

Reconciliation requires “actionable deeds” by universities, not just talk

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At a conference in Ottawa, academics, policymakers, students and community leaders addressed the role universities can play in reconciling Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

What role can and should universities play in reconciliation efforts between Canadian institutions and Indigenous communities? What’s working well and what needs to change? These questions were central to a two-day symposium of university administrators, students, policymakers and community organizers called [Converge 2017](#), hosted by Universities Canada in Ottawa last week.

Ry Moran, Killulark (Laura) Arngna’naaq, Sheila Cote-Meek and Robina Thomas discuss reconciliation during Converge 2017 in Ottawa.

The issue of reconciliation and responsibility were woven through the event, from opening remarks on Monday morning by Claudette Commanda, an Algonquin Anishinabe elder and knowledge keeper of the Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg First Nation, to the closing address by Governor General David Johnston on Tuesday afternoon. In between, participants heard from Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on how his government is working to “repair generations of a relationship of neglect”; and from keynote speaker [Roberta Jamieson](#), president and CEO of Inspire – the latter expounding on universities’ responsibility to support Indigenous communities, particularly in teaching and bolstering Indigenous languages, in offering supportive services and programs that affirm young peoples’ potential, and by “working in deeds” towards reconciliation in ways that don’t compete with Indigenous communities for funding.

But it was an afternoon session on Monday, February 6, moderated by Annette Trimbee, president of the University of Winnipeg, that really dove into the challenges to reconciliation – and some possible solutions.

Panellist Ry Moran, director of the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation at the University of Manitoba, voiced his concern that the term “reconciliation” is being treated as a buzzword or trend, with no real action behind it. In his work with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and now with the NCTR, he has witnessed how talk of reconciliation has stirred up hope for real, transformational change in the way Indigenous peoples are treated. Failing to follow that talk up with transformational action would amount to a betrayal. “Don’t play with this stuff. We’re dealing not with abstracts but real death, real rape, real families,” he told the room.

Robina Thomas, director of Indigenous academic and community engagement at the University of Victoria, identified several “actionable deeds” for universities to perform, such as developing required courses that provide students with the “knowledge of the imperial impact on Indigenous communities” and the “deep systemic violence” waged against them. She also advised university administrators to counter Indigenous under-representation in institutional decision-making. Dr. Thomas added that under-representation should also be addressed at all levels of the institution and in all disciplines, and that all universities should offer fully resourced spaces and services for Indigenous staff and students. “It’s more than a checklist,” Dr. Thomas said. “It’s about reimagining and recreating a different kind of university.”

For Killulark (Laura) Arngna’naaq, director of finance at the Dechinta Centre for Research and Learning, such a university would “have services for people like me.” As a student at Trent University and later the University of Toronto, Ms. Arngna’naaq, an Inuk from Baker Lake, Nunavut, did not see her experience reflected in any of services or programs. She said considering their location in southern Ontario, she understood why these institutions would focus on the First Nations communities in their vicinity, but the fact that there was little in the way to engage Inuit

people leaves Inuit students at a disadvantage.

“There’s no postsecondary institution on Inuit territory,” Ms. Arngna’naaq pointed out. “We have to travel far away to study and spend lots of money to do it.” And the farther north one travels in Canada, the less reliable internet service becomes – which leaves online education options unrealistic. “The only option is to leave home, to leave your territory and family, which creates a whole set of new problems for Inuit students,” she said.

An additional obstacle on the path to a reconciled relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people is defining what that relationship will look like on both sides. “There’s a process of figuring out how we want to be together before we can move forward,” said Sheila Cote-Meek, associate vice-president of academic and Indigenous programs and Laurentian University. Reconciliation does not amount to an erasure of the past, she said, and a reconciled relationship must honour the “sacred cycle of keeping the past, present.” It’s an approach that she said would help governments and institutions to improve their relationships with Indigenous peoples, as well as with most marginalized and underserved communities.

Dr. Cote-Meek, a professor in Laurentian’s school of Indigenous relations and author of the book *Colonized Classrooms: Racism, Trauma and Resistance in Post-Secondary Education*, noted that these many challenges and solutions have received significant attention since the Truth and Reconciliation Commission released its final report and calls to action in 2015. However, they have long been discussed by Indigenous scholars, community leaders and their allies. Now, it’s a matter of recognizing that expertise and enabling it to lead the way. “We’re ready to move forward,” she said, “we just need someone to say, ‘Go.’”