Leading Practices in: Aboriginal K-12 to Post-Secondary Transitions
Okanagan College

Background

Okanagan College was re-established in 2005 as part of the restructuring of the post-secondary landscape in the region and the advent of UBC's Okanagan Campus. As the College emerged from the change, the number of Aboriginal students increased and the institution responded by broadening the scope of service provided by the Aboriginal Services department. The initial departmental structure was designed with a strong focus on mentorship and retention. The tasks and functions of these Aboriginal Mentor roles were focused on assisting Aboriginal learners in navigating the College environment, addressing student concerns, and liaising with other internal and community support services. There was, however, a need to enhance both recruitment efforts and the level of service provision.

Recognizing the necessity to increase the services, resources and programming for Aboriginal learners, Okanagan College has grown its complement of employees serving Aboriginal students to five full-time positions on four campuses in addition to adding a number of other services. This was an important step in developing an adequate level of support for existing Aboriginal learners, and building awareness of the programs and supports available to prospective Indigenous students.

A proposal to restructure how Okanagan College served Aboriginal learners was submitted to the Ministry for Aboriginal Special Projects Funding. The goal of the proposed project was to enhance recruitment and transition-focused supports for Aboriginal learners by expanding the number of positions within Aboriginal Services. This proposal was supported by a recommendation put forth and approved by the Aboriginal Education Council (AEC).

The AEC is one of the most important venues for consultation and partnership. The AEC is a council hosted by Okanagan College and UBC Okanagan. Its primary aim is to provide advice, recommendations, and guidance to enhance the participation and success of Aboriginal learners at both institutions. The AEC is comprised of nominated representatives from Okanagan and Shuswap First Nation communities, Aboriginal service providers and organizations, and students. The AEC has been influential in the continued development of academic and support programming delivered by Aboriginal Services at Okanagan College.
On April 11, 2008, the AEC unanimously voted in favour of supporting Okanagan College’s application for Aboriginal Special Projects Funding (ASPF) for this recruitment program. As noted in the letter of support, “The Aboriginal Council supports the development of an Aboriginal Student Recruitment, Promotions, and Transitions Initiative as a means of enhancing the relationship between the Aboriginal community and Okanagan College and improving Aboriginal student transitions and access to post-secondary education.”

After a few years of implementation and evaluation of the new recruitment structure, it became apparent that these positions were proving to be valuable. The College was making greater inroads into the First Nation communities and Aboriginal organizations we served. A comprehensive review of the effectiveness of the new positions was conducted and justified the need to continue with the model to ensure its sustainability. The College saw tremendous value in the pilot program and made a commitment to retain the Aboriginal recruiter positions by funding them out of base budgets. It was determined that perhaps a better model would be to amalgamate all four components of recruitment, mentorship, advising and event planning into one position. Facilitated by the Director of Student Services and the Coordinator of Aboriginal Services, a request for reclassification was put forth in 2012 and was subsequently set in place with much success. These new positions were given the title of Aboriginal Transition Planners, and their modified roles allowed for continual service provision to prospective students from the first point of contact through to leaving the College.

Essential to the recruitment and retention program is research and feedback. Aboriginal students are surveyed to establish baseline data including satisfaction levels, which are used to inform future recruitment strategies. Survey results help the College to assess student awareness of supports and services, and query how programming can be improved. Understanding what students like or dislike about the College and why they chose to come to the College informs recruitment efforts in a way that is sensitive and responsive to Aboriginal student needs.

**Purpose & Goals**

The ASPF project title was ‘Okanagan College Aboriginal Student Recruitment, Promotions, and Transitions Initiative’. The primary objective of the pilot project was to create two Aboriginal student
Leading Practices in Aboriginal K-12 to Post-Secondary Transitions

recruitment positions. Each position was responsible for half of the College Region and two College campuses. This pilot project also sought to expose prospective students to programs and existing first-year support services in the hopes of positively affecting transition and retention rates. Beyond simply hiring recruiters, additional project deliverables included attending community events and career fairs; directed recruitment visits; presentations with school districts, more one-on-one advisory engagement with prospective students to build educational plans; development of promotional materials for the department; and creation of a student handbook to help guide the transition into the College environment. Through this project, Okanagan College was able to improve recruitment, enhance timely and relevant service provision to current Aboriginal learners, and forge and maintain meaningful relationships in the community.

The Aboriginal Transition Planners act as a primary resource for prospective and current Aboriginal students, facilitating the successful transitions of Aboriginal students to Okanagan College. The Aboriginal Transition Planners are often the initial point of contact at the institution. A key function of these positions is facilitating retention, working closely with current Okanagan College students, and assisting them through the student life-cycle. Working with students to co-design and implement individual transition plans is an essential component of the mentorship and retention role. Aboriginal Transition Planners act as advocates and have regular meetings with students to assist them with their needs to help them achieve their educational and personal goals. From scheduling and setting priorities for peer mentors, to hosting and attending recruitment related activities, the Aboriginal Transition Planners ensure the smooth functioning of the Aboriginal Student Centres and that students are well supported.

During the transitionary phase of entering post-secondary institutions it is crucial to understand the personal and environmental factors that influence student engagement and their overall health and well-being in community, social and academic contexts. Addressing these broader social concerns with the methods set out in Okanagan College’s service model involves increasing the proficiency level of staff and peer mentors to provide timely and contextually relevant supports that students want and need to successfully engage in their studies. Collaborative engagement across the institution has helped create a stronger cohesion among interdisciplinary service providers. Stronger relations with visiting Elders have been established, and more consistent cultural programming can be offered. Programing
Leading Practices in Aboriginal K-12 to Post-Secondary Transitions

contributes immensely to fostering a culturally sensitive venue for students to engage in learning, which in turn fosters an environment where students can thrive and take control of their education. Post-program reviews often indicate that students view themselves as better equipped to successfully reach their educational and career goals.

Challenges & Future Plans

One of the main challenges for the Aboriginal Transition Planners has been finding enough time for all four phases of the job. That is, there is often tension between being in the community at events, working with partners, tending to administrative duties and simultaneously addressing student needs. As one Aboriginal Transition Planner notes, “the increase of Aboriginal students that OC is experiencing is fabulous and I believe it speaks to the great services and people we have in place to deliver the various services, outreach, the community connections, and the trust that band and community partners place in us. Students and their individual needs should always be the priority, but the workload to implement different, programs, events, seminars, organize visits with outside departments, promotion, recruitment, website updates, etc. can be difficult to feel that you can give 100% to all aspects of the position.”

With an increase in the number of events, more support is required. To help address the concern, OC has begun to train peer mentors to assist in the administrative and organizational aspects as well as act as hosts at the centre. Hiring additional peer mentors has helped with this increased workload. Peer mentors are an integral component of operations as they help with promotion of events, and act as a front line point of contact in many cases triaging requests for service and support. One more Aboriginal Transition Planner has also been hired on a temporary basis to help offset the demand.

As noted in the Major Capital Plan, and every year by the students in the Aboriginal Student Satisfaction Survey, by employees, and community members, the Aboriginal Centres at three of the four campuses have inadequate spaces to address many service needs. A peer mentor noted, “The one problem that I have encountered with the program is the facility in which it tries to take place. The area is often filled beyond capacity. There is little room for a mentor to consult with another student. Some problems that students wish to discuss are very personal, and they would like to converse in privacy, but privacy is something the room lacks.” The Aboriginal centres would benefit from additional features for adequate
Leading Practices in Aboriginal K-12 to Post-Secondary Transitions

service delivery including confidential office spaces, meeting/studying spaces, a kitchen, and an overall larger space. The Kelowna Campus Aboriginal Centre is roughly 400 square feet, accommodating three staff members and more than 800 students. Establishing a more culturally relevant space that accommodates service provision needs will enhance the capacity of the Aboriginal Services, and is expected to be a key recommendation of the College’s Indigenization Task Force.

Involvement in academic supports across existing departments as well as drawing upon, maintaining and sustaining familial and cultural forms of foundational support with the overarching goals of reducing attrition, supporting program completion and enhancing self-confidence to achieve students’ educational goals will continue to be a key direction of the department.

Contact Information

Anthony Isaac
Aboriginal Services Coordinator
250-762-5445 ext. 4322
aisaac@okanagan.ca.ca