



Setting Ourselves Up For Success:

Interim Report on Resourcing Cultural Support at the University of Saskatchewan

Purpose

For many years the University of Saskatchewan (U of S) has prioritized Indigenous student success and engagement with Indigenous communities. This is reflected, for example, in the new mission, vision and values statement and in the current integrated planning process. Achieving these goals requires engaging in Indigenous ceremonies and cultures in a respectful, sincere and sustainable way.

The Office of Aboriginal Initiatives set out to develop a clearer picture of the needs and aspirations of the university community in this area as well as to understand the current practices in accessing cultural support. From this, we hope to develop a plan to better support this work at the university and—in turn—become a better place for Indigenous students and their communities. Working toward the university's goals involves supporting Indigenous ceremonies, strengthening the university's cultural capacity and ensuring that faculty and staff are supported in and recognized for this work.

Methodology

It is important to note that this analysis remains ongoing and that this report is only in an interim stage. This interim report was compiled with information gathered from:

1. A survey (*Appendix A*) that was sent to 77 faculty and staff, including:
 - deans,
 - members of the Aboriginal Advisors' Circle, and
 - Indigenous faculty members.

There were 24 responses to this survey, for a response rate of 31 per cent.

2. Interviews (*Appendix B*) were conducted with 12 key stakeholders from the groups listed above.

Following the release of this interim report there will be an opportunity to respond to these findings through focus groups. This information will augment the survey and interview data to create a final report that will inform the future direction of cultural supports.

Results

The interviews and survey responses were coded for themes and grouped based on strength of emphasis within the data. While much was garnered from the interview and survey process, the themes that seemed to emerge most prominently are listed here in an attempt to convey the overarching thoughts of respondents.

A: Faculty and Staff

Many of the interviews and survey responses focused on the human resources required to support cultural work at the university and how this work can be supported and recognized.

Recognizing contributions of faculty and staff: It is important to value and recognize the staff and faculty that make this sort of work possible. Many faculty and staff reported feeling under recognized or unrecognized for their work in cultural support and program development on campus. Many respondents indicated that they felt this is not a sustainable practice for the university, especially given the growing market for people with these sorts of skills and knowledges. As one person said: "*You cannot just have a few Indigenous faculty members. You need a critical mass.*" Many respondents felt a pressure to support this sort of work at the university, but often felt that this work was "*above and*

beyond” their prescribed duties at the university. Respondents indicated that this work needs to be properly recognized by managers, department heads and deans. One respondent spoke of their experience by saying, *“If you are First Nations on campus, there is an assumption that you have access to culture, language and ceremonies. I have had requests of all manner on campus. If you really put your heart into it there is so much involved in planning a ceremony and ensuring that ceremony is respectful.”* Indigenous faculty and staff are often seen as the ‘go-to’ people for much of this work and it regularly happens off the side of someone’s desk. It needs to be fully appreciated and valued for the important role it fulfills for the university.

Professional development opportunities: Interviewees spoke about the need to value and invest in employees through professional development opportunities. Recommendations included making existing opportunities more visible and easily accessible and offering (and advertising) new learning opportunities. People also spoke about the need to expand our understanding of what is implied by ‘professional development’ to include personal development that relates to Indigenous cultures, histories and knowledges: *“Not everyone needs to be an expert, but we need to raise the level of knowledge that is expected of faculty and staff. There should be opportunities for people to learn and gain confidence.”* Specifically, learning Indigenous languages and developing opportunities to learn about and participate in ceremony were emphasized as something that is valuable and should be encouraged.

Developing confidence and empowering staff: Another theme that emerged was the importance of empowering Indigenous faculty and staff. Respondents indicated that they would like the university to support and trust Indigenous faculty and staff, emphasizing that they are the people who are often working in Indigenous programming every day and who are experts in their area. In particular, a group that came up in discussions was the importance of empowering the Aboriginal Advisors’ Circle. By empowering and trusting Indigenous faculty and staff, the university may be able to overcome some of the negative aspects of hierarchical organizations and support informed decision making. Many respondents emphasized principles of *“nothing about us, without us,”* a commonly used phrase to indicate the importance of Indigenous people informing the development of Indigenous-oriented programs and practices. Indigenous staff and faculty need to be able to share ideas freely and feel supported in their work. This often involved supporting one another: *“The work that I do I try to focus on the contributions of Indigenous people and the way that they can support and add to what we need, but we need to do it in a more mindful way as an institution. An Indigenous worldview is often antithetical to the work at the university.”*

B: Cultural Strength of the University

Many respondents indicated their vision for how the university could support and facilitate the growing demand for cultural support in an appropriate and respectful way.

Partnerships: Respondents indicated that partnering externally could help the university to collaboratively increase capacity for cultural support through allowing the university to access a larger breadth of cultural resources and a greater diversity of perspectives. In doing this, it was recognized that the university can overcome some of the limitations that it faces in engaging in a diversity of cultural work. Partnering with community organizations was also seen by respondents as a means of expanding university networks.

Respect: Almost all respondents emphasized the importance of engaging in cultural work—such as requesting the knowledges of Elders or for someone to lead a ceremony—in a respectful way. Practical

suggestions included asking for help when necessary, being aware of one's knowledge and limits, and not rushing the sort of cultural shift that needs to take place at the university. For participants, respect was important not only in how someone was asked, but also in ensuring Elders are being asked to contribute in ways that are not superficial or tokenistic. More specifically, there was a concern raised by what one respondent called "*cultural tourism*," or treating Indigenous ceremonies merely as a destination and people not being consciously engaged in a meaningful way. While only one respondent used this specific language, the concern for cultural tourism emerged throughout other interviews as well. Similarly, when the university uses ceremony, it was suggested that it must be done in a respectful and thoughtful way. To make meaningful change in this area, Elders' knowledges must be respected and valued. This often comes from understanding and appreciating the years of experience and teachings that have guided an Elder. As one respondent explained in reference to Elders' knowledge and its appreciation on campus: "*There is a lack of understanding about what people have learned and what they are expected to share.*"

Meeting demand: Many participants spoke about the increased (and increasing) demand for the services, assistance and advice of Elders, knowledge keepers and language speakers. This demand at the U of S is not isolated, and many other groups and organizations are also relying more heavily on these groups of people for this sort of work. Given that this pool of people is quite limited, respondents indicated that maintaining positive and mutually beneficial relationships was important so we can continue to offer these services and supports to the university community. It was suggested that by being respectful of these relationships the U of S will be able to more easily expand programming and provide appropriate cultural services.

Shifting institutional culture: Respondents spoke of the need to shift the institutional culture at the U of S to fulfil the ambitious goals outlined in the recently adopted mission, vision and values document and the commitment to live up to the calls to action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Respondents also touched on the need to create safer places for cultural explorations with the hope to lessen anxieties that are often inherent to substantive changes. As one respondent said, "*Many people are well intentioned and coming at this thoughtfully and humbly but they are afraid of making mistakes. We need to support a culture where people can make mistakes. If you make a mistake, it doesn't mean that you're a racist or a bigot, it means that you made a mistake and that's okay.*"

Funding: Many respondents indicated a need for further resources. Present within many interviews was an emphasis for further human resources and land, but almost all underscored their thinking with the importance of further monetary resources to ensure success in the area of cultural support, emphasizing that funding for cultural activities and support should be made permanent. Additionally, the funding that currently exists needs to be made clear so that people who are interested in pursuing this work do not feel inhibited by costs. Suggestions about how this funding should exist varied greatly, with some suggesting that all colleges and schools need to make it a priority and allocate funds towards it and others wanting a centrally-located fund. Regardless of the final format of this funding, it was clear that some sort of permanent funding will show a commitment on behalf of the institution and will help to move from words to action.

C: Accessibility

Respondents spoke to the accessibility of cultural supports and how to make these services inviting to Indigenous students.

Diversity of Indigeneity: In various ways, many participants spoke of the need for the university to ensure that it is supporting and recognizing a diversity of Indigenous cultures and identities. This included, but was not limited to:

- ensuring that our cultural offerings are inclusive to many different nations and communities so we are valuing the diversity of Indigenous peoples that are integral to our university, and similarly that Elders and knowledge keepers are coming from diverse identities;
- supporting students' identities—as one participant said, *“Indigenous people should be supported in their post-secondary pursuits and not feel that their Indigeneity is contingent on roles prescribed by anyone else”*;
- valuing that different Elders and knowledge keepers may have different teachings or perspectives depending on a variety of different factors; and
- recognizing that culture can exist and be promoted in a variety of ways, such as through ceremony, visual art, songs, dancing, language, storytelling, etc.

Gender: A theme that emerged in the data was gender inclusivity. More specifically, respondents said that it is important that women's teachings and women's ceremonies are included in the university's cultural offerings. This would mean forging and maintaining strong relationships with those able to provide these teachings and conduct these ceremonies.

Availability of Elders and knowledge keepers: The participants emphasized the need to have Elders and knowledge keepers that are easily and readily available, and not just loosely 'accessible.' Participants spoke of the need to better market the current offerings and to create an environment where students feel safe in approaching an Elder and not fearful that they will do something wrong.

D: Centralization versus Decentralization

Respondents to the survey and those interviewed had many opinions on the benefits and detriments to centralized and decentralized models of administering cultural stewardship.

Benefits of centralization: Respondents identified four broad reasons for the benefits of centralization:

1. *Simplicity:* Many respondents spoke about the importance of a simple process in accessing cultural supports. Especially for smaller units or for those with less readily available expertise in this area, going to a central unit is a simple solution or starting point. Respondents spoke about how a central unit would be better able to create consistency on campus, maintain positive relationships and increase collaborations across unit and college boundaries. A central office can influence and assist all on campus and make cultural services and supports more accessible.
2. *Knowledge:* The need to have access to somebody who is knowledgeable in protocols and about the resources and people that exist external to the university came out as a priority so the university can do this work respectfully and maintain positive relationships. A centralized office was viewed as the logical place for this capacity to exist.
3. *Consistent procedures:* Centralization allows for the purely transactional aspects of acquiring these services to be predictable and streamlined, such as the payment process.
4. *Known offerings and limits:* Many people spoke to the desirability of knowing the university's cultural capacity, current cultural offerings and the relationships that we currently have. Many were unaware of this information and would like it to be made clear to the university community.

Benefits of decentralization: There were also four broad arguments for the benefits of decentralization:

1. *Spread accountability:* There were many arguments made as to how proper cultural stewardship has to be a university-wide commitment, not the responsibility of one person or one office. The U of S needs people throughout the institution with relationships and responsibilities in this area to create greater buy in and capacity. Moreover, as one interviewee put it, complete centralization means that one person (or office) “owns” culture, and this is problematic as it does not achieve the diversity requirements described above. Decentralization also helps to make cultural services less of a transaction and more deeply embedded in a college or unit.
2. *Differing needs and outcomes:* As one interviewee said, “one central unit supporting everyone seems like a lot to ask.” The U of S is a complicated and multifaceted organization with various needs. A decentralized model would be better suited to meet the unique needs of each college and an Elder or knowledge keeper would be able to become very well acquainted with the faculty, staff, students and programming in an individual college to best help support them.
3. *Problems with complete centralization:* Some respondents were weary that moving too far into centralization could lead to lessening the autonomy of colleges. Rather, respondents wanted any coordination to happen *with* colleges, not simply *for* colleges.
4. *Accessibility:* Many participants said that a more decentralized model would increase accessibility and availability of cultural supports. Many spoke of the need to meet students, faculty and staff where they are as a way to get rid of any barriers to access.

Going Forward

Following the release of this interim report, there will be three different focus groups for those that were interviewed or who were sent an interview. From there, this information will be used collectively to guide our decision making in this area so we are best able to engage in this work in a respectful and sustainable way that supports students, faculty, staff and the entire university community.

Appendix A – Survey

Questions

1. What is your role on campus?
 - a. Administration
 - b. Faculty
 - c. Staff
 - d. Advisor
 - e. Other _____

2. What is your experience accessing cultural supports on campus? (Check all that apply)

3. How do you currently access cultural support on campus?
 - a. Through the Gordon Oakes Red Bear Student Centre
 - b. Through the Gwenna Moss Centre for Teaching and Learning
 - c. Through my own contacts and community
 - d. Through another person on campus
 - e. Through another person off campus
 - f. Other _____

4. What cultural supports are required for us to meet the goals that have been articulated by the institution? (Comment box)

5. What would you like cultural support, on campus, to look like?
 - a. What services do you believe should be provided centrally?
 - b. What services do you believe should be provided by colleges and schools?

Appendix B – Interviews

Interview Script

- 1. Introduction**
- 2. Confidentiality and Anonymity**

Indigenous engagement has been articulated as a high institutional priority. We are currently involved in a project with the purpose of building a clear picture of what we have as well as what we need. We know demand is high, but this will allow us to better understand the context that we are in and how to best support resources to meet our goals as an institution.

I'd like to outline a few things to make sure that today is as meaningful as possible. You're not expected to know everything about the current cultural supports on campus—we are just looking for your individual perspective based on what you currently know. We're not here to judge or comment; we're just here to listen for the purpose of program and support development. **This will never be attributed to you as an individual.**

As we're asking questions, feel free to ask for clarity, or jump around if you remember something that you'd like to add to a previous statement. We can always take a break and come back to the question at hand later. Also, if you would like something to be heard, but off the record, just let me know and I'll stop typing.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

3. Interview Questions

- a. What is your role on campus?
- b. What experience do you have accessing cultural supports on campus?
 - i. How do you currently access cultural support on campus?
 - ii. What obstacles or challenges have you had accessing cultural supports?
- c. What cultural supports and needs are required for us to meet the goals that have been articulated by the institution?
 - i. What would you like cultural support, on campus, to look like?
- d. What services do you believe should be provided centrally/ what services do you believe should be provided by colleges and schools?
- e. In light of everything that you've said, is there anything else that you'd like to add?

Conclusion

- Thank you for taking the time to come in and speak with us today.
- If you remember anything later or if you would like to speak with me privately, you are welcome to do so. My contact information is on my cards.
- A report will be created and posted to the Aboriginal Initiatives website
- Thanks again and have a great day!