

SHERIDAN COLLEGE

Sending a message of welcome and possibility

The Centre for Indigenous Learning and Support at Sheridan has a big job to do.

The Centre is a hub for community, connection, comfort, and assistance for the indigenous students enrolled at Sheridan. For the non-Indigenous members of the Sheridan community, it is an educational resource and an advocate for change. The Centre is also working hard to make Sheridan a welcoming place for Indigenous students considering pursuing postsecondary education at the College in the years to come.

The Centre was established as part of Sheridan's three-year partnership with Mohawk College to create a better support system for Indigenous students at Sheridan. With Mohawk's guidance and the support of the Province of Ontario, the Aboriginal Initiatives Office, as it was first called, opened at Sheridan's Trafalgar campus in 2014. The Office continued to operate closely with the support of Mohawk until the beginning of 2016, when the partnership formally came to a close. In the summer of 2016, the Office was renamed Centre for Indigenous Learning and Support. Outside of Sheridan, the Centre is advised by an Indigenous Education Circle, which provides input and guidance into their operations.

Paula Laing has led the Centre since its inception in 2014 as Coordinator of Aboriginal Initiatives. Laing belongs to the Mohawk First Nation Peoples, Turtle Clan. She has worked in education for more than 25 years, as a teacher, counsellor, and transition consultant, spending many of those years supporting First Nations students living both on and off reserves. She has been driven to advocate for indigenous issues since her childhood, as her mother instilled in her a deep pride of her heritage as a young girl. Laing travels to Sheridan every day from her home in the Six Nations of the Grand River Territory.

In the two years since the Centre opened its doors at Sheridan, it has welcomed over 2,400 students, over half of whom self-identified as Indigenous. More than 1,000 of the students who have visited the office to date were non-indigenous. But Laing understands that effectively supporting Indigenous students goes far beyond offering a friendly drop-in space. It means empowering them with the tools and confidence to succeed, in an environment that feels safe and welcoming. Most importantly, it means working with Indigenous Peoples to ensure they are actively part of decisions that affect them. "The Indigenous community doesn't want a handout," Laing says. "We want empowerment and reconciliation."

Creating a nurturing environment for Indigenous students often begins by helping the non-Indigenous members of the Sheridan community better understand the history of the Indigenous Peoples of Canada and how it impacts our Indigenous students' everyday lives. Equally important is ensuring Sheridan faculty members integrate knowledge and discussion of Indigenous issues into their curriculum in a thoughtful and inclusive way, with direct input from

the Indigenous community. Laing regularly consults with Sheridan professors on how best to introduce Indigenous pedagogy into their courses. This past year, she and her team also presented at an on-boarding event for new Sheridan employees, introducing them to the resources available to them through the Centre. In 2016 the Centre collaborated with Sheridan's Library and Learning Services team to create Sheridan's first Indigenous Peoples of Canada Research Guide. The Guide is a resource for all members of the Sheridan community to explore Indigenous knowledge and learn more about the cultures, history and traditions of Indigenous Peoples.

Indigenous students who come to college are often the first in their families to seek post-secondary education and must act as a bridge between their nations and the non-Indigenous community. Many of the students who visit Laing and her team at the Centre feel nervous and apprehensive about navigating a system that may not be familiar to them, and may struggle to fit in and feel confident. "I believe that is the biggest issue facing our Indigenous students in Canada — a lack of confidence that comes from a heritage filled with oppression that's still felt by families every day," says Laing. "We want them to know that they are worthy of their dreams and goals. We want them to be proud of their culture and identity. Most importantly, we want them to understand that they do not have to change to fit in."

Every day, a smudging ceremony (burning and gently fanning white sage) creates a relaxed and calming atmosphere in and around the office, which often draws in curious students.

Students sometimes come to the Centre looking for someone to talk to, for assistance, and to connect with a piece of their culture. Laing regularly counsels students looking to learn more about their heritage and connects them with the appropriate resources. Sometimes, just stepping into the Centre and meeting other Indigenous students and staff makes a big difference for a student who may feel isolated. Every Thursday, the Centre hosts Bertha Skye, Elder-in-Residence, to share with students her traditional cultural knowledge and work with them on crafts, which are often a pathway to learning more about their history. Skye is a member of the Cree nation. She has quickly become one of the Centre's most beloved members.

The Centre also works hard to ensure Indigenous students see themselves represented within the broader Sheridan community and feel welcome. As an educational institution, Sheridan has a big responsibility to give Indigenous students the tools they need to succeed, and this starts with a safe and encouraging learning environment. "Research shows that students will not self-identify as Indigenous if they do not feel safe," says Laing. "And historically, education is where Indigenous people have felt most harmed."

Laing and her team have made visibility of the Indigenous community and the Centre's resources at Sheridan a top priority in the Centre's first two years. They have integrated hoop dancing and singing events at new student Orientation, held regular craft and drum-making workshops, and annual universal drum circles at Sheridan's Trafalgar, Mississauga and Brampton campuses, which have drawn 80 participants in the past. They also regularly

participate in hallway campaigns to bring attention to their resources, offering students the opportunity to chat with them and share some traditional medicinal tea. They've run Red Dress Campaigns in honour of missing and murdered Indigenous women, worked with Sheridan's student Earth Club on tree planting events, and are working on setting up a nature garden on campus to allow Indigenous students to feel more connected to the land.

The Centre has also focused on creating opportunities and fostering an inviting space at Sheridan for future Indigenous students. Laing works with Sheridan's finance and admissions team to facilitate the distribution of scholarships for Indigenous students, and advocates for allocating spots for them in classes. She also provides guidance and assistance to students who are planning to study at Sheridan with the support of third-party funding, which can often be a daunting system to navigate. With the Centre's support, the number of Indigenous students in residence at Sheridan has doubled the past two years.

This past summer, the Centre team coordinated a special skateboard-making summer camp workshop for Indigenous high school students. The goal of the camp was to provide the participants with the chance to meet fellow Indigenous students and members of the Sheridan community in a fun, inspiring and creative setting. The event brought 11 Indigenous high school students to Sheridan, and they joined professors from the Faculty of Animation, Arts and Design for five days to create their very own, custom skateboards.

Laing recognizes that there is still much work to be done in order to create a truly inviting, safe, and encouraging educational environment for Indigenous students across college campuses, including Sheridan. She believes that an empowering postsecondary experience for Indigenous students begins with making connections to their culture in their new community, and that is her priority when each new student comes through the Centre's doors. "When I greet them, I often say, 'Welcome. We've been waiting for you, and we're so happy you're here.'"

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