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Aller au sommaire du numéro

Découvrir la revue

Citer cet article

Résumé de l'article

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Changing the Story: Indigenous Youth Belong in Post-Secondary Education

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This article describes a collaboration between an urban school board and a faculty of education aimed at supporting Indigenous youth transitions to post-secondary education. Drawing upon strengths-based approaches including wise practices, we offer a model for how postsecondary transition events can illuminate pathways for young people to see that they belong in higher education. We highlight the importance of connecting with Elders, hearing from successful Indigenous speakers, and seeing campus. The theme of our event reiterates to Indigenous youth that they have a story and that they can take the next steps to a new beginning in post-secondary education.

Cet article décrit une collaboration entre une autorité scolaire en milieu urbain et une faculté d'éducation visant à soutenir la transition des jeunes autochtones vers l'enseignement postsecondaire. Puisant dans des approches fondées sur les forces, y compris les pratiques sages, nous offrons un modèle de la façon dont les événements liés à la transition vers l'enseignement postsecondaire peuvent éclairer les passerelles permettant aux jeunes de voir qu'ils ont leur place dans l'enseignement supérieur. Nous soulignons l'importance d'établir des liens avec les aînés, d'écouter des conférenciers autochtones qui ont réussi et de visiter le campus. Le thème de notre événement rappelle aux jeunes autochtones qu'ils ont une histoire et qu'ils peuvent franchir les prochaines étapes vers un nouveau départ dans l'enseignement postsecondaire.

Oo'mahn'istay Iikakimaaks: Introduction and Context

Oo'mahn'istay Iikakimaaks roughly translates from Blackfoot to, "You've got a story—next steps to a new beginning." When the Calgary Catholic School District (CCSD) Indigenous Education Team and the Werklund School of Education (Werklund) collaborated to create an event aimed at increasing Indigenous high school graduate transition rates to post-secondary education, every effort was made to honour and include local culture, protocols, and Indigenous community voices (Alberta Government, 2019, 2020, 2021; Wesley-Esquimaux & Calliou, 2010). The Blackfoot name *Oo'mahn'istay Iikakimaaks* was gifted to the event by Elder Wanda First Rider, from the Kainai Nation in Southern Alberta. Elder First Rider, whose traditional name is *Pukaki* (Little Woman) has been guiding CCSD initiatives since the late 1980s. When she was approached with a tobacco offering and asked to suggest a name for the event, she went to see her own mother, 93 year-old Elder Anne First Rider, for insight. Together, they discussed the intention of the event

and the impact they wanted it to have on Indigenous youth before creating the name and gifting it to the planning team. With such a meaningful name in place, planning could begin. Although we have not conducted a formal study to assess the impact of this event, this paper tells the story of this one-day transitions event to share our working model and inspire further work in supporting Indigenous youth through strengths-based approaches.

Under Elder First Rider's guidance, CCSD consistently has a very high Indigenous student high school graduation rate, often between 78 to 82% (Alberta Government, 2020). Notably, CCSD is a large, urban school district within Western Canada, and the majority of Indigenous students live in or near the urban centre. CCSD is congratulated often and is invited to share with other school districts and the province about their strategies and practices. When Elder First Rider expressed concern regarding the percentage of Indigenous students in the district who choose to move on to post-secondary education after successful high school completion, the CCSD Indigenous Education Department therefore took heed (Statistics Canada, 2016). The most recent statistics have the provincial transition rates of Indigenous students to post-secondary at 22.2% in four years and 35% in six years (Alberta Government, 2021). The current transition rate for Indigenous graduates of CCSD in four years is 38.4% and the six-year transition rate is 50.3% (Alberta Government, 2021). That means that within six years of an Indigenous student starting grade ten, only half of them transition to post-secondary. With Elder First Rider's guidance, CCSD and Werklund wanted to explore ways to increase that rate. Following the Blackfoot way of listening to Elders, the CCSD Indigenous Education Team started planning a project to increase the successful transition rates of Indigenous students moving from high school to post-secondary.

The Indigenous Education Team became aware of a grant opportunity via the Werklund School of Education to increase Indigenous student transition rates to post-secondary education. This grants program focused on (and was titled) "welcoming Indigenous students to campus." Building on a network of connected projects and ongoing relationships, the CCSD partnered with two Werklund faculty members to develop a proposal. Centering on a strengths-based approach to a transitions event as detailed below, our collaborative team secured a grant to pursue this initiative. The CCSD Indigenous Education Team is very diverse, with people from multiple Indigenous Nations and cultures, and even more so when teamed up with collaborators from the Werklund School. The CCSD team working with Elder First Rider at the time of this project included Angela Houle, whose family are from the Métis community of Willow Bunch, Saskatchewan, and who was the Indigenous education consultant for Teaching and Learning, and Patricia McCallum, who was the Indigenous education consultant for Diverse Learning. Patricia is Cree, from Waterhen Lake First Nation in Saskatchewan. From Werklund, the team included Aubrey Hanson, who is a member of the Métis Nation of Alberta and Associate Professor, and Erin Spring, Associate Professor. Erin is a non-Indigenous researcher with British heritage. Once the project began, two graduate student research assistants were hired: Teresa M. Miles, who is a member of Opaskwayak Cree Nation, which is located in Treaty 5 Territory, and Maureen Plante, who is Iroquois Cree and a member of the Métis Nation of Alberta, with family from Northern Alberta and who holds a Masters of Science in Counselling Psychology. This diverse collaborative team brought with them a wealth of knowledge, support, and existing relationships with local Indigenous communities—all important assets to the project.

One additional and crucial piece of the background to this project was the support provided by institutional policy and leadership. The CCSD has made Indigenous education one of their four district priorities. Likewise, the grant opportunity emerged from within strategic initiatives for Indigenous education at Werklund and UCalgary such as the UCalgary Indigenous Strategy, *ii'*

taa'poh'to'p (2019). These existing factors contributed to the prioritization of the event by the leadership of both CCSD and Werklund, which helped the organizers with their requests for resources and time. Both organizations were central to the overall success of the project. With this team and institutional support, and with Elder First Rider's guidance leading the way, the event became a reality. On February 3rd, 2021 then, in the midst of a pandemic, a full-day online event was hosted for CCSD's 13 high schools.

Theoretical Framing and Literature Review for a Community-Driven, Asset-Based Process

The intentionality behind the event day was inspired by strengths-based theories. We listened to how Mathie and Cunningham (2003) framed *Assets Based Community Development* (ABCD), and we likewise learned from Wesley-Esquimaux and Calliou's (2010) articulation of a "wise practices approach" (p. 3). It was vital to our team to use a strengths-based framework, foregrounding Indigenous communities and cultures, and to avoid the harms inherent in deficit-based framing (Oskineegish, 2014; Tuck, 2009; Wesley-Esquimaux & Calliou, 2010). These frameworks focus on "asset-based and capacity-focused approaches as opposed to needs-based and barrier-focused approaches" (Wesley-Esquimaux & Calliou, 2010, p. 18), illuminating the strengths already working in communities. A strengths-based approach also resonates with theories and models for appreciative inquiry (Coghlan et al., 2003).

Assets-Based Community Development

Knowing that the project must involve Indigenous communities and be community-driven (Wesley-Esquimaux & Calliou, 2010), the organizers opted to theorize the event through Mathie and Cunningham's (2003) ABCD theory. In their research on best practice for asset-based community development, Mathie and Cunningham (2003) wrote that the "central theme of ABCD is relocation of power to communities" (p. 482). In response to the ABCD model, the plan for the day included Indigenous voices and community at every step and made best use of "social capital" by drawing on existing relationships already in place in the organization (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003, p. 474). The ABCD theory made sense for the project, because the people who best know the assets of a community are the people in that community (Frank & Smith, 1999; Mathie & Cunningham, 2003; Tuck, 2009). This line of thinking resonates with work like Njeze et al.'s (2020) study of resilience with urban youth, which contended that "a key element of resilience supported in current research is a concept of 'culture continuity,' often defined as reestablishing expressions of Indigenous identity and belonging through connections with the land or environment, language, and spiritual or cultural practices" (p. 2002). The fact that education was historically, and is contemporarily, imposed on Indigenous people highlighted the importance for our project to be a community-driven initiative, drawing upon the strengths of Indigenous community members and knowledges (Battiste, 2013; Smith, 2021; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada [TRC], 2015).

In acknowledging the history of Indigenous people and formal education (Battiste, 2013; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003; TRC, 2015), our team knew that a culturally rich and empowering event would be necessary in counteracting that history. One example of this approach was the way the project began, as described above, with a naming request of an Elder. This naming protocol is in line with the cultural protocols of the Treaty 7 Nations, on whose territory the event took place,

and in this way the project held Indigenous protocols and knowledge systems as central. Another way in which we realized this ABCD approach was to foreground the voices of Treaty 7 Indigenous community members throughout the day for young people to hear, drawing upon community relationships to celebrate Indigenous success in post-secondary education. We provide further details on the structure of the day below, but wish to note here that four Elders from local communities spoke at the event: knowing that the urban Indigenous youth in CCSD schools were from various communities, we wanted to ensure that diverse Elder voices were foregrounded. These kinds of intentional details in the planning were essential to enacting an assets-based approach.

Wise Practices

Our team also followed Wesley-Esquimaux and Calliou's (2010) articulation of "wise practices" for community development. Although we do not situate our work within development studies, we appreciated their focus on attending to the dynamics of a community, with a particular emphasis on culture and local strengths. These scholars provide a critique of "best practices" in Indigenous settings, stating that a best practices approach is decontextualized and relies on a one-size-fits-all model. "Best practices" does not work amidst the diversity of Indigenous communities and does not take into account the importance of culture (Wesley-Esquimax & Calliou, 2010). With a "wise practices" framework, they explained, community developers take the specificities of context into account and adapt approaches to the particular situation. Wesley-Esquimaux and Calliou listed "identity and culture" as key amongst the "locally appropriate actions, tools, principles or decisions" that make up wise practices (Wesley-Esquimaux & Calliou, 2010, pp. 19-22). Highlighting wise practices helps to counter the ongoing legacy of colonial education by validating Indigenous people and cultures. In *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future (Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*; TRC, 2015), which highlights the effects of the residential school system, historian, and educator Sol Sanderson stated that the objectives of the residential school policies were "assimilation, integration, civilization, Christianization, and liquidation" (p. 191). These policies undermined Indigenous identity and culture, diminishing the strengths in Indigenous communities. The ongoing legacy of these policies continues to affect the relationship between Indigenous young people and post-secondary education (TRC, 2015); system transformation is necessary. To counter this legacy, we believe validating Indigenous identity and culture is vital to student success. As Murray Sinclair reminded us, "it is precisely because education was the primary tool of oppression of Aboriginal people, and miseducation of all Canadians, that we have concluded that education holds the key to reconciliation" (Johnston, 2022, para. 12). It was therefore important that our youth post-secondary transitions event foregrounded the strengths of Indigenous students, communities, and cultures. The team kept wise practices at the forefront of all plans, as we detail below in "The Story of the Day."

Moving Beyond Deficit-Based Framing

It is vital to note, briefly, the harmful potential of deficit-based framing. Eve Tuck (2009) has called for an end to *damage-centred research* in Indigenous contexts, asking whether the wins of making a case for the work to be done through a damage-centred lens is "worth the long term costs of thinking of ourselves as damaged?" (Tuck, 2009, p. 415). Instead, Tuck calls for

Indigenous research to lean into "desire-based" framing (Tuck, 2009, p. 416). We, in turn, are looking for collaborative ways of telling the story for Indigenous youth that begin with strengths. Likewise, Mathie and Cunningham likewise illustrated that, "Communities that have been defined by their problems … internalize this negativity" (2003, p. 478). Pervasive racist ideologies define Indigenous communities by their struggles and Indigenous communities can start to internalize the oppression that results (Poitras Pratt et al., 2018; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). The project aimed to combat these oppressions by foregrounding Indigenous voices and culture and highlighting the strengths, diversities, and validity of Indigenous learners.

Indigenous Youth Belong in Higher Education

Drawing these theories together, the event focused on the theme of belonging—of youth seeing themselves as belonging in higher education. In using the word "belonging" we are aligning our thinking with that of Martin Brokenleg (1998) who has written about the importance of belonging to the success of young Indigenous people as part of the *Circle of Courage* model. For instance, Brokenleg (1998) said that "belonging is the organizing principle in partnership cultures. Significance is assured by belonging, whereas in dominator cultures one gains significance by standing out from the others" (p. 131). Young people need to feel they belong in order to succeed in education (Lam et al., 2015). Belonging is akin to relationality; students; abilities to thrive depend on relationality (Stelmach et al., 2017). Likewise, we appreciate how Susan Dion and Angela Salamanca's (2014) arts-based study emphasized that urban Indigenous youth belong in spaces like schools, contrary to the ways in which they have long felt that they "don't (didn't) fit in school and schools don't (didn't) fit them" (p. 160).

Conversely, there are negative implications for youth wellbeing when belonging is compromised. Although Canada ranks one of the top countries for advanced education, research shows that Indigenous youth are underrepresented in post-secondary education (Arvidson et al., 2020; Gallop & Bastien, 2016; Prete, 2018; Shankar et al., 2013). Factors such as lack of financial support, proximity to educational institutions, parental educational levels, and the impact of residential schools contribute to this disparity. In Shankar and colleagues' study (2013), Indigenous students reported concerns regarding the sense of belonging at post-secondary such as: institutions being impersonal, intimidating, hostile, and having little to knowledge of Indigenous culture, traditions, and values. Our work seeks to counteract the negative impacts of colonialism on Indigenous youth's education (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). We worked deliberately to ensure that we presented the University of Calgary as a safe space where Indigenous students will feel represented and at home.

The immediate goal of this project, therefore, was to increase the successful transition rates of this cohort of Indigenous students from high school to post-secondary, but the larger, longer-term goal of this project was to help students see themselves as successful, contributing, valued members of the education system who *belong* [emphasis added] in post-secondary. The team viewed these goals as mutually inextricable.

Situating Our Work in the Broader Field of Indigenous Education

In setting out to describe our project for the purposes of this article, it is important to us to acknowledge our relationship with other scholarly work in the field of Indigenous education. Our aim in sharing our project as a model is to present ideas relevant to Indigenous education,

education for Indigenous youth, importance of Elders in Indigenous youth education, and the stories that are told by Elders and youth to promote Indigenous youth education successes. In responding to these topics, we are hoping to be part of the dialogue on the importance of showing positive Indigenous role models, enabling youth to see themselves doing well, and more broadly supporting youth in finding well-trodden pathways into educational success. For example, we were inspired by the work of Goodman and colleagues (2019), whose photovoice project highlighted the importance and impact of fostering healthy supportive spaces and role modeling for Indigenous youth (Goodman et al., 2019). Strength and resilience are promoted when success is modeled for Indigenous youth (Goodman et al., 2019). Our event shared stories of successful Indigenous students and scholars in this same vein.

A key component of our project was to have Indigenous youth and Elders walking together, or enabling youth to listen to Elders' Wisdom. Elders' role in teaching traditional knowledge, values, culture, collective identity, and relationality is important to Indigenous peoples' wellbeing and understanding of intergenerational relationships (Lessard et al., 2021; Njeze et al., 2020; Rowe et al., 2020; Viscogliosi et al., 2020). Rowe et al. (2020) explained how "Elders are responsible not only for the transmission of knowledge, but for ensuring the passing on of the unique world-view that holds this knowledge in context" (p. 158). Youth are benefited by Elders' social participation, knowledge, and contributions that promote intergenerational solidarity (Viscogliosi et al., 2020). Given the importance and benefit of Elders' contribution to youth, community, and solidarity, we prioritized Elder sharing throughout the event.

An additional significant theme for connecting this project to the broader field of Indigenous education is the importance of story and narrative in Indigenous work. Story is integral to Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing. As observed by Judy Iseke (2013), "Indigenous peoples engage oral traditions, historical/ancestral knowledge, and cultural resources to examine current events and Indigenous understandings in ways consistent with traditional worldviews and cosmologies" (p. 559). In aiming to change the story of schooling for Indigenous youth—storying the notion that they do belong in higher education—we are centering the role of story in Indigenous research and education practice (Archibald, 2008; Battiste, 2000; Hanson, 2020; Hanson et al., 2020; King, 2003). In saying this, we echo Thomas King's (2003) now-famous insistence that "the truth about stories is that that's all we are" (p. 2). The aim of our event was to promote a positive experience to the youth who participated and to demonstrate to them that their stories matter and their voices matter (Battiste, 2000; Donald, 2009; Kovach, 2010). Additionally, we recognize that experience is storied, and that Indigenous youth need stories that make space for their lived experiences. With Chung (2018),

> [We] wonder how policies can think with the storied experiences of youth and families. [We] wonder how we can create educative, belonging spaces for youth as they experience multiple transitions in their lives. [We] wonder how we can better attend to their experiences and work with them as they compose [their] lives. (p. 101)

If experience is storied, Indigenous youth need strong examples of stories that show people like them thriving in higher education.

Having explored the theories and themes important to framing our project, we will now move into the details of our post-secondary education transitions event and its goals for supporting Indigenous youth.

The Story of the Day

In keeping with the strengths-based approach to this project, the day's itinerary was planned around building on student successes and highlighting the possibilities and options available to students in terms of post-secondary education. Although, again, it might be tempting with projects like this to focus on deficits or filling a gap, it was important to us to remain in a strengths-based space. Building on the momentum of strong graduation rates in the CCSD, the day's events were designed to boost the transition of Indigenous students to post-secondary learning, and, consequently, we put a great deal of thought into the outline for the event held on February 3, 2021. In this section, we explore the elements of the day and the intentionality behind them.

One of the unique circumstances we had in planning this event was the COVID-19 era, in which we needed to work virtually. Under normal circumstances, a *welcoming Indigenous students to campus event* [emphasis added] would involve bringing Indigenous students to the university: we needed to be creative to find ways of helping young people envision themselves in a post-secondary setting. In order to prepare for the virtual nature of our event, several members of the team met on the UCalgary campus to record videos, creating a virtual tour. We focused on key spots, such as the public transit (C-Train) station, coffee shops and food courts, lecture halls, the library, student services, our Indigenous students' centre (Writing Symbols Lodge: https://www.ucalgary.ca/student-services/writing-symbols/home), and the new mural by Blackfoot artist Kalum Teke Dan (Faculty of Nursing Staff, 2019), highlighting Indigenous presence in the university environment. Our objective was to reiterate that UCalgary is a safe, welcoming space for Indigenous students. We wanted the students to be able to imagine themselves walking these paths and sitting in these classrooms. We had these videos ready to go in advance of the day. Transitioning an in-person event to one that was conducted in an online setting required cooperation and creativity by all involved.

In the lead up to the occasion, the project team met at the CCSD Indigenous Education leadership office—in a school board facility where we were able to follow current safety protocols—to assemble packages for each student participant. These packages included information about undergraduate enrolment, possible scholarships, and pamphlets about the UCalgary Indigenous Student Access Program. We also included materials for a cultural activity to be held at the end of the day. Coming together around this task, we built a sense of camaraderie and shared purpose as a team: looking at the piles of envelopes, we were able to get a tangible sense of how many students our event would reach.

At the time of the event, schools were still operating in person. We had invited 150 students, primarily graduating grade 12s but also a number of grade 10 and 11s. These students would gather at their home schools, with teacher supervisors, and attend the virtual event over Zoom. Everyone would wear masks and distance themselves physically, as was the safety practice at the time. Although its participants would be attending remotely, we were intent on establishing a sense of togetherness and community. Delivering hands-on materials was part of that intentionality. Even more importantly, we knew we needed to feed all of the participants to generate that sense of connection.

In Blackfoot culture, it is customary to provide food at gatherings (Wanda First Rider, personal communication, November 6, 2020). Therefore, early on the morning of February 3rd, the project team rendezvoused to begin delivering lunches to each of the thirteen participating schools, prior to the event. At times, COVID-19 safety protocols made Blackfoot cultural protocols more difficult to follow, but we were dedicated to providing a lunch. Elder First Rider asked if an

Indigenous caterer could be utilized, so the lunches were catered by a local Indigenous chef. We were glad to be able to provide a nourishing and delicious bagged lunch to each young person and each supporting teacher, ready for the mid-day break. Members of the team met the caterer at one of the high schools at 8:00 a.m. and divided up the deliveries.

The project team then reconvened at the Indigenous education office where we had tables staggered in a large space. Angela was the masters of ceremonies of the event from a central computer, while Patricia moderated the Zoom call and troubleshot the inevitable technical issues. From our separate computers, we all joined the call. Each school had one central computer where teachers and students were Zooming in.

In a good way, we began with an acknowledgement of the land and an opening prayer and smudge from Elder First Rider. We greeted the students participating and introduced ourselves as hosts. The focus of the first half of the day was the theme of "seeing yourself at university:" the aim was for students to gain familiarity with the university and to visualize themselves on campus. Then we showed a set of videos featuring local Elders to prioritize the message that education is important for Indigenous Peoples. Elder First Rider advised the team to engage the participation of Elders from all Nations represented on Treaty 7 territory, including the Métis, and so we approached four Elders following protocol. Members of the Indigenous Education team at CCSD had prior working relationships with these Elders, namely Blackfoot Elder Wanda First Rider, Tsuu T'ina Elder Bruce Starlight, Stoney Nakoda Elder Rod Hunter, and Métis Elder Edmee Comstock.

In an effort toward protecting the health and safety of the Elders amidst the pandemic, each Elder was interviewed, outdoors, ahead of time, and a twenty-minute video compilation was created for the students. The Elders were each asked, "What message would you give to an Indigenous student who is not sure if they belong at post-secondary?" The team decided on this prompt because, anecdotally, we have heard from students that they are not sure if they can honour their culture and communities by attending a colonized educational institution. Indigenous students' anxieties regarding belonging in post-secondary are a concern as many find university to be impersonal, intimidating, and hostile. Communities perceive universities as reflecting limited knowledge of Indigenous cultures, traditions, and values (Shankar et al., 2013).

Messages from the Elders laid a foundation for the day, emphasizing for students that they could walk in both worlds—Indigenous and Western/academic—and that they should be proud of their achievements. Elder Hunter explained that, "to be successful in life, you need to have a formal education and the traditional education." Elder First Rider reminded the students to hold on to their Indigenous values while navigating university: "Wisdom, love, respect, bravery, honesty and truth. Share these values and move forward using the teachings of *kimmapiiyipitssini*: compassion, as one of your guides." It was reiterated that their Indigenous cultures, families, and communities would be there to support them: students would always have someone to turn to. Elder Starlight, for instance, encouraged students to "go see Elders, go to ceremonies, and attend functions that are Indigenous. Don't lose yourself" and later that "It's always good to have a dream. Without dreams, you can't get to where you want to be" (personal communication, January 21, 2021). He also told them, "Remember, you've done something great. You advanced the Indigenous people one more step … towards creativity and success." All of their messages of support highlighted the importance of education. Elder Comstock reminded students that, "The biggest gift you can give yourself is education. Doors will open, people will listen, and you will become proud of yourself." She also showed them how they were opening doors for others in turn: "You can help make the difference to another Métis, First Nations and Inuit people who

are coming behind you."

Following this opportunity to listen to the encouragement and guidance of community Elders, we were joined by three successful UCalgary Indigenous students, who spoke to the young people about their own educational journeys and campus involvement. They shared stories of struggle and perseverance, of safeguards and supports, of campus as a welcoming space, of their individual transitions to university life, and described a day in the life on campus. Breakout rooms were then created, allowing the high school students to meet with and ask questions of the guest speakers in a small space. Following these conversations, students watched the video tour of the UCalgary campus, which put the former students' stories and experiences into context.

The final session of the morning included presentations by UCalgary Indigenous faculty and leadership from across campus, including political science, education, and psychology. Faculty shared their own educational experiences, including roads to university studies, and spoke about Indigenous spaces, opportunities, and relationships on campus. Students were again offered a question-and-answer session with the guest speakers via breakout rooms. Following the event, each of the student and faculty guest speakers received a thank you of beautiful items purchased from a local Indigenous gift shop. Purchasing Indigenous-made gifts from an Indigenous business was another intentional choice we made in our event planning.

Lunch hour included students enjoying their tasty pre-delivered bagged lunches. During this time, students were presented with an interactive activity: knowing that young people sit for long periods of time at school because of COVID-19 restrictions, we wanted them to get up and get moving, so we challenged them to take creative photos of themselves in action during the break. Students uploaded their pictures via a QR code and then voted on their favourite entries. The top three photos were chosen and announced at the end of the lunch break. Prizes included hoodies and other swag from the UCalgary bookstore. Giving out UCalgary sweaters reiterated our invitation for students to see themselves belonging on a post-secondary campus.

The afternoon session focused on the theme of "How do we ensure that you get there?" Our first invited speaker was an Indigenous recruiter from the University. She highlighted the student application process, national and international student loans, funding opportunities, scholarships, bursaries, and student support. Information packages that were received by each student also contained relevant details pertaining to the application process that students would find helpful in becoming a University student. This portion of the day was invaluable as students needed not only the inspiration, but also the tools and resources to undertake the application. While listening to the presenter, students spent time opening their packages and looking at the information provided. Additionally, we had a CCSD team member come to speak about support available within the school district, particularly in relation to application processes.

It was crucial to our team to emphasize for students that they do not need to leave their culture and identity behind when they go to university; rather, they can carry it with them. Even more, they need their culture and identity to succeed and to gain the most from their educational journeys. This emphasis echoes Blackfoot scholar Tiffany Prete's (2018) reminder that education for Indigenous youth needs to be grounded in Indigenous languages, cultures, and identities. Elder Starlight reiterated this point by telling students, "You go see Elders, you go to ceremonies, attend functions that are Indigenous. Don't lose yourself." The day ended, therefore, with a cultural teaching and keepsake creation activity guided by Elder First Rider. Students were invited to create a medicine pouch of their own, following along with her teachings and step-by-step instructions. In their individual packages, the students received pre-cut pieces of hide (embossed with a University logo), leather strings, and beads, as well as sage (a sacred medicine) to tuck into

the pouch. This activity reinforced the value of culture for students and ended the day in a positive way. It also ensured they would have a keepsake from the day to carry with them on their journeys that would remind them of their culture and the reassurance they gained from the experience.

We wanted to hear from students whether or not the event was useful for them. Before the grades 11 and 12 students left for the day, we distributed a short digital survey of four questions to elicit their responses to what they had heard: What was your favourite part of today? What is one thing you wish we would have included? Was this event helpful? If so, how? Has this event increased your confidence and/or likelihood of applying to post-secondary? Students who participated enjoyed the day and were thankful for what they had learned. Remarkably, of the 44 students who completed the survey, 43 of them agreed that they were more likely to consider going to post-secondary than they had been before the day began. This strong response indicates that similar supports for transitions to post-secondary education would be beneficial for other students in future. When asked what their favourite part of the day was, the students reported enjoying the cultural activities, listening to the Elders, and learning about other Indigenous students' experiences in university. Youth also commented on the lunch. One student summed up the impact of the event for them by saying, "I found this event very helpful because prior to this I had no idea of how to apply or where to get [the] support and help that I need. I am also very inspired by the speakers today" (student survey). Although there were, of course, some limitations with the online event—one student did respond they wished they could have had "an actual tour of the UofC"—we were encouraged to see that, despite the doubts we might have had before the pandemic, holding events like ours is in fact possible and effective in online environments.

In sharing their responses to the event, one student mentioned that they appreciated hearing "people discussing the barriers they have overcome": we hope that our event helped to illuminate pathways into the postsecondary world, and that building on community assets was a positive approach (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003). Another student pointed to the importance of authentic community voices, sharing that they appreciated "learning that it's okay to struggle and be unsure right now, and that eventually things will work out." Echoing the heart of the project, one student shared that "real stories from real people are great": it was vital for students to hear from other Indigenous people on their educational journeys.

Carrying the Story Forward

We believe that the success of our *Oo'mahn'istay Iikakimaaks* gathering may encourage other schools or districts to hold similar events around post-secondary transitions in support of Indigenous youth. Ours is one model for future events that may inspire young Indigenous people to see themselves at university—as was the spirit of the initial funding opportunity that precipitated our event. The story of the day above offers a step by step guide to our process, which we hope will encourage other educators to embark on similar endeavours. Upon completion of the event, we distributed a community report showcasing our event and the approaches we took for other people working in Indigenous education. Likewise, this article offers a model, framed through a strengths-based perspective (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003; Tuck, 2009), of how to nurture partnerships between faculties of education and school boards, as well as for how to collaborate across Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities in support of Indigenous youth. This collaborative work resonates with key focuses for practitioners in the field of Indigenous education, such as growing more Indigenous teachers (Tessaro et al., 2021), supporting Indigenous students once they are in higher education (Walton et al., 2020), providing

mentorship opportunities (Rawana et al., 2015), and providing culturally enlivening materials for teaching and learning (Hanson et al., 2020). Most importantly, we hope to have shown a way to ground such events—aimed at formal education but in service of communities—in Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing. This approach validates Indigenous peoples and cultures and shows young people that they matter.

In addition to offering an example of community-based work (Battiste, 2013; Wesley-Esquimaux & Calliou, 2010), this article also illustrates a precedent for how to do this work in an online setting. It was also a key learning for us that, although the place-based experience of touring campus and connecting to the university space is essential for prospective students, online spaces and virtual gatherings can allow students to connect to campus from a distance. Hopefully this is the last global pandemic of our generation, so we will not need virtual gatherings for that reason, but the realities of remote communities and inequity of access may persist: online sessions like ours can be a strategy to bring students from remote communities virtually to campus despite distance or other barriers to access. The success of our online gathering is another piece we offer to other educators and leaders: this kind of community engagement and post-secondary transition or recruitment work can take place through web-based technologies.

Our event mattered because it helped young people to feel confident about going to post-secondary, building on their strengths and assuaging anxieties they might feel about the transition. Although Indigenous students in the CCSD have high graduation rates, members of the team had heard concerns from students in the past that they lacked confidence with the skills and abilities needed to be successful at post-secondary institutions. Walton et al. (2020) similarly have considered factors related to "student persistence" (p. 433). A central theme of our event was to show Indigenous students that there is a clear place for them in university spaces. Introducing Indigenous youth to successful Indigenous university students and faculty members, touring them through the campus, making the application process transparent, and showing them how they could carry their culture with them all helped to communicate that they belong in post-secondary spaces. Furthermore, foregrounding Elder voices reiterated for students that their communities believe in their ability to thrive in university and value higher education. We hoped that this reassurance would give the students the confidence that their Elders and communities will continue to support them on their educational journeys, despite the difficulties they might face.

Circling back to the naming of our event, our intention was to show students *you've got a story* [emphasis added] and to help them envision the *next steps to a new beginning* [emphasis added]. We hope that our post-secondary transitions event for Indigenous youth told them a better story than what they might have heard in the past: university is your place; you belong here. We would like to close this article by listening to some additional words from our Elders, which we hope you will carry forward in your work, in turn.

> Wherever you want to be, it's up to you. It's not up to anybody else. If you want to be at the university, go for it. Creator will be behind you if you ask him (Elder Rod Hunter, personal communication, January 26, 2021).

> Each of you has a gift to be able to achieve this [education] and it is your given right (Elder Edmee Comstock, personal communication, January 22, 2021).

Without dreams, you can't get to where you want to be (Elder Bruce Starlight, personal communication, January 21, 2021)

We are proud of your accomplishments and we know you will accomplish your dreams of pursuing post-secondary education. Our Indigenous communities are unique in that we live in two worlds. Our people know that we must understand these two worlds. So, as Indigenous people we go through life seeking out gifts of knowledge from these two worlds. (Elder Wanda First Rider, personal communication, January 29, 2021)

Acknowledgements

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