attach the shell to a tree. The monkey reaches through the hole in the shell to grab the peanut, but then is unable to withdraw its fist without letting go, and in this state of single-minded obsession with the peanut is readily captured and sold to the zoo trade.

At first glance, we as human beings may identify ourselves with the tribal people in this story and view it as just another example of the successful application of human ingenuity to the solution of an everyday problem. However, if we take a closer look, we may also see a reflection of ourselves in the

predicament of the monkey. We needn't look far to find examples of situations in which we as humans, individually and collectively, have become so captivated by habitual behavior as to be unable or unwilling to make timely adaptations in the interest of our future well-being. Consider, for example, the efforts to entrench English-only (or French-only) language policies in an attempt to impose unilingualism on an increasingly multicultural society, or the various resource extraction policies and practices that we adhere to while depleting limited resources with little consideration for the needs of future generations. These are but two examples of where we, like the monkey, attempt to ignore the consequences of our infatuation with the status quo. In this paper we will examine the extent to which similar head-in-the-sand, hand-in-the-coconut myopia is evident in the policies and practices of universities in Canada and the United States with regard to the educational opportunities for First Nations (Native/Indian/Indigenous/Aboriginal) students. While universities generally have adopted the political rhetoric of "equal educational opportunity for all," many of the institutional efforts to convert such rhetoric into reality for First Nations people continue to fall short of expectations. Why is this so?

If we are to address this perennial issue in a serious manner, we have to ask ourselves some hard questions:

- * Why do universities continue to perpetuate policies and practices that historically have produced abysmal results for First Nations students, when we have ample research and documentary evidence to indicate the availability of more appropriate and effective alternatives?
- * Why are universities so impervious to the existence of de facto forms of institutionalized discrimination that they are unable to recognize the threat that some of their accustomed practices pose to their own existence?
- * What are some of the obstacles that must be overcome if universities are to improve the levels of participation and completion of First Nations students?

There are no simple or single answers to these very complex questions, but those of us who are associated with universities in one form or another must continue to seek effective solutions, and along the way, we must be prepared to set aside some of our most cherished beliefs and free ourselves to consider appropriate alternatives. Let us take a look at some of the issues we are likely to encounter in this quest, and some of the policy and practice options we may need to consider along the way.

Coming to the University vs. Going to the University

First, let us take a look at what attending the university can mean from a couple of different perspectives, one coming (the institution's perspective of the student) and the other going (the student's perspective of the institution). From the vantage point of the university, students are generally viewed as "coming" to partake of what the university has to offer. From this perspective, it is presumed that the university is an established institution with its own long-standing, deeply-rooted policies, practices, programs and standards intended to serve the needs

of the society in which it is imbedded. Students who come to the university are expected to adapt to its *modus operandi* if they wish to obtain the benefits (usually translated to mean better, higher paying jobs) of the knowledge and skills it has to offer, the desirability and value of which are presumed to be self-evident. From this point of view, when particular clusters of students, such as those from First Nations backgrounds, do not readily adapt to conventional institutional norms and expectations and do not achieve levels of “success” comparable to other students, the typical response is to focus on the aberrant students and to intensify efforts at socializing them into the institutional milieu. The lack-of-performance issues in such circumstances tend to be defined by the university in terms such as “low achievement,” “high attrition,” “poor retention,” “weak persistence,” etc., thus placing the onus for accommodation on the students and fortifying the entrenched nature of the university as an institution.

The institutional response, when faced with these internally-constructed and externally reinforced problems of inadequate achievement and retention, is usually to intensify the pressure on First Nations students to adapt and become integrated into the institution’s social fabric, with the ultimate goal that they will be “retained” until they graduate. Typical solutions that emanate from this “blame-the-victim” perspective are special counseling and advising centers, “bridging” and “developmental” programs, tutorials, and an array of additional student support services, all of which are intended to help problem students successfully partake of what the university has to offer. To the extent that students are willing and able to check their own cultural predispositions at the university’s gate, these kinds of initiatives can and do assist them in making the transition to the culture of the institution, but such intensification efforts alone do not appear to produce the desired results of full and equal participation of First Nations people in higher education. Even with the many well-intentioned support services that have been proliferating for two decades in institutions across Canada and the U.S., the overall “attrition” and “retention” rates of First Nations students remain near the bottom of all university students in both countries. The statistics speak for themselves:

- * In Canada in 1986, only 1.3% of the First Nations population had completed a university degree, compared to 9.6% of the general population. In other words, non-Indians were 7.4 times more likely to have successfully completed a degree program than First Nations people (Armstrong, Kennedy & Oberle, 1990).
- * In the U.S. in 1984, less than 60% of the American Indian students completed high school, and approximately one-third of these went on to college, but only 15% of those who went on to college completed a four-year degree, for an overall average college graduation rate of 3%, compared to 16% for the general population (Tierney, 1991; Fries, 1987).
- * In 1986, only 25% of the First Nations population in Canada completed high school compared to half of the non-Indian population, and of those, only 23% went on to the university, compared to 33% of the rest of the population. Of those First Nations students who commenced university studies, 25% earned a degree, compared to 55% of non-Indians (Armstrong, Kennedy & Oberle, 1990).

- * In 1986, only seven four-year institutions in the U.S. had 500 or more American Indian students enrolled, and most of these were tribally-controlled colleges located on reservations (Tierney, 1991).

It is clear that despite the many efforts to improve First Nations' participation in higher education, U.S. and Canadian universities, by-and-large, do not yet provide a hospitable environment that attracts and holds First Nations students at a satisfactory rate. University policies and programs aimed at decreasing First Nations student attrition are typically oriented toward helping the students make the transition from their home culture to the culture of the university (Beaty & Chiste, 1986; Pottinger, 1989). In a study of the college experiences of American Indian students in the U.S., Tierney (1991) identified five implicit "axioms" or assumptions held by universities, that serve as the basis for most of their efforts to integrate the students into the ways of the institution:

- * Post-secondary institutions are ritualized situations that symbolize movement from one stage of life to another.
- * The movement from one stage of life to another necessitates leaving a previous state and moving into another.
- * Success in post-secondary education demands that the individual becomes successfully integrated into the new society's mores.
- * A post-secondary institution serves to synthesize, reproduce, and integrate its members toward similar goals.
- * A post-secondary institution must develop effective and efficient policies to insure that the initiates will become academically and socially integrated.

However, from the perspective of the American Indian students Tierney interviewed, who had their own distinctive reasons for "going to the university," social integration into the culture of the university was not what they had in mind, at least not if it was going to be at the expense of the culture they brought with them. He quotes one student who had dropped out in his first attempt at college after two semesters, and then returned to the local community college ten years later with a different cultural perspective:

I think White people think education is good, but Indian people often have a different view. I know what you're going to say — that education provides jobs and skills. It's true. That's why I'm here. But a lot of these kids, their parents, they see education as something that draws students away from who they are..... I would like to tell them (at the university) that education shouldn't try and make me into something I'm not. That's what I learned when I wasn't here — who I am. And when I learned that, then I could come back here. I sort of walked away for a while and then came back. It's one of the best gifts I've ever had. But a lot of us just walk away.

In these comments, we see the university from a perspective in which what it has to offer is useful only to the extent that it respects and builds upon the cultural integrity of the student. The university must be able to present itself in ways that have instrumental value to First Nations students; that is, the programs and services that are offered must connect with the students' own aspirations and cultural predispositions sufficiently to achieve a comfort level that will make the experience worth enduring. If we cannot create an environment in which First

Nations students begin to “feel at home” at the university, all the special programs and support services we can dream up will be of little value in attracting and holding them in significant numbers. We must recognize that attending the university is not an all-or-nothing proposition, and many students, such as the one quoted above, will move in and out of the university over a period of many years, depending on how well it suits their purposes.

While improved job opportunities alone may provide sufficient motivation to keep some students interested, in the case of many First Nations students, these “jobs” are often linked to aspirations with much broader collective/tribal considerations, such as exercising self-government, or bringing First Nations perspectives to bear in professional and policy-making arenas. The inadequacy of our understanding of, and attention to, these kinds of considerations was pointed out in a recent government report on “university education and economic well-being” for First Nations people in Canada, which concluded: “A greater understanding is needed about motivating factors if policy and programs are to be successful in their intent to increase participation and success at university” (Armstrong, Kennedy & Oberle, 1990). Wendy Hull, chair of the Aboriginal Students’ Association at Dalhousie University in Halifax, illustrates the point in her observation: “(University) education is not important to me in my life. But it is important when we start dealing with the government.” (Harrington, 1991). We need to recognize that there can be many reasons for pursuing a university education, reasons which often transcend the interest and well-being of the individual student. For First Nations communities and students, a university education can be seen as important for any of the following reasons:

- * It can be seen as a means of realizing equality and sharing in the opportunities of the larger society in which we live.
- * It can be seen as a means for collective social and economic mobility.
- * It can be seen as a means of overcoming dependency and “neo-colonialism.”
- * It can be seen as a means of engaging in research to advance the knowledge of First Nations.
- * It can be seen as a means of providing the expertise and leadership needed by First Nations communities.
- * It can be seen as a means to demystify mainstream culture and learn the politics and history of racial discrimination.

From the extra-institutional point of view of a First Nations student who is “going” to the university for any of these reasons, the problems they encounter along the way are not constructed as matters of attrition and retention, which make sense only from an internal institutional perspective. Rather, the issues are likely to be framed in more humanistic, culturally-sensitive terms, such as a desire for “respect,” “relevance,” “reciprocity,” and “responsibility,” and as such, reflect a larger purpose than simply obtaining a university degree to get a better job. First Nations students and communities are seeking an education that will also address their communal need for “capacity-building” to advance themselves as a distinct and self-determining society, not just as individuals.

In this context, a “job” may be important, but more as a means to an end, than an end in itself.

In the effort to sustain their own cultural integrity, there is an urgent need for First Nations people to assume roles as teachers, doctors, lawyers, administrators, comptrollers, architects, historians, etc. This need is reflected in an observation by Chief Simon Baker, an elder from the Squamish Nation in British Columbia who has often pointed out that, “Having White lawyers running your band government is not First Nations self-government.” These sentiments are echoed by Patricia Monture, a Mohawk and professor of law at Dalhousie Law School, who has pointed out that getting a university education is an indispensable, if often unpleasant step to attaining self-determination. She goes on to state, however, that “Canada is not making an effort to talk to us. We’re the ones who have to do double-time and learn how to talk to them” (Harrington, 1991). How then can the monolithic/ethnocentric institution of the university be reoriented to foster a more productive two-way exchange that increases its capacity to respond effectively to the higher education and human resource needs of First Nations students and communities? To begin to respond to that question, let us examine more closely the implications of the “Four R’s” of respect, relevance, reciprocity and responsibility.

Respect of First Nations Cultural Integrity

The most compelling problem that First Nations students face when they go to the university is a lack of respect, not just as individuals, but more fundamentally as a people. To them, the university represents an impersonal, intimidating and often hostile environment, in which little of what they bring in the way of cultural knowledge, traditions and core values is recognized, much less respected. They are expected to leave the cultural predispositions from their world at the door and assume the trappings of a new form of reality, a reality which is often substantially different from their own.

The physical and social environment of a typical university campus is intended to protect faculty and students from “the real world,” or put another way, it is a reality unto itself. It is a literate world in which only decontextualized literate knowledge counts, and that knowledge must be displayed in highly specialized literate forms. As an institution for perpetuating literate knowledge, the university has served us well. But there are other kinds of knowledge in the world and there are other ways of conveying knowledge than those embodied in the “Ivory Tower.”

One variation of another kind of knowledge is that which has typically been associated with First Nations people, usually referred to in terms such as traditional knowledge, oral knowledge, indigenous knowledge, etc., depending on which literate tradition you draw upon (Goody, 1982). While the manifestations can vary considerably from one group of people to another, some of the salient features of such knowledge are that its meaning, value and use are bound to the cultural context in which it is situated, it is thoroughly integrated into everyday

life, and it is generally acquired through direct experience and participation in real-world activities. If considered in its totality, such knowledge can be seen to constitute a particular world view, a form of consciousness, or a reality set.

In an examination of contemporary values and lifestyle in the context of a northern Athabaskan community, Ron and Suzy Scollon (1981) identified four aspects of what they described as a "Native reality set" (patterns of behavior and ways of thinking) which they felt distinguished it from "modern consciousness" (as articulated by Berger, 1973). Native people who live in isolated northern communities, in Scollons' view, tend to favor a lifestyle that exhibits a high respect for individual self-reliance, non-intervention in other people's affairs, the integration of useful knowledge into a holistic and internally consistent world view, and a disdain for complex organizational structures. The Scollons go on to point out that these aspects of local consciousness create considerable interactional tension and conflict when Native people encounter the componentiality, specialization, systematicity, bureaucracy and literate forms characteristic of Western institutions and modern consciousness. The holistic integration and internal consistency of the Native world view is not easily reconciled with the compartmentalized world of bureaucratic institutions.

For the First Nations student coming to the university (an institution that is a virtual embodiment of modern consciousness), survival often requires the acquisition and acceptance of a new form of consciousness that not only displaces, but often devalues their indigenous consciousness, and for many, this is a greater sacrifice than they are willing to make. If they enter and then withdraw before "completion," however, they are branded by the university as a "dropout" — a failure. Those who persevere and make the sacrifice can find themselves in the end, torn between two worlds, leading to a further struggle within themselves to reconcile the cultural and psychic conflicts arising from competing values and aspirations.

Some of the institutional implications of this struggle for recognition of competing realities were summarized by Scollon (1981) in a study of communication patterns and Native student retention at the University of Alaska Fairbanks:

The problem of retention in an institution of higher education lies as much in the definition of the problem as in any other factor. Previous research has indicated that the problem of communication between modern bureaucratic institutions and members of non-Western cultural groups can be understood to a considerable extent as a problem in conflict of world view or reality set. More recent research has argued that this difference in reality set is associated with the predominant modes of communication, with the modern bureaucratic institutions showing a strong association with literacy. While the extent and power of Western bureaucratic institutions is well known, it is also well known that these institutions are highly unresponsive to their environments. Some researchers have referred to this unresponsiveness as an institutional incapacity to learn.

Scollon went on to characterize the problem of high Native student attrition at the University as a conflict between "the institutions's knowledge" and "human knowledge."

“The institution’s knowledge” characterizes the relationships between individual members or clients which are governed by institutional considerations. “Human knowledge” characterizes the relationships between members or clients which are governed by human interpersonal considerations. By framing the problem as a problem of “retention” the institution was incapable of perceiving the issue from the point of view of the affected population, Alaska Native students. It is recommended that what is required is not increasing the involvement of students in the institution, but on the contrary, increasing the domain of human knowledge of institutional members.

Increasing the university’s domain of human knowledge to include and respect First Nations cultural values and traditions is a formidable task, but it is a task that we must begin if we are to make the institution more “user friendly” for First Nations students. What then can be done to begin to reduce the cultural distance and the role dichotomy between the producers and the consumers of knowledge in university settings.

Relevance to First Nations Perspectives and Experience

If universities are to respect the cultural integrity of First Nations students and communities, they must adopt a posture that goes beyond the usual generation and conveyance of literate knowledge, to include the institutional legitimation of indigenous knowledge and skills, or as Goody (1982) has put it, to foster “a re-valuation of forms of knowledge that are not derived from books.” Such a responsibility requires an institutional respect for indigenous knowledge, as well as an ability to help students to appreciate and build upon their customary forms of consciousness and representation as they expand their understanding of the world in which they live.

The complexity of the task of incorporating a First Nations (oral) perspective in the everyday functioning of the (literate) university is exacerbated by “the inherent problem of speaking of two reality sets in the idiom of only one of them” (Scollon, 1981). Nevertheless, with the help of an emerging group of First Nations scholars, we are beginning to see the outlines of a more culturally accommodating view of how knowledge is constructed and passed on to others. One example of an attempt to reconcile differences in the ways knowledge is understood and conveyed is a contrastive study of orality and literacy by Joann Archibald, a member of the Sto:lo Nation in British Columbia, in which she points to the need “to define and create new ways of thinking and writing about literacy and its relationship to orality.”

With the technological advances of video, television and film, our world has become a combined oral/literate/visual one. This combination has exciting possibilities for First Nations because it is nearing the traditional holistic approach to teaching and learning which is needed to heal our people who have been adversely affected by history (1990).

Eber Hampton (1988), a Chickasaw originally from Oklahoma and now in Alaska, has made an effort to identify some of the qualities that he considers

important in the move to construct an “Indian theory of education.” He lists the following as twelve “standards” on which to judge any such effort:

- * *Spirituality* — an appreciation for spiritual relationships.
- * *Service* — the purpose of education is to contribute to the people.
- * *Diversity* — Indian education must meet the standards of diverse tribes and communities.
- * *Culture* — the importance of culturally determined ways of thinking, communicating and living.
- * *Tradition* — continuity with tradition.
- * *Respect* — the relationship between the individual and the group recognized as mutually empowering.
- * *History* — appreciation of the facts of Indian history, including the loss of the continent and continuing racial and political oppression.
- * *Relentlessness* — commitment to the struggle for good schools for Indian children.
- * *Vitality* — recognition of the strength of Indian people and culture.
- * *Conflict* — understanding the dynamics and consequences of oppression.
- * *Place* — the importance of sense of place, land and territory.
- * *Transformation* — commitment to personal and societal change.

Such a list of qualities begins to offer universities (and schools) a set of standards against which to examine their policies and practices to see how respectful and relevant they really are to First Nations considerations. While Hampton’s set of standards may differ from those against which the university is accustomed to being judged, it is in fact a more inclusive list of criteria whereby all students can find something with which to identify. To the extent universities are able to reconstruct themselves to be more relevant to, and accepting of First Nations students’ perspectives and experiences, they will be that much more relevant and responsive to the needs of all students.

Reciprocal Relationships

One of the most frustrating aspects of the university experience for First Nations students is the role dichotomy between the producers and the consumers of knowledge in university settings. The conventional institutionalized roles of a university faculty member as the creator and dispenser of knowledge and expertise and the student as the passive recipient of that knowledge and expertise have a tendency to interfere with the establishment of the kinds of personalized “human” relationships to which First Nations students are most likely to respond. Scollon described the problem in Alaska as follows:

Our research leads us to believe that the only way that modern institutions such as the University of Alaska can become responsive to their environments is to acknowledge and exploit the institutional/human interface that each member negotiates in each institutional act. In the phrasing of the students, we must constantly “expose” ourselves to the human and non-institutional. In the phrasing of the faculty we must allow ourselves to become vulnerable. Institutional invulnerability is the mark of institutional unresponsiveness (1981).

In an effort to help Native students understand the nature of the institution in which they were situated and to learn how to successfully negotiate their

way through it, Scollon developed an entry level course titled "Cultural Differences in Institutional Settings." The course, which continues to be one of the more popular for beginning Native students, is described in the 1990 University of Alaska Fairbanks catalog as follows:

Introduction to the phenomena of culturally organized thought processes, with emphasis on the communication patterns resulting from the interaction of peoples from different linguistic/cultural traditions in modern institutional settings. Special attention is paid to Alaskan Native and non-Native communication patterns.

Another example of a course with a similar purpose but a different focus, is a course offered at the University of British Columbia titled, "Cross-Cultural Education (Native Indians)," described in the 1990-91 Calendar as follows:

Instructional techniques for adapting teaching to the needs of Indian students; methods of enriching the curriculum by including the cultural background of all students; the course will include some examination of the anthropological, sociological and historical background of Native Indians with an emphasis on contemporary situations as these relate to teaching.

In both of these courses, the emphasis is on making teaching and learning two-way processes, in which the give-and-take between faculty and students opens up new levels of understanding for everyone. Such reciprocity is achieved when the faculty member makes an effort to understand and build upon the cultural background of the students, and the students are able to gain access to the inner-workings of the culture (and the institution) to which they are being introduced.

One of the few examples of situations in which university faculty members make a deliberate effort to be more accessible and "vulnerable" to accommodate First Nations students is in field-based programs in which faculty are physically located in outlying communities. The out-stationing of faculty has been an inherent feature of many of the Native/First Nations teacher education programs that have been established across Canada and the U.S. over the past twenty years. The effect of such a move on the role of faculty and students is reflected in the following account of the "field-coordinator" faculty position in the Cross-Cultural Education Development (X-CED) teacher education program situated in rural Alaska:

The most effective faculty members in our field programs have been those who have been able to engage themselves and their students in a process of sense-making and skill-building through active participation in the world around them. They use books and pencil and paper as a means to add breadth and depth to the students' understanding, but not as the sole source of knowledge. They measure their students' achievement through the students' ability to effectively perform meaningful and contextually appropriate tasks. They engage the students in tasks that allow for the integration of various forms of knowledge and the application and display of that knowledge in a variety of ways. They jointly build knowledge from the ground up with their students, through an inductive process that allows the students to develop their own emic perspective, at the same time using literate forms of knowledge to acquaint them with other perspectives. They experience with students, the ambiguity, unpredictability and complexity of the real world, and in the process, prepare students who

are better equipped to find solutions to problems for which we may not yet even have a theory (Barnhardt, 1986).

Faculty members and students in such a reciprocal relationship are in a position to create a new kind of education, to formulate new paradigms or explanatory frameworks that help us establish a greater equilibrium and congruence between the literate view of the world and the reality we encounter when we step outside the walls of the “Ivory Tower.” It is not necessary that all faculty leave the security of the university campus with its protective structure of academic disciplines and venture into the uncertainty of the world outside, but it is important that enough do so to provide a reality-check for the institution as a whole. Even those who do venture out, however, sometimes hesitate to make themselves vulnerable to any challenging of the efficacy of their authority and beliefs, and find ways to protect themselves behind a veneer of academic aloofness and obfuscation. For First Nations students and communities, such a posture is no longer acceptable.

Responsibility Through Participation

In the context of a First Nations perspective of the university, higher education is not a neutral enterprise. Gaining access to the university means more than gaining an education — it also means gaining access to power, authority, and an opportunity to exercise control over the affairs of everyday life, affairs that are usually taken for granted by most non-Native people. For First Nations students, this is a matter of necessity, for in order to survive the formal curriculum, they must also learn to navigate through the alien power structure of the institution. In effect, they must engage in an educational strategy comparable to what Henry Giroux (1988) refers to as “border pedagogy:”

Students must engage knowledge as a border-crosser, as a person moving in and out of borders constructed around coordinates of difference and power. These are not only physical borders, they are cultural borders historically constructed and socially organized within maps of rules and regulations that limit and enable particular identities, individual capacities, and social forms. In this case, students cross over into borders of meaning, maps of knowledge, social relations, and values that are increasingly being negotiated and rewritten as the codes and regulations which organize them become destabilized and reshaped.

For universities that are seriously committed to finding ways to create a more hospitable climate for First Nations students, the institutional implications of such border negotiations can be far-reaching. Tierney (1991), building on Giroux’s form of critical analysis, outlines what he sees as some of the steps that need to be considered:

I am suggesting that organizations need to be constructed where minority students’ lives are celebrated and affirmed throughout the culture of the institution. The point is not simply to have a Native American Studies Center or a course or two devoted to Native peoples. Minority students need institutions that create the conditions where the students not only celebrate their own histories but also are helped to examine

critically how their lives are shaped and molded by society's forces. Such a theoretical suggestion has implications for virtually all areas of the organization — from how we organize student affairs, to the manner in which we construct knowledge, from the role of assessment, to the role of the college president.

Clearly, such “theoretical suggestions” for comprehensive reform are not likely to spread like wildfire through college campuses, but that does not mean that systemic changes are not possible; in fact, they are already happening. The most promising sign on the horizon of First Nations people exercising responsibility and increasing participation in the arena of higher education is the burgeoning number of First Nations post-secondary/adult education initiatives, both within and outside existing institutions across the U.S. and Canada. Examples range from the 24 Tribal Colleges in the U.S. to the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College, the Nicola Valley Institute of Technology, the Secwepemc Cultural Education Society, the James Bay Education Centre, the Gabriel Dumont Institute, the First Nations House of Learning, and many other similar First Nations institutions across Canada, all of which are having a marked effect on the level of participation and success of First Nations students (Boyer, 1989; Chrisjohn & Mrochuk, 1990).

The structure and focus of each of these institutions vary greatly, with services aimed at clientele ranging from the local community to national levels, and with program emphases ranging from adult and vocational education to graduate level programs. Typical program offerings are in the areas of band/tribal/municipal self-government, rural/community/economic development, Native/Indian/Aboriginal law, land claims and natural resources management, Native teacher education, First Nations health and social services, Native language revitalization, First Nations performing and creative arts, and adult education/literacy development. Underlying all of these programs and institutions, is an explicit commitment to culturally appropriate, readily accessible, quality post-secondary education for First Nations people. Typical of the mission statements associated with such institutions is that of the Nicola Valley Institute of Technology (NVIT) in Merritt, British Columbia:

To provide First Nations people with access to a system of the highest quality post-secondary, academic and career/technical education in a culturally reinforced environment (NVIT, 1990).

While NVIT functions as a more or less independent First Nations institution, similar purposes can be achieved within the structural framework of existing public institutions. At the University of British Columbia (UBC), for example, the First Nations House of Learning draws on the following mission to broaden the cultural attributes of all UBC programs by helping them better serve the needs of First Nations people:

The mandate of the First Nations House of Learning is to make the University's vast resources more accessible to British Columbia's First People, and to improve the University's ability to meet the needs of First Nations. The House of Learning is

continuously seeking direction from the First Nations community in determining priorities and approaches. This is achieved through consultation meetings and workshops held throughout the province. The First Nations House of Learning is dedicated to quality preparation in all fields of post-secondary study. We believe that quality education is determined by its relevance to the philosophy and values of First Nations (Kirkness, 1990).

Similar missions, goals and programs can be found in most of the other higher education initiatives coming from First Nations people across Canada and the U.S. It is the exercise of First Nations leadership and responsibility through institutions such as these that offers the best long-term promise for improving First Nations participation in higher education (Barnhardt, 1991). Through institutions of their own making and/or under their own control, First Nations people are creating a more comprehensive definition of “education” and reaffirming their right to respect and self-determination. The significance of this undertaking was summarized by the Carnegie Foundation in its report on U.S. Tribal Colleges:

At the heart of the tribal college movement is a commitment by Native Americans to reclaim their cultural heritage. The commitment to reaffirm traditions is a driving force fed by a spirit based on shared history passed down through generations, and on common goals. Some tribes have lost much of their tradition, and feel, with a sense of urgency, that they must reclaim all they can from the past even as they confront problems of the present. The obstacles in this endeavor are enormous but, again, Indians are determined to reaffirm their heritage, and tribal colleges, through their curriculum and campus climate, are places of great promise (Boyer, 1989).

The need for such a shift in cultural emphasis as that sought by the Tribal Colleges is no less important in existing Western-oriented institutions of higher education serving First Nations students, but the structures and processes for engaging with First Nations people through these institutions are necessarily different. The nature of some of those differences are spelled out by Tierney (1991) in his use of critical analysis to examine the role of colleges with regard to Native American students:

The emphasis of a critical analysis shifts away from what strategies those in power can develop to help those not in power, to analyzing how power exists in the organization, and given how power operates, to developing strategies that seek to transform those relations. All organizational participants will be encouraged to come to terms with how they may reconstruct and transform the organization’s culture. As opposed to a rhetoric of what mainstream organizations will do *for* Native Americans — a top-down managerial approach — the struggle is to develop strategies and policies that emerge from a vision of working *with* Native Americans toward a participatory goal of emancipation and empowerment.

Tierney’s call for the reconstruction and transformation of the university’s culture to better serve First Nations ends may seem at first to be a daunting task, but it really is no more than a matter of shifting to a policy, posture and practice of actually working with First Nations people, and in doing so, attending to the “Four R’s” of respect, relevance, reciprocity and responsibility. We have

ample evidence that this can be, and is being done, within existing institutions, as well as through institutions of First Nations peoples own making.

Conclusion

It is the notion of empowerment that is at the heart of First Nations participation in higher education — not just empowerment as individuals, but empowerment as bands, as tribes, as nations, and as a people. For the institutions to which they must turn to obtain that education, the challenge is clear. What First Nations people are seeking is not a lesser education, and not even an equal education, but rather a better education — an education that respects them for who they are, that is relevant to their view of the world, that offers reciprocity in their relationships with others, and that helps them exercise responsibility over their own lives. It is not enough for universities to focus their attention on “attrition” and “retention” as an excuse to intensify efforts at cultural assimilation. Such approaches in themselves have not made a significant difference, and often have resulted in further alienation. Instead, the very nature and purpose of higher education for First Nations people must be reconsidered, and when we do, we will find that the entire institution, as well as society as a whole, will be strengthened and everyone will benefit. The only question remaining is, can those who are in a position to make a difference seize the opportunity and overcome institutional inertia soon enough to avoid the alienation of another generation of First Nations people, as well as the further erosion of the university’s ability to serve the needs of society as a whole? Can we make the necessary adaptations and escape the misfortune of the monkeys in Indonesia? Let us hope so, because the university is too vital an institution to end up in the zoo.

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