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**RETAINING INDIGENOUS STUDENTS IN POST-SECONDARY PROGRAMS:**

**What Means for Whose Ends?**

Challenge Paper Prepared by  
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*The opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada*

Several years ago I participated in a “round table” concerning ways of getting 1,000 Aboriginal students enrolled in a particular university by the year 2000. While most people made quite reasonable suggestions as to how this could be brought about, when it came my time to speak I repudiated the question. Instead I argued that if the university was doing something important for our nations and communities, 1,000 students on campus would be woefully inadequate for our needs; however, if what awaited these future students was a continuation of the blatant and subtle marginalization, racism, and irrelevance of the existing institution, one student on campus would be one too many. My point was that our working group’s prescribed focus on a purely bureaucratic index (a head count) rather than content was misplaced. The problem was not to lure warm indigenous bodies to our school until there was a more comforting (and less obviously discriminatory) proportion of Aboriginal individuals running about. It was to create a place where Aboriginal individuals could pursue their intellectual interests in an atmosphere constitutive of, not destructive to, Aboriginal ways of life.

Consequently, when set the question: **What interventions are most effective in ensuring that a student who enters post-secondary education directly from high school has a good chance of success in his or her post-secondary studies?**, I find I have to react with similar hesitancy. By success, is “getting through them” meant? And, to what *end* is post-secondary educational success a *means*? And further, why the interest in bringing this about now? The *agenda* standing behind the statement isn’t stated at all, and yet (as I shall argue below) it is essential to both recommending and implementing specific courses of action.

And I find I must curb my immediate tendency to reply sarcastically to the question. Retain indigenous students in post-secondary education programs? No problem. Make the programs of study ridiculously easy (with lots of “relating to your Indianness” and feeling good about yourself). Or, bribe the students to do every educational task, starting with the simplest of things like waking up in the mornings, showing up for classes, and doing their homework, and build from there. Or maybe it would be best to accept only ridiculously overqualified prospective students, thus assuring those who enter will exit on schedule. But then again maybe an entirely different tack is needed. Why not do what was done during the residential school era and beat and starve incoming students into compliance with the institutional performance demands? Or perhaps even more effectively, hold parents/families hostage to the favorable behavior (intellectual and otherwise) of the students, and *vice versa* students to parents/families (to ensure smooth operation on reserves and other enclaves of Aboriginal peoples). Well, irony may have its uses, but a foundation must first be laid if it is to function as anything more than wisecracking.

On the other hand, conventional thinking demands conventional answers, and on those terms it is relatively easy to comply with the letter of this Challenge Paper. Many post-secondary educational institutions have implemented and are implementing retention

programs for indigenous peoples, minorities, and disadvantaged groups, and from existing self descriptions and evaluations they all seem to work. UCLA, for example, has RAIN (Retention of American Indians Now!), Northern Arizona University has NAARP (Native American Academic Retention Program), Lake Superior College has STIPP (Services to Indian People Program), and so on, and they all provide similar interventions with a demonstrated capacity to keep North American Indigenous peoples in post-secondary programs:

- (1) specialized, culturally-sensitive academic and non-academic counselling (sometimes with actual Indians functioning as counsellors);
- (2) peer academic and non-academic counselling;
- (3) campus orientation programs, to provide for an easier transition from home to campus;
- (4) summer apprenticeship/study or academic orientation programs for high schoolers who are prospective university/college students;
- (5) remedial academic short courses (e.g., math, literacy, writing);
- (6) short courses in academic skill building (e.g., note taking, library research, time management, exam preparation, etc.);
- (7) personal deficiency workshops (e.g., self-esteem building, anger/stress management, interpersonal relationships, etc.);
- (8) assessment (vocational and academic) and assessment-based counselling (e.g., vocational counselling);

Some features of the programs are focused less on the characteristics of the “academic student” than on the “student as a human being:”

- (1) transportation to and from campus;
- (2) daycare facilities;
- (3) study areas, kitchen facilities, and informal meeting room provision;
- (4) social activity centers;
- (5) student advocacy;
- (6) emergency loans and financial assistance counselling;

And some program features don't consider the students as the sole locus of the retention "problem" or the retaining intervention:

- (1) sensitivity/race awareness training for institutional faculty, administration, and staff;
- (2) sensitivity/race awareness training (often during orientation) for incoming mainstream students;
- (3) affirmative action hiring of faculty, administration, and staff, so that indigenous students will encounter other indigenous people in positions of authority and responsibility in the post-secondary setting;
- (4) for some campuses, replacement/elimination of stigmatizing Indian mascots and logos;
- (5) (very rarely) modification of existing course content and curricula to reflect indigenous viewpoints, knowledge, history, and/or contributions. (This feature must be distinguished from the development and inclusion of "indigenous specific" programs of study, like Native Indian Teacher Education Programs, Native Studies departments, and such like, which are often thought of as being intrinsically attractive to Aboriginal students, even if of marginal academic respectability or intellectual interest/content.)

Frankly, I believe this is the kind of list expected from readers of this Challenge Paper, and, with all honesty, I must admit that these things have worked in the past and will work in the future: initiate as many of these programs as is feasible within a post-secondary setting, and indigenous students will (1) be attracted to those campuses and (2) complete a course of study. If this statement satisfies your need, read no further.

Having said this, however, I must restate my objection, originally raised in response to the "head count" mentality I encountered years ago: these procedures are uniformly averse to the educational objective of creating a place where Aboriginal individuals can pursue their intellectual interests in an atmosphere constitutive of, not destructive to, Aboriginal ways of life. If this is thought a harsh judgement, the reader needs a dose of reality. The most singular, consistent fact about Indian Education is that it has never been concerned with education. Since Confederation, what has been passed off onto us in the name of education has been an admixture of indoctrination (in western civilization, religion, worldview, behavior, etc.) and vocationalism, the combination euphemistically labeled a "policy of assimilation," but in fact constituting a policy of genocide. The relative proportions of this combination of non-educational aims varied with type of institution (e.g., residential schools vs. public schools) and time (blatantly religious indoctrination being phased out with the movement toward public schooling of Indian children). The agenda at the beginning was straightforward: Indians would become "absorbed into the body politic" or would evaporate, so that (except for the tan)

those who hadn't evaporated would be no more recognizable as Indians than a Scots or an Welsh is (to be) differentiable from a Britain. And, though concealed in flowery, generous sounding language, the impetus behind the agenda was the elimination of federal obligations (moral and legal) to the Aboriginal owners of Canada and their heirs.

Now, what has changed since the bad old days? As already mentioned, variations of Christianity are less incessantly pounded into the heads of indigenous students (it being merely assumed now, as is the general structure of western ideology). Furthermore, the daily dosage of vocationalism is no longer administered in Total Institutions (to use Goffman's phrase) like residential schools, but instead students are allowed to return home to receive an extended message of modernity from television, movies, sports activities, and similar disguised forums. And finally, rather than having to administer the new lessons with generous helpings of physical and/or emotional abuse, children are allowed to draw their own conclusions from the consistent underlying theme of late 20<sup>th</sup> century existence: do as you're told and you will live (sometimes even comfortably); get out of line and you will wither and die.

However, while these cosmetic changes might be thought of as "advances" by some, the bottom line is that the agenda and the impetus behind it remains the same. It is from these considerations that I've argued for years that "residential schools" in the most meaningful sense of the phrase never ceased operation; they merely changed their clothes and went back to work.

The unabated persistence of the attitude isn't difficult at all to see. For example, on page 501 of **Gathering Strength**, the third volume of the **Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples**, (RCAP) released in 1996, we read:

We envisage a world where the representation of Aboriginal people among doctors, engineers, carpenters, entrepreneurs, biotechnologists, scientists, computer specialists, artists, professors, archaeologists and individuals in other careers is comparable to that of any other segment of the population. Aboriginal leaders who signed treaties earlier in our history sought education that would give their children the knowledge and skills to participate as equals in the Canadian economy that was emerging.

The authors (nowhere specified as Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, or as anything else for that matter) envisage the world aimed at by Duncan Campbell Scott, Jean Chretien in his 1969 **White Paper** policy, Eric Nielsen in his 1985 **Indian and Native Programs** report, the present Reform Party platform on Aboriginal Affairs, and any group which considers the burden of living up to treaties *onerous*, which finds attention to human, economic, civil, political, linguistic, religious, and educational rights of "internal minorities" *burdensome*, and which finds the persistence of justified Aboriginal claims to the lands and resources of what they now call "Canada" *troublesome*. And to insinuate

this agenda, the authors are willing (as in all the documents cited here) to play fast and loose with history. Our ancestors were *not* signing us away to become fodder for industry or cogs in someone else's machine: they deemed education, *real* education and not indoctrination and vocationalism, as the means of securing our survival as Aboriginal peoples. They could only pray that Canadians would take these agreements as sacred trusts, and not as licenses to destroy.

What has any of this to do with possible programs of post-secondary retention of indigenous students? Well, existing Canadian colleges and universities (1) unquestioningly assume the ideology of western civilization and (2) enforce adherence to that ideology in both subtle and obvious ways. The delineation of that ideology would take at least an entire book (which I hope to write someday), but to summarize it all too succinctly, it is a belief (formally called *methodological individualism* or MI) that the understanding and explanation of all phenomena must be situated within what individuals think, choose, and do. This is not the place to go into detail, but this belief is simply wrong (the simplest refutation was once given by Joseph Schwartz: "You cannot predict the shape of the Royal Albert Hall by the knowledge that it is made of bricks"). However, like a belief that tulips are a suitable medium of exchange, it is possible to base an entire way of life upon it. By the same token, there is not just *one* way people can live without believing in MI, so there is little point in trying to find something common in all the indigenous forms of life that do not share MI's central presumption.

Go back to the lists of retention interventions I produced earlier and examine them in light of what I've called the central presumption: academic counselling (peer or otherwise), remedial courses, orientation programs, assessment, etc., all presume that the difficulty in getting the indigenous student to finish the program is something that is wrong within those individual students; "human" interventions, such as transportation help, daycare facilities, and financial assistance presume an individual problem with individual problems in living; and even sensitivity training and affirmative action (which will lead to the production of "role models" for the deficient indigenous students) presume a local individual defect in faculty, staff, and students that can be overcome with a bit of fine tuning. This constitutes part of what I mean by saying that existing post-secondary institutions accepting the ideology of western civilization and subtly and obviously enforcing adherence to it.

The only hint that there may be another world of "interventions" to examine comes from modification of course content and curricula; that is, such an intervention acknowledges slightly that perhaps there is more than one side to a particular story. However, even this is done as an "add-on" or "afterthought" to an existing ideological system that, in its own depths of self-criticism, finds itself merely in need of a bit of adjustment rather than a thoroughgoing overhaul and reformulation. Nowhere do these interventions examine the question of whether or not what is happening to Aboriginal students in post-secondary institutions is something that *should* be happening to them. The *end* to which formal education (primary through post-secondary) is a *means* is the assimilation

of Aboriginal individuals into the Canadian mainstream. As I have argued elsewhere, for *assimilation* read *genocide*.

The educational experience of Aboriginal peoples thus comes down to some very stark realizations: (1) regardless of what people say it's doing, formal education of indigenous peoples in Canada has constituted a major part of a relentless attack on Aboriginal forms of life; (2) Aboriginal forms of life retain their viability in great measure because of the *rejection* of formal education by indigenous individuals (as I've written elsewhere, many Indian Nations are strong today *because* many of our parents and grandparents were "dropouts"); (3) nothing in the cultural milieu of educational theory and practice indicates a breakthrough in self-criticism or a reform in the mainstream education of indigenous peoples; if anything, the continued (if subtle) application of models of deficiency, disease, and defect to *us* argues strongly that nothing has changed; and (4) consequently, these "new" initiatives towards retention of Aboriginal students have, *mutatis mutandis*, the cachet of the development of the Gatling Gun.

Nor can we neglect the political economy of what has been done to us and called "education." There's no need to go over the details of how public school systems used federal subsidies to finance capital projects, dropping (figuratively and literally) Indian students once payments had been received; or of how universities and colleges added "Indian" programs in response to federal funding initiatives (that is, program needs as identified by the mainstream politicians and bureaucrats, not by Aboriginal peoples), only to drop them once the initial funding period passed; or of how unilateral federal "interpretations" of treaties have uniformly "found" that obligations are limited and particular, so that non-mainstream institutions receive little or no funding and "unapproved" education is not supported at all; and so on. But, given such a history, am I compelled to believe that the sudden need to "retain" indigenous students in post-secondary institutions is a purely humanitarian act on the part of post-secondary educators? ...or is it easier to assume that possible future initiatives like the projected training of 10,000 "social healers and therapists," as recommended by the **Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples**, has more to do with colleges and universities desiring to attract and retain Aboriginal students? Note, in addition, that I need not impugn the motives of mainstream educators (in fact I can't, since they haven't provided a statement of motives that I can react to): however, even assuming the "best of intentions" behind the interest in retention, I still must question the assumptions of *what* is to be taught to indigenous students by *whom*, and for *whose* purpose. I don't pretend to know the why's and wherefore's of the present initiatives, or whether there are other agendas lurking in the background. It's sufficient for me to know *historically* that what little good that has been done us in the name of education has been more central to someone else's purpose than to ours.

And finally, we can't neglect the political imperatives of control, whether from the perspective of federal and provincial governments or from the perspective of educational institutions and professional organizations themselves. The indigenous

people's reaction to Chretien's **White Paper**, for example, was a rise in the consciousness of the centrality of education to our struggle for survival, a rise that was epitomized in such documents as **Citizens Plus** by the Chiefs of Alberta, **Wahbung: Our Tomorrows** by the Indian Tribes of Manitoba, and **Indian Control of Indian Education** by the National Indian Brotherhood. In 1973, the federal government formally adopted the thrust of these documents as education policy, and then proceeded to eviscerate the initiative by redefining the word "control" to mean "the freedom for Indian Nations to do what we say the way we say to do it." The manner in which this was achieved? Unwavering INAC control over education budgets and funding allocations, enforced by a newly-found (in that it was absent during the residential school era) loyalty to educational "standards," formal "credentials," and similar artifices that sidetracked any serious discussion of alternatives. The Alice-in-Wonderland fallout observable today from separating financial control from educational planning includes such absurdities as First Nations desperately trying to meet the requirements for declaring large segments of their student populations "learning disabled" so that they will be able to secure sufficient operational funds. In the old days, the mainstream called us stupid; today, we do it ourselves.

Control was asserted and continues to be maintained no less by the educational profession itself, and in a manner that speaks not so much of *collusion* (that is, no *conspiracy* is needed to explain how it came about) as it does about the generalized acceptance of an unstated ideology by distinguishable mainstream bureaucracies (government departments and post-secondary institutions). Even with "Indian" control, it was "obvious" (to bureaucrat and educator alike) that those Indians in control (whether it was in a classroom, an accounting office, a physical plant, or whatever) would have to be *qualified*, wouldn't they? And where would they *get* those qualifications? Why, at mainstream post-secondary institutions, of course. And how would those qualifications be judged? Why, obviously, by the graduation candidate's adherence to the unstated and unexamined ideology of the mainstream, as reflected in his or her course work, writing, and other forms of academic discharge.

In all this it struck no one as remarkable that the mainstream that was supposedly giving up "control" would still hold the purse strings and decide who was and was not a suitable functionary within the "new" Indian education to be brought about, just as it's not supposed to be remarkable that the legal and judicial system that countenanced residential schooling for more than 100 years is now supposed to be able to judge the damages the program did to individual abuse claimants. It was *taken for granted* that Indian control would have to accommodate itself to budgetary supervision, and it was *taken for granted* that it would have to accept the intellectual authority of someone else, just as the universities and professional organizations (e.g., educators, psychologists doing educational testing) could take for granted the government would enforce adherence to their particular competence criteria. The upshot of maintenance of control by both the governmental and the educational institutions is that today, Indian



control of Indian education is empty rhetoric. Not even a dream deferred, it is a penciled-in sketch that never left the drawing board.

Again, given this history, what is to be made of the desire to retain indigenous students “to term” in post-secondary programs? If the culmination of the initiative is anything other than a desire to increase the number of nominally indigenous individuals who are willing to accept the cultural, intellectual, and pragmatic domination of the mainstream, I fail to see any indication of it. And I find it dubious that such a program could meet the condition I consider essential (that education create a place for Aboriginal individuals where they can pursue their intellectual interests in an atmosphere constitutive of, not destructive to, Aboriginal ways of life).

I must believe that the kind of position I’m taking is unfamiliar to many of the people reading this essay. If so, I hope I have been clear: education has, wittingly and/or unwittingly, continually been used as a weapon of assimilation against the Aboriginal peoples of Canada, and there’s every reason to believe the concern about retention is more of the same. However, if you can accept that (1) a sizable proportion of indigenous peoples don’t wish to be assimilated, (2) indigenous groups have the human rights to their cultures, languages, religious convictions, etc., (and see the United Nations **Declaration of the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious, and Linguistic Minorities** for that standard supposedly adhered to by “civilized” countries), and (3) that education is a means of securing those rights, then I feel compelled to be presumptuous one more time: there are steps that can be taken that will be effective in graduating indigenous students from post-secondary programs, and those steps would be constitutive of, not destructive to, Aboriginal ways of life. I provide these in the belief that my ancestors were perspicacious in understanding that true education was indispensable to the continued existence of our Nations, that people in positions of authority in the mainstream can make differences if they choose to, and that, divested of latent ideologies, there are no fundamental conflicts between *education* and *Indian education*.

(1) heal thyself. The ideological division between the mainstream and various indigenous nations is not rhetorical blathering on my part, but the source of friction that all too often develops as Aboriginal students make their way further into formal education. The mainstream educators, philosophers of education, education policy makers, and so on, must understand their ideology, *that it is* an ideology, and that it infests theory in practice to the extent that education has become all too irrelevant to all too many people, Indian and otherwise. Once the influence and extension of this ideology is made clear, the mainstream (if it so chooses) can continue on with it, while treating ideological alternatives as the business of this group or that group. After all, political differences in Canada are still settled by elections, and religious conflicts (though

sometimes heated), no longer lead to internecine war, exclusion, or burning at the stake.

(2) increase support for First Nations schools. If you want a better graduate student, make a better undergraduate student, a better secondary student, a better primary student, and so on. Students entering college or university with a sound educational foundation, secure in themselves, with a well-founded belief that the system she/he is entering has much to teach while not attacking the core of who she/he is, must have a better chance of carrying through than someone without such security. First Nations schools are better positioned than any other to bring these conditions about, if provided with the support needed.

(3) fund indigenous organizations in curriculum development programs. There are virtually no funds available (except on an case-by-case basis for individual university-based researchers) for curriculum development, any yet without a thorough commitment to this activity neither (1), the critical examination of the ideological presumptions of mainstream education, nor (2), the improvement of education in First Nations schools, can take place.

(4) fund First Nations post-secondary institutions. Rather than treating First Nations post-secondary institutions as some sort of “rivals” of mainstream institutions, or as respectable only to the extent they accept the administrative and intellectual domination of non-Aboriginal colleges and universities, they should be created as viable on-going educational concerns. This means proper buildings, libraries, faculty, support staff, and so on. Not only would this development contribute to each of the initiatives already mentioned (for example, curriculum development for Aboriginal primary schools would doubtless be a part of the activities a stable First Nations college would engage in), it would assist in bringing about the intellectual climate necessary for indigenous peoples of all ages to appreciate the value of true education.

(5) control means control. In fact, most of what I've mentioned thus far would be an organic unfolding of something the government already pretends to be doing: turning over control of Indian education to Indians. What is necessary is not the appearance of control I've already criticized, but control that does not divorce financial planning from educational program planning (or from economic, or health, or social service planning, for all that matter), control that recognizes as a sovereign right the prerogative to decide who is competent and who not. First Nations initiatives like FNAHEC (First Nations Adult and Higher Education Consortium), which is creating an internal, self-critical accreditation and certification process for higher education programs within First Nations,

are important strides toward real control, and it is within the power of existing mainstream institutions to demonstrate their commitment to control by supporting these ventures.

Finally, go back to the list I provided at the beginning of this essay. If you truly want Aboriginal students to complete their projected courses of post-secondary studies, undertake the five initiatives mentioned above *and* all the initiatives listed earlier. For it is not the *activities themselves* that are destructive to Aboriginal ways of life, but the *context in which they occur*. If the context celebrates our forms of life, if the information offered therein is allowed to become the natural extension of the intellectual interests of the student, and if the student sees his/her intellectual efforts contributing to that chain of being that is his/her people, then those programs will be accepted in the spirit given, as sincere efforts to ease the labors of a truly daunting task. Without that context, however, those initiatives must come to be seen as something else, something sinister: the cheese in the trap; lip-service to tolerance; the hypocrisy of a hidden agenda.

Is the relation between indigenous forms of life and the Canadian mainstream necessarily adversarial? Must education be deformed into one more instrument of an ongoing campaign of assimilating indigenous peoples? Are Aboriginal Peoples fated to become a nostalgic footnote in the dustbin of history? No, to all of these, or I would not have bothered to write this essay. None of what I suggest can or will happen overnight, but to overthrow an injustice it is not enough to simply identify it, nor merely to understand it, nor even to know what must be done. If the historic and continuing abuses done indigenous peoples in the name of education is to stop, it requires we act.