

# Indigenous Studies is not a Ghetto

 [queensu.ca/connect/equity/2017/04/03/indigenous-studies-is-not-a-ghetto/](https://queensu.ca/connect/equity/2017/04/03/indigenous-studies-is-not-a-ghetto/)

April 3,  
2017

In the latest edition of our blog, we hear from Dr. Adam Gaudry. In this piece, Adam explores the historical and contemporary tensions that exist between units like Indigenous Studies and the academy. Perfectly timed, Adam's piece draws our attention to the calls to Action in the recently released Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

## Indigenous programs are here to stay and it's time to accept that

At a 2013 university town hall at the University of Saskatchewan, then-president Ilene Busch-Visniac suggested that Indigenous-specific programming should be [amalgamated into "mainstream"](#) university programming over the long term. There was immediate push-back, from both those on-campus and off of it. A concerned Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations interjected, along with numerous faculty and student groups, forcing her to walk back the statement and reaffirm the permanence of Indigenous focused programming at the university. However, underneath this controversy is a pervasive logic shared among many university administrations, one that believes Indigenous programs exist primarily to facilitate student transition from their communities into post-secondary education, and to ultimately give way to the more venerated disciplines of old world education. In short, Indigenous academic units—like Indigenous studies and Indigenous education—are treated as if it were a kind of equity uplift meant to temporarily “bridge the gap” by providing Indigenous students with less competitive (that is, easier) programming.

I hear variations of this kind of thinking a lot, (although rarely from my current administration). Indigenous academic programs are rarely understood as creative, important sites of resistance by Indigenous students and scholars, intended to engage and empower our communities by confronting the violent colonial contexts in which we live. Certainly, Indigenous programs are seldom seen as standalone “disciplines” with their own intellectual traditions, pedagogies, methods, community of scholars, and agreed-upon process for judging the efficacy of scholarship. Many times, I've also heard people casually refer to my own discipline, Indigenous studies, as a kind of ghetto, a place where Indigenous students are supposedly denied the knowledge and rigour of the “real disciplines.”

Treating Indigenous academic units as if they are mere equity programs is rooted in three flawed assumptions. First, there has been a normalization of non-Indigenous majorities in post-secondary education, so much so that high concentrations of Indigenous people are treated as abnormal. The presumed goal of much of post-secondary education is the integration of Indigenous students into the mainstream, and while one rarely hears the word assimilate any more, the end effect can often be the same. Second, there is a widespread assumption that European intellectual traditions are superior to Indigenous ones. Indigenous-majority programs, which usually privilege Indigenous experiences and problematize Euro-centric assumptions, are interpreted as inferior. This separate educational path is then said to ‘ghettoize’ Indigenous students into an inferior education path. Third, as a result of the first two assumptions, Indigenous programs are seen by many as a kind of easy leg-up, as if their purpose is to facilitate the integration Indigenous students into the normal (non-Indigenous, Canada-oriented) education system, rather than leaving them confined to (inferior) Indigenous-majority spaces on campus.

While these attitudes may become less pronounced in light of the Calls to Action of the recently released Truth and Reconciliation Commission's, they certainly continue to exist and therefore need to be addressed if Indigenous people are to have a meaningful place in the universities and colleges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Lost in this conversation is what exactly Indigenous communities want from universities, a consideration that effective university administration must be focused on. What if the goal is to carve out spaces at post-secondary institutions where Indigenous students can learn skills to be used in service of their people, to work alongside other Indigenous students to hone these skills, and collaborate with Indigenous faculty to integrate traditional and

contemporary knowledge aimed at returning power to Indigenous communities? In my experience, Indigenous studies is exactly this, a place for Indigenous peoples to work with Indigenous and allied knowledges to address the needs of their community, in an atmosphere of support from academics and community alike. Students may choose to do this in Indigenous studies, or elsewhere, but they should be encouraged to choose what is best for them and for achieving their goals, not some old colonial metric on what constitutes a “real education.” For many Indigenous students and scholars, this is actually the end goal of Indigenous presence in the academy: transformational social and political change with Indigenous people at the helm and the freedom to chart our own futures.

If universities accept this reality, much more energy can be put towards creating enriching intellectual spaces for Indigenous and supports for a robust and self-sufficient Indigenous intellectual community on campus. This, I believe, is the more important consideration, and is one that gets to deeper truths and a more hopeful future in which Indigenous students and their knowledges are treated with the respect and dignity they are due.

