



## **First Steps for First Nations Students: the Library as a Partner for Student Success**

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### **Abstract:**

*The University of British Columbia's Okanagan Campus is dedicated to providing a holistic university experience to Aboriginal students. Through Aboriginal Programs and Services, the Aboriginal Access Studies Program provides an opportunity for Indigenous students who would not otherwise qualify for admission to enroll in university studies. The program's holistic model assists students through their transition to university and includes support for their academic, personal, cultural and social needs. UBC's Okanagan Library has partnered with this program to provide library instruction to students in this program, which for many is their first library experience. In addition to teaching monthly group library instruction sessions, librarians also provide one-on-one reference service at the Aboriginal Centre weekly during peak times each term to build relationships with these students. This program is in the second full year of operation and we will describe our observations over the past two years and our future plans to expand the program and our relationships, such as recruiting students from this program into students jobs within the library. In September 2012 the library and the Aboriginal Centre will begin a longitudinal study that will examine the Access Studies program by collecting qualitative data from the students and staff involved and quantitative data from the university to track the impact that this comprehensive program has on student success. We will also include a brief description of how this program is directly linked to the strategic plan of the University as a whole and the importance of institutional support.*

## **Introduction**

One of the most significant barriers to Canadian Aboriginal student participation in post-secondary education is the need to qualify with academic course grades. In British Columbia, the provincial Ministry of Education's Student Transitions Project reports on high school graduation rates. The project breaks the rates into three categories: graduates with university eligible GPA, graduates with GPA but not university eligible and graduates with no GPA. According to this data, 96% of Aboriginal high school graduates do not have a university eligible GPA. In addition to not having the academic requirements to participate in post-secondary studies, Aboriginal students face a number of other financial and non-financial factors that limit their participation in higher education. Non-financial barriers include lack of confidence, lower levels of parental education and parental expectations. These personal factors are closely linked to the intergenerational effects of residential school.

When we began our collaboration we found a significant gap in the literature on library support for Aboriginal students in Canada, as well as for students at-risk in Canada. In addition, there are few studies examining Access Programs for university entrance, their partnerships with other campus departments, and their success.

## **Strategic Plan**

*Place and Promise: the UBC Plan (2009)* includes a commitment to Aboriginal Engagement, with a corresponding strategic plan, implementation plan, and annual reporting back to the community. The Aboriginal Access Program directly meets the goals of our university by strengthening programs of academic and social support for Aboriginal students. The library's commitment to the university and our community includes developing campus partnerships to better support our students, and enhancing access to librarians and library resources. Our work together is advancing these goals set forth by our institution in a manner consistent with the needs of our students. However, we are only in the second year of this collaboration and are continually seeking ways to improve our programs.

## **Aboriginal Access Studies**

UBC's Okanagan campus initiated the Aboriginal Access Studies program in September 2007 as a pilot program to provide Aboriginal students the access and opportunity to enroll in post secondary studies while not undergoing the standard admission process. The program is operated within Aboriginal Programs and Services, a unit within Student Services. The program was approved by the UBC Okanagan campus Senate in October 2010. Aboriginal Access Studies is designed from a holistic perspective and aims to provide an educational experience to the "whole" student; social, emotional, physical and intellectual well being. This holistic approach is a significant concept within an Aboriginal world view and can be seen in variations throughout different Indigenous groups.

The main goal of Aboriginal Access Studies is to provide services and support to students in a holistic framework that will allow them to develop an educational foundation and skill set that will allow them to be successful in their post secondary studies. Some of these services and support consist of additional tutorials, academic workshops, peer mentors, cultural and social activities. The partnership with the Library programming fits within the holistic academic support that is provided to students. Aboriginal Access Studies programming follows "the tenet of *equality of condition* that demands that mere access is not sufficient, but must be accompanied with the kinds of supports that are given to students who are motivated, but poorly prepared and under-resourced, and a realistic opportunity to succeed "(Levin & Alcorn 2000, p.20).

Aboriginal Access Studies supports a diverse range of Aboriginal students varying in ages from 18 – 50 and these students include: recent high school graduates, mature students, students who would like additional support as they step into university and students whose grades do not reflect their academic potential. Aboriginal identity includes those of First Nations, Metis and Inuit ancestry. Results from Winter 2007-2011 sessions demonstrate that most students who have enrolled in this program are primarily in the age range of 19 to 29 while the second most common age range is from 30 to 39. Furthermore, 58% of the students have been female and 42% have been male.

The range of degree programs to which Aboriginal Access Studies students have been admitted to include: Arts, Science, Management, Education and Social Work. Last year, Aboriginal Programs and Services started working with the Nursing faculty as well as the Forestry faculty at the Vancouver campus, to establish a plan for students who enter Aboriginal Access Studies who would like to enter these programs.

### **Library Support for Aboriginal Access Students**

We know from interacting with our students in the Aboriginal Access Studies Program that they have some different needs and preferences from our general student population. They are less likely to walk into our library, which can be an intimidating place, and they are less likely to ask a question or ask for service. Generally they do not use our services. If they were confident users of our automated services this would be less concerning, but most of them are not. They are mostly inexperienced researchers with little exposure to post-secondary library spaces and resources. These characteristics are common to students who are most in need of extra support.

In order to successfully break down these barriers we must learn to connect with the students in a way that is meaningful for them. We have found that the students in our Aboriginal Access Studies Program value personal communication and relationships, and are more likely to make use of our resources if they have a pre-existing relationship with the librarian or other service provider. Frequently they ask the person they feel most comfortable talking to for help, even when they know that there are others with more expertise available. They are less likely to use our automated services and do not trust our electronic resources to provide them with necessary materials. As a result they rely on a limited range of materials to support their coursework and assignments, which is sometimes reflected in their grades.

Our current library support for students in the Aboriginal Access Studies program consists of a variety of planned opportunities throughout the year for students to access library materials and interact with library staff. A combination of formal and informal instruction in both group and individual settings allows us to build relationships with the

students and work with them to progressively build their information literacy skills over the course of the year.

### *Formal Instruction*

Formal instruction takes place in the library's computer lab and study areas. This series is progressive, beginning with a library orientation and tour at the beginning of the year. Following sessions include research instruction delivered in their English and Anthropology classes, and instruction on referencing and referencing tools later in the term. During the orientation the students visit the library, walk around the space on a guided tour. During this tour of the space, the librarian highlights not only the physical resources available to the students, but also the norms of how the space is used and the personal services available to students. The norms include quiet versus noisy areas, how some spaces can be booked in advance, and how our security gates, fines, and other apparatus for managing the collection work. The personal services include drop-in help at our service desk, peer help for student computing, and individual research appointments.

### *Informal Instruction*

Informal instruction takes place both in the library and in the Aboriginal Centre. Informal sessions in the library are on topics less specifically related to coursework. This past year the primary informal session held within the library was *Digital Tattoo: Highly Visible and Hard to Remove*, which teaches students to manage their online identity effectively. In the Aboriginal Centre the librarian brings a laptop computer and provides research help as-needed. If no one is requesting research help the librarian engages the students in general conversation to build a relationship with them. This informal communication is the cornerstone of the relationship between the librarian and the students toward that will allow the students to feel confident asking their academic and research questions in the future. When possible, during these informal conversations the librarian listens for opportunities to "look things up" to demonstrate information literacy for personal and social purposes as well as academic needs.

### *Appointments*

All librarians at our campus take individual appointments for research assistance and training in the use of library resources. The students in the Aboriginal Access Studies program are frequently offered appointments when they have lengthy questions, and the librarians will hold the appointments outside of their offices if the student prefers.

### *Advocacy*

Students in the Aboriginal Access Studies program are able to request assistance from the staff in Aboriginal Programs and Services to negotiate communications with the library including requests for appointments, library fine appeals, and requests for information about library services.

### *Library Renovation*

We are currently renovating the main floor of the library, including the entrance. Information about the feelings that students in the Aboriginal Access Studies program experienced entering and using the space was considered during the planning phases. This information was collected from the students in conversation with the librarians when discussing why and how students use the library. The service desk will be moved back so there is room to enter and exit the library without having to travel through a crowd at peak periods. Also, improved sightlines and signage will help students feel confident entering and navigating through the space to accomplish their tasks. Reducing two service desks to one will reduce students' uncertainty about who to ask for assistance.

### *Assessment*

Assessment of our success is difficult. Increased student visits to the library are observed and reported anecdotally, and the librarians tracks appointment requests. An increase in requests from students to Aboriginal Programs & Services staff to assist with

resolving library problems, and the resolution of those problems guided by the librarian are improving the trustworthiness of the library for some students.

Another measure of success is the number of students who complete the Access Studies program and continue on to pursue a degree. Without supporting information from our students we are unable to assess which specific supports are useful to students and the impact of those supports. During the development of our program we identified that there is a gap in both the library literature and student development literature on this topic.

## **Research Plan**

Because of the difficulty measuring our success we are embarking on a longitudinal study to assess the Access Program, its supports and partnerships, and the effect on students. Our study proposal is currently before the ethics review board at the University of British Columbia, and once it is approved we will begin to interview students, staff & faculty. We will also be collecting data about student enrollment and retention to track the success of our students. Our future plans include using the collected data to analyze the impact of this program on our students, and to publish our findings.

There is very little available current literature on our topic, but that which exists tends to support our initial observations. It is clear that many colleges and universities have alternative admissions options for at-risk students (Osborne, Leopold, & Ferrie 1997; King 2009). In Canada most institutions have programs for Aboriginal students, and many of those programs include partnerships with support services and academic units (Levin & Alcorn 1999; Richardson & Blanchet-Cohen 2000; Levin, Sloan-Seale & Wallace 2000; Timmons & Doyle-Bedwell 2009). Many do not have an Access Studies program with a similar model to that at UBC's Okanagan campus, but an increase in interest from our colleagues across the country indicates that many campuses are considering similar admissions and support programs.

There are some articles about library use by Aboriginal people, and programs within libraries, but many of them are concerned with issues of geographical remoteness, lack of resources, and Indigenous materials in public library collections. There is much less written about Aboriginal students' use of academic libraries. Deborah Lee's 2001 paper

offers qualitative data from interviews with Aboriginal students at another Canadian university. Lee notes that library use increases when Aboriginal people have a relationship with the library that includes collaboration, and when the library invests in relationship building (286). Lee's suggestion of action on four main themes has helped us shape our library's approach to relationship building (287). Lee discusses three areas of concern, two of which we are focused on with our current programming and research project. These areas of concern: the lack of services incorporating the values of relationship and reciprocity, and the lack of research in this area, are common themes in other papers. Lee's the third area of concern discussed is a lack of holdings of indigenous resources. This is a more complicated area, which involves discussion not only of what we collect in our holdings, but what we should collect. Our institution's partnership with the En'owkin Centre, and current efforts to improve our collections are first steps to address this concern.

By including qualitative data in our study we hope to learn from our community how we can better shape our collections and programs to meet their needs.

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