Building Social Infrastructure: Two-Eyed Seeing and the role of Elders

Etuaptmumk is the Mi'kmaw word for Two-Eyed Seeing. This phrase, made popular by Mi'kmaw Elder Albert Marshall, refers to "learning to see from one eye with the best in the Indigenous ways of knowing and from the other eye with the best in the mainstream ways of knowing, and most importantly, learning to see with both eyes together – for the benefit of all."[1]

Two-Eyed Seeing is required to enable the transdisciplinary and collaborative work of building social infrastructure by postsecondary education institutions in Canada.

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What is social infrastructure?

"Social infrastructure" is a term developed by settler institutions to describe the set of organizational arrangements and deliberate investments in society's systems, relationships, and structures that enable society to create a resilient, just, equitable, and sustainable world; social infrastructure includes social, economic, environmental, and cultural assets.

While the language is different, the idea of building social infrastructure in a postsecondary context is aligned with Indigenous concepts and approaches to creating the social, physical, economic, spiritual, political, and health conditions that influence the learning process and contribute to community well-being.

Educational institutions can weave the idea of social infrastructure with Indigenous concepts around building community well-being as a way to organize and communicate their efforts to create positive social change and sustainable economic prosperity.

1 http://www.universityaffairs.ca/the-gift-of-multiple-perspectives-in-scholarship/

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The role of Elders in Residence

Some Elders are keepers of traditional knowledge, and some are comfortable with "Two-Eyed Seeing." A strong ability for "Two-Eyed Seeing" is helpful in navigating the complex and challenging role of Elder in Residence within a postsecondary setting.

Notwithstanding ongoing changes to the educational landscape, Canada's advanced education institutions are still 'gatekeepers' of the process of knowledge creation, and they primarily embody a Western viewpoint on the role of research, higher education, and job training. It has too often been the case that researchers who do take time to learn from Indigenous communities do not use their research results to benefit those communities—an unfair exchange. Elders play an important role in institutions by facilitating learning to be a highly social process that nurtures relationships in the community and flows benefits back to the community.

Wendy Phillips is the Elder in Residence at University of Toronto Scarborough campus. She worked with the Dean to launch an Indigenous-led program to preserve endangered languages in Ontario communities: Lenape, with only two speakers left, and Chippewa, with no speakers. The linguistics department helped find a faculty member to provide theoretical and research direction and support, while Indigenous staff and communities lead the development and testing of a prototype program. Their collaboration as equals is a key principle for the program. The pilot program will culminate in a set of open online dictionaries. The next phase will be to take a social innovation approach to scaling their successful methods and technologies to save other languages in Canada. The team is currently partnering with social innovation groups at the University of Toronto and seeking further collaboration with social innovation groups across Canada.

In this example, and many others across Canada, Elders in Residence play an important role in facilitating the connections and conversations between Indigenous and settler communities. This allows educational institutions and all their community members to better participate in preserving and sharing both Western and Indigenous knowledge. Elders in Residence are critically helpful in guiding the building the social infrastructure that legitimizes Indigenous perspectives long ignored by academic institutions operating in a Western, Euro-centric manner.

Framing the opportunity

Canada's advanced education institutions have historically played an important role in shaping Canada's broad economic, governance, and social systems. These systems have produced less-than-optimal outcomes, like climate change, rising income inequality, destruction of Indigenous cultures, resource scarcity, and ecological degradation. Overcoming these issues to achieve sustainable, shared, social, and economic prosperity, and to achieve reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, will be a complex, interdisciplinary, and multi-sectoral effort—one that includes changing the state of social infrastructure. Advanced education institutions, by virtue of their influence, expertise, and other assets and resources, are well-positioned to support this change.

Partly in response to the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action, several postsecondary education institutions in Canada have now created formal roles for Indigenous Elders on campus.

Elders take a great variety of roles across institutions, including as special advisors to presidents, faculty members, counselors, curriculum experts, spiritual advisors, role models, and more. Elders in Residence help to equip students and faculty with the collaborative skills, systems perspective, mindfulness, social innovation approaches, and networks to address social science gaps and challenges, and to consider questions of reconciliation, poverty, and exclusion broadly across the advanced education sector.

There are significant opportunities, and challenges, for Elders in Residence to connect their work to a broader institutional strategy for "building social infrastructure."

Elders in Residence and postsecondary education institutions can work together to:

- Assert the critical role of Indigenous knowledge and perspectives in postsecondary institutions in "social infrastructure building", where it has historically been omitted or overlooked.
- Seek support from Presidents, Deans, and other funders for additional support and funding, particularly with respect to the first point.
- Make connections for community-engaged research projects and other opportunities to build stronger relationships between Indigenous communities and the institution.

Where to begin?

Asserting the critical role of Indigenous knowledge and perspectives in social infrastructure building

People strongly interested in social innovation and social infrastructure building do not necessarily see this work as strongly connected to building institutional understanding of, and capacity for, Indigenous ways of learning and knowing. As a result, Elders may face a 'language gap' where they are not heard unless their ideas are expressed in expected Western academic language and/or jargon. In other cases, there may be Elders involved but no space for their voice, or they may be treated as ceremonial rather than as knowledge keepers.

Integrating Indigenous knowledge and perspectives, and making an effort to 'translate' them into the language of social infrastructure building may open up new and novel opportunities for collaboration. However, there is understandable concern around the compatibility of worldviews as mainstream approaches to 'social entrepreneurship' (often inherent in social infrastructure building approaches) may contribute to recolonization and assimilation pressures on Indigenous communities.

Realizing opportunities for support and funding

Elders frequently report being overburdened with the responsibility to educate staff, students, and faculty on the importance of Indigenous culture, ceremonies, experiential learning, and land-based knowledge. These groups may have demands for input, feedback, training, or ceremonial support that exceed an Elder's capacity to respond effectively.

"Two-Eyed Seeing" was adopted as a guiding principle in the strategy of the Institute of Aboriginal Peoples' Health (IAPH) within CIHR (Canadian Institutes of Health Research). Similarly, more cross-disciplinary, collaborative approaches to solving complex problems are finding favour among many funders—both traditional sources like the Tri-Council agencies, but also philanthropic foundations and government social innovation programs.

Making connections and building community

One of the key transitions in postsecondary education institutions is to change from doing things for Indigenous people, to doing things by and with Indigenous people and as Indigenous communities would do. This change requires deconstruction of hierarchies and sharing power. It necessitates respect for, and adoption of, Indigenous worldviews. It leads to opening leadership to include indigenous communities. Success stories come from situations where trusting personal relationships have formed. Relationships are the catalyst for building the social infrastructure that helps policies, funds, plans and programs to take shape in service of reconciliation and community well-being goals.

Overcoming barriers

In working to cultivate social infrastructure with Indigenous communities, it is important to consider the increasingly global nature of postsecondary education. A significant and growing number of members of campus communities come from outside of Canada, and may have little or no understanding of Canada's Indigenous history or culture. However, many foreign students and faculty have experienced colonization and understand this aspect. Even in these cases, though, learning must take place before fully engaging them in social infrastructure projects that may involve culturally or politically sensitive topics or material related to Indigenous people in Canada. This barrier is not insurmountable, but does add to the investment of time and effort required to build social consensus and shared priorities.

Another barrier is inertia and complexity in existing systems. An interesting case in point has been Elder Wendy Phillips' work at the University of Toronto to introduce smudging ceremonies into the process of opening new built spaces on campus. Even with full and enthusiastic support of the President, it has snowballed into over a year of unexpectedly complex consultations with insurance companies, fire departments, and building engineers. Sometimes building social infrastructure means delving into the fine details about how physical infrastructure works—HVAC systems in this case.

Realizing Benefits

Everyone benefits from "Two-Eyed Seeing"—weaving together of Western and Indigenous ways of knowing and learning. When this approach, and Elders in Residence, are truly embedded in institutional culture and operations and are not just a "box to check" indicating that some action is being taken with respect to Reconciliation, a more resilient community and institution result.

Institutions that work committedly and authentically with Elders and Indigenous communities may see higher levels of Indigenous attainment, and other benefits like decreased tension and the development of mutually beneficial relationships between settler and Indigenous communities. Vancouver Island University (VIU) drew on their Elders in Residence, their long-standing relationships with local First Nations, and their own reputation and stature in the community to organize a series of community dialogues to address a sudden flare-up of racist incidents in the Nanaimo, BC, community. The dialogues were not driven by VIU's academic plan, but by VIU's assertion of the fundamental role for universities in society today, which includes a responsibility to collaborate and work with local First Nations.

About McConnell and RECODE

The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation is a pan-Canadian foundation that works toward building a society that is inclusive, reconciled, sustainable and resilient—and that advances progress toward the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. RECODE, an initiative of the McConnell Foundation, is a call to 21st century postsecondary education that enhances community wellbeing.

As a funder, capacity builder and convener, RECODE supports the capacity of schools to weave social innovation tools and practices into the very fabric of campus and community culture.