

OFF-CAMPUS DELIVERY OF GRADUATE PROGRAMS TO FIRST NATION STUDENTS

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Abstract / Résumé

The Brandon University Faculty of Education was asked to create a special program to train Aboriginal teachers to provide special education services. It was felt that teachers representing their own communities would be most sensitive to local needs. Further training either within the communities or nearby was perceived as necessary. A certificate program was created, and proved to be successful.

La faculté d'éducation de l'université de Brandon a été sollicitée pour créer un programme spécial dans le but de former des professeurs autochtones, capables de fournir des services d'enseignement particuliers. Les professeurs, qui représentent leur propre communauté, sembleraient être plus sensibles aux besoins locaux. Une formation supplémentaire, soit au sein des communautés, ou à proximité, semble nécessaire. Un programme (dont le diplôme est reconnu) a été créé et s'est avéré être une réussite.

Introduction

The delivery of special education services to Aboriginal children in northern Manitoba remains, according to many Aboriginal leaders, a matter for concern (Keewatin Tribal Council (KTC) and Island Lake Tribal Council (ILTC), 1992; Northern Resource Teacher Training Program (NRTTP) Steering Committee, 1996). Some of the more serious problems that are inherent in the current delivery system have been described as follows:

When specialists are available, they frequently come from off-reserve, stay for relatively short periods of time, do not speak the language of the community (whether Cree, Island Lake Dialect, Ojibway, Sauteaux, or Dene), and are not always aware of the extent to which Native education and Native culture intertwine in the North (Northern Resource Teacher Training Program Steering Committee, 1996).

Representatives from Keewatin Tribal Council (KTC) and Island Lake Tribal Council (ILTC) have suggested that, in large part, the solution to this problem must involve training Aboriginal teachers to deliver the required services in their own communities. In their words,

qualified Native resource teachers are highly recommended and required because they know the child's community, speak the Native language of the child, and possess enriched knowledge about the history, traditions, values, culture, and lifestyle of the community (Keewatin Tribal Council and Island Lake Tribal Council, 1992:3).

It was for this specific purpose that the Northern Resource Teacher Training Program was developed.

Campus-Based Training Programs

Defining a Problem

For many Aboriginal students who have attempted to pursue studies at the post-secondary level, success has been elusive. In the first place, compared to their counterparts from the majority culture, fewer Aboriginal students have even tried to enter college or university (Cross, 1991). Of those who have done so, extremely high dropout rates (McIvor, 1994; Robinson, 1994) have held the numbers of graduates, in both Canada and the United States to a small fraction of the national average (Kleinfeld, Cooper and Kyle, 1987; Ruey-Lin, LaCounte and Eder, 1988).

Several factors have been identified as contributing to the twin problems of underachievement and failure within the population of Aboriginal

university students. Feelings of homesickness (Macias, 1989), isolation, and loneliness (Eberhard, 1989; McIvor, 1994; Ruey-Lin, LaCounte and Eder, 1988) are common among students who move from rural or remote communities to attend university in distant urban centers, and, as these feelings intensify over time, study behaviors inevitably suffer. In many cases, academic preparation at the secondary level does not adequately equip Aboriginal students to deal with university programs (Macias, 1989). In some cases, basic concepts are not mastered. In others, problems with language development, particularly among students who have learned English as a second language, leave students only marginally able to cope with the domain-specific terminology that is common to specialized areas of study (Macias, 1989).

With regard to colleges and universities, it is now commonly acknowledged that most institutions of higher learning have been designed primarily for students who come from the cultural majority and not for students who have been brought up in Aboriginal communities (Hornett, 1989; McAlpine, Cross, Whiteduck and Wolforth, 1990). In fact, many Aboriginal students soon come to regard universities as truly inhospitable learning environments in which they are routinely expected to deal with attitudes that range from indifference through lack of respect for their cultural origins and traditions (Kirkness and Barnhardt, 1991; McIvor, 1994) to outright hostility (Kirkness and Barnhardt, 1991; Ruey-Lin, LaCounte and Eder, 1988). In these environments, traditional teaching and learning practices are generally not valued (Barnhardt, 1991; Kirkness and Barnhardt, 1991; More, 1989); non-Native predispositions toward individual achievement through competition take precedence over Native attitudes that value co-operation and interpersonal support (Cross, 1991); and students who fail to adapt, either academically or socially, tend to be regarded as deficient and unsuitable for training at the post-secondary level (Hornett, 1989; Kirkness and Barnhardt, 1991; Pictou, 1994).

The acquisition of a university degree, whether undergraduate or graduate, is highly valued in Native society (Barnhardt, 1991; Eberhard, 1989), and failure to perform to expectation causes many Native students to experience serious problems with their self-esteem (McIvor, 1994; Simard, 1994). Furthermore, for many Native students, feelings of inadequacy and inferiority are accompanied by increased feelings of isolation due to what has been described as a culturally-based tendency to avoid interfering in some one else's life and problems (Hornett, 1989; Kirkness and Barnhardt, 1991; More, 1989; Ross, 1992). Given all of these factors, it is little wonder that drop out rates among Aboriginal university students are as high as they are.

Moving Toward a Solution

In the field of pre-service teacher education, initiatives such as the Native and Northern Education Program at McGill University (Wolforth, 1994), the Brandon University Northern Teacher Education Program (BUNTEP) (Lall, Nicol and Chambers, 1994), the Project for the Education of Native Teachers (PENT) at Brandon University (McIvor, 1994), and the Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program (SUNTEP) of the University of Regina and the University of Saskatchewan (Barnhardt, 1991) have all contributed to a dramatic improvement in the number of Aboriginal people who hold Bachelor of Education degrees. Beyond the level of undergraduate study, however, minimal rates of success remain the rule rather than the exception (Cross, 1991; Robinson, 1994).

This is the reality that caused those responsible for planning the Northern Resource Teacher Training Program to approach the task with caution. Mounting a graduate program to serve Aboriginal teachers working in rural and remote areas of northern Manitoba was acknowledged to be a formidable undertaking. At the same time, however, the planning committee was able to feel somewhat optimistic, due to the fact that the models which have served pre-service teacher education programs so well were also available to serve at least some of the needs of the Northern Resource Teacher Training Program.

The Northern Resource Teacher Training Program

Planning for Success

From the very beginning, it was clear that any attempt to deliver a graduate program to Aboriginal students in northern Manitoba would have to incorporate at least three components into its design: a) the establishment and maintenance of a meaningful partnership between the providers of the service and its principal beneficiaries; b) delivery of the program in or as near as possible to the communities that it was intended to serve; and c) reasonable levels of academic and social support for the participating Aboriginal students.

Meaningful Partnerships. There is no doubt that full and meaningful participation of representatives from the Aboriginal community is critical to the successful design and delivery of post-secondary programming for Aboriginal students (Mazurek, Mocosch and Lane, 1989; McAlpine, Cross, Whiteduck and Wolforth, 1990; Ralph, 1993; Wolforth, 1994). Strong representation on planning committees ensures that communities' needs will remain central to the process, and, perhaps more importantly, it sends a

message of respect and acceptance to the Aboriginal community-at-large (Hornett, 1989; McIvor, 1994; Ralph, 1993).

The planning committee of the Northern Resource Teacher Training Program (NRTTP) was made up of representatives from Island Lake Tribal Council (ILTC), Keewatin Tribal Council (KTC), Brandon University Northern Teacher Education Program (BUNTEP), the Faculty of Education of Brandon University, and Inter-Universities North (IUN). The principal duties of the committee included:

(the identification of) the administrative and financial needs of the proposed program, the identification of suitable facilities, the recruitment and vetting of students, the recruitment of instructors, and the development of a suitable curriculum (Northern Resource Teacher Training Program Steering Committee, 1996).

From the outset, it was understood that neither the committee-as-a-whole nor the various sub-committees would be allowed to proceed without adequate representation from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants.

Community-based delivery has also been identified as essential to the development and implementation of post-secondary programs for Aboriginal students (Barnhardt, 1991; Cross, 1991; Kirkness and Barnhardt, 1991; Lall, Nicol and Chambers, 1994; Mazurek, Mokosh and Lane, 1989; McAlpine, Cross, Whiteduck and Wolforth, 1990; Wolforth, 1994). From the perspective of the participating students, there are two reasons for this. First, students function within and derive their sense of self from their respective communities (Yoh, 1994). Therefore, cutting themselves off from their communities in order to pursue post-secondary studies at a distant college or university introduces the strong possibility that their ability to function productively will be impaired. Secondly, the deleterious effects of campus-based programs on many Aboriginal students from rural and remote areas has been well documented (Barnhardt, 1991; Cross, 1991; Eberhard, 1989; Kirkness and Barnhardt, 1991; Macias, 1989; More, 1989; Pictou, 1994; Robinson, 1994; Ruey-Lin, LaCounte and Eder, 1988; Simard, 1994), and any strategy that helps students to avoid so destructive an experience has to be valued as an important alternative.

In recent years, a large number of researchers and practitioners have also underscored the importance of community-based post-secondary programming for the communities being served (Barnhardt, 1991; Cross, 1991; Kirkness and Barnhardt, 1991; Lall, Nicol and Chambers, 1994; Mazurek, Mokosh and Lane, 1989; McAlpine, Cross, Whiteduck and Wolforth, 1990; Pictou, 1994; Simard, 1994; Wolforth, 1994). There seem to be

at least three reasons for this. In the first place, moving the delivery of post-secondary programs into a community necessitates the identification and specification of that community's needs (Pictou, 1994). Secondly, once specific needs are identified, teaching and research activities can be tied directly to those needs (Barnhardt, 1991). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, among Aboriginal people there is the strong perception that community-based programming increases the possibility that emerging expertise will remain in the community and that the community will, thereby, be able to retain its cultural, social, and educational integrity (Keewatin Tribal Council and Island Lake Tribal Council, 1992).

Academic and social support for participants of the program was the third component to which the planning committee gave priority. Justification for this position came from the personal experiences of committee members with post-secondary environments and from a body of research that testifies to the importance of such strategies. The sorts of strategies that have been identified include: advising/counselling services (Hornett, 1989; Kleinfeld, Cooper and Kyle, 1987; Lamont and Arcand, 1995; Ralph, 1993), training in the use of study skills (Ralph, 1993; Wolforth, 1994), course-related tutorials (Kleinfeld, Cooper and Kyle, 1987; Ralph, 1993), and the provision of extended periods of study (Ralph, 1993; Yoh, 1994). Although formal training in the use of study skills was not emphasized in the Northern Resource Teacher Training Program, a serious attempt was made to incorporate the other elements into the delivery of the program.

The First Cycle of Instruction

Instruction for the Northern Resource Teacher Training Program (NRTTP) began during the summer of 1993 and continued until the end of the winter term of 1996. During this period, a total of thirty-three credit hours of instruction (i.e. eleven three-credit hour courses) were delivered. (In fact, the number of credit hours delivered in the summer of 1993 was repeated during the summer of 1995.) Twenty-seven of the thirty-three credit hours were delivered on-site in Thompson, Manitoba. The remaining six were delivered on the Brandon University campus. The thirty-three credit hours gave the participants the opportunity to qualify for both a Graduate Diploma in Special Education from Brandon University and a Certificate of Special Education from the Department of Education and Training, Province of Manitoba.

The original Northern Resource Teacher Training Program cohort was made up of twelve Aboriginal and two non-Aboriginal students, all of whom held Bachelor of Education degrees or their equivalent. As the program proceeded, the cohort was augmented by four more Aboriginal students,

Table 1: Number of Students by Credit Hours Completed at the End of the First Cycle of Instruction

	Credit Hours Completed										
	3	6	9	12	15	18	21	24	27	30	33 ¹
Number of Students	2	3	2			1	3	1	1		3

¹ indicates completion of the program.

which brought the total number of Aboriginal participants to sixteen. (A number of casual students from Thompson and The Pas, another sizeable northern community, took advantage of the courses that were being offered, but they were never really considered to be part of the Northern Resource Teacher Training Program.) By the end of the first cycle of instruction, three of the sixteen Aboriginal students in the program had satisfied the requirements for the Graduate Diploma in Special Education and the Certificate of Special Education. Of those three, one had continued on into a Master's program.

The levels of achievement of the remaining members of the cohort were highly variable. (Please see Table 1 for an illustration of levels of achievement as credit hours completed.) Seven of the students finished the first cycle with three or fewer courses to their credit. The other six students, however, successfully completed from eighteen to twenty-seven credit hours of instruction and were, therefore, placed well on the way to realizing the stated goal of the program. A number of the students who were not able to complete the program by the end of the first cycle of instruction decided to take advantage of on-campus delivery of courses. Of these students, one was able to satisfy the requirements for the diploma and the certificate and the other three were able to graduate with their diplomas by the end of the summer of 1997. It is a credit to the planning committee that all of this probably happened because the committee had the foresight to put the Northern Resource Teacher Training Program in place.

Problems Within the Program

By the end of the first cycle of instruction, it was obvious that: a) the goals and objectives which had originally been identified for the Northern Resource Teacher Training Program had come within reach for many of the participants, b) practical benefits were accruing both for the participating

teachers and for the children of their communities, and c) the students were showing overwhelming support for the continuation of the program (Northern Resource Teacher Training Program Steering Committee, 1996). It was also obvious, however, that the continued success of the program was dependent upon finding solutions to a series of problems that had emerged during the course of the program's introductory cycle.

Problems with language and course content had been anticipated by the committee members who were responsible for defining the curriculum for the program, and it took very little time for these problems to emerge. Although all of the students were able to understand English, many of them had learned Cree as their first language, and they continued to regard Cree as their preferred means of communication. In class, where English was used as the language of instruction, several of the students confessed that they coped by translating concepts from English into Cree, processing the information in their own language, and translating the results of their processing back into English for subsequent discussion. Given that course content at the graduate level can challenge even students who are fluent in the language of instruction, and given that most of the students in the Northern Resource Teacher Training Program had been out of the university environment for a number of years, a period of transition during which students became acclimatized to graduate school was to be expected. In this particular case, for some of the participating students at least, problems with the language of instruction obviously increased the demands that were already inherent in the program.

People who have developed post-secondary programs for Native students have recommended the provision of extra time for study (Ralph, 1993; Yoh, 1994), and this was adopted as a preferred strategy in this case as well. For each course that was delivered, extra sessions were scheduled so that students could come together in a supportive and collaborative atmosphere for the purpose of discussing difficult concepts further, having assignments explained more thoroughly, or relating course content to their particular classrooms and communities. In addition, deadlines at the end of the courses were routinely extended, often for three to six months, so that students, almost all of whom were teaching full-time, could work on assignments at a pace that was comfortable for them. Finally, although the program was structured to allow for completion in a cycle of thirty-three credit hours of instruction, the expectation was that many students would require a second cycle in order to meet the requirements for this diploma and the certificate.

Access to the program proved to be a second complicating factor for the planning committee of the Northern Resource Teacher Training Pro-

gram. From the beginning, community-based programming had been conceptualized as the face-to-face delivery of summer and regular session courses in Thompson, Manitoba, a population center which lies approximately 850 kilometres north of the provincial capital. This certainly brought the program closer to the communities that had expressed interest in participating. For most of the northern Bands, however, the high cost of transportation (i.e. return air fare to Thompson), room and board in Thompson, tuition, and books still proved to be prohibitive. This meant that, while those teachers who lived and worked in Thompson, or in one of two Aboriginal communities that lay within driving distance of Thompson, were able to derive substantial benefit from the program, it proved to be of little use to teachers from the more remote communities of northern Manitoba. This remains a major concern for the planning committee because

if the original intent of the planning committee is to be satisfied, some way of reaching beyond the immediate vicinity of the town of Thompson will have to be found (Northern Resource Teacher Training Program Steering Committee, 1996).

Loss of focus. As long as a majority of places in the Northern Resource Teacher Training Program could be held for and by Aboriginal teachers, then the focus of the program could remain on Aboriginal issues in Education. In actual fact, as the program continued through 1994, the number of Aboriginal participants began to decline. In a few cases, this seemed to be the result of individuals exercising their right to move in and out of the program according to their personal needs and motivation, a common enough strategy among some Aboriginal students (Kirkness and Barnhardt, 1991; Kleinfeld, Cooper and Kyle, 1987). In most cases, however, the decline could be attributed to the withdrawal of funding or, in the case of one community, the implementation of year-round schooling. This effectively eliminated the summer session as an alternative for the individuals involved. From the point of view of Inter-Universities North, the agency of the universities of Manitoba for the delivery of courses in the northern area of the province, the program was never in jeopardy because the vacant spaces could be filled by interested non-Aboriginal teachers from Thompson, Flin Flon, and The Pas. From the perspective of the planning committee of the Northern Resource Teacher Training Project, however, the situation was serious because

the Aboriginal focus (became) difficult to maintain, and... Aboriginal students...tended to take a less active role in the classroom (Northern Resource Teacher Training Program Steering Committee, 1996).

Completing Programs. During the first cycle of instruction, funding for the program remained secure. At a meeting of the steering committee in the Fall of 1995, however, representatives from Inter-Universities North announced that other programs for Aboriginal students in northern Manitoba were also in need of funding, and that funding for a second cycle of instruction for the Northern Resource Teacher Training Program could not be guaranteed. As many of the students had, for one reason or another, missed elements of the program, a second cycle was essential if those students were to be able to earn their diplomas and certificates. Needless to say, this represented a major threat to the overall success of the program.

The Next Cycle of Instruction

The position of the planning committee has to be that a second cycle of instruction for the Northern Resource Teacher Training Program must be initiated as quickly as possible, because the need that originally gave rise to the program is still very much a part of the delivery of educational services in northern Manitoba. For the next cycle of instruction, the planning committee will have to build on the successes of the recent past by continuing to pursue those strategies that have been validated by its own experience and the experiences of other researchers and practitioners in the field. It will have to continue to foster a culturally responsive teaching-learning environment (Barnhardt, 1991) where Aboriginal culture is treated with respect (Hornett, 1989; Kirkness and Barnhardt, 1991; Mazurek, Mokosch and Lane, 1989; McIvor, 1994) and in which traditional ways of knowing are valued (Barnhardt, 1991; Kirkness and Barnhardt, 1991; Macias, 1989; More, 1989; Pictou, 1994; Simard, 1994). It will also have to continue to encourage an appreciation for traditional approaches to learning, such as experience-based learning, reciprocal teaching, and co-operative learning (Barnhardt, 1991; Kirkness and Barnhardt, 1991; Pictou, 1994; Ralph, 1993; Robinson, 1994; Simard, 1994; Yoh, 1994). Finally, it will have to continue to monitor the participants with care and to ensure that appropriate levels of support are available when needed (Hornett, 1989; Kleinfeld, Cooper and Kyle, 1987; Lamont and Arcand, 1995; Ralph, 1993; Ruey-Lin, LaCounte and Eder, 1988). One strategy that will require extra attention involves the use of Aboriginal instructors. This has now become a priority for the committee, but the first order of business remains the development of a cost-effective delivery mechanism that will allow the program to reach interested teachers who work in more remote areas of the province.

Alternative models for program delivery. There is now no doubt that the cost of site-based, face-to-face delivery of courses is prohibitive for most of the Bands who have expressed interest in the Northern Resource Teacher

Training Program and that the continuation of the program will depend on the development of more cost-effective alternatives. To date, the alternatives that have been considered have included course delivery by means of correspondence, teleconference, videotape, electronic mail, and interactive audio/video. Like face-to-face delivery, each of these alternatives has its advantages and disadvantages.

While interactive audio/video delivery remains as the ideal toward which distance education, in general, seems to be moving, the reality is that this is not yet close to being an option for the Northern Resource Teacher Training Program. Most northern communities do not have the requisite components in place to permit the use of the technology, and provincial service providers are not yet in a position to be able to undertake the cost of installation and maintenance of the equipment. Correspondence courses, teleconferencing, and electronic mail have all been used in recent years and have the advantage of being among the more affordable options. However, all of them have deficiencies that need to be taken into account.

It is the feeling of the planning committee of the Northern Resource Teacher Training Program that, where Aboriginal students are concerned, the rates of success that emerge when correspondence courses are used as the primary vehicle of instruction are far too low. Teleconferencing appears to increase rates of success (i.e., course completion), but the perceived lack of personal contact has caused most of the students of the program to reject this as an option as well. In addition, like electronic mail, teleconferencing depends heavily on telecommunications technology for its success, and, in many northern communities, the level of service is simply not adequate to allow for the reliable delivery of instruction using these means.

At the present time, the alternative that is being given preferential consideration by the planning committee of the Northern Resource Teacher Training Program is a hybrid approach that makes use of site-based, face-to-face instruction in combination with regularly scheduled teleconferences. A proposed ratio of one face-to-face session to three or four teleconferences would dramatically reduce delivery costs, would provide the personal contact that the students seem to value so highly, and would prevent the less confident students from "getting lost in the telephone lines" (Northern Resource Teacher Training Program Steering Committee, 1996). Of course allowances would have to be made for the problems that routinely accompany telephone service in the North, at least until the telephone lines are upgraded by the Province's service provider.

A modification of the above strategy was proposed for use within the Northern Resource Teacher Training Program, and, in fact, has already

been piloted by Inter-Universities North with considerable success in another program. The modified strategy was used to serve multiple sites, in each of which there were only a few students who had opted to take the course, a situation which tends to characterize the distance delivery of programs to graduate students. Instead of using the facilities in Thompson for site-based delivery and as the center from which teleconferences were conducted, the instructor flew directly into one of the participating communities and used that as a base of operations. This base of operations changed weekly, as the instructor moved from community to community, and when all the communities had been visited once, the rotation began again. This strategy still required the students to take a majority of their classes through teleconferencing, but it also allowed the students of each community to experience face-to-face sessions from two to four times during the delivery of each course.

Aboriginal instructors. The inclusion of Aboriginal people as active participants in the delivery of post-secondary programs for Aboriginal students has been strongly recommended in recent years (Mazurek, Mokosch and Lane, 1989; Wolforth, 1994). These recommendations have focused on a variety of roles, including those of counsellor (Barnhardt, 1991; Kleinfeld, Cooper and Kyle, 1987), teaching assistant (McAlpine, Cross, Whiteduck and Wolforth, 1990), and instructor (Barnhardt, 1991; McAlpine, Cross, Whiteduck and Wolforth, 1990). Within the Northern Resource Teacher Training Program, the use of trained teachers as post-secondary teaching assistants (McAlpine *et al.*, 1990) and the use of Elders and other community leaders as counsellors (Barnhardt, 1991) represent adaptations which can easily be incorporated into the delivery of the program. The use of Aboriginal instructors, however, is a strategy that will require additional planning.

At the present time, Aboriginal instructors are in short supply at the post-secondary level (Robinson, 1994). For the planning committee of the Northern Resource Teacher Training Program, this problem is particularly acute because the Department of Graduate Studies at Brandon University normally requires instructors at the post-graduate level to have doctorates in their area of specialization. The net effect is that the possibility of finding Aboriginal instructors who meet the requirements that have been laid down by the degree-granting institution and who are available to teach in the Northern Resource Teacher Training Program is remote indeed.

One solution that has been discussed by the planning committee involves the use of instructional teams. It is the feeling of certain members of the committee that Aboriginal instructors for the Northern Resource Teacher Training Program could be selected from among the large number

of Aboriginal people who now hold Master's degrees in Education and who are currently residing in Manitoba. These instructors could be teamed with professors who have met the requirements of the Department of Graduate Studies and who would be willing to monitor course delivery. In this way, the needs of the University, the program, and the participating communities would all be served, presumably to the satisfaction of all parties.

Summary

The Northern Resource Teacher Training Program was developed specifically for the purpose of giving Aboriginal Teachers in northern Manitoba the expertise that would allow them to provide special education services to the children of their communities. Of the sixteen teachers who have been part of the program, four have acquired Graduate Diplomas in Special Education from Brandon University and Certificates of Special Education from the Province of Manitoba. Three others have not yet met the requirements for provincial certificates, but have obtained diplomas from the University.

The extreme need for trained resource teachers in northern Manitoba makes the continuation of the program essential, but if this is going to happen, a delivery mechanism which is more cost-effective than the one that was used during the implementation phase will have to be found. The Northern Resource Teacher Training Program was launched as the direct result of a strong collaborative effort on the part of the members, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, of the educational community in Manitoba. That same sense of dedication and the willingness to work and learn together will now be necessary to keep the program on course and to realize fully those goals that originally gave the Northern Resource Teacher Training Program its purpose.

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