

# Preparing First Nations Students for College: The Experience of the Squamish Nation of British Columbia

Dennis A. Wright  
Brigham Young University

---

*The Squamish Nation of British Columbia initiated a program to improve the success rate of their postsecondary students through a partnership with a local community college. Accepting principles of First Nations self-determination, the partnership empowered the Squamish Nation to participate fully in developing a college transition program. The program assisted students by providing an initial skill assessment, developmental instruction, and ongoing support services. The success rate of students enrolled in the program demonstrated the benefits of the partnership. The experience of the Squamish Nation indicated that as colleges accept First Nations self-determination more First Nations students will succeed.*

The First Nations people of Canada are seven times less likely to graduate from university as are members of the general population. They are twice as likely to not complete high school, and of those graduating fewer than 23% go on to college and only 24% of those earn degrees (Armstrong, Kennedy, & Oberle, 1990). These rates are significantly below those of the general population and indicate the serious problems facing First Nations leaders as they encourage their members to seek postsecondary education.

The response of postsecondary institutions to this problem reflects limited understanding of the First Nations perspective. Colleges and universities often view the lack of success of First Nations students as an acculturation issue. This results in programs designed to adjust students to the realities of a conventional postsecondary institution rather than to modify existing programs to better assist and suit First Nations students. Such programs are generally unsuccessful.

An alternative is tribal colleges, which provide evidence of an increase in student achievement when First Nations people manage their own educational experience. The two-year retention rates and number of students successfully transferring to traditional institutions are significantly higher for students enrolled in tribal colleges. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (1990) reported retention rates at some colleges increased more than 20% and that half of those who complete a two-year degree go on for further study. Empowered to design local postsecondary experiences that reflect community values, the tribal colleges succeed where other institutions fail. Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991) observed that when First Nations people assume control of their educational process the result is a better education, "An education that respects them for who they are, that is relevant to their view of the world, that offers reciprocity in their relationships with others, and helps them exercise responsibility over their own lives" (p. 14)

The Squamish Nation of British Columbia examined the advantages of the tribal college and elected to develop a relationship with existing postsecondary institutions that would accept a First Nations perspective. Motivation for this decision came from the Squamish experience that indicated their students preferred attending traditional educational institutions. Although experience working with traditional colleges was negative, Squamish leaders remained convinced that existing colleges could provide a viable alternative. Their educational experience prepared them to make a strong initiative to establish a productive relationship with Capilano College. Determined to improve the success rate of their students, they approached the college and suggested a partnership. The Squamish Nation felt that the right kind of partnership could result in a productive opportunity for their students.

### *The Partnership*

The Squamish Nation of British Columbia represents a First Nations population of almost 3,000 citizens, most of whom live in the urban setting of greater Vancouver and the adjacent rural coastal communities. Some 60% of the Squamish people live in one of the five reserve communities located in the North Shore and Howe Sound-Whistler areas. A 16-member elected council that includes three hereditary chiefs governs the Squamish Nation. An administrative force of 300 employees supports the work of the council. Administrative officers appointed by the council manage the educational programs. The most recent reports indicate that 113 Squamish students are enrolled in postsecondary institutions with 34% of those enrolled at Capilano College. Most of these students register in degree or equivalent programs.

Capilano College, North Vancouver, British Columbia, is a mid-sized community college offering a wide range of programs including academic studies (University Transfer), career or vocational training, college preparation (Adult Basic Education), and extension courses. These courses are offered during the fall, spring, and summer terms. Study at the college leads to one of several options: career or vocational certificates, associate degrees, applied degrees, and postbaccalaureate degrees. The college serves the urban communities of North and West Vancouver and the adjacent coastal communities. Much of the reserve land of the Squamish Nation lies in the area served by the college. A board appointed by the provincial government governs the college, and a citizen of the Squamish Nation represents First Nations interests on this board. The college maintains a First Nations Advisory Committee to implement the college First Nation policy statement and respond to First Nations initiatives.

The Squamish Nation and Capilano college established a goal to provide better educational opportunities for First Nations students. The college accepted principles of self-determination as defined by the Squamish Nation and understood that any successful effort must be community-based and locally controlled. This satisfied the Squamish Nation priority to maintain jurisdiction over educational decisions affecting its students. The active involvement of Squamish leaders appeared to be a major factor in ensuring community-based education. Educational facilities located on reserve land as well as at the college campus served as centers of instruction. Squamish leaders monitored instruction and provided suggestions

for improvement as the community became actively involved in the educational experience of its students. This resulted in a more “user friendly” college, able to foster success among First Nations students. The relationship between the Squamish Nation and Capilano College became a productive partnership that provided more opportunities for First Nations students.

The partnership addressed institutional resistance to suggestions from First Nations leaders by providing a voice for the Squamish perspective. The program steering committee, with two members from the Squamish Nation Education Department and one from the college resource center, ensured that a First Nations perspective guided the project. Squamish representation on the college First Nations advisory committee and the general college governing board facilitated necessary administrative support.

### *The Transition Program*

The Squamish Nation’s experience with student frustration suggested a need for a college transition program. After considering factors related to culture, economics, and educational preparation, they chose to focus on educational preparation as being most relevant to the needs of their students. The partners designed a transition program to prepare Squamish students for college by focusing on factors such as mastery of basic learning skills and involvement with ongoing support services. Objectives for the transition program included (a) determining the readiness of each student for college, (b) providing a program that would develop the basic skills necessary for college success, and (c) monitoring the progress of each student enrolled in the transition program.

Students applying for funding from the Squamish Nation completed an assessment battery to determine their skill achievement level. The Squamish Nation contracted with the college to provide the necessary assessment services. The assessment battery included tests of reading comprehension (Nelson Denney Reading Test, Brown, Fishco, & Hanna, 1992), math and language usage (Differential Aptitude Test, Hammill & Bryant, 1988), spelling (Wide Range Achievement Test, Jastak & Wilkinson, 1984), an informal writing sample, and a study skill inventory. The college learning center administered the assessment battery and provided detailed reports to the Squamish Nation. Given the limitations of standardized tests when used with First Nations students, Squamish leaders established local criteria to guide placement decisions.

The Squamish Nation initially accepted the 40-60 percentile score range for placement in the college transition program. After the first year of the program, Squamish leaders determined that a percentile range above 50 proved to be a better index for successful placement in a college program. They also concluded that the spelling index was the least useful, whereas the language usage and reading indexes were the most useful. Experience with the placement assessment indicated that acceptable achievement levels related to a high school grade of at least C+ in English 12 and Math 12. A C grade in these subjects appeared to reflect performance often well below what the grade indicated. However, Squamish leaders determined that the C+ grade indicated that student achievement was significant and the student was not being simply “pushed through the system.”

The transition program provided three different levels of developmental instruction. Students achieving below the 50th percentile required for acceptance to the college program enrolled in the Level I Pre-Transition program Hungry for Knowledge. Typically, these students had not completed high school, earned a GED (General Equivalent Diploma), or achieved above the 50th percentile on assessment tests. Also included in this group were students who determined themselves that this was the best place to start their education. Some of these students demonstrated sufficient achievement, but preferred a Level I experience to start.

Level I students participated in the Hungry for Knowledge basic education program provided jointly by Squamish Nation and local school district. They attended classes held in a Squamish Nation learning center located on reserve lands. This program worked to prepare students to write the GED. Although the Level I program did not have definite prerequisites, Squamish educational leaders preferred a grade 8 achievement level. The Squamish Nation provided funding to support those enrolled in the program. The Level I program focused on basic literacy, math preparation, and an introduction to computer word processing. In addition, students completed a college orientation course taught jointly by a Squamish Nation education center instructor and college faculty. This course provided an orientation to the campus, an introduction to student resources, and an introduction to basic college reading and study skills.

Students who achieved above the 50th percentile on the placement test and had graduated from high school level or achieved a GED qualified for enrollment in the Level II: College Transition program. At this level the college provided adult basic education (ABE) courses to further develop student skills in language arts, science, and social studies. The Squamish Nation education coordinator and college First Nations advisor monitored these courses. In addition, students completed one computer word processing course and two college reading and study skills courses. To encourage students the Squamish Nation provided funding contingent on demonstrated progress in the program.

Students achieving at a college level enrolled in the Level III: Advanced Transition program. Typically these students had graduated from high school and demonstrated high achievement in the basic skills assessment. They may also have completed the expectations of the Level II program. The Level III program included an advanced reading and study skill course combined with enrollment in regular first-year college courses. As with Level II, funding provided through the Squamish Nation related to student progress.

The college First Nations advisor actively supported students enrolled at Level II and III. This resource helped Squamish students gain access to activities that balanced their college experience. Activities included involvement with college support services, First Nations awareness days, cultural and social activities, campus government, and the community mentoring program.

The college resource center worked with college faculty to monitor the progress of program participants. The Squamish Nation contracted with the college to provide this service. In fulfilling the contract, the college provided the Squamish Nation leaders with a monthly progress report that they used to identify potential

problems. College support groups, Squamish Nation counselors, and community mentors worked through the college First Nations advisor to provide students with support counseling.

### *Course Description*

The Level I course (Hungry for Learning) focused on preparing for the GED examination. The Squamish Nation established an educational center and approved instructors to conduct classes in Squamish facilities. These classes worked to increase basic skills to levels required by the GED.

Level II involved several basic courses. Program directors directed students to classes best suited to their upgrading needs. The basic course, ARC 100, encouraged development in reading and study skills. Topics in the course included strategies in notetaking, flexible reading, time management, test preparation, and basic composition. Faculty selected from the college reading center and the counseling center initially taught this course. Teachers from the counseling center focused on the development of life skills. After some experience with the class, Squamish leaders recommended that the time given life skills be devoted to more work in reading and study skills. This proved to be a productive recommendation. One life skill component retained dealt with understanding the registration, advising, counseling, and other services that assist students in the college.

Courses in the Level II program provided by the ABE faculty included basic math, composition, and science upgrading. In addition, students received training in the use of the computer as a tool for learning. This proved to be an important part of the Level II program. Besides these courses the students often enrolled in one or more regular courses as appropriate.

At Level III the course work typified most first-year college programs. The only exception was the required enrollment of all Level III students in a college reading and study skills course. This provides the students with the advantages the experience brings.

### *Transition Program Observations*

Records kept during the initial years (1991-1995) of the transition program included entry assessment scores, college grade-point averages (GPA), a record of the number of terms completed, and narrative reports on individual student progress. Information from these data resulted in the following observations.

A total of 216 Squamish Nation Students applied for the transition program during the four-year period. Seventy-seven students (26%) met the requirements for enrollment in a Level II or III program. Students enrolled in a Level II or III program remained at the college an average of five semesters, earning an average GPA of 2.30. Experience indicated that significantly more Squamish Nation students succeeded at Capilano College because of the transition program.

Students not initially accepted to a Level II or III college program often enrolled in the Level I Pre-transition program. Over the four years, this program contributed 34% of those accepted into the Level II program.

Fifty-seven men and 159 women applied for the program. Twenty-three men and 54 women enrolled in a Level II or III program. The male students earned an average GPA of 2.09 and the women 2.39. Both groups remained at the college for

an average of five semesters. The most recent data drawn from the ongoing program yielded a GPA of 3.09, with a retention rate over 90%.

Those who participated in the transition program completed a follow-up survey. Due to college experience with low survey returns from First Nations students, the college trained and funded a Squamish Nation student to conduct a survey that included a written questionnaire and phone interview. Fifty percent of the former students responded to the survey. This exceeded all prior attempts to survey former First Nations students. Student responses tended to be brief and positive. The following represent responses made in the survey.

1. How did the transition experience help you succeed?
  - a. I needed it because I had been out of school for a long time.
  - b. The classes were small and the faculty friendly.
2. What did you like about the transition experience?
  - a. The college First Nations advisor and programs were helpful.
  - b. Course variety made the program interesting.
  - c. The feeling of community was important.
3. What did you dislike about the transition experience?
  - a. After school tutoring would have helped.
  - b. Family demands made the program difficult.
  - c. It is hard to figure out how the college works.
4. How did you feel about the reading and study courses?
  - a. The First Nations emphasis was excellent.
  - b. Reading and study skills are really important.
  - c. More reading and study skills are needed.
  - d. The time management course was most helpful.
5. What difficulties did you experience in the program?
  - a. A need for more social contact with other First Nations students.
  - b. Personal problems often interfered with studying.
  - c. More personal counseling is needed.
  - d. I was so nervous about being at college.
  - e. It was difficult to be on time and getting everything done.
  - f. Registration was hard to understand.
6. What advice would you have for other First Nations students?
  - a. Find out where the support services are.
  - b. Join extracurricular activities.
  - c. Arrange to meet your teachers and talk to them.
  - d. Get information about scholarships.
  - e. Take a public speaking course.
  - f. Don't get pregnant.

Of the students participating in the program the following examples are typical. In 1997 one student graduated from law school, one completed a Bachelor of Commerce degree, and another a Bachelor of Arts in archaeology. Representing those in two-year diploma programs, two completed general studies programs and one an associate degree in the arts. Certificate program graduates completed programs in counselor training, office technology, and business administration. The number of graduates and the variety of fields of study is encouraging.

### *Conclusions*

The Squamish Nation wanted a better opportunity for their postsecondary students. They sought this by initiating a partnership with an existing community college. Although the Squamish Nation considered the tribal college approach, they preferred working with existing educational institutions. In doing this they recognized that a true partnership can exist only with full recognition of principles of First Nations self-determination.

In prior relationships the college and the Squamish Nation had not achieved partnership status. In early efforts the college attempted to create a positive learning environment without allowing the Squamish Nation to participate fully in the decision- and policy-making process. The college had not recognized the benefits from empowering the Squamish Nation and thus gaining from their insight and skill. This limited the success of these early programs.

To change this and improve the opportunity for success, the college accepted the principle that it is not what colleges can do for First Nations students, but what can happen when colleges join with First Nations students and leaders to effect success. The college worked with the Squamish Nation to enable students in the process of higher education. This partnership provided First Nations students with access to programs designed to help them succeed.

The Squamish leaders attributed the success of the partnership to several important variables.

1. The Squamish Nation retained control of the educational process for their students.
2. The program was community-based.
3. Actual student achievement levels determined program placement.
4. The college carefully monitored student progress and provided regular reports.
5. Student performance determined funding.
6. The Squamish Nation participated in the course design process to ensure relevance.
7. There was an emphasis on reading and study skills and computer proficiency.
8. Support services empowered students to fully participate in the college and enrich the college with their perspective.
9. Administrative councils of the college included Squamish Nation leaders as voting members.

The Squamish Nation and Capilano College experienced challenges and difficulties in the first year of the program. As a result, the college and the Squamish Nation refined communications skills to understand the needs of the Squamish students and the limitations of the college. This resulted in the development of programs that improved the opportunity for student success. The commitment of working together as partners enabled more Squamish Nation students to succeed in college. The acceptance of the principles of self-determination empowered the Squamish Nation to improve educational opportunities for their students.

At the national level, Canadian First Nations students continue to find college frustrating. The Squamish Nation reversed this trend for their people by initiating a partnership with a community college. With the cooperation of the college, a

partnership resulted that provided an improved educational environment for First Nations students. As a result, the student success rate increased. The Squamish Nation demonstrated that self-determination works for the benefit of First Nations college students.

*Acknowledgment*

The author is grateful to Richard Band and his colleagues at the Squamish Nation Education Department for their leadership and vision of this project. Special recognition is given to Richard Band for his invaluable contribution to this article.

*References*

- Armstrong, R., Kennedy, J., & Oberle, P.R. (1990). *University and education and economic well-being: Indian achievement and prospectus*. Ottawa, ON: Indian and Northern Affairs Canada.
- Brown, J., Fishco, V.V., & Hanna, G.S. (1992). *Nelson Denney Reading Test, forms G and H*. Toronto, On: Nelson Canada.
- Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. (1990). *Trendlines. Change*, 22(1), 27-30.
- Hammill, D.D., & Bryant, B.R. (1988). *Differential Aptitude Test*. Toronto, ON: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Jastak, S., & Wilkinson, G. (1984). *Wide Range Achievement Test*. Wilmington, DE: Jastak Associates.
- Kirkness, V.J., & Barnhardt, R. (1991). First Nations and higher education: The four R's: Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity, Responsibility. *Journal of American Indian Education*, 30(3), 1-15.