

Algonquin College

## Building on Strength: Collaborating for Indigenous Student Success

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## Dedication

Back in my former life and career, I became interested in how different processes impacted results. This interest developed mainly due to a statement from some Joseph M. Juran tapes loaned to me by a special colleague, Chuck Doyle. Juran said 90% of failures are caused by the process and only 10% are caused by people. I've maintained this as a guidepost throughout my career as an Indigenous Relations Manager at Canada Post and now here at Algonquin College as a Community Liaison Resource.

To my surprise the colleague who loaned me those Juran tapes many years ago became a colleague again at Algonquin College. Our shared belief that understanding a process, documenting it and asking questions about the results led us to collaborate again, this time on the different processes that affect Indigenous students.

Our ultimate collaboration resulted in this report. We want to highlight two things. Indigenous students want to succeed, and when expectations, requirements and resources are right, they do. Also, those who determine expectations, requirements and resources—the stakeholders make up a complex web of different processes. Sometimes these processes are at odds with each other, and they lose sight of the student. Indigenous students are subjected to so many of these processes. We were glad to look at what worked for Indigenous students. We can use this as a basis to work with stakeholders to examine their processes. Together we can increase the success of processes, so Indigenous students can succeed.

This journey with my colleague Chuck Doyle, Manager of Lean Initiatives has been a continuous learning experience. Without our frank discussions, open dialogue and drive to pursue understanding, the insights in this report would not have been possible. In fact, without Chuck's willingness to share his knowledge in assembling and documenting data, it would not have even started. I believe this initiative would not have progressed without his expertise, morality and support.

It has and always will be my great pleasure to say that working with my good friend Chuck Doyle is a prime example of collaboration and an example of what two like-minded colleagues can achieve.

## Acknowledgements

This report is important not only for the future of Indigenous student success, but to me personally. Organizational processes become norms, and it is sometimes necessary to question them to make sure they achieve the intended outcomes. This is especially true when there have been significant environmental changes. That is the case today. Indigenous populations are growing. The majority are working age. They want to learn, to work and to succeed. But the processes in place were designed for different populations. They need to change. With this report, we have demonstrated that the changes we need are good for all. And real collaboration is the key. In the spirit of appreciating that collaboration, I would like to recognize some of those who were a part of the work that led to this report.

I wish to thank Dr. Linda Manning for her tireless work for the many hours devoted to research, analysis, and listening to my ramblings as we worked together to design this report. Another great example of the collaboration and dedication that can motivate real solutions.

A special thanks goes out to all the Indigenous youth who participated in the different programs that were reviewed for this document. They were not only enthusiastic volunteers in the programs, they allowed us to follow their progress and helped us to understand what works and what doesn't.

One of the most important collaborations of all is the one that the Community stakeholders brought. They have shown a willingness to look at student outcomes through a new lens, and begin to change the way they work with students. There is still a long road ahead because their systems are well established, and they face their own set of processes in the Community, and others from the Government who funds Indigenous education.

Another of our primary stakeholders that deserves to be appreciated is the Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities (MTCU), who not only funded this project and providing the opportunity for us to share our learnings about Indigenous postsecondary education with key stakeholders, but they have always taken an interest in the results of this work.

With the collaboration of all of these stakeholders, we have a report that tells the story of what is, what works, what is needed, and what the path forward must be. This report is just the first step. There is still much to do.

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## Introduction

Indigenous education and employment are key priorities for regional Community stakeholders sponsoring students at the College (Sponsors), Algonquin College, Canadian government provincial and federal programs. Based on 2006 Canadian Census data, there is a 60.5% increase in employment among Indigenous students who complete a College program, compared to those with no diploma or degree. The impact of a college degree is greater for Indigenous people than for non-Indigenous people, whose increase in employment due to a College degree or diploma was 37.3%. (Assembly of First Nations, 2010). Yet Ontario's postsecondary institutions continue to report significant gaps in enrolment and retention of Indigenous learners in spite of some gains in education completion rates (MTCU 2011).

Indigenous learners in postsecondary education institutions face a number of barriers to success. Coming from a wide variety of backgrounds and levels of preparedness to attend postsecondary studies, some may be inadequately or differently prepared from a personal/social and academic perspective. There are likely also financial barriers, institutional barriers and physical infrastructure (Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology, 2009). In addition, differences in worldview mean different priorities.

In a British Columbia study of Indigenous students, Heslop (2009) reported that they complete high school with generally lower academic qualifications than non-Indigenous students. This may explain choice of programs, persistence behavior and academic performance in postsecondary institutions. Communities can play a role in addressing each of these.

To explore meaningful solutions to these gaps, the Indigenous Strategic Partnerships sector of Algonquin College has led an initiative in collaboration with other key stakeholders to identify the barriers and opportunities for Indigenous educational persistence and employment success. This report documents and summarizes the key findings of activities, which provides the basis for future collaboration and actions.

While summary statistics on Indigenous education and employment outcomes typically compare Indigenous people as a group with non-Indigenous people, this report will concentrate on the story of education and employment for sponsored Indigenous students. Supports that learners receive as they move from family to school to job and into adulthood can either contribute to or limit their success.

The Indigenous Strategic Partnerships team at Algonquin College set out to look more closely at Indigenous student data to identify what was working and what was not working—with the intent to *strengthen data collection and reporting to support evidenced based decision-making* and to *communicate and dialogue with all stakeholders to address retention and graduation challenges*. The analysis and communication revealed fundamental needs for Indigenous students that can be addressed with almost certain success, which has been verified by research on successful Indigenous students and programs to test solutions. Community, government and College stakeholders have been part of the dialogue throughout this process, and have participated in the projects reported here. The purpose of this report is to document the journey from data collection and analysis, to dialogue with stakeholders, to program results. Throughout, the purpose has been to build on strengths of sponsored Indigenous students and all stakeholders to set students up for success in their academic and employment careers. In this report, we present summaries of the following activities:

- **Aboriginal Student Academic Performance (ASAP)** (Part 1 and Part 2). These reports provide insights into key areas where sponsored Indigenous students are not prepared for postsecondary education or the workforce. Data on enrollment, retention, performance and completion measures for the period of 2009-2013 were presented in Part 1, and Part 2 focused exclusively on sponsored students and their retention and completion rates.

- **Supporting Aboriginal People for Labour Market Entry (SAPLME).** This program combined assessment of academic skills as well as personal interests and strengths assessments, provided group counselling and one-on-one career coaching over a 3 week period. The purpose was to help students match their strengths and interests to a career path and to learn how to map out the path to achieving the career of their choice. The assessment portion of the program revealed **three significant and persistent gaps** in preparation for postsecondary education and workforce participation, namely **English, English as a second language (ESL) and Math (basic and fundamental)**. None of the participants qualified postsecondary education without upgrading, and some did not qualify for upgrading at all. The project also gave us insight into the importance of connectedness among the students—and the necessity for one-on-one interaction with someone who will guide them.
- **DevelopMENTOR (DM).** This program builds on barriers identified in ASAP and SAPLME, and success factors revealed in the IYEP (below). Open admission is on a volunteer basis, with 7-10 students completing the program annually. The DM program has 3 main components: preparation for workplace training, partner employers where the students learn on-the-job skills, and a continuous one-on-one coaching throughout the workplace preparation training and the first 8 weeks of employment. The DM program, through skill development activities, ongoing personal and situational coaching with real world work experience, resulted in 100% success—that is, all participants completed their work term and are employment ready. The coach is critical to the success of the program because of the one-on-one, situation-specific guidance that can be provided. Because the coach also works closely with the manager in the workplace, the participant not only builds the necessary skills to succeed at work, they can also develop a sense of belonging in the workplace.
- **Indigenous Youth Educational Persistence (IYEP).** This is a research study to identify the factors that lead to successful completion of postsecondary education for Indigenous youth. Fifteen Indigenous individuals who have completed at least one postsecondary program were interviewed using semi-structured interview methods. Even given unsatisfactory graduation rates among sponsored students, there is still a substantial proportion who graduate, and many who perform well in their academic career.

This various studies, projects and activities summarized in this document reveal two major issues:

**English, ESL and Math Barriers.** Students have difficulty gaining access to programs and completing courses to complete programs. The primary barriers appear to be academic (English, ESL and Math) and employment skills. A significant number of students who apply to a program fail the entrance test: 80-90% failed because of English; and 25% of because of Math. Once students get into a program, lack of English and Math competency continues to plague them. Over the period of study, there were 17,586 exams written, and of these, 1,627 were English exams. Of the 1627 English exams there were 409 failures and 186 withdrawals which is a 36.6% failure rate. One hundred-seventy-five of the failed English exams were in the GAS program, which is where a large proportion of sponsored students enroll.

**Retention Without Results.** Students enroll, often without being sufficiently ready or in the wrong program. Some stay in school (sometimes trying to complete a program, and sometimes they just ‘quit and stay’ without official withdrawal for a period), but many do not complete their program. The College continues to count these students as retained, but they end up leaving the College without completing their program.

- **Building Empowerment—Achieving Results (BEAR) Program.** The final program to be presented in this report is still under development, and is built to address the need for academic and soft-skill preparedness, and opportunities for stakeholders to collaborate to improve sponsored student outcomes in education and employment.

## Programs/Projects/Reports

### Student Performance Reports (2009-2015)

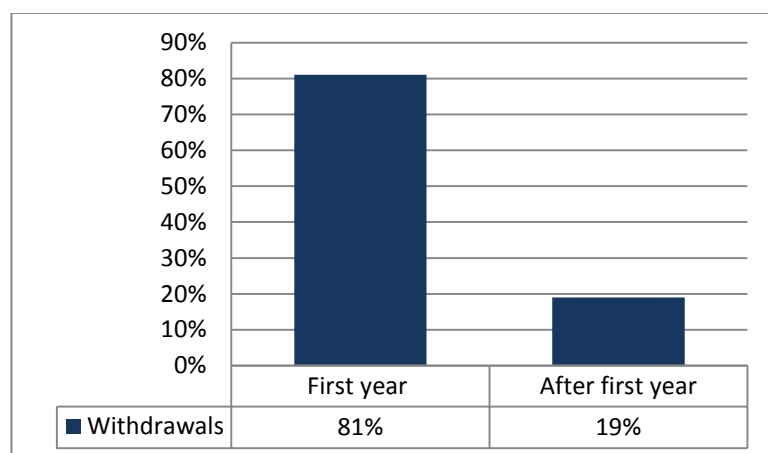
The ISP conducted 2 studies of sponsored Indigenous student performance at the College. The first of the studies extracted data on sponsored students and compared them to self-identified Indigenous students and to the College population overall on a number of enrollment, retention, performance and completion measures for the period of 2009-2013. This study became the basis of the first Day of Dialogue in 2014, providing stakeholders with a one-of-a kind look at the patterns of student performance. Many new questions arose from the discussion that followed. The reader will see a summary of the Day of Dialogue I below.

The second study focused exclusively on sponsored students, explored answers to questions that arose from the first study, and added data through winter semester 2015. The phrase that these reports evoke is Retention Without Results

#### Retention without Results

Students who enroll in postsecondary education may not be sufficiently ready, or they enroll in the wrong program, and as a result, fail courses. Many of these students stay in school (sometimes trying to complete their program, or sometimes they just 'quit and stay' without official withdrawal). When this happens, the College considers them to be retained on the list of students, but they do not complete their program. The figures below illustrate what we're talking about. First, when we look at withdrawals, we see that the largest percentage of withdrawals are in the first year, as opposed to any time after the first year.

*Figure 1 Percent Students Withdrawing in First Year*

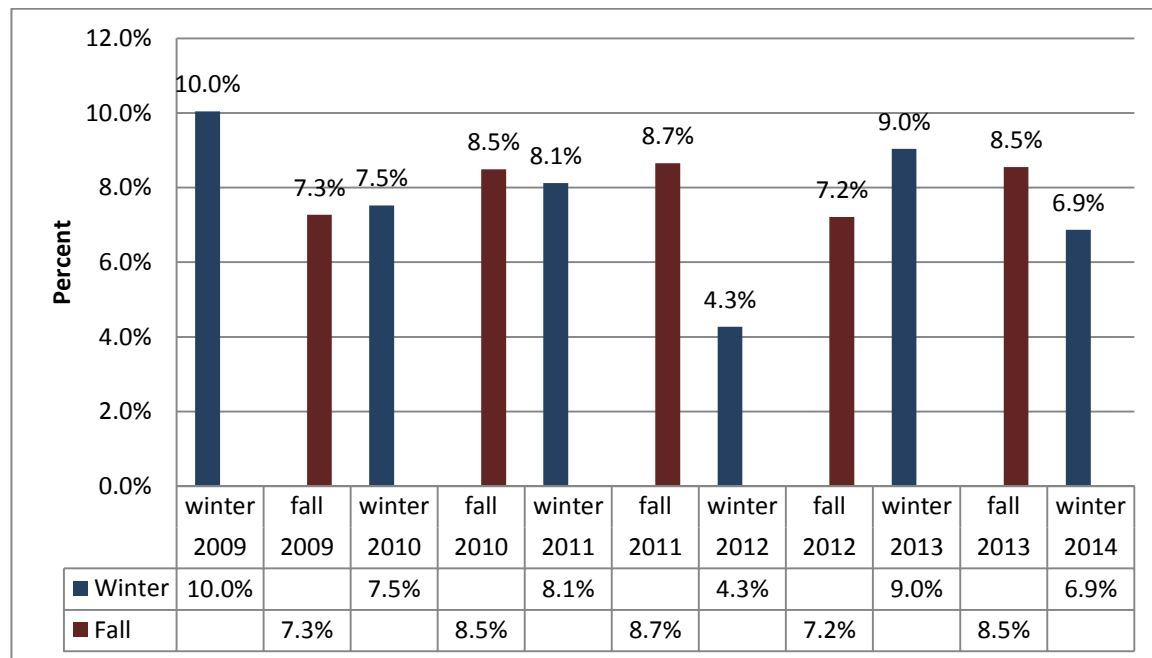


The result above may represent the high percentage of Indigenous students in one-year certificate programs. There is also a high propensity to restart in different programs. There are two questions that we need to consider if we want to provide support to these students. First, when in this year do they withdraw (to identify pivotal points for supports) and why are they taking multiple programs.

The second question is not easily answered without further investigation, but the first one is easy to answer.

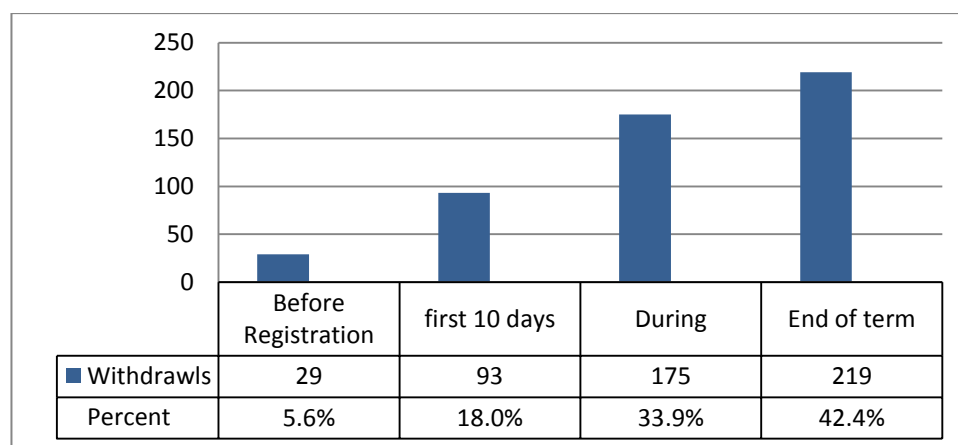
- Sometimes students do not withdraw in time to avoid receiving All Fs, which is what they receive if they haven't taken any final exams, haven't completed requirements for their courses or have failed all of their courses.

Figure 2 Sponsored Students All Fs by year and term



Students are leaving and some may be staying till the end of term but not completing the semester. If we are to understand where to provide supports and what kinds of supports to provide, we need to first understand when they are leaving. The withdrawal data at the College provides an interesting picture.

Figure 3 Withdrawals by time in term



The highest number of withdrawals is at the end of term, after grade reports are received. It is assumed that this number includes many of the students who received All Fs. The second highest number of withdrawals happens during the semester, and this appears to be associated with mid-term marks.

These outcomes have an impact on completion rates, as the next two figures illustrate.



Figure 4 Last Term not Graduated by year and term

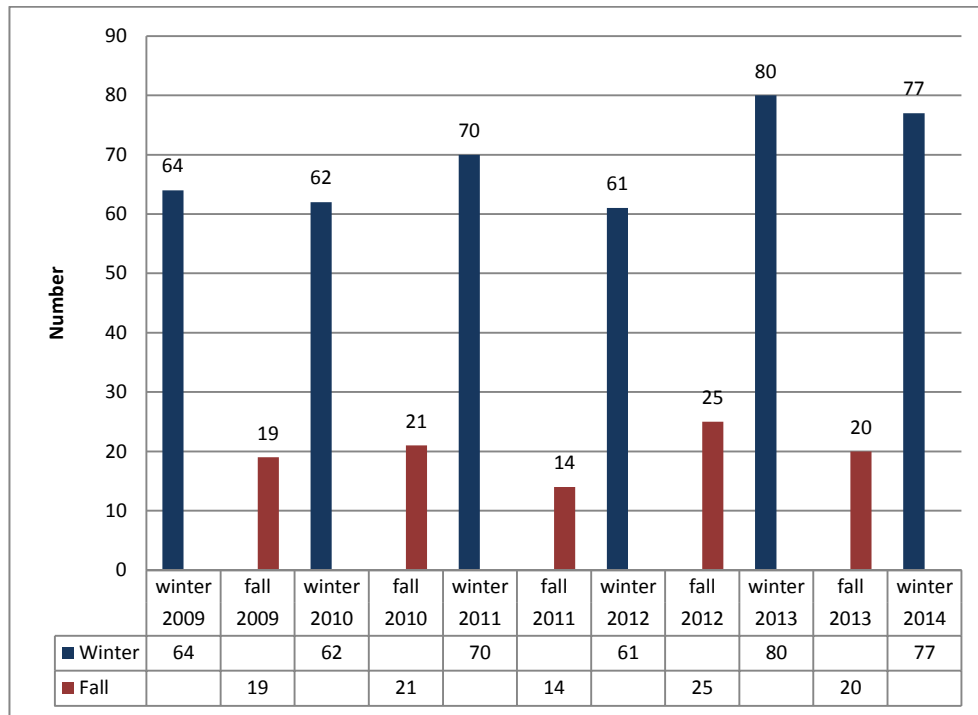
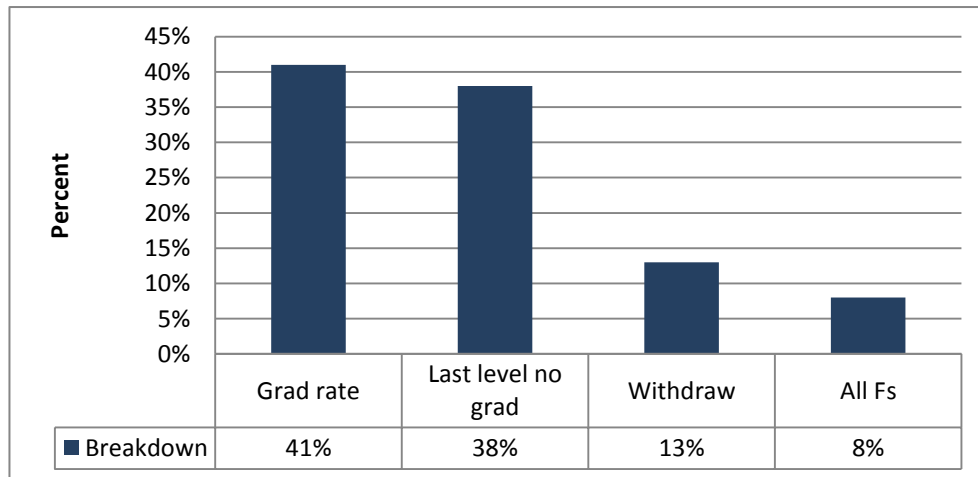


Figure 5 Sponsored Student Outcomes



Notice that the All Fs category plus the last level not graduated accounts for 46%, compared to the 41% graduation rate.

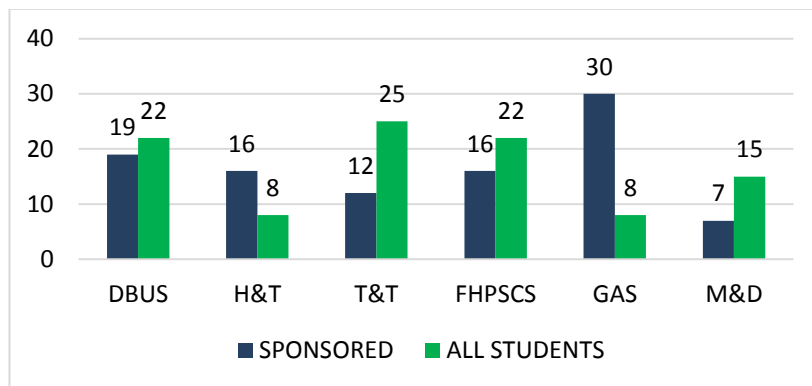
It is proposed that this is where we can target collaboration and action plans to make the most gains. These are areas where Sponsors can provide support to students that can lead to more successful outcomes, and where the College sees an improved graduation rate.

## English, Math and ESL Barriers

There is strong evidence of Math and English as barriers even before students enroll in the College, as many cannot gain access to a program of their choice. A significant number of students who apply to a program fail the entrance test: 80-90% fail because of English; and 25% of because of Math. Once students get into a program, lack of English and Math competency continues to plague them. Over the period of study, there were 17,586 exams written, and of these, 1,627 were English exams. Of the 1627 English exams there were 409 failures and 186 withdrawals which is a 36.6% failure rate. One hundred-seventy-five of the failed English exams were in the GAS program, which is where a large proportion of sponsored students enroll.

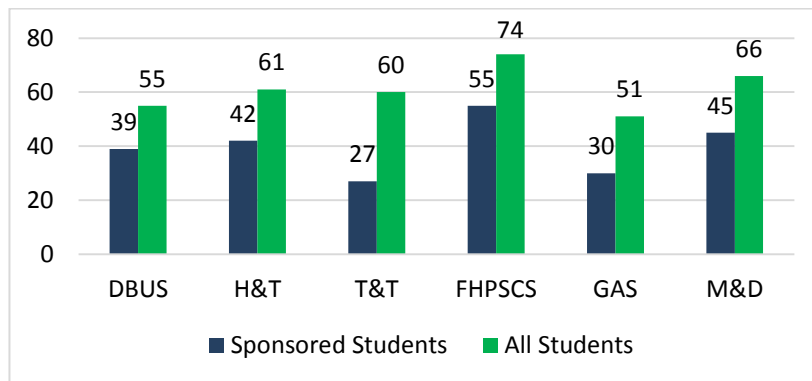
Figure 6 shows the enrollments of sponsored students in Algonquin programs compared to the general college population. Half as many Sponsored Indigenous students enroll in Technology & Trades and Media and Design, twice as many enroll in Hospitality and Tourism, and a full 3.5 times as many enroll in the GAS programs. The GAS program is often mistakenly viewed as a transition program. The high rate of sponsored students enrolled in the program compared to the general college population may be due to failed attempts to get into first-choice programs and a hope to transition into them later, or the need to identify which program they want to pursue. It is difficult to answer this question with the data, but the results along with the English exam performance in the GAS programs suggest lack of academic preparation and/or lack of career planning and guidance.

Figure 6 Percent of Students Enrolled, by program



The relatively high enrollment in GAS programs and the high rate of failure in English exams leads to low graduation rates, as demonstrated by Figure 7.

Figure 7 Program Graduation Rates



Not only is the graduation rate of sponsored students 40% lower than for students in general, it is nearly as low as the graduation rate in trades and technology. In fact, there is a graduation rate for sponsored students that is approximately 40% of the college overall, except for Hospitality and Tourism, where the graduation rate for sponsored students is 50%. All the evidence in the student performance studies as well as other programs reported here point to inadequate preparation in math and English being serious impediments to success in education and the workplace.

Getting back to the basics that are missing—it's why we wanted to start the BEAR program—to get the students who are borderline to the level they need to be to be successful. All the other issues become more prominent because of low achievement in the basics. If they're successful in the basics, they can overcome many issues. When we look at the reports, they all seem to point that way collectively. Those basics are missing.

It is worth taking note of the 55% graduation rate in Health, Public Service and Community Studies. The IYEP study revealed that one of the most important motivators of postsecondary completion is the desire to give back to the community and reconnect with their roots in some way.

## Day of Dialogue I

In February 2014, the Indigenous Strategic Partnerships (ISP) team at Algonquin College hosted a Day of Dialogue to present the data from the first Student Performance Report, and used it to inform best practices for collaboration among the College, the Community and the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU). Representatives of all three groups attended: 10 representatives from community organizations, 3 from MTCU and 10 from Algonquin College.

The day-long session began with a presentation of the data, followed by rich break-out sessions and interactivity. There were 3 issues identified and used as points of discussion in the breakout sessions, namely Retention and Attrition; Multiple Enrollments; and Program Choice. Across the topics, there were certain common points raised.

- Difficulties with Math/Communication/Science
- Accountability and tracking (with shared information between College, Community and MTCU)—with clear standards and expectations that are enforced
- Individual and situational guidance (e.g., role models, champions)
- Understanding and recognizing a path through education to successful employment (e.g., requirements, expectations, job market)
- Understanding and following processes to succeed, and the significance of actions (in school or work)
- Sense of community and belonging (e.g., formal and informal networks)
- Maturity, self-efficacy, self-determination and decision-making
- Finances, housing etc.

## Day of Dialogue II

In February 2015, the Day of Dialogue II was hosted by the Indigenous Strategic Partnerships (ISP) team at Algonquin College to present the data from the *Aboriginal Student Performance, 2009-2015 Components of Student Success—Part 2*. Representatives of all three groups attended: 6 representatives from community organizations, 1 from MTCU and 10 from Algonquin College.

The objectives of this event were to reflect on new data for sponsored students, in particular enrollment, withdrawal and graduation success; to identify challenges and opportunities for improving student experience and success; and to create a plan of action.

Based on review of the data, participants identified four priorities for collaboration and consideration: Support for students before start of school and the first two weeks of the term, during mid-term period and in the last term of their program; and raising cross-cultural awareness with faculty and staff.

The action plan that emerged focused on the following needs:

- Networks and feeling of belonging
- Understanding expectations and culture of postsecondary environments
- Accountability
- Indigenous entrepreneurship connections
- Working with College faculty and staff—raise awareness of bias; training for mental health and disability issues; and honouring of Indigenous peoples and their accomplishments.

## **Supporting Aboriginal People for Labour Market Entry (SAPLME)**

A full description of the SAPLME<sup>1</sup> report, activities and outcomes is available upon request. This project was pivotal in understanding some of the barriers that sponsored students bring with them to the College and to the workplace. It was designed to help students intentionally take control of their career path by building on their strengths, abilities and values. From 2013-2015, in collaboration with several Indigenous community organizations, this program (1) assessed academic and personal strengths and interests; and provided (2) vocational counselling, (3) one-on-one career coaching to develop individual learning and employment action plans and (4) training and certification in WHMIS and CRP/First Aid.

A total of 57 participants over a two-year period in four cohorts were selected by Indigenous community representatives as those who would benefit from a purposeful and directed path of assessment, educational support and employment literacy. In particular, participants were Inuit and First Nation participants whose first language has taken priority over English, causing barriers and challenges to meet employment standards.

### Assessments

#### ***Academic Assessment***

Three measures of academic assessment were included in the program. As the results below show, all participants in all sites either required English and Math upgrading to qualify for enrollment in Algonquin programs, or their low English and Math scores made them ineligible for upgrading. It is worth noting that participants were invited because they were thought to be more likely to benefit from the program—that is, their English and Math skills generally were considered above average. The results then suggest a pervasive issue with academic preparation for postsecondary education that must be addressed.

#### **English Assessment Results**

The purpose of the English and Math assessments was to establish whether participants required foundational skills to be ready for postsecondary education or employment. Through the Algonquin College Career and Academic Access Centre provided language and mathematics assessments of the participants in this program.

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<sup>1</sup> Manning, L. (2013). Supporting Aboriginal People for Labour Market Entry (SAPLME), Report for Workforce and Personal Development (WPD), Algonquin College, Ottawa, ON

*Table 1 English Assessment Results*

<b>LEVEL</b>	<b>Group 1</b>	<b>Group 2</b>	<b>Group 3</b>	<b>Group 4</b>	<b>Group 5</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>PERCENT</b>
<b>Below required</b>	-	3	2	4	-	9	20%
<b>Beginner</b>	2	-	1	2	-	5	11%
<b>Medium</b>	-	1	2	3	1	7	16%
<b>College prep</b>	2	4	8	1	-	15	33%
<b>Waived</b>	2	-	-	3	4	9	20%
						<b>45</b>	<b>100%</b>

### **Basic and Fundamental Math Assessment Results**

The students were required to write two math assessments—to determine whether they met the pre-requisites for Basic Math – MAT 5953 and/or which units the student was exempt from in Fundamental Math – MAT 5957.

*Table 2 Basic and Fundamental Math Assessment Results*

<b>Exempt from Basic Math</b>	<b>Group 1</b>	<b>Group 2</b>	<b>Group 3</b>	<b>Group 4</b>	<b>Group 5</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>PERCENT</b>
<b>Yes</b>	2	-	7	9	4	22	51%
<b>No</b>	4	7	6	3	1	21	49%
						<b>43</b>	<b>100%</b>

The mathematics test, consisting of two parts, is organized into 9 distinct sections, each one examining specific skills. A passing grade in any section indicates the student is exempt from completing that section of Upgrading.

### **English as a Second Language (ESL) Assessment Results**

English as a Second Language (ESL) assessments comprised individual testing of 30 minutes for ‘speaking’ and 30 minutes for ‘writing.’

*Table 3 English as a Second Language (ESL) Assessment Results*

<b>ESL-related Difficulties</b>	<b>Group 1</b>	<b>Group 2</b>	<b>Group 3</b>	<b>Group 4</b>	<b>Group 5</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>PERCENT</b>
<b>Yes</b>	✓	✓	✓	✓	-	40	89%
<b>No</b>	-	-	-	-	✓	5	11%
						<b>45</b>	<b>100%</b>

The results of the assessments were used to counsel students on their next steps in reaching their academic and career goals. Feedback was focused on obtaining prerequisites for postsecondary programs primarily via academic upgrading.

### ***Personal Strengths and Interests Assessment***

Three measures of personal strengths and interests assessment were included in the program, as shown below. The results are not reported here, but it is worth mentioning that the purpose of these assessments was to understand strengths and interests upon which to begin building a career path.

**Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)** measures **psychological** preferences in how people perceive the world and make decisions. It can help participants find their strengths, recognize possible blind spots, and help them to express these to themselves, to colleagues, instructors, and potential employers.

**Strong Interest Inventory** measures career and leisure interests, and designed to help participants make educational and career decisions. The questionnaire results in measures of interests in four main categories: general occupational themes (GOT); basic interest scales (BIS); personal style scales (PSS); and occupational scales (OS).

**Career Cruising** is an online career guidance resource. With it, required workplace skills can be researched and identified for a large range of occupations. Participants can identify what jobs they can do with the skills they have.

### **Vocational Counselling**

Vocational counselling took place as part of a group workshop with sessions scheduled over 3 half-days. With this activity, participants commented on a sense of belonging that was helpful.

**First half-day:** With personal strengths and interests results, activities targeted individual values, learning to name them, and identifying what it is about the things they enjoy doing that translate to a career path to see careers that fit them, gaps to be filled to get there, and programs Algonquin College could offer.

**Second half-day:** participants learned what makes organizations successful & how to look for employers that have values that align with their own or they can choose to adapt. Also how to adapt to changing economic trends and market shifts.

**Third half-day:** participants identified their ideal job, and identifying gaps (e.g., skills and experience) to be filled to get there, with a focus on closing gaps. They chose two careers based on data and the workshop activities, and left with an appointment for the one-on-one session with the career coach.

The vocational counselling sessions and the ESL interviews were both one-on-one activities and gave the participants a chance for self-reflection, for understanding their role and personal power as individuals to call upon resources that lower barriers, and to begin to understand their place in the labour market. A definite shift in attitude and focus was observed. Participants enjoyed the self-reflection, especially in the context of their group, and trust increased with facilitators and coaches as they validated participants' self-expression and maintained high expectations. They began to show an appreciation for and the desire to work on their confidence and self-efficacy.

## One-on-One Coaching and Learning Action Plan Development

Participants met one-on-one with the career coach. Participants were actively engaged in the coaching session and participated fully in the development of their learning action plans. They each brought a list of two careers or jobs that interested them (based on the assessments, self-reflections, self-discovery and research), and were guided with a self-discovery approach to identify training plans for the careers they had identified. Together with the career coach, they developed a learning action plan.

Participants began to show a sense of ownership and control over their education and career path. They came away with labour market information and the education services that would be necessary to get into that profession (including private programs and other Colleges). Participants remarked that they had never received anything like this service in the past, and that they felt empowered and more in control than ever of their career future. It is worth noting however that they still had the academic gaps. Their motivation had increased, but not yet their academic or life skills.

All participants required some upgrading at the College to qualify for admission to the College, and for some their academic assessment results were too low to qualify for the upgrading program. The participants who did not qualify for the upgrading were still full participants for the life of the program, but at the end were directed to the adult high school to earn the credits to qualify for upgrading.

All of the participants who finished the program and were qualified for upgrading enrolled for the courses they needed and registered at the College for the program of their choice, anticipating they would be ready in time for the next semester. None of the participants were able to complete the upgrading.

One weakness of the program is that there was no guidance toward gaining work experience as a means for filling gaps and working toward career objectives. This type of guidance might have been especially important to the students who did not qualify for upgrading. In addition, some participants had challenges (e.g., personal, family, financial) that needed to be addressed before they were prepared to continue their education successfully. There was nothing built into the program to address these issues, and once the program ended, there was no further contact with program staff.

Participants seemed to benefit especially from the group cohesion and sense of belonging in the program. At the end, the group was left to disperse as individuals. This was especially difficult for those who were directed to the adult high school.

## Preparation for Postsecondary Education (Foundation Training—Upgrading)

Based on the foundational skills assessment in English and math and selected career goals, the learning action plan identified an individualized set of foundational skills training for participants.

## Training Credentials

Participants from Tungasuvvingat Inuit Employment Support Program received training and certification in WHMIS and CRP/First Aid. Participants from the Minwaashin Lodge received CPR/First Aid training and certification.

## The DevelopMENTOR Program

The DevelopMENTOR<sup>2</sup> program at Algonquin College was designed to prepare First Nation, Métis and Inuit students to be successful in paid part-time work with participating Corporate Partners through customized, individual employment coaching that fits with their academic schedule. While many programs provide workplace experience to vulnerable youth to integrate them into the workplace and career pathways, the DevelopMENTOR (DM) program treats participants as individuals with the capacity but needing guided development to reach that capacity. The DM program also addresses the all-too-common and overlooked challenge of numerous physical, emotional, developmental and environmental needs that the students come into the program with. The one-on-one, situational coaching with the student and the employer helps to set them up for success with skills that transcend the employment coaching period, contributing to better outcomes in the workforce and academia.

The DM program provides students with training and coaching as part of a continuous process of experience, reflection and feedback. An employment coach works closely with the student from the point when they join the program and begin employment preparation training through the initial 8 weeks of the employment with the Corporate partner. During the the first 8 weeks of employment, the the employer agrees to give the coach access to the student's supervisor and work premises. It is anticipated that although the pre-employment training is important, it may not prepare the student for all on-the-job situations and/or they may not have developed the skills to deal with these situations. These situations often lead to employment termination. As a result the students learn the necessary 'soft skills' to be successful in the workplace. They learn to understand workplace expectations and why they exist, and as a consequence, become 'employment competent.' To date, no student who completed the program has been dismissed from employment. Some have resigned to move on, but none of the changes in employment have been initiated by the employer.

This result is remarkable enough, but even more significant is that it was determined that approximately 30% of the DM participants are dealing with emotional, physical or mental disabilities and challenges.

### Attributes of Successful Students

At the same time, those who are successful share 3 characteristics—They

- have a foundation that the Employment Coach can build on
- are willing and open to receive constructive criticism to help them become self aware of behaviours that can become a barrier to their success in the workplace
- are willing to make necessary changes that will allow them to become successful in the workplace. Self awareness is the key to positive changes.

In addition to learning about expectations in the workplace, other objectives included developing skills that are transferrable to other work environments; developing skills and motivation for completing their education; and provide financial support and skills to attract more to foster program completion

There has been a 100% success rate to date. Students develop skills such as working in a fast-paced environment and under pressure, time and stress management, customer service, confidence, patience, problem solving, taking initiative and how to balance work, social and academic life. They are able to continue participating in the program in the summer, depending on staff availability and when their contract ends. The program is individualized with features such as self-assessment quizzes, and videos—elements that make it enjoyable for the student.

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<sup>2</sup> Robineau, S. (2015). DevelopMENTOR Progress Report, for Workplace and Personal Development, Algonquin College, Ottawa



## Successes

The coach observed personal skills development—there were improvements and new attitudes about *time management* – handing in their assignments on time or not procrastinating; *stress management* – balancing family, social life and school; *professional behaviour* – creating image of being in control of one’s actions.

There were also observed developments in life skills, such as *dealing with discrimination and conflict resolution*—how to communicate in a non-aggressive and diplomatic way, and how to express feelings without attacking verbally. Students were *building confidence and self-esteem*—and taking control in uncomfortable situations, where most tend to shy away due to limited skills; and *integrating work with managing school and personal life*; supporting family members facing physical and mental illness; and managing education with family life—especially for those with children. They had begun connecting school experiences and work experiences, and doing follow-ups with employers, teachers, or anyone reaching out to them. In addition, they had learned the skills to begin managing a budget and meeting housing requirements.

And finally the coach also noted development in several employment skills. Students were expected to use work experience to learn to *know their strengths*, what is needed to improve skills and how to promote them to employers; *build on those strengths* (which was taught through positive reinforcement); understand expectations such as *arriving on time*, or else email/call; *find a job*, how to network, how to market their skills and how to interview. It is important that they *understand the working world* in the city versus their community, and *deal with disclosure of criminal record or disability*, if needed.

## Challenges

The challenges facing students were difficult and included disabilities—both physical and or mental illness and learning disabilities; and environmental barriers—financial instability, affordable housing, supporting family members – children, or those with physical and mental illnesses, and dealing with discrimination

## **Study of Indigenous Youth Educational Persistence (IYEP)—what works?**

During the first Day of Dialogue in 2014, there was a good discussion about the large number of students who succeed in school and the workplace, despite the barriers they face. Frustrated with the preponderance of studies of why students fail, the question was raised—why then do so many succeed? It was determined that an appreciative inquiry on the factors that make it possible for Indigenous students to succeed in postsecondary education—that is, they complete their program and graduate.

A small advisory group was formed, and members invited Indigenous people they feel are resilient. Ten people have been interviewed at length so far and results analyzed. The study considered a variety of types of supports and resources that an individual might take advantage of to succeed. We group them into the following categories: personal (attributes and actions; family (relatives and relationships); community; culture (language & spirituality, defined by the individual); and institutional (educational, etc.)

## Factors for Successful Postsecondary Education Completion

The most important factors identified to date are:

- **There has to be somebody who wants you to succeed—and expects you to succeed**

Throughout our lives there is always someone there who is there to help you understand something. ‘Could be somebody you meet in a bar, but they may say something that makes some kind of sense.’ We may not

always be ready to hear what they have to say, and they may not know how important their message, kindness or presence is, but they are there.

The most powerful people in the interviews seem to be those who were *intentionally* there, offering an example of their life, giving generously in spirit and belongings, and guiding. These people motivated the desire to perform, be creative, learn and do well, to avoid disappointing and to live up to. Every one of the respondents had at least one person who they knew and trusted was there for them.

The respondents showed a strong tendency to seek mentorship and other forms of guidance—sometimes even a network. Grandparents are important—providing guidance and love, and also a connection to the past. All of the respondents spoke gently about grandparents. Most also had parents who were dedicated, but in most cases, parents were not together. In many instances, the individuals were offspring of one Indigenous parent and one non-Indigenous parent.

Many looked for a connection at the Indigenous center at their educational institution and were able to find comfort, feeling that they belonged. Some did not find solace there because for one reason or another they didn't feel connected with others there, or the center itself did not embody the comfort they needed. Somebody in their lives recognized them as worthy individuals and spent time with them one-on-one, providing a consistent message of appreciation and caring.

- **You must draw a line in the sand, make that commitment and set goals to reach**

They can see their future—a future that they can see themselves in. *One respondent mentioned field trips and guided trips that expose Indigenous youth to different ways.* Another talked about defining her own meaning of success, which was different from her grandmother's definition. Others had a strong desire to fight stereotypes and fight an oppressive system, and to prove others wrong. One mentioned the cheque she received from the Band—the others didn't understand why she didn't use it for drinking and smoking. She chose to use it for her bus pass and books. The interview asked about turning points—when they might have chosen to withdraw from school. No matter what their situation was, none of the respondents could identify that turning point—for them it was just a fact that they would finish school no matter what. And doing the minimum is not enough. “You can't just say I want to be in it, and be in it.” And that you cannot do it alone. But you can be the first to move ahead. Move a bit out of your comfort zone.

All of the respondents received funding support from an Indigenous organization, although not all of them grew up in their reserve community. And all used their education to give back to the community in some way, even when their success was met with jealousy back home.

Every one of them found a path they were passionate about, and each one is involved in something that gives back to their community or their people.

- **You have to do it on your own volition (with the right kind of support system)**

They have to want to change. They likely do not know how to change, and that's where the community, the college and the government can come in.

Most have a learning disability, family obligations at a young age, or numerous traumatic events, very similar to the findings for the participants in the DevelopMENTOR program.

They love learning. Many remarked that in primary and secondary school they often did not feel challenged. Some failed courses, but returned and persisted by following the field of study they were most passionate about.

## Building Empowerment Achieving Rewards (BEAR)

Success can cure many ills, and so too can reaching a level of strong basic skills of academic achievement. The BEAR program is about students rising to that level to ensure success at the next step whether it be postsecondary education or employment. This program is currently under development to be a one-year pathway program to prepare Indigenous students with the skills and strategies required to be successful in both postsecondary education and the workforce. Based on lessons learned in previous projects, the BEAR program will target the most tenacious issues that are now known to plague Indigenous students, namely: language challenges; being under-prepared for postsecondary education; challenges with developing transferrable skills and transferring psychological and social strengths to new environments; limited positive experiences with building networks outside the community; and pressure to apply for limited funding, and satisfying criteria of the community and federal programs.

## Conclusions

Canada is forging a new nation to nation partnership with First Nations Communities that will include education. In this report, we have identified what we feel is a unique set of conclusions—unique because the focus is not only on successful achievement of College or Government objectives. Those objectives are important, but to achieve them for Indigenous students requires attention to the strengths, characteristics and needs.

Indigenous students are falling through the cracks of the system. Systemic checks and balances that hold students accountable and provide them with supports as they're needed either don't exist or are not applied to Indigenous students. Postsecondary and Community stakeholders, along with the government must make systematic changes too.

This report represents a step-by-step data collection process, documentation and analysis of what Indigenous students need to be successful in education and employment. These results can inform the development of a logic model to identify what is working and what is not, to trigger the necessary questions we must consider to ensure successful educational and employment outcomes, and to identify the ways that the 3 major stakeholders (Communities, College and Government) can collaborate on meaningful solutions.

In this comprehensive series of projects, programs and studies, we identify the following conclusions:

- 1. Academic and life skills preparedness improvement is required.** The English and Math barriers that students face prevent them from accessing the programs they need and from succeeding in postsecondary programs, and in employment. Further, for many students, ESL is overlooked as a barrier that can be as significant for Indigenous students as it is for international students. Evidence supports that students are willing to persist and achieve, but do not have the basic skills to do so. Supports need to be put into place to direct students who are prepared into their programs of choice, and to direct those who are not yet prepared to resources and opportunities to develop the necessary skills.
- 2. Recognition of attention to English as a Second Language (ESL) barriers are necessary:** An important and often overlooked barrier for Indigenous students who maintain their native language is ESL. It is therefore important that we use explicit teaching methodologies that recognize ESL issues and value Indigenous English as a dialect, while teaching [Standard English].<sup>3</sup> To that end, it is the intent of the Algonquin College ISP is to create a course for English for Cree Students to give them an understanding of the structure of language. Beyond vocabulary, grammar and sentence construction, the intent is to develop understanding of English in a context that permits them to translate meaning, as opposed to merely words.

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<sup>3</sup> DeBats, R. (2003). Aboriginal Students with Disabilities. Report to the Ministerial Advisory Committee: Students with Disabilities, Adelaide South Australia

- 3. The relationship between College and Community must shift:** The College is well positioned to capitalize on opportunities offered by the new government’s shift in priorities—to establish a new relationship model with Indigenous sponsors—one modeled after sound business practices, following **customer relationship management (CRM) principles**. Indigenous Sponsors have unique interests and also have different legislative criteria pertaining to them compared to other Canadians and Foreign Sponsors.
- A relationship with Indigenous Sponsors based on the CRM model would result in a long-term higher-return approach to recruitment, retention and success of sponsored Indigenous students. One of the strongest recommendations emerging from this report is the need for accountability. That accountability does not rest solely with the students. While students need to build certain academic, life and employment skills, there are too many gaps in the system where they can fall through without being noticed. The College and Sponsors must collaborate and consider ways to forestall failures that are avoidable.
    - As in any successful customer relationship, there needs to be regular and frequent points of contact between the College and Sponsors. If the College treats Sponsors as preferred customers/clients, the information Sponsors need to make decisions about sponsorships can be used at prescribed points in the semester. There are other initiatives that can arise from the preferred customer relationship—including volume discounts based on technology products, more enrollments and more graduations leads to more success for the College, the Sponsor and the student. Sponsors must hold students accountable, and be accountable themselves. If the Community is a preferred customer, the college can compile student performance data and provide it to Sponsors at agreed times during the semester. The data in this report revealed that the first half of the first semester of the first year is pivotal to the success of sponsored students. Arming Communities with the appropriate data will empower them to intervene and help students who are facing difficulties.
    - Another potential data-related collaboration between the College and Sponsors is to track sponsored students who receive all Fs and those who don’t complete their program even after persisting through the program. These two groups combined make up 46% of students who don’t graduate. An open conversation/collaboration between College and Sponsors will lead to solutions.
- 4. One-on-One Guidance and Coaching a Must!** Support for soft-skill development in academia and employment requires one-on-one intervention in real-world situations, guiding individuals through experiences they have to adapt to. When the coach/guide also works with members of the group the Indigenous student is adapting to, it works best. For example, the most important element of the DevelopMENTOR program was the employment coach who worked one-on-one with students while at the same time they were in contact with the employer. This finding is also evident in the IYEP study, as all participants reported someone who spent time with them one-on-one, were interested in their development, and rewarded them for success. The need for this type of guidance takes many forms, and it is not surprising that study after study finds that all people benefit from this type of intervention—young people especially. It is especially critical for Indigenous youth because they can face many barriers that other youth do not, and yet when they have access to the same resources as other students, they succeed.
- 5. Students are Ready to Succeed!** This report reveals that students may not be ready academically or their soft skills may need improvement or adaptation. But there is also another kind of being ready that is more about attitude. Each of the projects discussed here shows a strong interest of the Indigenous youth to participate in efforts to improve their skills and their future. In order to do the work to achieve the level of academic and soft-skills required for success in academia and employment, another basic requirement is the desire and conviction to succeed. We find that these characteristics are demonstrated throughout this report. Students continuously showed a personal commitment to improve and be successful. As the results reveal, the more aligned with student needs the projects were, the more successful the outcomes.
- 6. More Data is Needed!** The analysis documented in this report represents only a portion of the work done by the ISP at Algonquin College. The student performance report was compiled as a means to understand

where students were struggling and where they were successful. The data revealed information that has already led to changes in the way things are done at the College. The work by the ISP has informed Government and Sponsors about student performance in a way they've never seen before, and brought them together to collaborate as never before. After having informed both groups and framing solutions together, it is time to go further. We are well positioned to take the next steps.

This report presents the answers to many previously unspoken questions, and opens the door to more. It is time to determine whether existing programs and practices achieve intended outcomes for Indigenous students. We find that several may be unintentionally setting students up for failure. With open dialogue across stakeholders and data collected for that purpose, we can set students up for success instead.

- 7. Deeper Stakeholder Collaboration is Needed:** At several levels, this report reveals that stakeholders, even with the best intentions, tend to act independently with a primary focus on their own objectives and lose sight of the effects on student outcomes. At its worst, it becomes a 'check-box mentality,' so the number of 'bums in seats' is the goal, and the needs of the student are overlooked. Only with collaboration and consultation across stakeholders, including the Government, Sponsors and the College, can this be rectified. The projects described here suggest a willingness among stakeholders to do just that.

The conclusions above alluded to a number of the recommendations going forward. The main points follow:

- A deeper collaboration among stakeholders is needed to ask the hard questions, collect the relevant data, and develop a logic model for evaluating whether programming works in the best interest of Indigenous students—to set them up for success in academia and employment. Although individual programs cannot guarantee graduation from postsecondary education or a successful career, they can provide the basis for both. And they should.
- For the Government, we propose that the criteria for funding be reassessed in consultation with Sponsors and the College to determine if the logic model holds up (before funding) and whether the desired and intended results were achieved (during and after funding). There can also be flexibility in funding eligibility so students do not feel compelled to apply for postsecondary education before they are ready. There should be follow-up and accountability benchmarks to ensure that students remain in school and complete coursework. One of the most important revelations in this report is the tremendous need for preparation for postsecondary education. We believe it is time to consider allocating funds for preparation activities (e.g., the BEAR program and DevelopMENTOR).
- Corporations must get involved. The Government won't allocate funds for programs without results. The same goes for Indigenous youth. If education does not give them access to income, security and self-respect (i.e., employment and career), then the incentive to perform is diminished. Employers must participate to provide workplace experience, help Indigenous workers develop and maintain a professional network, and communicate the expectations at work clearly.
- All stakeholders must be willing to lower barriers between them, monitor and share outcomes and processes, and turn their good intentions into best practices that maximize the return for students.

All of these conclusions and recommendations represent movement forward. A significant amount of open, intentional and purposeful work is reflected in this report, providing information and insight to all stakeholders interested in improving educational and employment success of Indigenous youth. It is only the beginning. An exciting beginning, certainly, but there is much more work to do. Hard work, but filled with the reward of stronger communities and a stronger Canada.

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