



Building Reconciliation National Forum November 18 and 19, 2015: Major Themes Summary

The Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission identified an urgent need for reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and societies. Universities across the country are examining how they can make changes within the core of their institutions, engage more effectively with Indigenous communities and become leaders and partners in building reconciliation.

Following the release of the TRC's summary report and calls to action in June, 2015, Chancellor Blaine Favel urged the University of Saskatchewan to continue its leadership and host a national forum to discuss the important issues emerging from the TRC. Favel and our new President Peter Stoicheff co-hosted the forum held November 18–19 on our Saskatoon campus and at Wanuskewin Heritage Park. The national gathering attracted more than 200 participants, including 25 Indigenous leaders and 14 post-secondary institution presidents. The forum was co-chaired by Dr. Margaret Kovach and Dr. Keith Carlson.

A video of the forum's plenary session speeches can be viewed [online](#). This video includes inspirational words from our co-hosts, welcoming remarks for a number of honoured guests, and compelling speeches from TRC Commissioner Justice Murray Sinclair and National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations Perry Bellegarde.

The U of S committed to capturing the key themes that emerged from the discussion and sharing them with participants. What follows is a summary of themes that emerged from those discussions within each of the four sessions: Teaching and Learning, Research, Aboriginal Student Experience, and University Governance and Structures.

Knowing that the TRC had set out the "why" and the "what" in their report, forum participants spent time discussing how universities can respond to the calls to action put forward by the TRC. Across the two days of the forum, several powerful underlying messages emerged, cutting across both the "how" and the "what" of moving forward with actions

- (1) The time for action is now. Allies are everywhere and the national agenda has shifted to make this an ideal time to bring about change. Still, patience is needed as real and sustained change will take years.**
- (2) The change in our institutions must be change to the core; change must be long-term and sustainable.**
- (3) Concrete resources are required to make change happen and metrics need to be in place to measure progress.**

- (4) Although the work of changing institutions belongs to everyone with everyone playing a part, Indigenous faculty and administrators are critical to bringing Indigenous viewpoints into post-secondary institutions. Collaboration with Indigenous people is required at every step—exemplifying the idea of “nothing about us without us.”**
- (5) It is vital that Indigenous students are able to see themselves in our institutions—in our people, in our spaces and in our values.**

Although critical consideration was given to challenges and opportunities in response to the calls to action, there was also a sense of incredible optimism. Participants believed that we do not have to look far for the answers we seek—many of the ideas and models we need already exist in our institutions within Canada. The consensus was that post-secondary institutions need to continue to create opportunities and safe spaces for dialogue about these important issues.

Background to the discussion sessions

- There were four discussion sessions at the Building Reconciliation National Forum:
 - Session 1: Setting a change agenda for university teaching and learning
 - Session 2: Setting a change agenda for university research
 - Session 3: Setting a change agenda for Aboriginal student experience
 - Session 4: Setting a change agenda for university governance and structures
- Each discussion session began with brief presentations from national thought leaders.
- Tables of 8 to 10 participants were provided with a set of discussion questions to guide conversations.
- Whenever possible, honorary student witnesses were at each table. Their role was to listen carefully to the discussion and prepare themselves to seek opportunities to speak about their thoughts and experiences in other venues at other times.
- Each table had an appointed note-taker who recorded discussion for subsequent transcription and analysis.
- What follows is an analysis of the raw data out of which key themes were identified (with examples) from discussion sessions.

Session 1: Setting a change agenda for university teaching and learning

Thought Leaders:

[Jo-Ann Archibald](#) – University of British Columbia

[Qwul’sih’yah’maht Robina Thomas](#) – University of Victoria

Discussion Questions:

1. What are your reactions/responses to the introductory remarks of the thought leaders? What struck you about what you heard?
2. What does it mean in a university environment to “indigenize the academy”? How do we achieve this? How can university leadership and the collegium assist in recruiting and retaining Aboriginal faculty?

3. What are the keys to successfully cultivating and supporting Aboriginal leadership within the institution?
4. What strategies can universities develop and implement to ensure that Indigenous ways of knowing are respected and valued within academic structures and governance?

Emerging Major Themes:

(A) Post-secondary institutions need to change curricular requirements and modify the typical approach to making this happen. This theme received considerable attention in the discussion session in terms of what to teach, who to teach it and how to be successful. Exemplars of this theme included:

- Different models and levels of curriculum implementation: (i) a mandatory Indigenous studies course for some or all programs, (ii) integrating Indigenous content, learning outcomes and objectives into most courses, (iii) a mandatory Indigenous knowledge component, but not a traditional for-credit course, (iv) an experiential learning opportunity (e.g., going out onto the land with an elder), (v) an online module, (vi) a national MOOC shared with many institutions and (vii) implementing small changes into the classroom as a way of incorporating Indigenous practices (e.g., have students sit in a talking circle).
- There was recognition that the development and implementation of new curricula would require a commitment of financial and human resources, with a view to the value in looking at established, successful programs as a model to either replicate or build upon.
- Participants identified the need to recruit more Indigenous faculty with the ability to teach Indigenous content and the need to consult with students on the design of any mandatory Indigenous studies course.
- Some discussion groups contemplated the role of elders and knowledge keepers in teaching and learning—the need to hire elders and knowledge keepers to act as guides and teachers and the need to position these people in the professorial ranks.
- There was an identified need to create a framework for the teaching of Indigenous topics by non-Indigenous people. One suggestion was to have Indigenous and non-Indigenous faculty members co-teach courses for a period of time, potentially leaving the non-Indigenous instructor with the knowledge and experience to teach material alone in the future.
- Cautions against “forcing” Indigenous education given the fear that forcing may create hostility and entrench unfavourable attitudes.
- As a way to improve the likelihood of successfully implementing Indigenous content into curriculum it was suggested that institutions
 - develop clear and persuasive communications to students, faculty and the community explaining why intercultural education is important and beneficial,
 - This may involve framing the conversation as one about citizenship; a university should give a good education in citizenship, including such things as Aboriginal cultures, treaty rights and residential schools.

- Where appropriate, frame the curriculum changes as a professional development opportunity for students rather than a moral obligation; show that this knowledge will lead to increased effectiveness in working with Indigenous clients/patients/organizations.
- influence the public and private school systems to incorporate education on topics relating to Indigenous peoples much earlier (i.e., kindergarten to Grade 12).

(B) Shifting to doing things differently in the curriculum will require additional and intentional professional development opportunities for faculty and staff. For example, there is a need to:

- Demonstrate to faculty that new and different kinds of conversations will increasingly arise in their classrooms; professional development will help them to better the quality and productivity of these conversations.
- Create tools for professors to use in the classroom (e.g., videos of knowledge keepers).

(C) Doing things differently in the teaching and learning domain could be best accomplished by developing Canadian networks and platforms. Examples include:

- Exploring the idea of a cross-institutional task force (perhaps through Universities Canada) to catalogue some of the great things happening across the country and to identify best practices. Post-secondary institutions in Canada would benefit from the creation of a platform to serve as a common ground for developing and sharing ideas.
- Developing MOUs between institutions to allow students to take an Indigenous studies program elsewhere if their home institution does not have one.
- Establishing collaborations within institutions for faculties/colleges to share Indigenous teachings (or mandatory courses) across a university.

Session 2: Setting a change agenda for University Research

Thought Leaders:

[Marie Battiste](#) – University of Saskatchewan

[Craig McNaughton](#) – Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada

Discussion Questions:

1. What are your reactions/responses to the introductory remarks of the thought leaders? What resonated for you? From your vantage point, should anything be added or adjusted in terms of the opening remarks?
2. What are the high-impact strategies universities can use to develop a rich research agenda that will contribute to building reconciliation?
3. How can we build a national network of Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars and research partners working in support of reconciliation? What are the mechanisms or steps to achieve that?



Emerging Major Themes:

(A) One of the key themes in this session focused on the importance of recognizing the value of Indigenous/community outreach and research. Participants touched on:

- The need for Indigenous community-based research to be recognized within the university when it comes to decisions regarding tenure, promotion and merit.
- The need for community engagement (and the building of relationships) to be recognized as a key element of scholarship.
- The value and needed support of research/scholarship reported in non-traditional ways (e.g., using photo media to reflect orality of Indigenous cultures).
- The possibility of linking such things as tenure, promotion and merit to activities focused on supporting Indigenous/reconciliation activities.
- The need for universities to identify grant funding in support of Indigenous research (and researchers).

(B) Another theme focused on the need to rethink our approach to Indigenous research, exemplified by:

- Asking communities what outcomes they need, rather than researchers seeking a suitable community after creating a project and creating a system to facilitate the sharing of this information. This involves
 - beginning community relationships by identifying elders in the community to work with,
 - encouraging researchers to engage with Indigenous communities through ceremonies,
 - encouraging researchers to partner with organizations within Indigenous communities, not just with elected officials,
 - approaching research projects as equal partnerships between researchers and Indigenous communities,
 - actively inviting members of Indigenous communities onto campus, and
 - setting a requirement for the percentage of research projects that must be community-initiated.
- Keeping forefront the notion of "nothing about us without us," which signals the requirement that researchers not undertake projects involving Indigenous peoples and topics in the absence of thorough and meaningful consultations.
- Establishing clear ethics protocols on Indigenous research that
 - includes Indigenous peer review at the university ethics level (perhaps an ethics subcommittee),
 - consults with the elders of a community for specific protocols,
 - follows the proposed SSHRC Indigenous research guidelines, and
 - supports Indigenous communities in creating their own ethics protocols.
- Involving Indigenous undergraduate students in research projects to help them develop skills and help build relationships with their communities.
 - Young people can go back into their communities and "incubate" ideas.



- Giving consideration to a system in which some research funding flows directly to communities, who then decide how to spend it.

(C) Significant discussion revolved around the theme of what might facilitate the needed changes to how research and scholarship are viewed and undertaken. Some concrete ideas regarding these “facilitators” included:

- Recruit and retain Indigenous faculty who can facilitate relationships with communities through their outreach activities.
- Identify non-academics working on community initiatives and invite them to enroll in PhD programs that could lead to tenure-track positions.
- Establish a national forum on Indigenous research, bringing together researchers, students and elders.
 - Establish a national post-secondary research group on reconciliation; meet annually to present findings.
- Create new faculty awards for reconciliation research.
- Showcase positive impacts on communities to inspire public and donor funding.
- Develop online platforms to share presentations from Indigenous scholars with students and communities.
- Establish a website to connect researchers and students around Indigenous pedagogy.
- Establish a leader at each university (such as an Indigenous Research Chair program with a chair at each university) to facilitate sharing best practices across the country.
- Choose external reviewers who have a basis for understanding Aboriginal issues.
- Guide the writing of academic reference letters by community partners to use the language expected by external reviewers.
- Teach graduate students how to translate research for different audiences (academics, funders, the public, etc.) to improve communication on how research is benefitting society.
- Create faculty positions with no teaching responsibilities: only community research responsibilities.
- Partner with groups such as the Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network.

Session 3: Setting a change agenda for Aboriginal Student Experience

Thought Leaders:

[Jack Saddleback](#) – University of Saskatchewan
 Dana Carriere – University of Saskatchewan
 Jeremy McKay – University of Manitoba



Discussion Questions:

1. What are your reactions/responses to the introductory remarks of the student leaders? What resonated for you? From your vantage point, should anything be added or adjusted in terms of opening remarks?
2. What are the key ingredients for Aboriginal students to experience a sustained welcoming environment on a university campus (e.g., beyond first year for the duration of a degree)?
3. How might we influence the hearts and minds of non-Aboriginal students to create allies and to mitigate any backlash that stems from steps taken to “indigenize the academy”?

Emerging Major Themes:

(A) *The first compelling theme around Indigenous student experience was about the pressing need for role models. For participants, this translated into some of the following examples:*

- Hire more Indigenous faculty into secure, permanent positions. Specifically, hire people who are engaged in their culture and want to engage others.
- Hire elders or spiritual leaders to guide and support students (noting that this is particularly critical during periods of stress and transition).
- Invest further in Indigenous graduate students and scholars to produce more Indigenous faculty members for the future.
- Provide opportunities for students to lead other students (e.g., peer mentorship).
- Make success stories visible—showcase role models.
- Engage Indigenous role models to encourage educational participation.

(B) *There is a clear need for the right places and spaces on post-secondary campuses. Some examples included:*

- Build spaces for Indigenous students and groups. Offer cultural programming/support in these spaces.
- Include space for smudging ceremonies.
- Establish spaces where students can have sweats.
- Give streets and buildings Indigenous names.
- Display Indigenous artwork.
- Consider having urban reserves on campus.

(C) *Welcoming environments for Indigenous students is a fundamental requirement for improving the student experience. Ideas about how this would look were plentiful, including the following exemplars:*



- Help Indigenous students see their values reflected in the institution: words, buildings, actions. This could be done by
 - hosting powwows and other ceremonial events—encourage non-Indigenous people to attend,
 - hosting Indigenous student graduation celebrations,
 - acknowledging the traditional territory on which the institution resides, and
 - recognizing Indigenous spiritual days as university holidays.
- Organize programs to create friendship and dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. This could be done by
 - feeding people—e.g., hold soup and bannock lunches on a regular basis,
 - establishing exchange programs for non-Indigenous students to visit Indigenous communities, and
 - establishing cultural bridging programs to connect international students with Indigenous students (or work with community programs that do the same).
- Establish clear metrics to measure retention and satisfaction of Indigenous students—such as detailed surveys that look beyond enrolment numbers. Ensure these metrics are published for maximum accountability.
 - Learn the goals of Indigenous students and consider alternate definitions of success—not getting a degree is not a failure.
- Train staff and faculty involved in support programs and with Indigenous students to be culturally aware.
- Recognize the complexity of Indigenous identities.
 - When incorporating Indigenous traditions and values, expand the scope to include many different cultures.
- Implement less stringent methods of proving ancestry for student awards—e.g., accept a description of one’s connection to an Indigenous community or First Nation instead of requiring documentation.
- Engage the families of Indigenous students.
 - Provide opportunities for them to celebrate the success of the student in their family.

(D) Not surprisingly, considerable discussion around Indigenous student experience focused on removing barriers of all kinds:

- Establish more funding that will benefit Indigenous students by
 - offering tuition waivers to students previously in foster care,
 - establishing more scholarships, bursaries and summer jobs specifically for Indigenous students, and
 - establishing scholarships for first-generation university students.
- Establish and expand support programs (including academic and non-academic supports) by
 - offering wellness supports,
 - expanding student support programs beyond the first year of university
 - offering childcare, and



- identifying affordable housing opportunities.
- Bring students to visit campus earlier—in middle school—to help them “see themselves” as belonging at a university. This can be done through
 - establishing pre-university programs to prepare students for university, and
 - establishing a summer program with cultural elements and elder mentors.

Session 4: Setting a change agenda for University Governance and Structures

Thought Leaders:

[Leroy Little Bear](#) – University of Lethbridge

[Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux](#) – Lakehead University

Discussion Questions:

1. What are your reactions/responses to the introductory remarks of the thought leaders? What struck you about what you heard?
2. What does it mean in a university environment to “indigenize the academy”? How do we achieve this? How can university leadership and the collegium assist in recruiting and retaining Aboriginal faculty?
3. What are the keys to successfully cultivating and supporting Aboriginal leadership within the institution?
4. What strategies can universities develop and implement to ensure that Indigenous ways of knowing are respected and valued within academic structures and governance?

Emerging Major Themes:

(A) Post-secondary institutions must take the lead in setting a tone, setting expectations and developing new ways of doing business. For example, participants articulated a series of strategies as follows:

- Senior leaders must set the tone at the top and champion Indigenization initiatives.
- Work to spread responsibility for Indigenous initiatives throughout the institution at all levels (administration, faculty, staff)—not just relying on a few positions.
 - Work needs to be done at the college/department level, not just the institutional level.
 - Engage non-Indigenous faculty to “pick up the torch” and lead work on Indigenous initiatives.
- Embed commitments to Indigenization within the institution’s mission or vision.
- Publicly incorporate Indigenous traditions into decision-making—e.g., go to a sweat lodge and involve elders when making an important decision.



(B) There was considerable discussion about positions and structures that would help to better position post-secondary institutions to build reconciliation. Examples included:

- Hire more Indigenous people into staff and faculty roles.
- Develop and fill senior leadership positions.
 - For example, this could include the roles of vice-president, vice-provost, and associate dean.
- Establish fair guidelines for financially compensating elders and knowledge keepers.
 - Respect and recognize the difference between elders and knowledge keepers and pay each appropriately.
- Maintain a council of elders available to the whole institution for consultation.
- Include Indigenous leaders in senior leadership meetings and places where important decisions are made.

(C) Institutions must build accountability throughout the organization. Concrete suggestions about what this accountability might look like included:

- Create accountability frameworks to ensure plans regarding such things as diversity goals and curriculum implementation are successfully implemented.
 - Leaders should provide regular status reports.
- Incorporate Indigenous goals into human resources strategies—employment, promotion, tenure.
- Develop and establish foundational documents (e.g., Charter of Indigenous Knowledge) as a way to implement and spread reconciliation awareness throughout the institution.

Going forward

At the close of the U of S National Forum, the stage was set for much more work to be done in response to the calls to action.

President Peter Stoicheff announced that all 24 post-secondary institutions in Saskatchewan [signed on to a commitment](#) to seek opportunities to collaborate, in consultation with Indigenous communities, to close the education gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. This accord, the first province-wide commitment of its kind, is an ongoing initiative within Saskatchewan. In February of 2016, the U of S and the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR) signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to provide access to information on Canada's history with Indigenous peoples. As is the case at many institutions across campus, new initiatives are planned or underway at the U of S to ensure the university is the best place it can possibly be for Indigenous peoples.

With a view to keeping the momentum going, the University of Alberta has generously offered to host the second national forum at their campus in Edmonton in the fall of 2016.

