

Improving Indigenous Students' Experiences and Outcomes at the U of L

Updated July 20, 2020

In the Classroom

- Indigenous cultures and ways of knowing differ from those of “western” culture. It is important to be aware and accepting of these differences.
 - Respect is an important value in Indigenous cultures.
 - Signals of respect, such as avoiding disagreement and not speaking until spoken to, can be misinterpreted by people who do not understand Indigenous culture.
 - As a consequence of their respect for a professor, Indigenous students may be reluctant to participate in classroom discussions. Encourage participation by carefully asking direct questions of individual students.
 - Indigenous students may feel their classmates are disrespecting the professor by speaking too much or in a way that is not sufficiently respectful. Explain your expectations regarding classroom discussion.
 - In many Indigenous cultures, avoiding direct eye contact is a sign of respect. An Indigenous person’s respectful indirect gaze is often misinterpreted by non-Indigenous people as rudeness.
 - Respect for professors, combined with cultural and positional power imbalances and a history of anti-Indigenous racism, can inhibit Indigenous students from reaching out to professors for guidance. Take it upon yourself to initiate opportunities for guidance and mentorship.
 - Indigenous students may have a cultural responsibility to take time away from class to attend a funeral (which can last several days) or other cultural event, or to help a family member in need. They may not always be able to provide formal documentation.
 - At the beginning of your course, explain that you understand that students have complex lives. Tell your students whether you allow children in class. Develop late work and absence policies that do not disadvantage Indigenous students.
 - Many Indigenous students at the U of L are Blackfoot, but there are other groups too. It is important to recognize that different Indigenous groups have distinct cultures.
- “Two-eyed seeing” is the concept of viewing the world through both an Indigenous cultural lens and the lens of western culture.
 - Show respect for Indigenous cultures and welcome diverse perspectives.
 - One way to show students that you respect Indigenous culture is by announcing and posting about Indigenous events. Sign up for the Eagles Nest list serve by contacting Ikasskini (Indigenous Student Centre) manager Lindi Shade (lindi.shade@uleth.ca).
 - Invite Indigenous speakers into the classroom.
 - It is appropriate to offer gifts as a sign of gratitude, especially to Elders.
 - Traditional gifts include blankets, tobacco, sweet grass, and money, but gift cards are good too. Ask an Indigenous person if you are unsure.

- Contact Rhonda Crow (rhonda.crow@uleth.ca) about inviting Elders.
 - When making requests of any Indigenous person, be mindful of the history of Indigenous exploitation by white Canadians.
 - Invite Indigenous students into conversation by asking for their interpretation of an idea or observation, then bridge that idea to the concept you are trying to teach.
 - At the same time, do not treat Indigenous students as representatives of a group, or burden them with special expectations. It is not their responsibility to teach us. Notice if a student is uncomfortable being put on the spot.
 - Appreciate that Indigenous students' life experiences are relevant to their academic development. Many Indigenous students have learned valuable lessons by overcoming obstacles, helping family members in need, and navigating two cultures. Value these experiences when writing letters of recommendation or evaluating applications.
- Hands-on learning and story-based learning align with Indigenous ways of learning. These approaches may be more familiar to Indigenous students than theory-based learning or learning from textbooks.
 - Start with examples (stories) and learning-by-doing, then transition into theory.
 - Use metaphor and simile to relate ideas to students' experiences.
 - If reading is essential for success, make that clear. Incentivize reading with low-stakes reading checks (e.g., quizzes, clickers).
 - Teach and facilitate active reading.
- Some Indigenous people have negative associations with Science. Topics like residential school experiments and "race science" call for extra sensitivity.
- Remember that each student has his or her own definition of success. Help them achieve their goals, not yours.

Outside the classroom

Many Indigenous students face challenges outside of the classroom that distract from their academic pursuits. Be kind, be sensitive, be understanding, and be prepared to help students access support services (Health Centre: 403-329-2484, Counselling Services: 403-317-2845 or counselling.services@uleth.ca, Mental Health Crisis Line 403-327-7905 or toll free 1-888-787-2880, Accommodated Learning Centre: alc@uleth.ca).

Many Indigenous students are also the first members of their families to attend post-secondary. Help them (and other students) navigate the system by announcing and discussing educational opportunities (e.g., Co-Op, education abroad, honours theses, independent / applied studies), job postings, and funding opportunities that they may not be aware of. Offer to provide broader forms of academic guidance (e.g., study skills, how to apply to graduate school) if you are able. If students are experiencing financial stress, point them to the relevant services (fin.aid@uleth.ca, awards@uleth.ca).

This document was written by David Logue, who takes sole responsibility for any errors. It attempts to advance The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Calls to Action #7, #62-ii, and #63-iii. Its contents are based on conversations with Professor Emeritus Leroy Little Bear, Professor Michelle Hogue, Librarian Mary Greenshields, alumnus Martin Heavy Head, and undergraduates Marley Heavy Shield and Kalli Eagle Speaker. Jennifer Mather and J.B. Leca provided helpful comments on earlier drafts.