



AFN Virtual Summit on Indigenous Institutions of Higher Learning (IIHLs)

Hosted by First Nations University of Canada
March 10, 2011





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On March 10, 2011, the Assembly of First Nations held a virtual summit on Indigenous Institutions of Higher Learning (IIHL's) hosted by First Nations University of Canada at their main campus in Regina, Saskatchewan. The virtual summit provided a forum for students, educators and senior administrators from IIHL's to identify key challenges and accomplishments.

According to a 2006 report submitted to a joint AFN-INAC Working Group on Post-Secondary Education:

“Indigenous Institutions of Higher Learning are unique institutions within the Canadian post-secondary system. Initiated, governed, managed and taught by Indigenous people, they offer students (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) a viable alternative to mainstream colleges and universities. With foundations in Indigenous culture, IIHL's reinforce Indigenous identity while providing a solid academic education in a supportive environment.”¹

IIHL's emerged to address the gap in post-secondary options available to First Nations, Metis and Inuit peoples which emerged as the residential school era came to an end. Preparation for post-secondary education was not a primary focus of the residential schools. In fact, until changes to the *Indian Act* in 1951, First Nations faced legal barriers to acquiring a post-secondary education.

According to Statistics Canada, in 2006 61% of First Nations peoples on reserve and 40% of Aboriginal people collectively did not have a high school diploma, compared to 13% of the Canadian population. Only 4% of First Nations people, and 8% of Aboriginal people have a university degree, compared to 23% of the Canadian population.

Economist Bert Waslander notes:

“Among the 481,000 First Nation people of 15 years and over in the year 2006, 25,000 have a university degree. Among the same number of other Canadians, 90,000 have a degree.”²

IIHL's deliver a wide range of programs including basic literacy and secondary upgrading, language and Indigenous knowledge based programs, skilled trades, and university graduate degree programs. There is significant variation in both the size of the institutes, and the type and number of programs which are delivered.

¹ Katenies Research and Management Services and Chignecto Consulting Group Inc.: Review of the Indian Studies Support Program Component of the PSE Program, - Final Report Presented to the Joint AFN-INAC PSE Working Group, March 31, 2006, pp. iv.

² Waslander, Bert: Focussing Indian and Northern Affairs Post-Secondary Program – Targets and Impacts, Prepared for the Assembly of First Nations, June 24, 2009

Prior to the Virtual Summit, the AFN distributed six questions to help facilitate dialogue and online submissions:

Questions for First Nations Students in IIHL's:

1. Why did you decide to go to an IIHL?
2. What do you like best about studying at an IIHL?
3. What do you need to help you succeed in your studies?

Questions for Representatives of IIHL's:

1. In what ways are IIHL's different from mainstream colleges and universities?
2. In what ways are they similar?
3. What do IIHL's need to strengthen their role in the post-secondary education system in Canada?

The following is a compilation of responses provided at the Virtual Summit and via email transmission.



Participants at the national virtual summit on Indigenous Institutions of Higher Learning at the First Nations University of Canada.

WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO GO AND BECOME A STUDENT AT AN INDIGENOUS INSTITUTE OF HIGHER LEARNING?

Cadmus Delorme, from the Cowessis First Nation in Treaty 4 Territory noted that he is a 3rd year business student at First Nations University of Canada.

“I decided to come to this institution because I was proud to be First Nations but I didn’t know what a First Nations person was. I grew up on my First Nation and I went to school on my First Nation. We are an hour and half away from any urban area. After graduating I didn’t feel that I had the best education. I know the teachers tried hard, but there were a lot of social issues on my First Nation that kinda pulled me in. So I didn’t feel that I was up to balance with other people that went to University. So when I started learning about First Nations University I started learning that from the professors here. It is mandatory that they do research on First Nations people. So they understood me. When I come to sit in their classroom, they understand my background; they understand where I come from, what I need to succeed. When I started coming here the professors were very helpful, they listened to me, they understood me.”

“This place makes me very proud to be a First Nations person. Ahmee a Nehiyaw, I am a Cree. I didn’t know that when I come here, before I came here. The teepee sitting behind you, Chief Atleo, that’s my number one classroom here at the First Nations University; it allows me to understand ceremony, the importance of Manitou, the creator. So to come here to First Nations University, it took me from where I was. Now I feel that I am even above that for how hard that I study and just to be in this building. I learned from the treaties, Treaty #4, that the chiefs wanted to learn the cunning of the white man and at the same time they wanted the settlers to learn the First Nations ways. And that is what this University does. It allows us to contribute in to the economy once we graduate, but then it also teaches the world the Indigenous way, our First Nations way.”

Jacob Cram, a Business major at First Nations University of Canada shared the following:

“I love this institution and I have a real appreciation for any institution that is indigenous based, because they provide so much for our Indigenous people. For me personally, this institution here has provided a place where I am not a minority. I am provided a place where my culture and my beliefs are all around me; where I have access to Elders that I could go to and learn my language. You know, where I learn my culture in every single class that I take, I learn new things about who I am.”

“I go to school here, and I also work here. In the summer time I was working and as I was sitting in my office I looked out the window and I saw one of our Elders...sitting on the grass by himself. So I went out there and I asked him what he was doing and he said he was having a pipe ceremony. It was at that moment that I realized this was the only place...I have been to other universities, I have spoken and I have presented and attended other universities, and this is the only university in the world that I have ever been to where our Elders can sit outside on the grass, in plain view and have a pipe ceremony with nobody wondering, or thinking it was out of place. It was completely accepted, and it was, it is that kind of instance or situation where

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it really shows the value of an institution like this. I really appreciate our Professors, our administration who strive to offer students every opportunity to experience our culture, while we learn our modern education. Being on the same level as any other institution within the country while also learning our culture and our languages is what is really special about this institution.”

A student at Blue Quills First Nations College shared:

“I decided to go to an Indigenous Institution of Higher Learning because it is close to home and because Indigenous Institutions understand our plight, our training, our need to heal from colonization and the damage Residential Schools have caused. I am an Aboriginal person and I feel comfortable in an Indigenous Institute. I came to this institution because I am familiar with it and because I had the good fortune to know the previous instructors. Blue Quills offered the program I wanted to pursue and the program that I was interested in.”

Another student from Blue Quills added:

“It makes sense to attend an institution that can offer a different world view than what we have already experienced....I decided to go because it was the only nearby college where I could get a degree without moving to the city and also for the one on one time that they can get with the instructors. I am an urban Ojibway, I was born and raised in the city, so I was taken away from my language before I even had the chance to know what my language was and, me personally, to speak for myself, when I was growing up, I lacked a lot of First Nations role models. The one thing that I noticed immediately upon coming to the First Nations University was that I was surrounded by First Nations role models. And that is something that I always hang on to. The first day is a day that I will never forget because it is so powerful to just all of a sudden be thrust in to this environment where I am just surrounded by First Nations professionals, teachers, Elders, you know everybody here and it was just something that absolutely changed my life.”

Students at Chemainus Native College in Ladysmith, British Columbia noted that the location of their institution is important.

“We get to work within our own community and among our own people. There are smaller class sizes; everybody is familiar with same lifestyle and culture. We understand one another, therefore, we support each other. We have better feelings inside and we don’t feel bottled up.”

Darren, Leona, Terri-Ann and Desiree noted that they needed to upgrade their credentials to enter a post-secondary program. Chemainus Native College’s University-College Education Program (UCEP) provides them with the opportunity to address this need.

Stephen Swan related his experience:

“I am one of those students that went to the University of Saskatchewan. You kind of feel out of place because it is a student body with over 20,000 students and you are just another number. You go in to a classroom, there are 450 students, the

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professor has no one-on-one contact with you. So you really have a disconnect. So I stopped going to school there. For about nine years I was working, doing odd jobs, then I went to CDI college trying to get my certificate in computer programming and web design. I enjoyed that. It was a smaller school but at the same time it wasn't First Nations run....”.

“I just wanted to get back to school and get my teaching degree. I grew up knowing that I was First Nations, I grew up knowing my language, I didn't speak it, yet, but I grew up speaking it pretty fluently. I can understand the differences, you know, the differences of importance of spirituality, the importance of land, the importance of water, air, everything included with growing up on the reserve. But the moment I started to come to school here, it really hit hard. It was January of last year, when the First Nations University went through its struggle. I met Jacob, I met Cadmus, I met Tom, I met Dan and they are the current student association executives. I connected with them real quick because right away you had that First Nations humour, they were ribbing each other left and right. And that is one thing that I really connected with and I wanted to be a part of that so I jumped right in to the group as much as I could just to have that connection to humour which I think is very important as a First Nations person.... My reserve is 8 hours north of here, so I am far from everyone I know. But having the connection with these guys just made it feel like it was home already. And going through all that craziness that we did last term, you know, today just seems like a cake walk. But it doesn't mean I don't love it any more, I just love the place.”

Statistically, First Nations post-secondary learners tend to be mature students, often with family responsibilities. Many have been away from a formal school environment for a period of years. This testimonial is a powerful expression of the importance of IIHL's to strengthening First Nations families, clans and communities:

“I am a 50 yr. old Indigenous student at Blue Quills and the time I have spent here I have learned so much about myself, my culture, the history. I am amazed at how much I didn't know and how I am still learning. I speak Cree and feel very safe and encouraged to speak Cree here and in turn I am speaking Cree to my grandchildren. I came back to school in the hopes of making a difference in this world and so far this school has made a difference in me. I hope to take this learning and share it.”

One participant on line stated that:

“...My son did not want to attend a mainstream institution; there was no one there that looked like him. He was seeking people that shared his interest in language and in culture and that is something that when I think of my little daughter, just going to a school, where she is the only First Nations child there...it is scary. So I know that it is scary for children and that is why I think that these schools are really important.”

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“As I learn my history, my heart is broken and re-strengthened everyday I am here and the institute here brings me up as a stronger mother, student and Indian.”

WHAT DO YOU LIKE BEST ABOUT STUDYING AT AN IHL?

Richard Jenson from the Pasqua First Nation is the Vice-President of the Student Association at First Nations University of Canada.

“...I also have my own personal idea about what is great, especially about sitting here at the First Nations University of Canada and that is that because of that foundation in our culture because of that foundation in the rituals, the beliefs, the community.It’s true, we give more one-on-one instruction...the environment is generally more enjoyable as is mentioned, the ceremonies, the ability to be around your own culture. The dedication of the instructors, how helpful and patient they are and they all really come back to that same thing is the relatability, the environment, the culture, being able to come to school where you are not having to leave your identity at the door, where you are not having to be the outsider, you are just going to school.”

The recovery of Indigenous identity enables individuals to be empowered and self-determining:

“I am a Cree from the Kehewin First Nation. I attend the Blue Quills College (formerly residential school) because of the magnitude of strength it takes to be a part of who we are as Native People. I am not far from home and I share the dream of success for our future generations. As I learn my history, my heart is broken and re-strengthened everyday I am here and the institute here brings me up as a stronger mother, student and Indian. I am comfortable being involved in ceremony, conferences, and gatherings all based on who I am.”

Students at Chemainus Native College noted that students get to study at their own pace, and teachers explain concepts in ways that enable students to understand. They noted that there is higher consideration for cultural and personal needs. Leona, Desiree and Darren identified that there is more one-on-one instruction when needed, and the structure of the program is flexible.

A student at Saskatchewan Indian Institute for Technologies (SIIT) noted that as a smaller institution, it “feels more easy-going and less serious than larger campuses.”

WHAT DO YOU NEED TO HELP YOU SUCCEED IN YOUR STUDIES?

First Nations students often need to overcome many challenges in their lifelong learning journey:

“There are historical barriers stemming from the assimilationist policies of the federal government and the residential school system.

There are social barriers that many First Nations people face, including but not limited to, family responsibilities, social discrimination, and lack of social support networks in many struggling communities, unemployment and poverty. Due to low secondary school graduations and large numbers of mature students, poor academic

preparation and college prerequisites, many First Nation students are simply not able to pursue post secondary studies.

There are financial barriers as well. For example, in the case of Status Indians, there is insufficient funding provided through INAC's PSSSP. Therefore, students must find other means of post secondary support. Many First Nation learners are often forced to move to urban centres to pursue a post -secondary education.

There are also cultural barriers, since post-secondary institutions do not have the mandate to address First Nation culture, perspectives, traditions, values, and styles of learning.

Finally, there are individual and personal barriers that First Nation students uniquely face, such as poor self-concept, health and frustration, lack of family support and culture shock.”³

Jacob Cram made an eloquent presentation about the challenges facing First Nations students:

“I just want to address some issues we need as First Nations students. Like any other student... we struggle with all the same issues, you know, getting to classes, homework, funding, all that kind of stuff. But for First Nations students, it seems to me that we are always struggling with further issues that non-First Nations don't have to. Like with our issues with First Nations University of Canada last year, our students, a lot of our students put their studies on hold to ensure that our institution was here for the future generations. Well, as with the Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP), our treaty right to education was threatened. Our students are again thinking about putting their studies on hold to ensure that our treaty rights aren't being threatened. So we need to make sure that our treaty rights are not becoming an issue for our students because our education always suffers because we are trying to fight for our people.”

Cynthia noted that:

“...there needs to be an increase in living allowance and there needs to be more incentives for students pursuing graduate studies and increased access to education through distance education”.

Jeffrey at SIIT added his experiences:

“I decided to attend the Saskatoon S.I.I.T campus to further my education. That working as a general labour and constantly running into dead end jobs, wasn't cutting. I'm happy I'm here, but wouldn't mind a little more funding to get by each month. Funding from my Tribal council and student loan only last so long.....And having a fair size family doesn't give me the option to seek part-time employment.”

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³ Katenies Research and Management Services: The Business Case for First Nations Post-Secondary Education, prepared for the Assembly of First Nations, May 28, 2007, pp. 10-11

“I need emotional and financial support, a sense of awareness of who I am in society today, and a sense of knowledge and truth of where I came from.”

A student at Blue Quills First Nation college stated:

“I need confidence and faith to succeed. I feel like I need ongoing support. I like being reminded of the bigger picture, I like how we can achieve as Native people”.

Another student identified the need for “Housing, babysitters, more funding, less expensive books”.

A student from SIIT stated that it is important to have “instructors that understand the perspective of a student or of an Indigenous student and make decisions with that perspective in mind...and have a sense of humour.”

Tamara at SIIT shared:

“I need emotional and financial support, a sense of awareness of who I am in society today, and a sense of knowledge and truth of where I came from. This is a very broad answer, but figuring out my identity is a major part in my success.”

Corrina identified the following:

“A post secondary education is important for a better livelihood for First Nations people. Funding needs to be increased for First Nations so more can attend. There is long waitlists of students that want to go to school. When a First Nations person is educated it is to advantage of everyone for example their own communities, province and country. They can be independent and be role models for the youth. First year students need more support because many cannot handle the transition from reserve to city or living with parents to on their own. Single mothers need additional assistance for daycare. The cost of living has increased dramatically. Most times the cost of rent is equivalent to what they receive as a living allowance and they probably starve. Student Aboriginal Centre or Academic Advisors should make available what supports are available for First Nations students.”

Students at Chemainus Native College stated that there are key needs which must be met to enable students to succeed: computers, funding, a library or a direct communication to university library site, an Aboriginal Career Planning Centre, and “a place we can go to learn about what steps to take to reach our education goals.”

They added that there needs to be funding to offer programs including lifeskills and workshops, more computers, transportation, a building, role models, visits to surrounding universities and access to Aboriginal centres.

Susan from Chemainus added that some students would benefit from transportation assistance.

Colleen at Confederation College noted the importance of community support:

“The thing that would be awesome is recognition that we are in school furthering our education. Our communities need to take pride in us, our people, that are getting educated. I personally would like my reserve to be proud of me, and other students. Make us (students) feel that we are doing something great for us and our future!”

Jesse Robson spoke about stereotypes regarding First Nations education funding:

“....A lot of people stereotype, well, you guys get your free education, you should have it easy, it’s an easy ride, it’s easy to get. It couldn’t be further from the truth. There are so many students here at this university who are on student loans, there are so many students across Canada, First Nations students who are on student loans and so I think that something that really would help just sort of smooth the relations between First Nations and non-First Nations or Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal is just a better understanding between those two groups and that we have to work at this too. You know this is the furthest thing from a free ride I have ever had in my life. So that is something that I would just like to say.”

Marion shared a powerful story from her family:

“I did not attend an indigenous higher learning institute, but I did graduate from the University of Victoria with a Bachelor’s degree in social work. I grew up in a small village of Fort Rupert gathering berries and roaming the beach gathering shells and trade beads. I lost my father very young as he died in a logging accident. So, my memories of him are very few. One of my memories of my dad is of him sitting with my sister Diane helping her with her math homework, and he said to her, “one day you are going to go to university”. I knew then at 5 years old that I was expected to go to university too. Attending a university of my choice was important for me. ...Fathers play a very influential role in supporting and encouraging children to achieve their goals of obtaining higher education.”

IN WHAT WAYS ARE INDIGENOUS INSTITUTES OF HIGHER LEARNING DIFFERENT FROM MAINSTREAM COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES AND SECONDLY, IN WHAT WAYS ARE THEY SIMILAR?

Blair Stonechild, related the story of Manitou College, the first IIHL in Canada:

“I went to McGill University and that’s where I completed my bachelors degree. ... When I was at McGill there was a group of Aboriginal educators and students who felt that they just weren’t getting the experience that they needed and therefore they got together and developed a proposal which actually resulted in the very first First Nations Control college that actually existed before the Saskatchewan Federated College that was called Manitou College.”

“It started in 1973 and went until 1979 and the reason why they did that was because of what was one of the more now accepted tenets of education which was that if you are going to have a successful education one of the first things you have to do is you have to deal with the question of identity. In other words if you have a person who doesn’t have a healthy identity, who doesn’t have a healthy sense of self concept, you are not going to be very successful in education. And that was really the fundamental mistake of Residential Schools is that they were attempting to destroy the identities, therefore they weren’t getting very good results in education. There are studies that demonstrate this, so that was the principle behind Manitou College and it proved to be very successful. We probably educated more Indigenous youth

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from all over Eastern Canada than many of the universities and it was demonstrated that we were having great success and Manitou College was at one point the largest of the Institute of higher education.”

“...One of the points I want to make is that I believe that faculty who join Indian Controlled institutions probably have a greater commitment to those institutions than the faculty who are hired at mainstream institutions. Faculty will come to these kinds of institutions are here because they really believe in them, you know, like I said, this issue of identity, treating the Indigenous person as if they are someone who is worthwhile, knowing where they are coming from and where they want to go. And I think that many of the faculty see themselves in the students, they know what has happened, how they feel about it and the dignity that comes from people of your own kind, helping you succeeding, that type of thing.”

Leslie from SIIT noted that IIHL’s are different:

“We have a variety of cultural events including a cultural room for smudging; pipe ceremonies; feasts; and we are fortunate to have an Elder at our campus. Our classes are smaller; include differentiated instruction, culturally relevant instruction and support from student services.”

She also identified that IIHL’s and mainstream institutions are similar in terms of “...the course formats and transferability into other post-secondary institutions.”

Students at Blue Quills First Nations college noted that the workload at an IIHL is similar to mainstream institutions, for example the amount of reading, exams, and assignments.

Students from Chemainus Native College referenced that IIHL’s have cultural relevance in programs and services, and you are not treated like a number. There is recognition of family duties, of extended family duties and those being accepted as reasons for missing class. There are smaller class sizes that are more interactive.

Jesse noted:

“Deadlines are deadlines and it is up to the students to get the work done...while a lot of First Nations university instructors will understand a students desire to maybe research in a different area or address a topic in a different area maybe through oral contacts and things like that, the fact is that there is in no way that represents any kind of lax attitude towards getting the work done and finishing it you know. So Indigenous Institutions are very learning orientated and expect the work done. I have actually heard people, stereotypes say that ‘it is easier over there, you are doing easier work’ and that is just something that is completely untrue.”

Chastity Delorme, from First Nations University of Canada, referenced the support from instructors, elders and administrators.

“They are accommodating to all needs, where if you were to attend different colleges that don’t have that community feeling it is a little bit harder for people like me to succeed.”

Lana wrote:

“I’ve attended 3 post secondary educational institutions, from a college diploma to master’s degree and the difference between mainstream and Indigenous owned and operated institutions is so great that in many ways they are incomparable. And, by comparing western institutions with Indigenous ones is playing into the dichotomous and hegemonic political games.”

“Education is our treaty right” and colonization has transformed and evolved our dialogues into an insidious comparison game between mainstream and indigenous world view. ENOUGH WITH THE COMPARISONS!!! We want to LEAD IIHL with the guidance of our Elders (those who have passed on to those who live), Ceremonies, language, and land. How do you compare learning as a minority within mainstream institutions to learning with relations within or near your community? How do you compare learning in English, a language which Indigenous people were colonized with to the point that majority of our Canadian Indigenous languages are becoming extinct, to learning your mothers tongue on the land by your relations? Where else could you go where ceremony, which was legally prohibited from 1895 - 1951, guides and supports your learning journey? Where else could you see Indigenous instructors humble enough that they are learners as much as the students as they are teachers? Where else could you go where sharing circles, smudging, Elders, songs, ceremonies, language, dancing, prayers, cooking, protocols, are shared and not enforced? Where else could you go where you learn where you come from (which is a fundamental Indigenous value!) by your own people and views?”

Shauneen Peete, President of First Nations University of Canada added to the discussion:

“What makes us special is that we are family, literally, we are, many of us are family and also we create in a sense a family here. We teach in an intergenerational manner, so it’s not uncommon for young people to sit with faculty and to sit with Elders in that intergenerational exchange of knowledge that is rooted in our traditional ways, that is what makes us unique and that’s what makes us special and it’s what makes us different. Not less than, but much more powerful than a mainstream education, much more powerful than a mainstream education can offer you. We do the double work here, of not only knowing the curriculum of the mainstream but at the same time, never losing sight of the value that comes from our own people and our own ways of knowing. We do both. We maintain tradition, we maintain innovation and we become stronger leaders because of it. That’s what makes us unique, at the same time we are also really hyper visible as an institution, we’re brown right, so we stick out in the Canadian landscape of higher education. And because we are hyper visible, people tend to view us, view our negativity instead of seeing our richness. We have a responsibility, each and every one of us, to change that, to continue to communicate our power, to speak from a place of power, to inspire youth to be independent and to be integrated with tradition and innovation so they too can lead. That’s part of what we all intend to do here, its part of what we intend to leave behind as our legacy. What we need in order to do that work, is a strong foundation of responsibility, to be accountable not only to the students that are here, but to the generations yet to come.”

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“IIHL’s require sustainable funding to enhance existing work and support for curriculum development and continued research. They require capital funding for safer facilities and require funding for students support services such as housing and daycare.”

“By ensuring that we set this place right, by putting forward policies and procedures and good governance practices, to strengthen the institution for the long run with a vision of sustainability and viability and ever last, we put those pieces in place right now and we will be able to see this place be successful and inform the lives of more generations of First nations people but not just First Nations people. Because we do two things here, we also serve a very large non-First nations population who want to learn about us as well. We can own the responsibility of teaching them from a place of authority and a place of power what we already know. It’s part of our mission, to enhance teaching and learning from a First Nations position to enhance First Nations Cultures and languages and traditions and to really inform major changes in society in Canadian society overall. What an incredible opportunity!”

WHAT DO IIHL’S NEED TO STRENGTHEN THEIR ROLE IN THE POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION SYSTEM IN CANADA?

Barry, at Red Crow College, noted that IIHL’s “need to be accredited with the province’s education board.” The issue of recognition of IIHL’s as a key partner in the post-secondary landscape in Canada is critical.

Lana from Blue Quills added the following:

“Need more monies to improve and update infrastructure, student services, housing, communication, mainstream-relations, research, transportation and technology. Many IIHL buildings are former residential schools. These schools were built over 80 years ago with the cheapest materials at the time. There are issues with asbestos, poor air ventilation, and heat circulation, and lack of space. These are extremely poor building conditions to work in. Also, these building spark trauma for Residential school survivors. Need monies to hire more staff and pay staff within their salary grid. We need humble, honest, accountable, assertive, Indigenous leadership/ stewardship that are connected with their culture, language and community, also money-wise and accountable.”

M. Shirt at Blue Quills identified that:

“IIHL’s require sustainable funding to enhance existing work and support for curriculum development and continued research. They require capital funding for safer facilities and require funding for students support services such as housing and daycare.”

Leslie added that IIHL’s need to:

“...Continue to meet the learning needs of the First Nations students by requiring non-First Nations instructors to examine their teaching styles and be flexible in order to meet their students learning needs. Be proud of the First Nations culture and share it with non-First Nations post secondary institutions.”

Kim from SIIT:

“We need to move beyond doing twice the work for half the money. Our institutions need stable, committed, core funding in order to continue to support students and staff as well as conduct long-term planning.”

The First Nations Post-Secondary Education: Access, Opportunity and Outcomes Panel identified that:

“The need for supporting IHLs is clear and compelling in the following ways:

- Indigenous post-secondary graduates become significant and positive economic and social contributors to First Nation and mainstream society;
- Indigenous Institutes facilitate the enrolment and graduation of First Nation students who otherwise would not receive a post-secondary education;
- Therefore, Indigenous Institutes must be adequately resourced.”⁴

IHLs in Canada, with few exceptions, lack the recognition to grant certification/accreditation and lack a stable source of long-term funding. Disagreements between federal and provincial governments over funding responsibility for post-secondary institutions located on reserve lands have not been resolved.

A report commissioned by the government of Canada compared strategies in Indigenous post-secondary education employed in Australia, New Zealand and the United States. Among other things the report concluded:

“...New Zealand has recently experienced the most significant growth in Indigenous post-secondary education enrolment overall in contrast to Australia and the United States. Data collected for this review suggests that this rapid expansion has occurred as a result of the establishment of well-funded, degree-granting Indigenous-controlled PSE institutions (Wananga)...”⁵

Wananga were the beneficiaries of a 1998 legal ruling which found that government policies placed them at a disadvantage and put their operations at risk. The institutes were compensated for past underfunding and are now funded equitably to non-Indigenous institutions.⁶

The same report also notes:

“...Tertiary sector research, particularly by Wananga, will help to support development of the knowledge base needed to manage cultural and economic assets and to maintain strong and prospering whanua [families], hapu [sub-tribes] and iwi [tribes].”⁷

⁴ The First Nations Post-Secondary Education: Access, Opportunity and Outcomes Panel: Taking Action for First Nations Post-Secondary Education: Access, Opportunity and Outcomes, a Report prepared for the Assembly of First Nations, June 21, 2010, pp 23

⁵ Silta Associates: Comparison of National Strategies in Indigenous Post-Secondary Education – Australia, New Zealand and the United States of America, prepared for Human Resources Skills Development Canada, March 31, 2010, pp. 6

⁶ Ibid. pp. 54

⁷ Ibid. pp. 49

“Indigenous post-secondary graduates become significant and positive economic and social contributors to First Nation and mainstream society.”

“The future of our nations and the expansion of First Nations capacity is contingent on quality education and the opportunity of First Nation citizens to access lifelong learning in a context of culture, language and homogeneity in an environment of nurturing and trust.”

IIHL's have become a key foundation of the First Nations post-secondary landscape, providing programs to over 10,000 learners. However:

“...in order to allow IIHLs to fully develop as permanent structures in the lifelong learning landscape, they require multi-year core funding for operations and institutional management. They also require per student funding allocations, capital grants (to provide modern facilities such as libraries and laboratories), grants for program evaluation and development, increased funding for student support services, and research grants. With this type of support, IIHLs will be able to maintain their role as leaders in Indigenous higher education.”

“The academic and institutional independence of IIHLs is a continuing goal related to empowerment. The future of our nations and the expansion of First Nations capacity is contingent on quality education and the opportunity of First Nation citizens to access lifelong learning in a context of culture, language and homogeneity in an environment of nurturing and trust. In so doing we guarantee student success and long term capacity building at a national level that is First Nation driven, First Nation controlled and First Nation accountable.”⁸

In 2007, the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Peoples issued a report on Aboriginal Post-Secondary education in Canada. They recommended that:

“The successes of Aboriginal controlled institutions should be acknowledged by government, supported and built upon. ...The government's objective should be to put in place measures that strengthen and promote the long-term viability of these key institutions for the future of Aboriginal post-secondary education.”⁹

Among the measures which need to be considered are adequate levels of funding for IIHL's:

“Resourcing programs, that increase the number of First Nation graduates, represents an investment, not a cost, for Canada. Continued economic marginalization of First Nations peoples in Canada will come at a tremendous cost to Canadians.”¹⁰

With adequate support for IIHL's, Marion stated:

“...Indigenous Institutes of Higher Learning will foster hope, produce healthy vibrant contributing members to society, instil a strong sense of identity grounded in traditional values, to have access and reap the benefits from the extraction of our resources, and to be granted the good given ability to dream.”

⁸ The First Nations Post-Secondary Education: Access, Opportunity and Outcomes Panel, pp. 23

⁹ Standing Committee on Aboriginal Peoples: No Higher Priority: Aboriginal Post-Secondary Education in Canada: Report of the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development. Ottawa, Ontario 2007, pp. 38,39

¹⁰ Katenies, pp. 22

CONCLUSION:

The Virtual Summit on Indigenous Institutions of Higher Learning affirmed the important role of IIHL's in creating opportunities for First Nations students to have post-secondary success. Clearly these institutions provide academically challenging programs within a culturally relevant setting that promotes a sense of pride in identity and creates a safe space where students feel that they belong and are nurtured and supported to succeed.

The students and staff who participated shared their experiences and vision with great eloquence and passion.

The Assembly of First Nations would like to thank all participants, and would especially like to thank First Nations University of Canada for hosting this event.



National Chief Shawn Atleo speaks with participants at the national virtual summit on Indigenous Institutions of Higher Learning at the First Nations University of Canada.

