



Indigenizing the Academy

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This research was collected under the guidance the Students' Society of McGill University for the educational advancement and consideration of McGill University.

Introduction

The purpose of this project is to illustrate what McGill offers and does not offer its Indigenous community. In doing so, I hope for McGill to identify some of its deficiencies in accommodating the cultural differences and barriers facing Indigenous students, and subsequently consider adopting some of my proposed reforms in addressing these shortcomings. The goal is to foster a more sensitive and friendly learning and social environment for Indigenous students at McGill, accommodating cultural differences.

Method

Over the period of May 28th to August 5th, I conducted interviews with Indigenous students, teachers, as well as various academic advisors and outreach workers from other universities. I also consulted with representatives from First People's House, a primary focal point for Indigenous services. My work also involved online research, focusing on the amenities and programs offered by other academic institutions as well as various websites.

Hypothesis

Making some distinctive changes in terms of representation, awareness, and visibility, I believe that McGill could enhance the Indigenous student experience. With some changes, I am confident that McGill could be an ideal learning space and positive community for our land's first peoples. Moreover, I believe these changes and the improvement of the Indigenous student experience at McGill would provide additional benefits for the non-Indigenous student body and help solidify the integrity of the institution as a whole.

Comparative Overlook

In my research, I noticed several other universities offered a more comprehensive array of support services and Indigenous focused courses than McGill does.

The following lists provide a sampling of the programs and services offered at other universities that are *not* currently offered at McGill:

University of Saskatchewan

- Aboriginal Achievement Program
- Upper Year Aboriginal Peer Mentors
- Aboriginal Advising
- Tutorial Leaders
- Indigenous Students' Council
- Indigenous Studies Department, with courses on Indigenous history, literacy, knowledge, and even Cree language classes

- Graduation Pow-Wow

Ryerson University

- Aboriginal Outreach and Recruitment Program
- Cultural support
- Career support
- Peer support
- Special lounge and ceremonies

University of Calgary

- Academic, cultural, and peer mentorship
- Career program
- Funding and scholarships
- Indigenous research opportunities
- Student policy designed specially for Aboriginal students
- Native Ambassador Post-Secondary Initiative
- Aboriginal Student Success, Empowerment and Re-Engagement Training
- Aboriginal Relations Leadership Training Program

University of Regina

- 11% of the student population is self-declared Indigenous
- Leading university in Canada for research impact on and collaboration with Indigenous peoples
- Aboriginal Advisory Circle
- Indigenization Fund

UQAM

- First Nations Circle, cultural and supportive group, supports francophone First Nations students

UdM

- Conducts specialized Indigenous Peoples and Governance projects

Representation

Only 8% of Aboriginal people in Canada between 25-64 have a university degree, opposed to the 25% of non-Aboriginal peoples of the same group (univcan.ca). This educational disparity is one of the major factors contributing to the myriad of social and economic challenges that face Indigenous people. Therefore initiatives aimed at improving the Indigenous educational experience will provide benefits not only to the students themselves, but will undoubtedly have a positive impact on Aboriginal populations as a whole whether they exist within the context of a geographically defined

reserve or whether these populations form subset communities within urban and rural areas outside of traditional lands. Education, self-esteem and empowerment are intrinsically linked. For Indigenous people to flourish all levels of the educational system including those at the post-secondary level must seek to identify and fulfill the unique needs and distinctive desires of Aboriginal students.

McGill can assist in the process of promoting Indigenous educational progress in two basic ways: Firstly, by adopting strategies and programs aimed at increasing the rate of acceptance of Aboriginal candidates into McGill; and secondly by committing to steps that put Indigenous students in the best position to succeed both academically and socially so that the rate of First Nations graduation rises.

Reforms for this could include: accepting more Indigenous students, recruiting more Indigenous students (especially Iroquois peoples, those whose territory the school occupies), offering more funding to Indigenous students, offering more tutoring services for Indigenous students. According to Mr. Cook, from First Peoples' House, the number of offers to Indigenous students at McGill has gone up, but the number of students has not. McGill needs to actively determine the underlying causes of this disparity and address them. In my view a bridging program and additional student funding may provide effective levers in addressing this issue.

I would also argue that McGill must seek to recruit more Indigenous professors. McGill currently has only one tenured Aboriginal professor, and several non-Aboriginal professors teach courses focusing on Indigenous issues. I would suggest that many Indigenous students would feel more comfortable and empowered by the site of more First Nations professors within the academic system, particularly teaching courses focusing on Indigenous topics.

McGill could also significantly benefit by the appointment of an Indigenous Secretariat. This would provide a respected and credible voice at a level that could promote and speak on issues from a First Nations viewpoint. This would provide great benefits in terms of program design, ombudsman functions and student support.

An Action Plan

1. Indigenous Recruitment

- Firstly, there is an opportunity for McGill to graduate more Indigenous students through the active recruitment of both high school age and mature students. By becoming a leader in Indigenous recruitment McGill would plant the seeds for future successes. The Iroquois population is particularly underrepresented in the McGill student body, which is particularly concerning in that McGill is housed on traditional Iroquois land.

2. Indigenous Student Funding

- McGill has an opportunity to both partner with Indigenous populations and provide leadership in funding assistance. Funding incentives should

be targeted towards specific items that are not covered by traditional reserve funding models and may include elements of housing, enhanced tutorial support, transportation and academic materials. According to Mr. Cook, from First Peoples' House, while the number of offers to Indigenous students at McGill has gone up, but the number of students has not. The gap between tendered and accepted offers may reflect to some degree financial considerations and challenges.

3. Increasing the Visibility and Number of Indigenous Professors.
 - At present McGill has only one tenured professor. This underrepresentation not only provides fewer identifiable academic role models for Aboriginal students but also may instill a false and damaging sense of inferiority when it comes to academic success. This underrepresentation is perhaps most telling when it comes to Indigenous Studies courses which are largely taught by non-Aboriginal instructors.
4. Installation of an Indigenous Secretariat
 - Having this representative at McGill could greatly assist in improving the Indigenous graduation rate. The Secretariat would provide a senior voice in bringing Aboriginal issues to the forefront of McGill policies and curriculum design as well as provide a strongly needed advocacy function.

Awareness

Awareness is another one of the major issues that needs to be addressed. There are already in existence a number of well-designed and well-administered programs and services aimed at assisting Indigenous students at McGill, but Indigenous students do not know about them. From my own personal perspective, I went through the first two years of my McGill experience not knowing about any Aboriginal resources or services. It was only in my last semester that I became aware of these support services and groups. The current array of Indigenous initiatives was fantastic, supportive, and extremely helpful when I did use them, but I had no idea they existed before. Raising awareness and improving outreach is crucial.

I believe another reason I never got involved in the Indigenous community at McGill stems from a great deal from the way it is framed around getting help. It primarily is promoted as a vehicle to receive support and assistance for those struggling. As a student with good grades, that was well integrated in the community at McGill, I did not perceive that McGill's Indigenous initiatives were aimed at enhancing my experience at McGill but only a lifeline for students experiencing difficulties. However, it would have been nice to have a way to connect with other Indigenous students, with a similar culture and upbringing as myself. This Indigenous connection would serve to enhance the student experience by sharing and celebrating personal and academic success.

Action Plan

1. Bridging Program
 - It may be beneficial to offer a platform for Indigenous students to connect other than through tutoring, mentoring, and the like before starting their time at McGill. It could provide more Indigenous students with a smoother transition into McGill life.
2. Peer Mentoring
 - Not necessarily in a rescue format, but a buddy system.

Visibility

There is a wonderful opportunity to increase the visibility and awareness of Indigenous culture on campus, particularly focusing on the strong Indigenous connections to the land and health of the physical environment. At Mohawk College there is a Wampum Wall. While this may seem perhaps a bit too elaborate as a first step it is symbols like this that will raise Indigenous awareness as well as elevate the sense of pride, community, culture, appreciation, within Aboriginal students. While McGill is a beautiful campus the architecture reflects dominant Western European values, culture and design and its appearance reflects to many an age of European colonialism. This element could be softened and complemented by the installation of symbols and art that celebrate the Indigenous experience and heritage.

Offering a major concentration in Indigenous studies would also increase visibility of the relevance and importance of Indigenous culture.

Action Plan

1. Hochelaga Rock
 - The Hochelaga Rock is still not visible, and its meaning even less apparent, to the student body at McGill University. Since it is already on campus, it seems like a feasible first step in making First Nations culture more visible to the public.
2. Traditional Indigenous Art
 - As mentioned, while beautiful the McGill campus looks very colonial. One way to incorporate more traditionally indigenous culture to the campus would be to have more Indigenous art and architecture around campus. Other universities such as First Nations University, and the University of British Columbia have structures and art works that really exhibit Indigenous heritage.
3. Indigenous Studies Major

- Lastly, one of the most essential ways that McGill can promote Indigenous culture and make it more visible to the student body, would be to actually offer it to the students. An Indigenous studies major would increase that.

Conclusion

Overall, my research suggests that there are many opportunities to improve the student life for Indigenous peoples at McGill. I would argue that McGill has an opportunity to become a leader in forwarding the interests on Aboriginal students and this will have benefits to communities far from Montreal. Strategies and programs must be specifically designed to increase the rate of acceptance of incoming Indigenous students as well as elevate the rate of graduation. By measuring these two parameters on an annual basis the effectiveness of programs can be assessed and modified as needed. I have identified a lack of awareness of current Indigenous programs and supports that can be quickly and readily addressed. I have also forwarded a number of initiatives aimed at increasing the level of awareness of Indigenous culture on campus. My research indicates a measureable disparity between what McGill and other universities offer and that there are a number of excellent initiatives that could be implanted at McGill using templates provided by other institutions. With commitment and compassion I believe that McGill can dramatically enhance the academic and social experience of Indigenous students and become a leader for forwarding positive change.