


Harvard program aims to equip Indigenous communities with keys to financial success

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This week, Harvard Business School launched its first annual Leading People and Investing to Build Sustainable Communities program, which set out to equip professionals from First Nations and native-American communities with new ideas for managing their businesses and resources.

Over 60 Indigenous people from across Canada and the United States attended the four-day course, in which professors taught investment practices and governance strategies, and provided opportunities for participants to put their heads together to solve issues in their communities back home.

“It’s a great way to collaborate with their peers ... And together through this collaboration there’s ways to work together, there’s ways to share best practices,” said Meagan Hill, who is Mohawk and a member of the Six Nations, near Hamilton.

Ms. Hill, an alumna of Harvard Business School, worked with Thomas Nicholas, a professor of business administration, and managing director of executive education, David Ager to create the curriculum, along with the Aboriginal Financial Officers Association of Canada and the National Congress of American Indians.

The curriculum focused on governance and investment practices to help a community manage its funds for generations to come. Prof. Nicholas observed that participants were not interested in short-term goals, but instead wanted to know how their choices will affect their communities seven generations in the future.

Andrew Leach, of the St’at’imc Nation and the Tsleil-Waututh Nation’s chief administrative officer, was a participant.

He said programs such as this are especially important now as communities in Canada and the United States are shifting from managing poverty to managing wealth. “First Nations are coming across tremendous opportunity right now. And [there’s a gap in] the capacity to fulfill that opportunity,” he said. “What we are in is a catch-up mode ... and programs like this come a long way in helping to build that capacity.”

Professor of native studies Patricia Doyle-Bedwell at Dalhousie University said that Indigenous communities are seeing a necessary shift in attitudes related to business.

“We haven’t thought in a business sense in a long time,” she said. “We’re now seeing people who are thinking about business and investment and jobs and how we can create a more sustainable community.”

Ms. Hill said she started the project to share Harvard’s community of like-minded, diverse and driven students and staff with other Indigenous people.

She is a first-generation college student and was the only First Nations graduate of her 2016 class, which she says might be because in “First Nations and Native American communities ... there might just not be an understanding that Harvard is possible.”

“There was such a sense of pride and excitement that I had been successful enough to get accepted to a place like Harvard,” she said. “Ever since that happened, I’ve constantly been thinking of ways to share that excitement and experience with other people.”

For Mr. Leach, the program has also given him the opportunity to network and create new partnerships with other Indigenous leaders. “We’re already swapping stories about how we might be able to help each other out in some of

our own cases,” he said, adding that the class plans to create a social-media group so they can bounce ideas and issues off of each other after they leave Harvard.

Wanda Brascoupé Peters, another participant, is the executive director of The Circle on Philanthropy and Aboriginal Peoples in Canada. She has found it motivating to be surrounded by individuals who feel responsible to learn as much as they can from the program for the benefit of their people.

“I am in a room of 60 Indigenous people and it is humbling,” she said. “They are brilliant, they are feisty, they push, they are willing to be uncomfortable. Not just for themselves, but for the benefit of our communities across Turtle Island.”

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