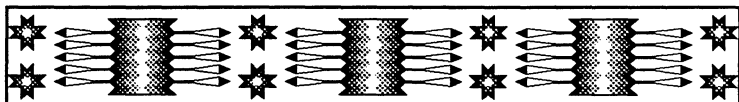


Northern Student Education Initiative



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Preamble

The Northwest Territories encompasses a third of Canada's land mass. In 1999, the one territory will become two. Separating the arctic from the subarctic, the division will approximately follow the tree line, which runs diagonally across the Northwest Territories from the northwest to the southeast. The Nunavut territory will provide a self-governed homeland for the Inuit in the eastern arctic. The western territory will encompass the traditional homeland of the Inuvialuit, the Dene and Metis (Canada's Northwest Territories 1996 Explorer's Guide). In the Northwest Territories, where Native people are the majority, Aboriginal self-government is a reality.

The North is rapidly changing. The old way of life is slowly vanishing, as life on the traplines gives way to jobs in mining, small business, government and tourism. While Aboriginal peoples have had to contend with European forces, there are many issues that need to be addressed. While adapting to changing conditions, many Aboriginal people have retained and, in some cases, revived their land-based knowledge and skills, their languages, their arts, their values, their spirituality and other traditions.

A post-secondary education allows indigenous students to understand and be involved in the introduction of modern technology as a means of preserving the customary ways of their ancestors. Students can use their education to serve their cultural interests, as it provides an opportunity to graduate with the qualifications and skills needed to pursue individual careers and to contribute to the achievement of Aboriginal self-government.

Introduction

The Northern Student Education Initiative was established in 1990 to aid students from the Northwest Territories in making a successful transition to urban life in the Edmonton area. The initiative was created to help reduce the number and severity of the obstacles and barriers Northern students must overcome in order to reach their potential and complete their chosen education or training program.

Principles of Program Delivery

The Northern Student Education Initiative relies on some basic assumptions about Northern students when developing services to meet their needs. Northern students:

- require proper guidance and support from academic institutions;
- need opportunities, and assistance if necessary, to decide the direction their lives will take;
- have transitional needs in the social, educational, emotional, physical and spiritual areas;
- are part of cultural, social and family systems which influence their behaviour;
- often have needs based on cultural and/or family background and
- learn responsible decision making in a living environment and circumstances unfamiliar to them if they are provided with support and assistance when necessary.

The Northern Student Services Advisor

Through the Northern Student Education Initiative, the Northern Student Advisor provides the opportunity for discussion, learning, sharing ideas, counselling and relationship building. The Advisor is able to help students to recognize their potential and assist them in seeking out programs and services that best address their individual and cultural needs. The services provide prompt, timely and equitable access to local services, focusing on natural helping systems within the Aboriginal student community.

Funding

The program requires, in total, approximately \$75,000 per year to administer. The Northern Student Education Initiative is a collaborative endeavour between academic institutions, government, private industry and other interested parties. From a sponsor's viewpoint, supporting the initiative offers the professional community a forum for coming together to support the practical and formidable task of helping Northern students adjust to a new environment so they can successfully complete their education. Post-secondary institutions want to retain the students so they can uphold academic stature and prevent any negative budgetary impact. Private industry employers and government rely on educational institutions as a resource for addressing the needs of potential, future employees. They are also very much concerned with supporting the communities in which they operate. A realistic, co-ordinated plan helps to ensure that students experience a smooth transition from one life setting to another in order to achieve their education goals.

Students

The focus is on the student. This is important since, for many, the start of a post-secondary education away from home is a critical period when they will experience physical, emotional and social changes. Each student brings different experiences, beliefs, strengths and needs to their school situation. Each student is pursuing a specific goal and the services must reflect the beliefs, values, culture and language that students bring from their home communities. Land and resources, language and culture, as well as self-government issues are among the most vital concerns facing young Aboriginal students.

One must recognize the spiritual values that are intrinsic to Aboriginal society--including its relationship with other groups, its relationship with the environment and with the concepts of space and time. These values can make it challenging for an Aboriginal student to fit into a non-Aboriginal academic environment in a large urban city. Ultimately, a post-secondary education for students is related to their community's hopes for its future and its young people. Social work practitioners must continue to be flexible and adaptive in the provision of services for the Aboriginal student population.

Aboriginal people of the North can access their resources by taking control of their own government. If young people want to be a significant force in the future in the North, they must be able to understand the process of learning (how to acquire knowledge and skills) which will enable them to be active participants in the governments of their communities. Within their post-secondary education experience, they can play important and active roles in defining the future of their communities.

Transitional Adjustment

The transition Northern students make when leaving their home community can often be more stressful and traumatic than working on their studies in their chosen program. In order to succeed, students will have to respond to unfamiliar and unexpected circumstances and situations with confidence and sound judgement. They must be able to adapt. The complexity of this process of transition requires an alliance with a professional in the development of a plan which recognizes the needs and abilities of students and enables them to become active, productive participants within their new environment.

The average community in the Northwest Territories has fewer than 1,000 residents. The Edmonton metropolitan area has a population of approximately 875,000 (Statistics Canada Census, September 1994.). Many of us take urban life for granted--the transit system, banking, shopping in a large supermarket or store and finding accommodation to suit our needs and budget. These tasks can create barriers for a student arriving without any personal or cultural support network. When students are not successful in completing the academic year, it is seldom academic work which has defeated them. Instead, it is often the barriers and events outside of school which have interfered with student success. Students face a diverse set of pressures, stresses and expectations from themselves, family and friends. Life away at school can be a lonely and frustrating experience.

Features

The program services are available to all Northwest Territories students attending school in the Edmonton area. This position deals with diverse student concerns and there is a high demand for services. A unique component of the working environment is that this position works with students who attend many different institutions and training programs in the Edmonton area. Aboriginal culture tends to rely on trust and understanding through personal relationships. Given the size, complexity and alienating nature of large cities and post-secondary institutions, it is imperative that Northern students are provided with the more personal and supportive services.

In cooperation with the Department of Education, Culture and Employment (Government of the Northwest Territories), Northwest Territories School Boards and the Edmonton area educational and training institutions, services are co-ordinated that help promote educational opportunities and support services.

As the primary NWT student contact in Edmonton, the Advisor co-ordinates, provides and participates in student orientation. Orientation is provided to city life, including accommodations, the bus system, bank machines, shopping and roadways. Assistance is provided with family integration, as well as with finding day care centres and schools for students with children. Additionally, students are informed as to their rights and responsibilities while enrolled at their respective educational institutions.

The well-being of students is a primary concern. Counseling and referral services are provided to students, to meet academic, social, cultural and financial needs both on and off campus. Counseling is available in the following areas:

- wellness
- relationships
- addictions
- parenting
- educational planning
- stress
- budgeting
- self-esteem
- public speaking
- preparing for a job interview
- job communication skills
- preparing for work experience
- assertiveness
- developing a resume
- abuse (emotional, physical)
- coping with discrimination
- coping with loss and change

Newsletters are regularly sent to those students who are now attending post-secondary institutions in the Edmonton area. Information regarding the aforementioned concerns are included. Students are able to assist in the editing and publication of the newsletter. They can publish their own stories and communicate with others from the North through the newsletter. A newsletter is also sent to all high schools in the Northwest Territories as a means of providing future students with information they will need to assist them in their move to a large Southern urban environment.

Counseling and support services are available to ensure that students are aware of the choices available to them. An ideal world would be one in which all young people feel loved and cared for--initially by the family into which they are born, and then by the rest of society which must recognize that we are all connected. Nothing is more important to our shared future than the well-being and stability of our youth.

Mastering simple tasks is a powerful force when it comes to cultivating responsibility as one moves toward adulthood. Students have to learn how to fill out an application for school. It may not make a whole lot of difference in the big picture of life, but it is important. If they can fill out that application themselves, they are one step closer to being independent people. Students must learn to be responsible for themselves, to be responsible for their own decisions and to accept the consequences for their actions. The priority is to help students find the support they need to look at their problems and concerns from a larger perspective. People can learn some new and exciting ways to negotiate and problem solve, so they can feel empowered to use their own experience and see they can make a difference in their own lives. With assistance students can explore alternatives, clarify issues and resolve concerns.

Outcomes

While it is true there are barriers to obtaining an education for many Aboriginal students, they are not insurmountable; they are merely challenges that must be overcome. The Northern Student Education Initiative is already doing much to overcome these challenges and is showing signs of success in achieving student retention and completion of programs.

Intervention and support are an important aspect of services needed when students experience difficulties during the school year. In one such school year, services to students in crisis were critical in assisting five students who were on the verge of dropping out, and instead chose to continue their education. Many others were provided with support services prior to, as well as from the onset of their arrival in Edmonton and it is believed that these services were paramount in

ensuring the students were set up to succeed. The Initiative makes approximately 50 - 75 contacts with students, or prospective students or employers each month. Requests for information and services also come from employers who are assisting students through an apprenticeship training program.

This developing model of student support services has garnered interest from many sectors of the business and academic community. Through partnering and collaboration the Northern Student Education Initiative is working towards meeting the needs of Aboriginal communities which face demands for skilled managers and staff to fill a range of public service jobs, jobs in mining, transportation, economic development, health and social services, education, sports and recreation. Contact is regularly made with several academic and training programs to obtain and provide valuable insights into what services are necessary for Northern students. In particular, the Advisor, maintains a good working relationship with the Native liaison offices on each campus. Collaboration amongst all service providers and interested parties such as employers is a key component to meeting student needs on an individual basis.

From its inception to the present, the Northern Student Education Initiative has been sponsored through donations from six corporations that hold an interest in the future of Northern youth. The sponsors are: Bellanca Developments Ltd., NorTerra Inc., Interprovincial Pipe Line (NW) Inc., NorthwesTel Inc., Government of the Northwest Territories and University of Alberta. Canadian Airlines has also assisted by allowing for excursion air fares when the Advisor travels to remote northern communities to do presentations on career planning and education opportunities. This partnership between the public and the private sector is an important link in forging supportive strategies that help assist Aboriginal students in their educational goals.

Conclusion

In the belief that students work best within their own environment, the services focus on maintaining effective working relationships with academic institutions, community-based programs and agencies. In developing and implementing support services, the Northern Student Services Advisor consults with academic and support staff as well as with the staff of community-based programs and agencies. The overall goal of the Northern Student Education Initiative is to assist students in finding a sense of balance and harmony, while striving to further their education in an unfamiliar environment. Mobilizing relatives, friends and fellow students into a supportive network helps counteract the depersonalization that is inherent in a large urban environment. The intent is to work with people to explore a system of support services that allows Aboriginal students to survive and thrive within a framework of values that is often alien to them. It is vital that cooperation among all concerned parties continue, in order to ensure that the needs of students, their families, and ultimately their communities are met.

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