

## *Honoring What They Say: Executive Summary*

In many First Nations cultures there is a trickster with special powers to transform itself/himself/herself into human or animal form or into other elements of nature. The trickster, sometimes referred to as a trickster of learning, travels on many journeys, learning lessons in life. One such trickster is named "Old Man Coyote"; one story of his adventures speaks of his search for his bone needle. He had lost it near the bushes, but was looking for it near the fire because the light was better there.

As people concerned with First Nations education and research, we seek respectful ways to bring First Nations contexts and research together. We must question our methods, approaches, and practices. We must consider whether our motives and our methods honor and respect First Nations ways. In this report we present our research process as we "sat around our fire" and began our "search for the needle."

In the spring of 1992, the then Ministry of Advanced Education requested the First Nations House of Learning at the University of British Columbia to follow up First Nations graduates from postsecondary institutions in British Columbia. In response to the Ministry's request the House of Learning suggested that a First Nations research model be developed and piloted in two institutions, the University of British Columbia and one other. This dynamic process model would address the substantive questions of interest to the Ministry relating to:

- the relationship between postsecondary education and employment;
- what factors encourage successful graduation; and
- what barriers and problems were faced by students during their university years and how they were overcome.

The research model would be shared with interested postsecondary institutions in British Columbia. During the research process a number of issues distinct or unique to First Nations postsecondary education could be addressed.

The development of the process model began with a consideration of the area of evaluation known as impact assessment. The result of our deliberations was a process model: an organic entity, adaptable and, once again, consistent with the principles of respect and honor that are basic to First Nations peoples' habits of thought. The research process when viewed from this perspective becomes a dialogue that is growth-oriented rather than static, and that allows the central place of other such fundamental First Nations principles as spirituality and a sense of community. The study, then, was rooted in tradition, but did entail a number of steps that generally conformed to usual academic practice, including a review of literature, submission of the proposal for ethical review, testing the research process model, and sharing the results of the project.

The literature confirmed the belief that the participation rate of First Nations peoples in higher education is less than 20% of the rate of the general population and identified several factors associated with success or attrition at university, including the nature of the K-12 school system, low expectations of First Nations students, unresponsive curricula, lack of counseling, racism, financial support, institutional commitment, family and peer support, and presence of First Nations staff in the institution.

### *The Process Model*

It appears that the process model has potential for revealing information about the substantive interests of the Ministry (the goals of the present study). However, low return rates, longer than usual return times, and the need for frequent personal contact to ensure returns are factors that should be taken into account in planning future applications of the process model. These may be a function of the particular characteristics of UBC: cross-validation is desirable before change in the process model is made.

When the model was tested by the Native Education Centre, it was apparent that the model itself is sufficiently adaptable to be of use to a postsecondary institution that is very different in its goals and student population from UBC. It appears, further, that the relationship with the UBC research team served a number of purposes: to influence the decision to cooperate with UBC's request; to witness and model a number of research processes; to complete the collection of participants' responses using both questionnaire and focus group; and to analyze and interpret the resulting information. During this collaborative venture some limitations of the process model became evident, including the low return rate of the questionnaires, the problems of adapting the form for use by other institutions, and the difficulties inherent in interpreting and reporting results by people who understand their own context well but are to some extent unfamiliar with the research enterprise.

### *Findings: UBC Graduates*

With regard to the UBC graduates, most of the respondents were graduates of the Faculty of Education; about 70% were women. They identified most closely with a large number of First Nations from across North America. Just under 40% were "competent" in a First Nations language. About two thirds of the group had worked in a field related to the area of their university study. About two thirds of the group felt that UBC had generally met their expectations.

In response to two items about sources of support, the graduates saw a clear division between First Nations family, friends, and First Nations students' services, and other UBC and community services: of 137 named sources, 119 specifically focused on First Nations people, institutions, or UBC First Nations agencies (especially NITEP and Ts'kel, which appear to have impact beyond their program mandates). It is clear from the ques-

tionnaire responses that the participants' First Nations cultures had a major impact on their UBC experiences; virtually all of this impact was positive. Being strong with a First Nations culture constituted a major success factor for the questionnaire respondents.

The first barrier may be the respondents' initial perceptions of the university: about 70% recalled their first few months at UBC in negative to neutral terms; about the same percentage of the adjectives they used to describe that experience were negative as well (e.g., *scary*, *lonely*). A second barrier is lack of funding or inadequate levels of funding. Just under 80% of the questionnaire respondents reported "barely adequate" funding or below: most funding came from DIA or bands, and it was this funding that was seen as inadequate much of the time (two thirds, as compared to about one quarter to one third for other funding sources). Problems were often barriers to success, many of which were some personal issue or characteristic. Negative perceptions of UBC as an institution constituted another potential barrier. The questionnaire respondents felt that, on the whole, UBC as an institution was somewhat more discouraging than encouraging.

A major barrier discussed at length by the focus group participants was racism in various contexts and forms. Some incidents took the form of belittling persons or cultures; some were depersonalizing incidents of tokenism and assuming that First Nations programs and achievements were inferior to those of the majority culture. The legacy of past discrimination and racism had present impact as well: aspects discussed by the focus groups included the unrealistically low self-assessment and low self-esteem, genuinely low skill levels, emotional barriers, and lack of awareness of First Nations identity and issues.

All but five of the respondents reported no difficulty in finding employment, almost always in the field in which they had studied. In general the respondents have broadened their work horizons in their field of training, and/or have assumed progressively more responsibility in the field of training. Two thirds of the group are working in a First Nations context. Just under two thirds felt that UBC had generally prepared them well; another 15% had mixed feelings about quality of preparation. Negative comments tended to focus on the gap between preparation for work and the reality of working (e.g., in education, in community schools).

An outcome of the UBC experience that is likely to have both a direct and an indirect effect on employment is the impact of UBC on the graduates' First Nations identity. The positive aspects confirm identity and legitimacy; the negative aspects challenge it and force resolution and firming of identity and power. Personal growth, another outcome of the UBC experience with both direct and indirect effects on employability, was revealed in a number of the respondents' statements about UBC's influence. One important aspect of personal growth is the graduates'

ability to act as role models and to serve their communities (the one allows the other), which in turn increased the sense of personal strength and efficacy. Negative personal growth was rarely reported.

*Findings: The Native Education Centre*

Although most NEC graduates heard about the Centre from private individuals, it was primarily the institutional characteristics of the NEC that respondents listed as influencing their decision to attend. The decision revolved around two broad factors, relevance-accessibility and First Nations milieu-identity (each of which operates, of course, in the context of the other). Other factors involved included the wish to learn and pass the learning on to others, a commitment to First Nations children, and a wish to benefit the community at large.

Success factors likely to have been influential include the immediate comfort felt at the NEC, even during the initial months. Sources of support included friends and family, staff and other students in NEC, the atmosphere of the Centre, the First Nations identity of the NEC, relevance of the course and program content, and the strict but helpful regulations. The comments of the focus group participants concentrated on four aspects: the possibility of taking successive programs, course/program quality, the personal qualities of instructors and staff, and the First Nations culture learning/milieu. Comments on the teaching skills and positive personal qualities of the staff and instructors are particularly frequent.

Barriers experienced by the respondents included funding and/or limited finances; many respondents felt that their funding was "barely adequate" or less. The "inadequate" source was often an agency or band. For some respondents responsibilities or perceived problems were likely to have been barriers: family responsibilities, financial responsibilities or problems, and personal situations. Negative perceptions of the Centre, likely to have been barriers for the few individuals making them, included specific problems with staff, perceived lack of information, and "lack of responsibility" of fellow students (a measure of academic climate in one particular class perhaps).

The connection between education at the NEC and employment is clear: virtually all the responding graduates are either employed in some area close to that of their training or are engaged in new educational ventures, again for the most part in their area of training. That is, they are progressing rather than switching. All found the NEC programs or courses relevant and useful. The graduates' increasing awareness and affiliation with First Nations is likely to act both directly and indirectly on graduates' employability, as is the increased sense of personal power reported by the graduates.

It is clear that the NEC is fulfilling its mandate to train First Nations people in a variety of postsecondary programs and to create a milieu in which First Nations culture and identity is validated in the context of

academic rigor (equal to that of other educational institutions). Other outcomes, equally desirable, include personal empowerment and growth, an increased involvement in First Nations issues, and an increasing sense of oneself as a member of a valuable culture. Success factors include the matching of program to needs of students, but equally important is the careful creation of an environment conducive to learning and comfort for First Nations people, including the skills of a caring staff. Barriers appear to be primarily financial, but also include a number of other factors reported as isolated, personal incidents. Reputation and milieu, in addition to ease of access and fit between programs and career/personal goals, appear to be major factors in the decision to attend NEC programs.

### *The Workshop/Symposium*

The research project and the process model were described during the daylong workshop/symposium. The comments by the workshop participants focused on a number of specific details of the research process. Issues discussed included the question and definition of First Nations research methodology and a number of constraining factors. The participants felt that the structure was comfortable and that the process model was useful and applicable. Some participants also felt that the day provided a demonstration of First Nations values of honesty, respect, and sharing, while one other commented on the prayer circle, which honored First Nations ways and set the pace. The few negative comments tended to focus on details of arrangements or the process and its findings. Interest in future workshops was high, with a number of topics being suggested.

### *Recommendations*

With regard to the research project and process model recommendations are as follows:

- The consensual team approach to the project worked well and was fully consistent with First Nations principles. It should be continued.
- The inclusion of Elders and students in the project, and the atmosphere of spirituality in which meetings and discussions were often framed, worked well and was again consistent with First Nations principles; both should be continued.
- the basic components of the process model proved to be useful and adaptable; they should be retained.

Recommendations with regard to substantive areas follow:

- Because First Nations graduates are putting their education to such good use, primarily in First Nations settings, programs for First Nations students are clearly worth the money put into them. It is important that they be supported. Institutional commitment is needed, as well as commitment at other levels.
- With regard to major success factors and barriers:

- encourage and fund First Nations support systems in post-secondary institutions; and enhance levels of support for those already operating, whether in First Nations controlled or in other institutions;
- work at preentry levels to ensure good preparation, especially the secondary school level;
- do everything possible to foster strong, traditional First Nations culture, both inside postsecondary facilities; and in the larger society;
- ensure the presence of adequate numbers of skilled, caring staff (especially important is a strong First Nations presence), including counselors to help students overcome the effects of past and present discrimination and racism);
- work to alleviate personal funding difficulties;
- foster change in the wider institutional climate so that the institutional climate is welcoming and humane (this factor is especially important in non-First Nations-controlled institutions); and
- work systematically to eradicate racism at all levels.