

Indigenizing the academy

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What some universities are doing to weave indigenous peoples, cultures and knowledge into the fabric of their campuses.

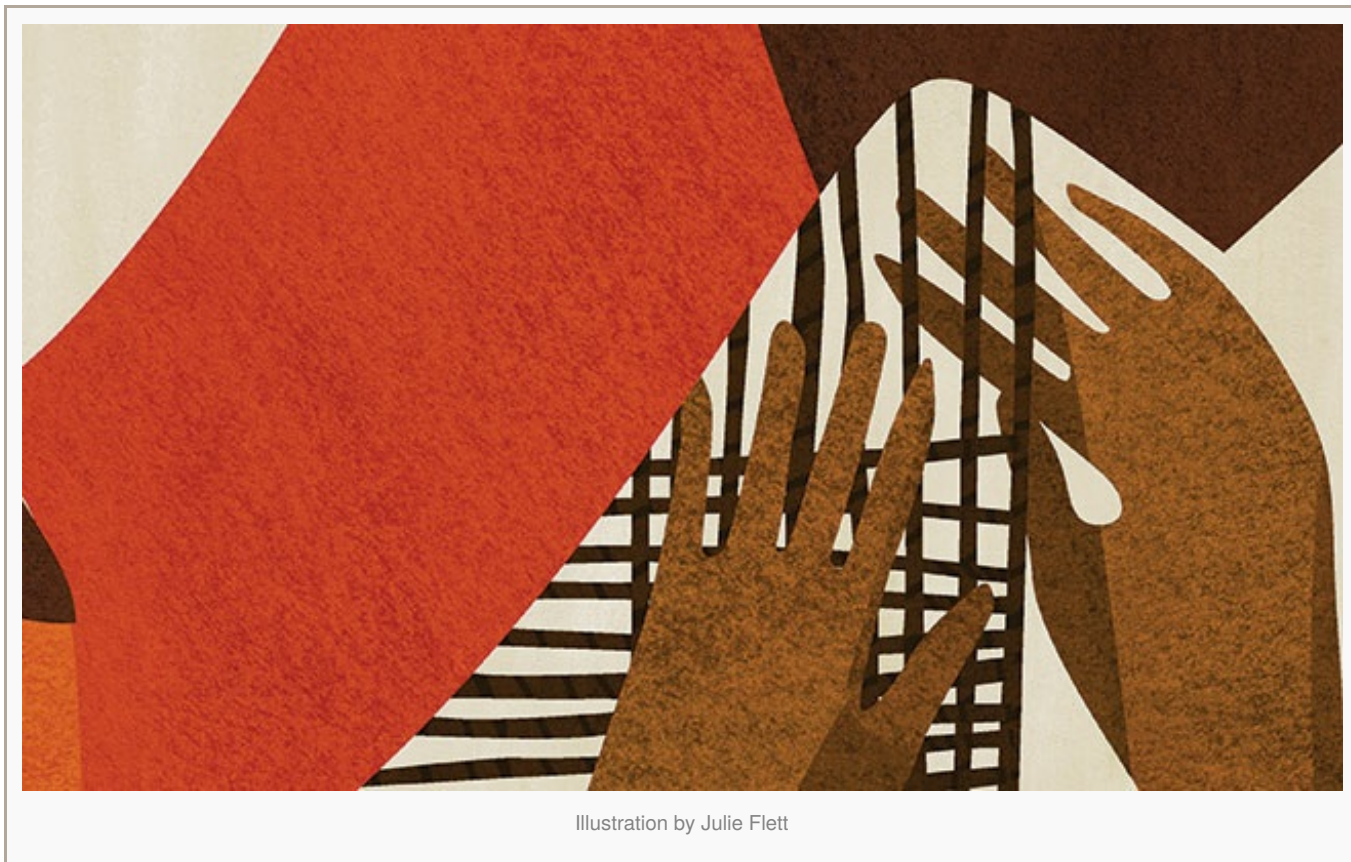


Illustration by Julie Flett

It was September 1987 and Blaine Favel was sitting in a lecture hall at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ont., a long way from his home on Poundmaker Cree Nation, northwest of Saskatoon. Already he had an advocate’s leanings honed from growing up in a family of chiefs and protected by the thick skin he’d developed facing racial intolerance in Saskatchewan. So when his professor opened her lecture on property law with the pronouncement that all land in Canada belonged to the Queen, Mr. Favel’s hand shot up. “I asked her, ‘How did the Queen get the land?’”

The question left the rookie professor so flustered that she cancelled the rest of the class to reconsider her curriculum. Some students hissed at Mr. Favel, but he had made his point. When class resumed the next day, the professor began by teaching about aboriginal title.

Mr. Favel, who went on to leadership roles in indigenous governance, business and the federal government, told this story to a roomful of university presidents and administrators last November at the University of Saskatchewan, where he is now chancellor. They were there to discuss the final report of Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission and how universities could address the 94 calls to action that came with it. Although Mr. Favel credited his former law prof for ultimately doing the right thing, he points to the incident as an illustration of how damaging historical fictions and obfuscations have cycled through generations of students in this country. This version of history “was designed to not tell our story,” Mr. Favel says. “It was designed to deprive us of our lands. It was designed to oppress us as people and it was just racist.”

The TRC has made it clear that universities have a fundamental role to play in getting it right with the next

generation of Canadians. But well before the TRC released its findings last June, some universities had already recognized a need to put indigenous cultures, histories, languages and knowledge on a new footing within the academy. Through a process known as indigenization, many universities are making a conscious effort to bring indigenous people, as well as their philosophies and cultures, into strategic plans, governance roles, academics, research and recruitment. (Much of this intent is reflected in Universities Canada's 13 principles of indigenous education, which, among other things, aim to encourage intercultural dialogue and "the cohabitation of Western science and indigenous knowledge on campuses.")

Indigenizing the academy is "really about transforming the university at its very core," says Shauneen Pete, an associate professor of education and executive lead for indigenization at the University of Regina. "It's about recentring indigenous world views as a starting point for that transformation and it's a process of institutional decolonization."

The U of R's 2015-2020 strategic plan is called *peyak aski kikawinaw*, Cree for "We are one with Mother Earth." It's a fitting title for a university situated on Treaty 4 and 6 land and where indigenous students make up 13 percent of the student body, a hike of more than 50 percent since 2009. Indigenization is one of two themes in the plan (the other is sustainability), in which the administration spells out its aim to make U of R's campus "the most indigenized in Canada." To that end, the university has already begun to integrate the process into priority areas such as improved student success, research impact and community development. Vianne Timmons, U of R's president since 2008 and a long-time promoter and defender of Aboriginal education, is a member of the Bras d'Or Mi'kmaq First Nation in Nova Scotia.

U of R, like most universities where indigenization is underway, has struck an indigenous advisory council made up of indigenous people from inside and outside the institution. Dr. Pete, originally from the Plains Cree Little Pine First Nation more than four hours northwest of Regina, says she's also been "shoulder-tapping" indigenous people she knows to consider sitting on the university's senate or board of governors.

In Ontario last year, Brock University appointed Cree filmmaker Shirley Cheechoo as its chancellor while Algoma University appointed alumnus Shirley Horn, from the Missanabie Cree First Nation, to the same position. These appointments play no small part in the institutions' reconciliation efforts – as children, both women attended Shingwauk Indian Residential School, located on what is now Algoma's campus.

There's a small but growing number of indigenous people moving into executive positions, too. Along with Dr. Timmons at U of R, they include Michael DeGagne, a member of Northwest Angle 37 First Nation in Ontario, who was installed as president of Nipissing University in 2013; Angelique EagleWoman, a member of the Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate tribe in North Dakota, who was recently named dean at Lakehead University's Bora Laskin Faculty of Law; and Anishinaabe broadcaster and artist Wab Kinew, who was named associate vice-president of indigenous affairs at the University of Winnipeg in 2014 (he took a leave of absence earlier this year to run as the NDP candidate in Manitoba's provincial election on April 19).

Probably the most complex, and contentious, aspect of indigenization is what it means for curricula, pedagogy and research. The University of Winnipeg – in a city with the country's largest urban aboriginal population (at 13 percent and growing) – has drawn both praise and criticism for requiring all undergraduates as of next fall to take at least three credit hours from an approved list of courses focusing on indigenous content. It is an approach students at several other universities are pushing for, too.

Speaking against the move, alumnus Brent Venton wrote in the *Winnipeg Free Press* last December that it "places a barrier of mandatory knowledge, as chosen by social and political priorities, between students and their futures" and undermines academic freedom. Days later, U of Winnipeg President Annette Trimbee and Mr. Kinew fired back in the *Globe and Mail*, stating that the requirement in fact gives students "a competitive advantage" and that "every university in the country should mandate indigenous content."

A course called Indigenous Ways of Knowing, part of U of Winnipeg's urban and inner-city studies program, supports their case. Taught by a local indigenous educator and elder, it is intended to give students a better understanding of how indigenous people in the Winnipeg area, where graduates are likely to work and live, may view the world and their place in it. Students learn about indigenous history, ceremony and may participate in traditional practices, such as visiting a sweat lodge. Kevin Settee, an Anishinaabe student who pushed for the mandatory requirement at

U of Winnipeg, took the course. He says its use of experiential learning, talking circles and personalized community-based research "really made me comfortable about being in a university." Mr. Settee, who is currently vice-president of external affairs for the university's student association, ran in Winnipeg's 2014 school trustee elections and has plans to pursue graduate work.

Lakehead University is setting things up a little differently, requiring students to take at least one semester course with 50 percent indigenous course content, or about 18 hours of class time. It's expected that this content could be folded into courses students would be taking anyway, says Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux, Lakehead's vice-provost of aboriginal initiatives. One way to do it would be to include indigenous case studies in course readings and assignments. "It doesn't work when people feel they're being coerced into learning about something they don't think is important," she says. "It has to be tied to the program it's actually being incorporated into. You don't want to be telling engineers they have to learn about the fur trade. That would be ridiculous."

What prospective engineers do need to learn, however, is how understanding and acknowledging indigenous land interests could benefit their future professional projects. As an example, Dr. Wesley-Esquimaux points to current negotiations around the Ring of Fire, a massive chromite mining development in Northern Ontario that would impact nine First Nations. "If the Ring of Fire takes off, that's who you'll be talking to. You should know something about it," she says.

Located squarely in Stó:l-o territory, the University of the Fraser Valley has been engaged in indigenization for more than a decade. As part of the project, faculty members seeking approval for a new course are encouraged to consider how to incorporate indigenous content. Shirley Hardman, the university's senior advisor on indigenous affairs, says that when the policy was first brought in several years ago, some faculty would answer "not applicable" to that section of the form. Then one day, the chair of the steering committee on undergraduate education said, "Let's send it back," asking the faculty member to explain their response. It was "a bold move" that got people thinking, Ms. Hardman recalls.

Indigenization has also had its share of skeptics – and their criticism doesn't just target mandatory course requirements. Some non-indigenous and indigenous faculty alike have voiced concerns that it may create new forms of injustice while trying to fix old ones. Andrea Bear Nicholas, professor emeritus of native studies at St. Thomas University, says teaching a version of history that better represents indigenous experience is always a good thing and that, done right, weaving indigenous cultures into the fabric of the institution makes sense – but really only at universities already serving significant numbers of indigenous students. She worries the "rush" to indigenize risks misrepresenting traditions that have been endangered by a dominant culture, and that it may draw experts and elders away from their communities where they are needed.

If universities truly want to help indigenous peoples, she says, they should be making more of an effort to partner with indigenous communities that need help preserving their languages. By equipping indigenous-language speakers with effective teaching techniques, they'd be giving a hand to the cause of cultural retention. (According to Universities Canada, more than 30 indigenous languages are currently taught at Canadian universities.) "The indigenization that goes ahead needs to be not something that builds the university as some sort of fount of aboriginal knowledge," says Dr. Bear Nicholas, "but some sort of project that helps First Nations maintain what has been destroyed by the universities and education systems."

Proponents of indigenization say it is important for the work to be led by indigenous people, supported by non-

indigenous allies, with everyone sharing and learning from the exchange. Building general awareness among everyone in the university community, and providing plenty of in-service training and pedagogical supports for educators (who may be nervous about committing a cultural faux pas) is key, says Ms. Hardman at UFV. “We can’t ask people to teach things that they don’t know anything about,” she says. U of R’s Dr. Pete, who envisions a more human and engaging environment for everyone through indigenization, has run dozens of such training sessions and distributes a tip sheet called “100 Ways to Indigenize and Decolonize Academic Programs and Courses.” It contains such suggestions as leading more off-campus and land-based classwork, and thinking about ways to counter “the dominant narratives about our collective histories, contemporary aspirations and challenges.”

Universities are increasingly following this model when it comes to indigenous community research, approaching it in terms of “nothing about us without us” (a popular buzz phrase at the November meeting of university presidents). A five-year, \$7.4-million collaboration between Memorial University and the Nunatsiavut government exemplifies this orientation towards projects that meet indigenous community needs and are done in partnership. Called Tradition and Transition Among the Labrador Inuit, it will bring together more than 30 academics and Inuit tradition-bearers, along with their respective knowledge practices, to understand the keys for sustaining and revitalizing Inuit culture.

Recruitment and improved retention of indigenous students remains an ongoing priority at universities, and at some institutions this is where indigenization efforts have been concentrated. The administration at Dalhousie University is keen to meet the TRC’s various calls to action – they’ve recently introduced an elders-in-residence program and are planning a forthcoming forum – though university president Richard Florizone says his first priority is Aboriginal student outcomes. “We need our Aboriginal students to be more successful,” he says.

That means looking at how Aboriginal students can be better supported when they arrive at university. Compared to universities in Western Canada, indigenous student numbers are relatively low in Atlantic Canada. At Dalhousie, they make up two percent of the university’s enrolment, though that number is starting to grow. A 2009 report analysing retention rates in Atlantic Canada showed only a six percent graduation rate among indigenous students at Nova Scotia postsecondary institutions. Discrimination, racism, a lack of financial supports as well as a sense of denigration of their identity were cited as contributing factors.

Ensuring that more indigenous students make it into university, finish their studies and are then encouraged to go on to graduate work means there will be more indigenous faculty to hire – a goal of many universities. The University of Guelph, for example, announced in March that it will hire five tenure-track Aboriginal faculty members within the next 18 months. The university will also create five new graduate awards for Aboriginal scholars – worth \$30,000 a year for PhD students and \$15,000 a year for master’s students – and a new \$45,000 postdoctoral award for an Aboriginal researcher.

While faculty recruitment efforts are picking up pace, several people interviewed for this story noted that if universities want to quickly fill staffing gaps in niche areas such as at-risk indigenous languages, they may need to re-evaluate their hiring criteria, specifically those regarding degreed credentials. Those with deep knowledge of indigenous arts and culture may not have doctorates, says Ms. Hardman, but may have community recognition. “Sometimes [that’s] harder to come by than a PhD.”

Making space for indigenous knowledge systems and practices in the academy may also mean making adjustments to the scholarship that qualifies as valid for promotion and credentialing purposes. “There are other ways in which knowledge can be circulated and disseminated,” says Peter Stoicheff, who has made indigenization part of his mandate as president of the University of Saskatchewan. “We have to figure out how to be more flexible in that regard.”

In 2010, PhD candidate Alfred Metallic became the first student at York University to both write and defend his environmental studies thesis entirely in an indigenous language – Mi’gmaq, his first tongue, which he says was integral to the ideas he wanted to convey. York U officials made special arrangements so the student could defend his thesis before a gathering of indigenous and non-indigenous academics and members of his community in

Listuguj, Que.

In the end, indigenization is not a series of tickable boxes, but a process moving at a different pace in each community that has taken it up. Some universities are further ahead than others and that's OK, say proponents. "There's no instruction book on how to do this," says Ms. Hardman. "We start where we are. We start with what we have. And you can't go along and indigenize without that community support and participation. Once you start to have that, I think it can grow."

Indigenizing the academy can take many forms

Campus spaces and symbols

- *Buildings inspired by indigenous cultures are popping up on many campuses, including the Gordon Oakes Red Bear Student Centre at the University of Saskatchewan designed by Aboriginal architect Douglas Cardinal (the main campus of the First Nations University of Canada was also designed by Mr. Cardinal); the University of British Columbia's Longhouse, a prize-winning building that reflects the traditions of the Northwest Coast; the University of Victoria's First Peoples House, which features a ceremonial hall and elders' rooms; and the Pavillon des Premiers-Peuples at the Val d'Or campus of Université du Québec en Abitibi-Témiscamingue (UQAT), a student space featuring Aboriginal architecture, a tipi and art by Huron-Wendat artist Ludovic Boney. Laurentian University recently broke ground on a new Indigenous Sharing and Learning Centre, and the University of Alberta has proposed a centre for Aboriginal students called The Maskwa House of Learning.*
- *Campus gardens with traditional plants highlight the importance of nature to indigenous knowledge and culture. Examples include the White Pine Garden at Brock University, the University of New Brunswick's medicine wheel garden, the Indigenous Food and Medicine Garden at Western University, and the Native Medicine Garden at the University of Toronto.*
- *Powwows are a key part of ceremonial and cultural life at many Canadian universities. The University of Regina even offers a course on the basics of powwow.*
- *St. Thomas University released a logo specifically for First Nations students and alumni to better represent the dual identities held by indigenous alumni. Similarly, UQAT has a First Peoples logo, which represents the institution's ties to local indigenous communities and its commitment to intercultural learning.*
- *In 2010, UBC's Okanagan campus erected street signs on campus roads in both English and Nsyilxcen, the language of the Okanagan's original people.*

Academic programs and resources

- *In January, Cape Breton University began offering Learning from Knowledge Keepers of Mi'kma'ki, an introduction to the Mi'kmaq band and the university's first open-access course.*
- *Université du Québec à Chicoutimi has a certificate program in indigenous technolinguistics which prepares students for work in preserving, promoting and revitalizing Aboriginal languages and cultures.*

- *University of Manitoba has created a new Master of Social Work based in an Indigenous Knowledges program that will begin accepting students this fall.*
- *Kwantlen Polytechnic University and the Tsawwassen First Nation jointly run Farm School, a 20-acre working farm on the Nation's territory. The school's 10-month program offers various classes, including one on indigenous food systems.*
- *In 2015, Université de Montréal's anthropology department began offering an interdisciplinary Aboriginal studies program. Meanwhile, Université du Québec à Montréal will begin offering undergraduates in several disciplines an 18-credit specialization in Aboriginal studies starting this fall.*
- *Also in the fall, the first cohort of students will begin Trent University's new BEd program in Aboriginal education.*
- *Several faculties of law offer programs on Aboriginal law and at least two, at the University of British Columbia and Lakehead University, have mandatory courses on indigenous legal issues.*
- *Most universities in Canada offer a range of resources – financial, academic and otherwise – for Aboriginal students. The Council of Ontario Universities has developed an online portal, Future Further, which lists supports and programs available at Ontario institutions. As well, Universities Canada released a set of principles outlining how universities can close the education gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, and support indigenous knowledge on campus.*

Research chairs and projects

- *Jeff Reading of Simon Fraser University holds the inaugural First Nations Health Authority Chair in Heart Health and Wellness at St. Paul's Hospital, which places a "holistic" focus on Aboriginal peoples' cardiac health; Keith G. Brown, Cape Breton University's vice-president of international and Aboriginal affairs, holds CBU's Purdy Crawford Chair in Aboriginal Business Studies; author and artist Gerald McMaster holds the Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Visual Culture and Curatorial Practice at OCAD University; and Fulbright Canada named Vancouver Island University home to a new Visiting Research Chair in Aboriginal Studies to focus on reconciliation and Aboriginal education.*
- *Multi-partner research projects include the First Peoples-First Person Indigenous Hub, which connects community organizations, indigenous peoples and researchers from University of Saskatchewan, Dalhousie University, Lakehead University and University of Alberta to work on wellness and healing practices among indigenous populations; the Nunatsiavut Government and Memorial University are collaborating on a project that will merge academic and traditional research for the preservation and revitalization of Labrador Inuit culture and language; and Trinity Western University opened the Institute of Indigenous Issues and Perspectives, focusing on Canada, Australia and New Zealand.*

- *Since 2001, DIALOG (Réseau de recherche et de connaissances relatives aux peuples autochtones) has provided a knowledge-sharing network for French-language researchers working on Aboriginal issues. Housed within the Institut national de la recherche scientifique, the network connects more than 150 people from 19 institutions worldwide. Also based in Quebec is CIÉRA (Centre interuniversitaire d'études et de recherches autochtones), a multi-disciplinary, interuniversity research centre based at Université Laval.*
- *The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council launched a statement of principles, a revised definition of Aboriginal research, and merit review guidelines to contribute to the development of researchers who are knowledgeable and considerate of Aboriginal perspectives. – Natalie Samson*