

Aboriginal Sensitive Curriculum

Jurisdiction: Alberta

Contact: Robert Rock

Level: Post-Secondary

Theme: Curriculum/materials

Description of Practice:

Alberta Advanced Education and Technology supports post-secondary institutions in developing curriculum and programming that reflects the needs of Aboriginal learners. This curriculum is usually developed in collaboration with key stakeholders within the local Aboriginal community, including elders. The University of Calgary's Bachelor of Social Work degree is one such example. It is described below.

Background:

The Faculty of Social Work at the University of Calgary offers a BSW (on site and via distance delivery), MSW (on campus and via distance delivery), MBA/MSW, PhD and Post Master's Diploma in Advanced Studies in Social Work. With close to 40 faculty members, the Faculty is one of the largest nationally. Collectively, the academic staff represents an impressive range of expertise in gerontology, child and family practice, family violence, community development, multicultural/multiracial practice and research, management in non-profit organizations, social policy, qualitative and quantitative research, and other substantive issues of concern to contemporary social workers.

The University of Calgary is the only Alberta institution to offer degrees in Social Work. The institution attempts to meet the diverse needs of undergraduate students by offering three routes to the BSW. The University Transfer route, primarily geared toward developing urban-based social workers, is offered at campus locations in Calgary, Edmonton, and Lethbridge. The Post Diploma route, also geared toward urban social work, is offered in Calgary and Edmonton. The Learning Circles curriculum, directed toward developing social workers for rural, remote, or Aboriginal communities, is offered in a number of smaller communities in the province.

Since 1999, Alberta Advanced Education and Technology has, through the Access Fund, supported the Faculty in offering a Bachelor of Social Work degree program through the Learning Circles Route to students in rural, remote, and/or Aboriginal communities across Alberta. The program was made available through distance delivery commencing fall 2005.

The Learning Circles proposal and curriculum reflected the collaborative work of many stakeholder groups including: the Faculty of Social Work, the Northern BSW Stakeholders' Council (representatives from Children's Services Regions, Metis settlements, Metis zones, First Nations and tribal organizations, northern regions of Family & Social Services, private northern service agencies, post-secondary institutions under the Alberta North umbrella), FNAHEC (First Nations Adult & Higher Education Consortium, with member colleges and education boards from the Treaty 6 and Treaty 7 areas plus the North Peace Tribal Council), and the Alberta College of Social Workers. It was also made very clear at the outset that the new model had to be "of the same quality as the programs currently delivered on-site by the Faculty," leading to a "University of Calgary accredited social work degree" which "adheres to national accreditation standards".

Recruitment for faculty positions was a lengthy and complex process. For the first time in the University's history, the Selection Committee included Aboriginal persons from community stakeholder groups as full voting members. An Elder from Grande Prairie and an Education Counselor from Old Sun College participated in the Selection Committee along with representatives from the Faculty of Social Work and an Aboriginal faculty member from Sociology. The resulting faculty was well balanced in terms of gender and cultural heritage: one First Nations woman, one Metis woman, two non-Native males. All had extensive related field experience and all had a PhD degree or were in the process of completing a doctorate.

The Learning Circles program admits students into the third year of a four-year degree. It has two distinct routes of study. One route is designed for students with a diploma in social work from an Alberta college (the Post Diploma route). The second route is designed for students transferring to social work after having completed two years of university studies (the University Transfer/After Degree route).

The program endeavors to provide a curriculum with cultural and geographic relevance that is sensitive to First Nations and Métis peoples. The curriculum incorporates traditional philosophies and knowledge systems. The Learning Circles program offers convenient scheduling of courses in local sites and local practicum placements. One unique feature of the Learning Circles Route is flexible scheduling which often allows students to remain employed while they attend classes. In this way the program furthers the professional development of both community agencies and staff members already employed in social work related roles.

Development:

The Ministry continues to support the development of new curriculum and programs at the college and university level that reflects Aboriginal history, culture, language and knowledge.

Evidence:

To date, the program has been provided to over 200 Aboriginal learners in various rural and First Nations communities in Alberta including Standoff, Hobbema, Slave Lake, Peace River, Blue Quills, Red Deer, High Level, Grande Prairie and Medicine Hat.

Adaptability:

Other jurisdictions may wish to contact the University of Calgary to examine the BSW Learning Circles curriculum and delivery model in more depth. Contact information can be provided upon request.

Further information:

Robert Rock
Manager, Public Institutions Branch
Adult Learning Division
Alberta Advanced Education and Technology
Robert.Rock@gov.ab.ca
Phone: (780) 427-7553