

An Ongoing Journey

The many layers of Indigenous reconciliation, representation, and educational support

By **Meredith Barnett**
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Credit: University of Calgary

In August 2021, students and staff gathered to raise the University of Calgary *ii'taa'poh'to'p* tipi in the heart of campus—a symbol of welcome, built right outside its busy MacEwan Student Center.

There are more than 800 Indigenous students at UCalgary. They can gather at the **Writing Symbols Lodge Indigenous Student Centre** for academic support, advising, workshops, and ceremonies. They can learn from a small but growing number of Indigenous faculty.

But this isn't always what Indigenous students have found at colleges and universities.

Shawna Cunningham has spent more than 25 years working in Canadian higher education. Cunningham, who is herself Métis-Cree, remembers hosting a group of 25 Indigenous students from northern Alberta visiting a university campus. A non-Indigenous high school teacher told her “not to worry” about giving them an admissions presentation because these students weren’t “university material.”

It was a transformative moment for Cunningham. She felt a “strong, heartfelt commitment to increase meaningful representation of Indigenous people in higher education and to dedicate my career to working with Indigenous youth to create a better future.” Today, she’s director of **Indigenous strategy** at UCalgary.

Like other universities across Canada, UCalgary is working on reconciliation: resetting and reimagining relationships with Indigenous communities after many years of systemic inequities. Here’s how Cunningham and the UCalgary team have approached this complex, interconnected journey.



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Addressing History

More than 1.67 million people in Canada (4.9% of the population) **identify as Indigenous**, and despite progress, income and education gaps persist. According to a **2020 government analysis**, most Indigenous groups make 75% to 80% of the median income of other Canadians, and those living on reservations are 3.5 times more likely to be categorized as low-income. Some 29% of non-Indigenous Canadians have college degrees, but only 10% of

Indigenous individuals do.

These numbers speak to the country's history of educational inequity, colonization, and marginalization of Indigenous peoples. Canada's Indian Residential Schools system separated 150,000 Indigenous children from their families from 1894 until the last school was shuttered in the 1990s. Most recently, in May and June 2021, 1,300 unmarked children's graves were [uncovered at former school sites](#). For Indigenous communities, this history of trauma breeds a mistrust of educational systems. That, compounded by financial challenges, means "the barriers Indigenous students face are still astronomical," says Cunningham.

In 2007, Canada formed its [Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#) to investigate and address the impacts of the residential school system. Today, in response to the commission's 2015 recommendations, 80% of universities have launched reconciliation plans that include steps like classes on Indigenous history and financial support for students, reports [Universities Canada](#).

Ways of Knowing, Being, Doing

UCalgary began working on its Indigenous strategy in the spring of 2016, forming a steering committee and a working group with university leaders and local Indigenous elders.

"The inclusion of the elders on the committee really changed the course of our work," says Cunningham. With both elder support and senior leadership, she says, "UCalgary developed a parallel path with both the 'institutional way of doing,' which involves having a committee, strategy, and launch date, and the 'Indigenous way of doing,' with a four-stage Indigenous journey framework and marking milestones through ceremonies."

During the "gathering stories" phase, the working group hosted community dialogues, held focus groups, and launched an online survey, all of which yielded more than 2,200 points of contact. Wading through the feedback and ideas, the working group wove together a framework based on four key Indigenous concepts: ways of knowing, ways of doing, ways of connecting, and ways of being. It's a circular journey, not a linear one, explains Cunningham.

"When we're moving through transformation and renewal, we have to create a space of engagement we can move through together and understand that it's ongoing," she says.

The strategy's Indigenous name, *ii'taa'poh'to'p*, means "a place to rest and rejuvenate during a journey." Elder Andy Black Water bestowed this name in a June 21, 2017, ceremony to validate the strategy, and other elders gave cultural gifts, like the tipi design, a buffalo robe, and an honor song.

Applying the Strategy

Across the university and within seven subcommittees, UCalgary is working through the strategy's seven statements of commitment and 27 institutional recommendations. Many of these address the many interconnected challenges for Indigenous students and communities. For instance, the "ways of knowing" category addresses teaching, learning, and access. UCalgary has distributed CA\$2.6 million in scholarships and awards to Indigenous students. Since 2019, it has increased research funding for Indigenous projects from \$2.1 million to \$6.2 million. It launched the Indigenous Knowledge Public Lecture Series, which drew more than 600 participants in 2020. The university hired an Indigenous research team and an Indigenous education consultant to support decolonization in teaching, learning and research.

To foster meaningful inclusion on campus (organized in the journey framework under "ways of being"), UCalgary created and hosted professional development workshops for staff. To better engage the community (under "ways of connecting"), UCalgary offered educational and cultural programs like the annual campfire chats for Indigenous Peoples' Day and [Orange Shirt Day](#) on the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation.

UCalgary also continues to mark milestones through ceremonies led by elders, like the ceremonial tea dance, pipe ceremonies, and transfer ceremonies.

Systemic Change

Some of UCalgary's progress is visible and immediate, like creating space on campus for ceremonies or hiring new faculty. But the longer-term journey toward reconciliation is complex and ongoing, says Cunningham.

"Journeys are typically circular: creating space transformation and renewal that is ongoing, yet evolutionary. Within *ii'taa'poh'to'p*, we have created a space for ethical engagement," she says.

Since Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission released its [final report in 2015](#) (and since the discovery of Indigenous children's unmarked graves), Cunningham has seen more commitment from Canadians to engage in reconciliation at individual and societal levels. But there's much work to be done to improve the educational system and shift community attitudes. And this is especially true for universities, whose hierarchal systems often exclude marginalized voices, she points out. To engage in reconciliation, institutions have to be more inclusive and collaborate respectfully with Indigenous peoples.

"When we're talking about transformation, we're talking about deep, meaningful systemic changes. And I think there's a tension between patience and impatience. People want to see change immediately," she says. "But

transformation is deeper than that. It's going to take time and mindfulness.”

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