



University Students' Council Submission to Western's Indigenous Strategic Plan

Introduction

The University Students' Council is committed to supporting Western University in its efforts to strengthen ties with its Indigenous community members, and to provide a broader network of support for its Indigenous students. Students strongly believe that, as per the institution's strategic plan, Western should strive "to make higher education more accessible to Indigenous peoples; to improve the learning experiences and success of Indigenous students; to hire and support the success of Indigenous scholars and staff; and to improve the well-being of Indigenous peoples through ethical research and social involvement" (*Achieving Excellence on the World Stage, 2014*).

We believe that each and every member of the Western community has a role to play in the indigenization of campus. In order to build positive relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, we must foster an environment in which a common understanding of history, customs, and values is recognized as an essential aspect of intercultural discourse. We should encourage and highlight the importance of understanding, and take concrete steps to ensure that all of our students – Indigenous or otherwise – play a substantive and meaningful role in the creation of a community that values Canada's first peoples.

To that effect and in that spirit, the USC has five key recommendations we firmly believe the University should embrace and adopt as elements of its Indigenous Strategic Plan. Together, students, faculty, staff, and community members can make Western University a national leader in Indigenous affairs. We need only deepen our existing commitments to diversity, excellence, innovation, openness, partnership, respect, and social responsibility to begin affecting positive change with, for, and on behalf of our Indigenous students.

Recommendations

1. Commit funding, derived from the University's operating budget, to Indigenous Services.

Indigenous Services at Western University operates with a complex and unsustainable funding formula that relies on donor funds, medium-term government funding, and ancillary fees to support their students. This financial model, which is precarious and ever-changing, is not conducive to providing stable, high-quality service to our Indigenous students. With demand ever increasing, funding for key initiatives drying up, and greater expectations placed on their shoulders, Indigenous Services needs and deserves permanent operational funding from the University.

In 2015, Indigenous Services came forward to the Student Services Committee to request an ancillary fee increase in order to continue offering an Elders-in-Residence program. This critical program,



explicitly tied to the academic success and mental and spiritual wellbeing of our Indigenous students, was faced with extinction due to a lack of stable funding. While students happily answered Indigenous Services' call for support, no unit on campus that provides critical programming that aids the success of our students should have to come to the USC for stable funding. Rather, Western administration should be leaders in this area and step up to the plate to support critical services for Indigenous students out of the central operating budget.

Achieving Excellence on the World Stage makes explicit mention of the University's commitment to improving accessibility and success in higher education for Indigenous peoples. Western cannot reasonably expect to abide by its commitment to broaden and improve support for our First Nations community without simultaneously committing to an annual appropriation from the central operating budget. To set expectations that rely on external, unstable, or unsustainable sources of funding is unfair and counterintuitive to the commitments outlined in the strategic plan. Therefore, students strongly recommend that operational funding be shifted to support Indigenous Services.

2. Issue an apology for the role Western played in the forced assimilation of Indigenous students into the Canadian post-secondary education system.

In 2011, University of Manitoba President and Vice-Chancellor David T. Barnard issues an apology on behalf of his institution to Indigenous peoples for “[failing] Aboriginal peoples” and “not [living] up to [U of M's] goals, ideals, hard-earned reputation, or mandate¹.” It was the first apology from a Canadian university for complicity in the residential schools atrocity and to this day, is a remarkable sign of leadership and commitment to reconciliation.

Western's founding came with the intent that our institution would serve to train “both Indian and white students for the ministry of the Church in Canada².” This explicit connection to the purpose and mandate of Canada's residential schools is undeniable. Western, as an institution complicit in perpetuating a system in which Indigenous culture is unappreciated and forcefully deconstructed, should demonstrate leadership and a genuine desire to make amends for its role. In order for reconciliation to be truly embraced, and for Western to be recognized as a legitimate and willing partner, an apology must be issued to our Indigenous community members.

3. Foster intercultural dialogue where Indigenous students are empowered to set the terms of discussion.

Too often, discourse between traditionally marginalized and privileged groups is predicated on the privileged group's expectations, desires, and decisions. The USC believes that in order to incorporate

¹ <https://umanitoba.ca/about/media/StatementOfApology.pdf>

² New England Co. Report, 1873-1878.



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Indigenous cultures into the Western experience (as opposed to assimilation, an unspoken expectation widely felt amongst our First Nations students), we must give Indigenous stakeholders the opportunity to direct intercultural dialogue. As privileged leaders and administrators, we cannot direct conversations about indigenization and the improvement of the Indigenous experience at Western. Rather, we must use that privilege to affect – to the best of our ability – meaningful changes identified by those most impacted by said changes.

The key to this type of engagement is the respectful asking of questions. What does your experience look like, or better yet, what does your experience feel like? What barriers exist? What are your needs? What is within our power to do to improve your condition that we aren't already doing? And, perhaps most importantly, what is the most respectful and meaningful way for us to engage with you?

Empowering our Indigenous stakeholders to actively participate in and more importantly, shape their experience is absolutely crucial to reconciliation and indigenization. The USC is committed to being a leader in this regard, seeking to engage with our Indigenous students when, where, and how they wish to be engaged. We encourage Western University to work with us to collaborate meaningful intercultural dialogue directed by those most affected by these discussions – our Indigenous students.

4. Increase the number of in- and out-of-class learning opportunities that focus on Indigenous peoples, languages, history, and culture.

As an institution of higher learning that prides itself on supporting students with a top quality, well-rounded education, Western should promote a holistic experience that incorporates seminal parts of institutional and national history. A large piece of that experience should be a positive understanding of Indigenous peoples and their connection to the Western and Canadian experience. Encouraging reflection on such fundamental parts of our common history will help shape intercultural dialogue about reconciliation and indigenization, raise awareness about the barriers Indigenous students face in post-secondary education, and foster a diverse culture that embraces Indigenous teachings.

Western should strive to give each of its students a meaningful opportunity to embrace Indigenous teachings. By offering diverse course content housed in disciplines beyond First Nations Studies, students will be better able to connect their program learning with information about the Indigenous experience. Creating non-mandatory online learning opportunities, such as an Indigenous Peoples Module akin to the OWL Mental Health Module, incentivized with a certificate or Co-Curricular Record addition may help fill a huge gap in Indigenous learning amongst non-Indigenous students.

5. Incorporate elements and symbols drawn from Indigenous cultures into Western's landscape.

In comparison to some of its U15 counterparts, Western University falls well behind where the incorporation of Indigenous motifs in campus' landscape is concerned. While our institution occupies



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the ancestral territory of the Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, Leni-Lunaape, and Attawandaron peoples, architecture, communal spaces, campus artworks, and green spaces do not pay appropriate tribute to those who have lived here for time immemorial. In fact, it is possible for our students to cross the entirety of campus' 1000+ acres and encounter no physical manifestations of Indigenous culture.

We believe that the physical presence of Indigenous symbols and motifs on our campus can play an important role in disrupting and deconstructing notions of entitlement and privilege. It will help build an understanding that the territory upon which we are privileged to learn and live has deep historical and cultural value to many of our Indigenous students, and will guarantee that all students are exposed to elements of Indigenous culture while completing their education.

Other institutions (the University of British Columbia [UBC] being a notable example) have taken substantial steps to ensure that campus is physically indigenized. Its on-campus Museum of Anthropology is a nationwide leader in First Nations history, and their exhibits include extensive displays of Indigenous artwork, structures, and symbols. Western could follow suit by housing a permanent collection of First Nations art in the Macintosh Gallery, flying an Indigenous flag outside the Western Student Services Building, planting a grove of white pine, or building a reconstruction round or long house. UBC has also named many of its residence buildings after local Indigenous peoples and installed permanent plaques in the lobby of each recognizing peoples like the Kwakiutl, Shuswap, həm'ləsəm', Nootka, Dene, Haida, and Salish. Western should follow UBC's commendable example and name prominent campus features in tribute of our local Indigenous peoples.

Respectfully submitted by the Executive Council on behalf of the University Students' Council and the undergraduate students of Western University.

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