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**Post-Secondary Experience of
Indigenous Students
Following the
Truth and Reconciliation Commission**

Summary of Survey Findings

September 2018

Post-secondary education fuels the dreams and hopes of students. This is especially true for Indigenous students as they pursue their dreams and aspirations in this post-Truth and Reconciliation Commission landscape. But, at the same time, they are wondering whether Canada's policy makers and post-secondary institutions will deliver on the promises that have been made.

In July and August of 2018, Indspire sent a survey to 2000 First Nation, Inuit and Métis students enrolled in post-secondary programs across Canada. We wanted their insight and perspective on how the Calls to Action (Calls) released by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in 2015 had affected their educational experience. All of the survey recipients had received scholarships and bursaries from Indspire between 2015 and 2018. Indspire received responses from 290 of the students canvassed, a statistically valid response rate of 15%¹.

What Indigenous Students Had to Say

Students told Indspire that there is a need to align funding decisions tied to scholarship and bursary programs, and those of their home communities with timelines and processes of post-secondary institutions. They feel that a large part of their financial needs go unmet and they require funding that helps with housing, food and childcare. They said this would help them deal with the impacts of not having their community, family and cultural supports close at hand, as some students travel from fly-in communities and geographically distant places.

Students said post-secondary institutions needed to incorporate Indigenous content in program and course work requirements and have Indigenous role models at the front of the classroom. Many said post-secondary institutions needed to provide mandatory Indigenous history training for all employees and instructional staff. Students also called for an increase in Indigenous teaching and mentorship resources to support them throughout their educational journey.

Student respondents shared some of their positive experiences in post-secondary spaces. They noted the value of having access to Indigenous student services and spaces on campus that provide them with a sense of community and support. They repeatedly said this gave them strength and a desire to become a role model and mentor to other Indigenous students. They also saw a need for Indigenous narratives in mental health, counselling and law programs.

Our hope in releasing this summary of the Indigenous Post-Secondary Student Experience Survey is to show policy makers, funders and post-secondary institutions that Indigenous students are conscious of walking in two worlds. They want a post-secondary experience that honours and responds to the needs of the Indigenous world they live in. They also believe the TRC's Calls to Action are a critical road map for

¹¹ Demographic of 290 respondents – 69% First Nations, 26% Métis and 4% Inuit. 75% identified as female and 25% identified as male.

ensuring the realities of Indigenous history are included in the programs and course work of which they form a part.

Educational Funding

Students told Inspire there was a general lack of financial resources for Indigenous post-secondary education and on-campus services for Indigenous students. They pointed to a number of reasons for the shortfall. For some, it started with a conflict between deadlines for applications, a conflict that crippled their ability to successfully enter university and complete their studies.

For myself, I received my acceptance into my program at... in August of 2017 but the deadline to apply for funding from my band was in June 2017. Because I did not want to lose my spot, I took out a student loan to attend my program. Due to health and financial problems I ended up withdrawing from university in January 2018 to return to work.

In other cases, students said there appeared to be differences in the resources for departments offering Indigenous Services at the college and university level. Again, this marred their experience as an Indigenous learner.

My experience has been very positive at the university level, however when I attended college the year before and my experience was very poor, and I felt the Aboriginal Department was way underfunded.

Most significantly, Indigenous students identified a critical need for funding that looks in a holistic way at the needs of Indigenous students. Inspire heard from students who were homeless, struggling to feed and clothe themselves while still attending classes. We heard from students who were parents but did not have family and friends to help them with childcare or the financial resources to purchase child care. As a result, they went to class with their child, because that was the only option they had.

There was also a call for base funding for students.

PLEASE, PLEASE, PLEASE increase PSSSP (Post-Secondary Scholarship Subsidy Programs) funding and make a minimum floor of per-student funding possible!

Indigenous students clearly said funding played a critical role in the success of their post-secondary experience. If the TRC's Calls are to be fulfilled in post-secondary spaces, it is important to increase funding for both Indigenous students and Indigenous services at post-secondary institutions. Students said both play a critical role in their ability to be ready to learn and succeed in their programs.

Culture, Identity and Belonging

If there is one overarching theme in the Calls, it is the need to make Indigenous culture, identity and belonging part of the healing journey to reconciliation. Together, these three things offer a framework, a source of strength and protection for Indigenous students. In their core, students feel it is important to know their culture, speak their language and have access to elders, cultural practices and knowledge specific to their people. There is a hunger to know who they are and claim the language and ceremony and practices that are part of their people, their communities and they want to reclaim for themselves and their families.

They also want to belong, not only to their families, people and their communities but to the post-secondary spaces they enter. Indigenous students want to find balance by feeling equally comfortable and welcome as they walk in two worlds. Many do not see that post-secondary institutions have taken the time to create settings where Indigenous students see themselves, their history and their culture incorporated into courses, systems, processes and supports.

There must be safe spaces for indigenous students to partake in spiritual and cultural practices - it is unacceptable, for example, that in my Indigenous spirituality classes, the professor was not allowed to smudge in the classroom (of course we broke this rule).

Students who attended Indigenous post-secondary settings spoke more positively about their experience than those at non-Indigenous post-secondary institutions. An important source of their reflections came from having Indigenous peers and from having their culture treated as a priority rather than an accommodation.

I loved my experience in a First Nations run school, being able to see Indigenous culture everywhere around the school and be surrounded by other Indigenous people and not confined to a designated room or "house" like most schools was amazing.

Indigenous students also talked about the pain of being in a post-secondary institution that did not value their culture, identity and belonging. Many students felt their needs were marginalized, and some felt they were unwelcome and alone. The inaccurate reflections of their culture and their people often place students in a position of having to address the misinformation and course content presented by non-Indigenous staff.

That it is not only about our history that is important to be represented. But we NEED to see faculty that represents us. In 2018 we do not need non-Indigenous peoples speaking about us. Make space, move over. In my field of study, it was very hard to describe how not only are we still here but everything we do in our programs is through a western lens. That there are indigenous ways of reaching decisions, creation of policy etc. It never gets recognized in my program.

Professional Development for Post-Secondary Staff

Students said post-secondary instructors and professors need to be active participants in the reconciliation journey and most importantly, be culturally respectful when they work with Indigenous students. They said they felt devalued when their professors and instructors lacked a knowledge of the history of Indigenous peoples. The impacts are not limited to students. Respondents also felt it placed an undue pressure on Indigenous staff who have to take on extra responsibilities when professors and instructors teach content they do not have the required background and skill to teach. Students talked of being triggered emotionally by teachers who lacked the skills or knowledge to sensitively work through difficult points in Indigenous history.

Courses..... specifically [on] intergenerational trauma and history of colonialism should be made mandatory in every program to educate everyone and attempt to decrease ignorance leading to racism.

A good deal of professors and staff are completely ignorant of basic Indigenous principles like the treaties, history and human rights. There needs to be more educational for educators. Indigenous staff at these institutions are stretched with emotional labour to do this education and it takes from our capacity to perform our normal duties. It's seen as an extra or add-on thing or a box to be checked.

Indigenous Content

Students were clear. The lack or quality of Indigenous content was a significant problem in their post-secondary experience.

People I know have been caught in situations where they have been discriminated against by professors or have been given the responsibility of being the "Indigenous point of view" in course content.

The lack of Indigenous course content also limited the professional development of Indigenous students. In the case of programs in social work, nursing, medicine and law, course content did not include text books, Indigenous literature and research on the impacts that colonialism, the Indian Residential School system and intergenerational trauma have on the physical and mental health of Indigenous people. There was a need for content that gave context to the realities of working with and for Indigenous people and communities. Students noted an outdated western world view dominates their course texts and content.

Much of what I learned about Aboriginal mental health realities and counselling treatment approaches were in text books and empirical research written not from an Aboriginal perspective.

Some students said Indigenous content was inconsistent within the same post-secondary setting.

The Indigenous content was relevant in the small program I took my studies through but on the main campus it was non-existent.

Racism, Isolation and Marginalization

While the majority of Indigenous students did not encounter these problems in the post-secondary world, 45% said they had to contend with racism, a sense of isolation and a marginalization of Indigenous student knowledge. This reinforces the need for training, content, and funding that takes on the misinformation that fuels these underlying stereotypes.

Indigenous students need champions/allies who are knowledgeable and informed, both within their classrooms and within the university system. They need these champions and allies to stand with them when Indigenous students are faced with barriers to inclusion. Where it exists, post-secondary institutions must address the racism that creates a sense of isolation and marginalization for Indigenous students.

I found a lot of my peers were resentful towards Indigenous students because they felt the Indigenous students were getting special treatment. As a result, the Indigenous students were not as welcome.

Another undercurrent runs through the survey responses. Indigenous students described “in class” as the place where they felt least comfortable.

That it's not easy. My experience has been okay. But there is always an undercurrent of racism.... I'm just another statistical injun who tried but didn't quite make it or when I pass I'm a great example to my brood... I am a human being, original and unique, just like everybody else. Implement a change in the general public's perception of the 'indian'.

There aren't always safe spaces within the university, other than Indigenous Student Centres, that are welcoming to Indigenous students. Racism and violence still very much exist so it is sometimes hard to move throughout the University and not experience those things, from professors, other students, administration etc.

Sadly, students reported they also experienced racism, isolation and marginalization in the broader community, beyond their post-secondary environment.

I've heard about racism in the town my school was in, so I was not too confident when I was in the grocery store or the mall. I didn't want to confront anyone who might be racist and confront me, so I kept my distance from people [and avoided] being out for long periods of time.

When students feel unsafe in post-secondary spaces, institutions must take on an immediate leadership role and take steps to address these situations so that students see they are a valued and welcome part of the post-secondary environment. The

imperative of our collective ongoing effort in this regard will be proof that healing and reconciliation are real, and that the education system is part of that healing relationship.

Emotional Labour

Many Indigenous students are caught up in a new phase of truth telling. They are in many ways, cultural elders in training. It is important to take time to consider what students call the “emotional labour” this involves.

Many students spoke about seeking out their own connections to culture, identity and belonging. They also felt a pressure to acknowledge they had a role in implementing the TRC’s Calls to Action. In some cases, students felt they did not have an option to participate, it was something that the post-secondary space expected of them.

Listen to them and try to implement them in a meaningful way—it is not up to Indigenous people to implement the Calls to Action—but include our voices and representation if we want to be part of it.

Students felt that post-secondary institutions expected them to bear some responsibility for the transformation of the post-secondary system, as part of healing and reconciliation.

There were not proper steps of considerations in bringing Truth and Reconciliation to the students, a full course load is a challenge and adding more stress and pain with no real support system at proper times was a struggle.

This is not meant to diminish the importance of the Calls to Action, a fact that one student powerfully noted.

We live in the 21st Century and the Truth and Reconciliation is a must, especially for non-indigenous people. There needs to be an understanding of why Our First People are struggling in school, work and everyday life. We need a positive, loving, respectful relationship with all people in Canada.

Students were very clear the Calls are just that, the need for change through action. They repeatedly referenced the importance of reconciliation and the need for post-secondary settings to take a greater role in their implementation.

Best Practices

A number of initiatives on post-secondary education have been launched since the Calls to Action by the TRC. But it is hard to be definitive about the Calls’ impact, as there is no baseline and this is Indspire’s first survey specifically on the topic.

It is starting to evolve and many of the faculty are putting in the effort to recognize that we are on native land. We also are being taught the differences in culture between each nation and how it impacts health and education. There is a shift upwards and we are being recognized as a people and not as a minority but as the first people of this land.

Students reported that progress in Indigenous post-secondary institutions and programs appears to be further along than in non-Indigenous ones. But non-Indigenous post-secondary institutions are having an impact as well.

.... I have been welcomed and respectfully educated by my college. I have never felt discriminated while [attending] my college. We have an Indigenous Resource Centre that welcomes all. This place provided me with knowledge about my people as well as support as my heart broke learning about my people and the suffering..... I have struggled academically, financially and personally and they have been there to guide me the entire time.

Students felt there is still work to be done. Some recommended it be focused on the disciplines cited in the Calls to Action, such as law and medicine, where students felt there had been no significant movement.

There has been a lot of work done, but that work is fractional [among institutions]. There are lots of areas that need to focus on i.e. areas of education where First Nation students have typically been omitted from, law and medicine etc.

Students said they wanted to see a focus on Calls that are close to their hearts. They want more language programs to be offered because they themselves have benefited from them in their post-secondary settings.

The TRC's Calls to Action ask for implementation of Indigenous languages at post-secondary education, and while it is offered in the school I am attending, I feel that Indigenous students are not obtaining enough language skills other than minor exposure to the sounds of the language. The language is often times taught in a manner that is based on memorization versus immersive style. As a result, I believe that it limits the learning capacity of Indigenous student's ability to learn more of the language.

Mentorship and Support Needs

Indigenous students need support, guidance and role-models to support them as they pursue their dreams in post-secondary spaces. They said they feel the absence of Indigenous educators in the classroom.

WE NEED MORE INDIGENOUS ROLE MODELS IN THE CLASSROOM. We are not being set up for success if we don't see ourselves being reflected in these positions of success and respect.

Students with mentors said it encouraged them to do the same for other Indigenous students.

I had such a wonderful experience and hope to get my post bac. I am also helping my son get his education through...College. I hope to be a role model for many more Indigenous people to work for their dreams through education.

In addition to role-models and mentors, all students need proactive support and outreach to help them navigate their route to academic success, health and well-being. Indigenous students said Indigenous staff at Indigenous student service programs were overworked and this has a very real impact when they are navigating areas of need and struggle.

Better experienced staff in the Aboriginal Centre Programs that are more hands on and check on their students. With the high rate of drop outs and suicides. Every Indigenous student should be given an aboriginal advisor that checks in. It's not culturally historic for aboriginal men to seek out help that's why follow through by advisors a must. The [negative] experience at the [Indigenous student centre at my school] is one of the main reasons I felt unsupported and dropped out after my first year.

Indspire's Recommendations

Our recommendations come from the hope and the belief that we can do better to realize the Calls to Action and support Indigenous students in post-secondary spaces. Indigenous students want the post-secondary world to do the work needed so that Indigenous students will increasingly see these spaces as their spaces.

Every support and initiative are valuable resources, but there is still lots of work to be done and I look forward to a day when Educational Institutions are filled with Indigenous people and perspectives in such a way that their input is a recognized and valued asset to the academy.

It is also the case that to do the work required, institutions must be adequately funded to do so.

Rather than map out a listing of key recommendations tied to each of the areas above, Indspire synthesized the feedback it received from Indigenous post-secondary students into three critical recommendations.

1. More funding for Indigenous students and Indigenous campus resources:
 - a) Indspire recommends that increased and sustainable funding be provided for the staffing and provision of Indigenous student services, so the post-secondary educational system can benefit all Indigenous students.
 - b) Indspire recommends that increased and sustainable funding for Indigenous students be committed by the Government of Canada in Budget 2019.

To expand access and foster greater achievement in post-secondary education and equip Indigenous people to succeed in the workforce, investments in Indigenous-led organizations must continue and expand over the longer-term. For more than 20 years, Indigenous students have said Indspire is a beacon of hope for students, helping them realize their educational goals. Indspire will continue to be a leader in providing an educational, cultural, and socio-economic support system for Indigenous learners.

2. The ongoing monitoring and evaluation of implementation of the TRC Calls to Action in post-secondary spaces.

The Calls continually refer to the need for monitoring, evaluation and annual reporting. Indspire sees the need for an ongoing conversation about such monitoring, evaluation and reporting of the experience of Indigenous students in post-secondary settings. Students want their language programs expanded, funding that meets their needs and educators that are trained and informed about Indigenous realities. They want to see change. Someone must be actively engaged with students and post-secondary institutions, asking the questions that will support ongoing evaluation and reporting of that change.

3. The strengthening of Indigenous Culture, Identity and Belonging through Mentorship on campus and beyond.

While more funding is required if Indigenous students are to thrive and be successful in post-secondary settings, the next priority is to meet the cultural needs that strengthen their sense of self and support their community connections during their time in a post-secondary space.