

# The limits of multicultural universities for Indigenous peoples

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By Neale McDevitt

Multiculturalism is a huge part of the Canadian identity. We see it from coast to coast in the faces of our fellow citizens, a huge mosaic – not a melting pot, we proudly point out – of diversity from around the world.

In 1971, under the leadership of Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau, we became the first country in the world to officially adopt a multiculturalism policy. By so doing, Canada affirmed the value and dignity of all Canadian citizens. This policy became law in 1988, when Prime Minister Brian Mulroney enacted the Canadian Multiculturalism Act, ensuring, among other things, that every Canadian receives equal treatment by the government regardless of their racial or ethnic origins, their language, or their religious affiliation.

Why is the great Canadian mosaic better at including people from certain groups compared to others? Is it because our multiculturalism policies focus on integrating European cultures and newcomers into Canadian society rather than in addressing the needs and aspirations of Indigenous peoples?



Political Science Professor, Philip Oxhorn.

These questions will be addressed by a panel of experts during the [Conference of the Americas on International Education \(CAIE\)](#) from Oct. 11 – 13, in Montreal. Organized by Political Science Professor [Philip Oxhorn](#), the panel will specifically look at the issue in the university context, with the goal of outlining ways to overcome the limits of multiculturalism for Indigenous peoples through their experience at universities.

“My own personal opinion – and this is probably controversial – is that [the challenges faced by Indigenous peoples in relation to Canadian society] have a lot to do with the relationship between the ‘settler community’ and the Indigenous population,” says Oxhorn. “I work a lot in Latin America where this issue is quite severe in terms of the consequences.”

“It has a lot to do with the relationship between European cultures and other cultures, in the sense that [the former] tends to erase or eradicate rather than include,” continues Oxhorn. “For eons it has been a policy of assimilation. If you are being assimilated, then you feel like you are being denied the basic respect that you would pay towards equals. After all, how would you feel if whatever value that your culture might bring to humanity – the beliefs, the norms, the practices – is rejected? At best, [these values] are seen as anachronistic and at worst, uncivilized.”

At universities, Indigenous students face any number of challenges. “Indigenous students are just as talented as

any others at McGill,” says Oxhorn. “But some may face the added burden of expectations – expectations from themselves, expectations from their community, expectations from the community that they are being inserted into. The weight of those expectations can be hard to bear.”

“And there is always the danger of tokenism,” continues Oxhorn. “Since it takes time to substantially increase the number of students from any under-represented group, there will be relatively very few Indigenous students initially. Many of these students might feel like they are the token representatives of the community, which is why it is important to set enrolment targets and advance toward meeting them in order to address this potential concern.”

While some universities have achieved a strong Indigenous presence, at others the lack of Indigenous presence extends beyond the student body to staff and faculty as well. This void creates another obstacle because “everyone needs role models, and including minority groups,” says Oxhorn. “People need to see success in the people they identify with. As well, everyone needs mentors who they can talk to when they have to work out their own problems.”

Oxhorn points out that McGill is addressing this issue, but there are no quick fixes. “There’s no doubt that McGill today is very much committed to welcoming more Indigenous people into the community, as students and faculty. The Provost’s Task Force on Indigenous Studies and Indigenous Education is a very serious, very proactive step in this regard,” he says. “But it takes time to renew academic staff.”

In the meantime, a university’s Indigenous faculty members face their own set of pressures. Because they are relatively few, they may end up being overburdened because the bulk of the mentorship responsibilities falls on their shoulders. “It’s an issue of fairness and equity,” says Oxhorn, “and it is important to look for alternatives to minimize such potential burdens.”

For the CAIE Conference Oxhorn will moderate a panel that includes; Ovide Mercredi, former National Chief, Assembly of First Nations; Dr. Ralph Nilson, President and Vice-Chancellor, Vancouver Island University; and Luis Urrieta, Professor of Cultural Studies in Education at the University of Texas at Austin.

Oxhorn assembled the panel with the intention of including as many different perspectives as possible, from the high-profile political leadership of Ovide Mercredi to the front-line experience of Professor Urrieta who, as an Indigenous Latin American, has faced and overcome many of these issues himself. “The whole point is to have a frank discussion of what works, what doesn’t work and what we still need to do going forward,” says Oxhorn.

“One of the things we appreciate about McGill’s panel is that it includes experts from outside the university,” says David Julien, Executive Director of the Inter-American Organization for Higher Education and the CAIE conference. “It brings a multi-sectoral, diverse component to the Conference which is quite exciting.”

When asked what could be done to make Indigenous people feel more welcome at universities and in society at large, Oxhorn pauses. “In a way, it boils down to respect,” he says. “My own work now focusses on reconciliation and what that means. One of the challenges with reconciliation is that it is a process and not an end. It is a process that involves respect.

“Earning respect of others is difficult enough,” he says, “but demonstrating that it actually exists is even more problematic – especially when you were dealing with populations that have a problematic relationship since the beginning of recorded history.”

Oxhorn believes that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and its recommendations has already put Canada ahead of most countries in this regard. He also applauds the current government’s commitment to try and implement those recommendations. “The discourse is the right one,” he says. “It is very integrative, welcoming and respectful. This is important to keep the momentum moving forward.”

But a lot more work must be done, including changing media bias so that there are more positive portrayals and stories of Indigenous people. Also, says Oxhorn, it is not good enough to simply include the input of Indigenous people in

public consultations. Their recommendations must also be acted upon in a way that has a tangible impact.

“When plans of a government agency or a business, a mining company for example, change after talking to Indigenous people, it is a sign of an equal relationship,” says Oxhorn. “You can’t predict what those changes will be, but the fact that plans or policies change means your voice has been heard and you have influence. There is no better sign of respect.”

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