

MITT:

Manitoba Institute of Trades and Technology acknowledges traditional territory of indigenous people

In December of 2015, the Manitoba Institute of Trades and Technology (MITT), fellow provincial post-secondary schools, and the Manitoba School Boards Association, signed the Indigenous Education Blueprint and formed a united front to advance Indigenous education in Manitoba. Previously, in 2014, MITT became a signatory to a similar effort, albeit on a national level – Colleges and Institutes Canada’s Indigenous Education Protocol for Colleges and Institutes. Fast forward to early September 2016, just days away from the return of students to campus, and evidence of this commitment is clear.

Class is in full swing for MITT executive, faculty, and staff as Dr. Sherry Peden, the college’s Senior Corporate Indigenous Lead, facilitates a session on Indigenous culture and traditions and her role at the institute. By the second slide of her PowerPoint, Peden pauses. “Acknowledge the land we are on” reads the title, and below it a statement, one that Peden says many in the group have likely heard as opening remarks at formal events throughout the province:

I would like to begin by acknowledging that we are in Treaty 1 territory and that the land on which we gather is the traditional territory of Anishinaabeg, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota, and Dene peoples, and the homeland of the Metis Nation.

“Why do we do this?” asks Peden, a member of the Tootinawazaibeing Treaty Nation in southwest Manitoba. With more than 30 years of experience as an educator, she thrives on opportunities such as this to teach. “Because by acknowledging the land, we are demonstrating a recognition of and respect for Indigenous Peoples . . . of their (our) presence both in the past and the present. Recognition and respect are essential elements of establishing healthy, reciprocal relations.”

Peden was hired by MITT to develop a strategy for inclusion of Indigenous learning and to support Indigenous students’ academic success. And with that strategy, to lead an allied effort across the college to address the significant social challenges – including income and employment gaps – plaguing Indigenous people in Manitoba. Parallel to these goals is the need to imbue Manitobans with a stronger sense of Indigenous traditions; something Peden says needs to happen long before entry to the workforce or the start of post-secondary education.

“People need to know this,” says Peden. ‘This’ being Indigenous curriculum at every level of our education system – from primary to post secondary. “Once people start to learn this, then they’ll do something. If you don’t know, you won’t, or can’t, do anything.”

Since her arrival at MITT in April of 2015, Peden has advised on policy, content and curriculum as it relates to Indigenous students; facilitated partnerships with Indigenous and other stakeholders; and brought traditional learning to staff and students in a variety of ways,

including the opportunity to work with Elders on a part-time basis, and later this fall, the launch of an Aboriginal book club for students and staff.

“One of the things that seems to happen in a lot of systems, is that we do a one-day workshop [for example, on an Indigenous topic] and then we get on to the next bit,” says Peden. “This is not necessarily effective. We need multiple kinds of education opportunities, and they need to be here for the long-term.”

The Student Success department is another resource at MITT offering Indigenous learners the cultural, academic, and other supports necessary to help them succeed. This includes a dedicated student advisor, Ryan Bruyere, who is from the Sakgeeng First Nation, and the Aazhogan Indigenous Student Centre – an on-campus learning centre for First Nations, Inuit and Metis students.

Students at MITT often find their own ways to inspire their peers, as was the case with Jenna Lynn McIvor in 2015. McIvor, who is from Sandy Bay First Nation, got to publicly share the challenges she’s faced as an Indigenous learner in postsecondary when she was invited to be a keynote speaker during the Indigenous Education Blueprint ceremony. It was just one of many powerful moments in a year that saw her graduate from MITT’s Motorsport Technician program, before representing her fellow graduates as 2016 valedictorian.

Targeted programs at the college, like YouthBuild MITT, provide Indigenous students aged 19-35 from across Manitoba an opportunity to earn their high school diploma and obtain job-ready skills in a trade. The program is divided into two streams: Exploration to Trades, for students who don’t have their high school diploma, and Carpentry for those who do. Both include year-end practicums on jobs sites – which can be paid or unpaid – regular class visits from industry experts and a strong cultural component in the classroom.

“A lot of the students, especially those who attended schools in the city, have not been exposed to cultural things in a school setting before,” says Stephanie Miller, who has been Manager of YouthBuild since 2014. “We smudge in the mornings . . . We want to create an atmosphere that is welcoming, where students can embrace their culture in a safe way.”

YouthBuild MITT is helping students change their lives, says Miller, recalling the story of one young man who in the course of the year went from struggling to shake a street gang lifestyle, to becoming a leader in his class. Of the 12 Carpentry program participants from 2015, 10 have full-time work today. Just as important, they enter the workforce with a group of peers they know and trust.

“A lot of the students hang out with each other,” says Miller. “They continue to support each other after they’re done here.”

Peden is pleased by the progress she has seen in education during the past few years, and optimistic about the next wave of young Indigenous leaders in Manitoba who have a voice and a “seat at the table” to make the changes that still need to get done. She also knows that

Manitoba still has work to do for Indigenous people be it for education, employment, or access to food and safe water. When those gaps narrow, says Peden, “Then we will truly be recognizing and respecting Indigenous people, their worldviews, and their contributions.”

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