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Canadian schools succeed in nudging one minority group to and through college

Despite continued challenges, similar approaches could help nonwhites in the U.S.

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by Jon Marcus November 25, 2016

SASKATOON, Saskatchewan — The students in the crowded hall fall silent as Darlene Speidel, an elder and "knowledge keeper" of native traditions, says a prayer in the Lakota language over soup and bannock, a kind of flat bread.

"It always makes me feel so good to see all of you students and the efforts you're putting in to advancing yourselves," Speidel adds, in English.

The price of this free lunch, under a ceiling designed to look like a medicine wheel in the new Gordon Oakes Red Bear Student Centre at the University of Saskatchewan, is to listen to a presentation about campus mental health services.

When it's over, there's a dash for the buffet.

Giving them their own building and cultural activities, intensive personal and academic help, and even free food are among the measures Canadian universities are taking to increase the enrollment and graduation odds of native, or indigenous, students, who get college degrees at less than half the rate of whites.

Those odds are gradually improving. And policymakers say some of the same approaches could succeed for other groups that go to college at lower levels than whites for surprisingly similar reasons — including, in the United States, Hispanics, blacks, and native Americans.

"A lot of these things are transferable," said Peter Stoicheff, the university's president.

As in the United States, they're also practical.

The number of indigenous Canadians grew four times faster than the rest of the population between 2006 and 2011, the most recent period for which the figure is available, and that pace is expected to continue, according to the government agency Statistics Canada.

Nearly a third are 14 or younger and another 18 percent are 15 to 24, Statistics Canada reports, meaning they're college age, or will be soon. That's double and triple the proportion of non-indigenous Canadians, respectively.

Nationally, about 4 percent of Canadians are indigenous, up from 3 percent in 2001. But in some provinces, the indigenous population is much higher, including Saskatchewan, where it's an estimated 20 percent.

The number of native students at the University of Saskatchewan is up 37 percent in the last five years; the number of graduates, up 66 percent

"If you were not paying attention to one fifth of your population, you would really need to start to," Stoicheff said.

A similar shift is well under way in the United States, where the number of college-age Hispanics will more than double by 2060, according to projections by the Hobby Center for the Study of Texas at Rice University, while the supply of college-age whites declines. The number of native Americans will increase 42 percent by then, the Census Bureau says.

But only 21 percent of Hispanics 25 and older have some college education, and 24 percent of native Americans, according to the Lumina Foundation, which tracks this. (Lumina is a funder of The Hechinger Report, which produced this story.) That's less than half and about half the proportion of whites.

In Canada, an even lower 9.8 percent of indigenous people have university degrees, Statistics Canada reports.

Ignoring groups like these not only means risking empty seats at universities as populations shift, say experts; it's costly to economies.

"There is a combination of a moral imperative and an economic imperative," said Paul Davidson, president of Universities Canada, the principal association of Canadian universities.

An economic imperative worth $90 billion in Saskatchewan alone, according to the Gabriel Dumont Institute of Native Studies. That's how much more money would be generated in just this one province, right now, researchers found, if the education divide were erased between indigenous and non-indigenous people, thanks to higher incomes, more tax revenue, and savings that result from better health and less crime.

In the United States, closing the gap between Hispanics and non-Hispanics would increase personal income nationwide by $24.4 trillion by 2060, based on current trends, a book coauthored by Hobby Center director and former U.S. Census Bureau head Steve Murdock calculates.

As for the moral imperative, that was speeded up in Canada by last year's report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which exposed a dark history of what it called cultural genocide against the country's native inhabitants.

"It was really our own reinvigorated call to action," said Patti McDougall, vice provost for teaching and learning at the University of Saskatchewan, or U of S.

The most damning part of that legacy: government-funded and church-run residential schools into which 150,000 indigenous children were forced as part of an effort to assimilate them into white Canadian culture. Many of those children were subjected to physical and sexual abuse, the commission found. Six thousand died.

The residential schools, which operated from the 1870s until as late as 1996, had another long-lasting impact: They made indigenous Canadians suspicious of any form of education, including college.

"It did create the message that school and western education is bad," said native third-year U of S nursing student Jennifer McGillvary, who said the substance abuse and violence with which some indigenous Canadians responded to this treatment "continues in our own families."

Rather than encouraging their children to go to college, indigenous parents "took the residential school and painted all of education with that brush," said Dallas Fiddler, the U of S Indigenous Students Council president.

That's one thing universities have to overcome to increase their numbers of indigenous students: mistrust.

"What you're dealing with now is the impact of all of that history," said Graeme Joseph, the university's team leader for indigenous student success, who said his own relatives recount stories of children being dragged off to the residential schools. "When you think about how aboriginal families relate to institutions like this, they can be very reluctant to send their students here."

Canadian universities have responded with a set of principles for improving indigenous education. And they've started taking concrete steps to overcome the obstacles to that — obstacles much the same for Hispanics, native Americans, and other groups in the United States, including cultural differences, poor preparation in high school, low incomes, an aversion to borrowing, a reluctance to move far away from home, and parents without college degrees or knowledge of the complex application and registration process.

"The big message we send out is, 'You belong here. It's as much your campus as anyone else's.'"

Patti McDougall, vice provost for teaching and learning, University of Saskatchewan

"It's not simply putting out a mat and saying, 'Why aren't the indigenous students coming?'" Davidson said. "When students do arrive on campus, they need to have a sense of home, a sense of place that reflects their culture and traditions."

The U of S, for instance, spent about $11 million on this student center, which opened in February among the European collegiate Gothic-style buildings of the campus. Named for an indigenous spiritual and community leader, it's rich with native symbols: the medicine wheel circling a skylight in the ceiling, two rows of tile girding the exterior that represent a wampum belt, the different colors on each side to represent the four seasons. The architect also designed the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C.

Inside is space for indigenous students to meet with advisors, and for frequent multicultural events including soup and bannock lunches, an aboriginal achievement week, a graduation pow-wow, and native pipe and "smudge" ceremonies, in which smoke from smoldering herbs is

used to carry prayers; they're particularly popular with students who are having academic or other problems, Joseph said. There are bowls of fresh fruit in the waiting room, and a wide-open study area.

Almost nine in 10 Canadian universities now offer academic counseling, mentorship, social and cultural activities, and designated spaces on their campuses for indigenous students, Universities Canada reports.

"You're creating a sense of welcome," said Joseph.

That begins with marketing materials and a recruiter specifically for prospective indigenous students, and one admissions officer designated to oversee indigenous applications.

On campus, deeper changes have been made. In the spring, the council that oversees academics at the U of S agreed that all degree programs will be required to include indigenous content. The number of university programs nationwide that focus on indigenous issues or are designed for indigenous students is up by a third since 2013, according to Universities Canada.

To cope with a high dropout rate among indigenous students between their first and second years — about a third at the U of S don't come back, compared to a fifth of non-aboriginal classmates — the university's Aboriginal Student Achievement Program puts them into classes together to support each other. Administrators provide a special orientation for indigenous students, check in with them monthly in their first year, and invite them for meals and sharing circles.

McGillvary said she didn't know about these programs when she first arrived, and she became discouraged. "I really felt like, 'What's the point of staying?' — that the university wasn't for me." What pulled her out of it, she said, was "finding a sense of community that helps you stay on track, helps you feel like you're not the only one." Said Fiddler: "You want to say, 'I can do this on my own.' I thought I could handle it. But after the first few months I was homesick."

Chennoa Tracey, an engineering student whose mother is indigenous, said she went through the same thing when she arrived at the university of 17,000 undergraduates from a hometown of 350. "I was thinking, 'This is too much,'" she said. Then she went to a soup and bannock lunch and joined a sharing circle of fellow women athletes, and settled in.

"The big message we send out is, 'You belong here. It's as much your campus as anyone else's,'" said McDougall. Which raises a question all of higher education should be asking, she said, as the demographics of its market transform: "Do we change the student to fit in or do we start thinking about changing the institutions?"

The results so far have been dramatic. There were 2,669 indigenous students out of 17,305 undergraduates at the U of S last year, the most recent period for which the figure is available. That's a 37 percent increase in five years, the university reports. Nearly 500 graduated last year, up 56 percent during the same period. Three of the last four student government presidents were indigenous.

"They're no longer at the margins," Davidson said. "They're no longer at the fringe."

Plenty of problems remain, including overcoming disparities in quality between the schools that serve rich and poor children before they even get to college. Only 33 percent of indigenous students graduate from high school in Saskatchewan, less than half the share of whites. Nationwide, 39 percent of indigenous students graduate from high school, compared to 87 percent of their non-indigenous classmates, the Chiefs Assembly on Education reports. In the United States, Hispanics (78 percent), blacks (75 percent), and native Americans (72 percent) trail whites (88 percent) in high school graduation rates.

Like some programs in the United States and Britain to encourage low-income prospects to consider — and prepare themselves for — college, Canadian universities take the simple step of bringing students from local high schools to their campuses. Sixty-six percent also offer academic support and mentorship to indigenous students starting as early as elementary school, according to Universities Canada.

One such student was Zoey Roy, who "didn't think my own life had a lot of value." Then she visited the U of S and "realized I wasn't less smart than the people in the classes."

The point, McDougall said, is that, "We want indigenous students to come on to our campus and see themselves."

That's not always easy. While the proportion of indigenous students at the U of S has slowly increased to 13 percent, only 40 of the 1,000 faculty, or 4 percent, identify themselves as indigenous. That mirrors the situation about which nonwhite students have been protesting in the United States, where 6 percent of faculty are black and 5 percent Hispanic, both well below their proportions of the population.

The U of S has hired an "inclusion diversity consultant" to change that, and is adding the position of vice provost for indigenous engagement, joining two other leaders of indigenous descent — the chancellor and the newly elected chair of the board of governors.

Indigenous students tend to be older than their more traditional classmates, raising another set of challenges; the average age of indigenous undergraduates at the U of S, for instance, is 26, the university reports, while the average white undergraduate is 23. Nonwhite U.S. students are also more likely to be older than traditional age and the first in their families to go to college, the U.S. Department of Education says.

"There's a parallel with [minority] groups in the United States, which is that they're not typically 18 years old," Davidson said. They're mid to late 20s, single mothers. That means practical, tangible, and costly measures such as providing childcare."

Some students say racism persists, too. "We talk about indigenization, but it's still a colonial place," said Roy, who said she's often called upon in class to explain the indigenous point of view. "It should just be normal for indigenous people to be part of the classroom."

That hasn't changed since Joan Greyeyes was one of a total of nine indigenous students on the campus in the 1970s, she said. "Racism hasn't gone away," said Greyeyes, now part of the team that works with indigenous students. "Just because you have a brown face, does that mean you're the expert in indigenous history?"

Then, of course, there's money. There are an estimated 10,000 indigenous students on waiting lists for funding to cover their college costs, according to the Canadian Federation of Students, which has organized petitions and protests calling on the government to invest an additional $50 million a year for that purpose. "There's just a huge number of students who are just waiting," Joseph said.

But for Roy, what overcame all that and brought her to the U of S was simply that she felt welcome. "It wasn't until I was invited that I felt like I should go," she said.

Now studying to be a teacher, she's an intern at a local school and just won a prestigious national teaching fellowship.

And she brings her own eighth graders to the campus.

"It makes them feel like they have a place in higher education," Roy said.

This story was produced by The Hechinger Report, *a nonprofit, independent news organization focused on inequality and innovation in education. Read more about higher education.*

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