

Enhancing Educational Outcomes:

A National Report on Supporting Indigenous Learners in Canadian Post-Secondary Institutions

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Introduction

Indigenous learners in Canada face unique challenges in post-secondary education that can hinder their academic success and personal growth. These challenges are rooted in historical and systemic barriers, including cultural disconnection, discrimination, and limited access to resources.

However, Indigenous communities also bring with them rich cultural knowledge, resilience, and a profound understanding of their own educational needs. As Canada continues to grapple with its colonial past, there is an increasing recognition of the need to create more inclusive and supportive environments in post-secondary institutions for Indigenous students.

This report, *Enhancing Educational Outcomes: A National Report on Supporting Indigenous Learners in Canadian Post-Secondary Institutions*, seeks to highlight the current state of Indigenous education in higher learning institutions across the country, with a focus on the initiatives, programs, and policies that have been developed to support these students. It aims to offer a comprehensive overview of both the progress made and the challenges that remain.

This initiative originated from a panel discussion at CERIC's Cannexus 2024 event, where four ISET staff members from Urban, Métis, First Nation and Inuit offices shared their insights and recommendations with a full room of academics, career counselors, coaches, educators, trainers, and facilitators. The strong demand for a formal report to disseminate this valuable information more broadly was evident, prompting the decision to publish and share these findings with a wider audience.

Data for this report was collected through surveys with Indigenous Skills and Employment Training (ISET) staff across Canada, as well as from a range of examples provided by Polytechnics Canada members. These perspectives have been invaluable in understanding the diverse needs of Indigenous learners, as well as the innovative programs and best practices that are helping to improve outcomes. By analyzing both qualitative insights and quantitative data, this report provides a grounded, evidence-based approach to enhancing educational experiences for Indigenous students.

By exploring successful strategies and identifying areas for further improvement, this report seeks to provide actionable recommendations that can help post-secondary institutions foster environments that respect Indigenous knowledge systems, support cultural identity, and improve educational outcomes for Indigenous students. This is not just a matter of academic success, but of fostering a sense of belonging and pride that will carry these learners forward in their personal and professional lives.

Darian Kovacs

Survey Results

We asked respondents how career counselors can best support Indigenous learners, in their own opinion. The majority noted that:

First Nations learners thrive in environments that foster a strong sense of community and provide ongoing support. Participating in peer-connected cohorts helps create meaningful relationships and a network of encouragement, which can be essential to their success. Regular, personalized check-ins with career counselors further reinforce this sense of support by making learners feel valued, seen, and understood. These consistent interactions help build trust, foster accountability, and address challenges, paving the way for transformative “aha” moments in their learning journey.

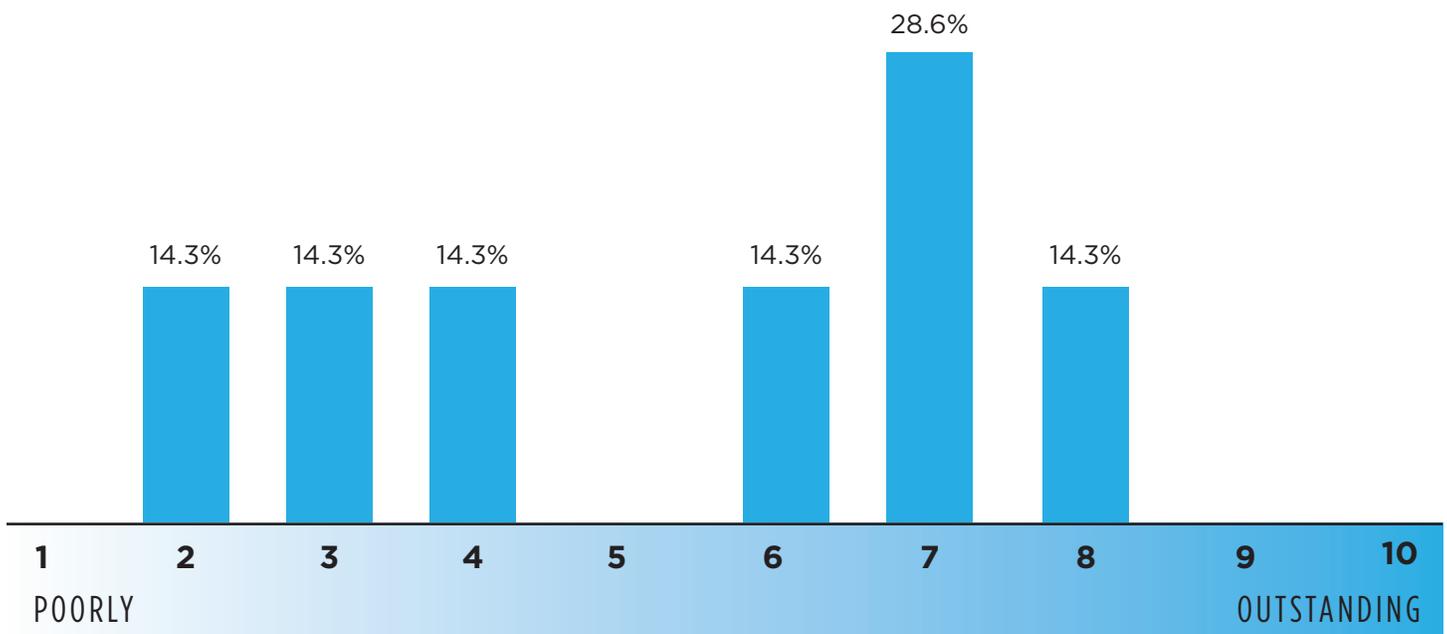
Additionally, comprehensive wrap-around supports are crucial to ensure that learners receive the guidance they need to navigate barriers effectively. Culturally inclusive content and practices play a significant role in their success, whether through academics, training programs, or counseling services. It is essential to employ culturally sensitive staff and ensure that career counselors understand the nuances of each learner’s identity, rather than generalizing all Indigenous learners into a single category.

By addressing their unique needs, fears, and perspectives, educators and counselors can create an environment where Indigenous learners feel empowered to achieve their goals and fulfill their potential.

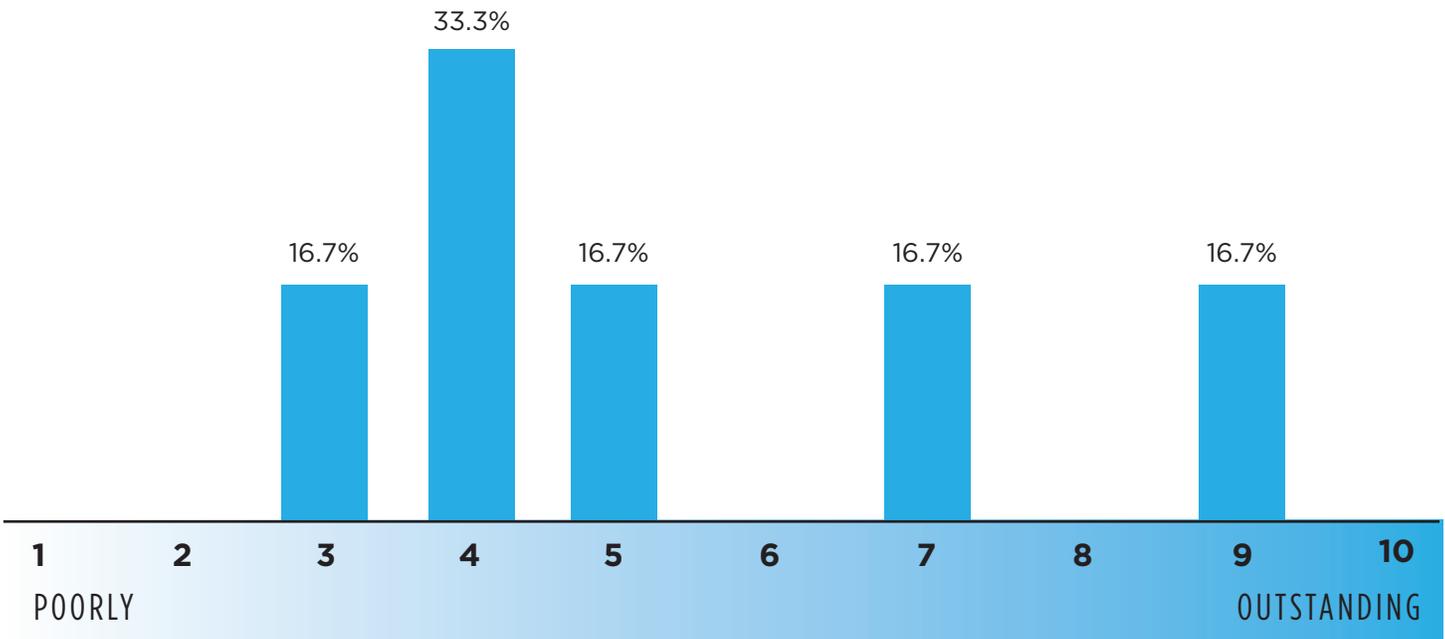
Those with distinctions-based learners (Métis, First Nations, or Inuit), think they would specifically need/benefit from:

- For First Nations learners, creating a sense of community and ongoing support is crucial. They would benefit from participating in cohorts that foster peer connections and provide a supportive network.
- Regular check-ins with career counselors can help ensure they feel seen and valued, reinforcing that someone genuinely cares about their success. This approach helps build trust and accountability, while also addressing any challenges they may face along the way. Such personalized and consistent engagement can significantly enhance their learning experience and overall achievement, by getting to reach their “aha” moment.
- Better wrap around supports to ensure they are successful.
- Culturally incorporated content, initiatives, and learning. Culturally sensitive and inclusive academics, training instructors, counselors and employers. People who understand their perspectives and issues and work with them to overcome barriers, fears, etc. so they can successfully fulfill their needs.
- Career counselors understanding the nuances of their identity, instead of clumping all Indigenous learners into one category.
- Culturally-sensitive staff.

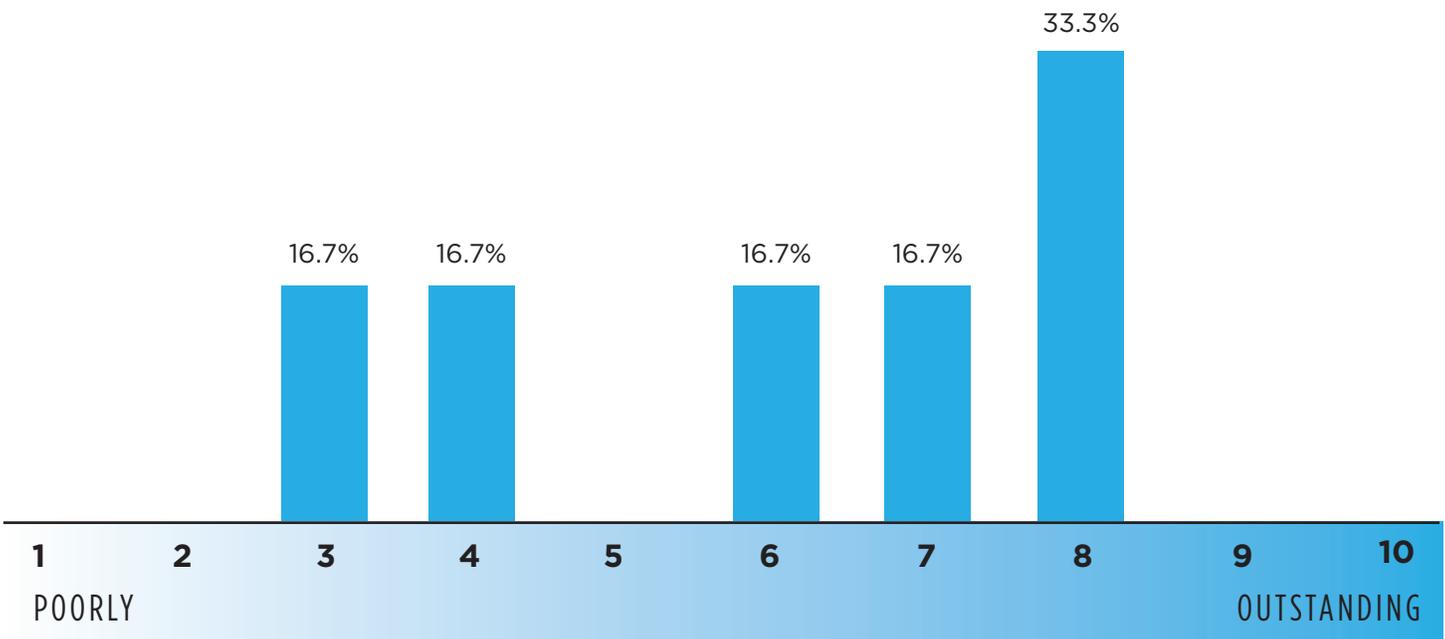
On a scale of 1 to 10, how do you feel public post secondary institutions do when it comes to Indigenous career counseling support?



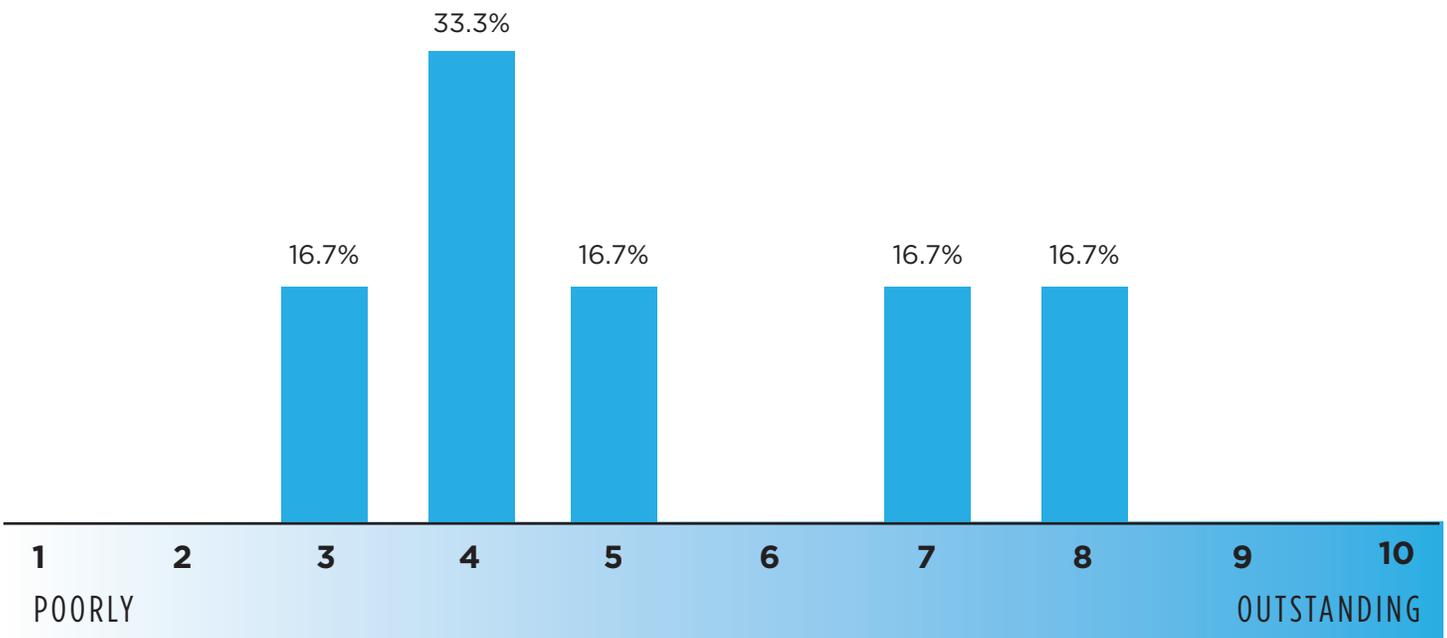
On a scale of 1 to 10, how do you feel private post secondary institutes do when it comes to Indigenous career counseling support?



On a scale of 1 to 10, how do you feel polytechnic post secondary institutes do when it comes to Indigenous career counseling support?



On a scale of 1 to 10, how do you feel career-focused bootcamps do when it comes to Indigenous career counseling support?



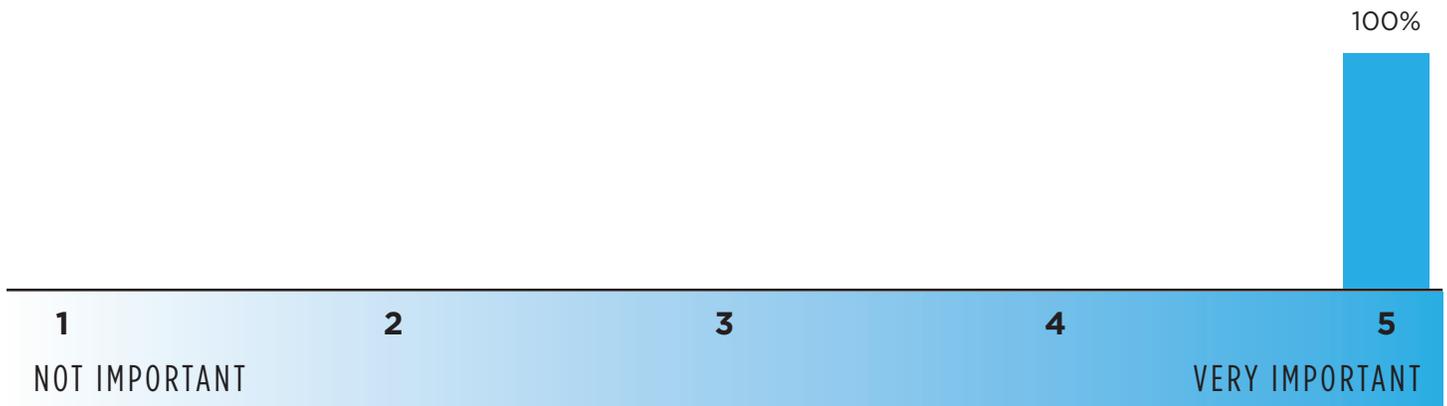
When asked how respondents would distinguish between types of schools and the differences in support provided based on the information provided above, majority said:

Different types of educational institutions vary in their support for Indigenous career counseling, each with unique strengths and challenges. Public post-secondary institutions often provide the most comprehensive resources, including Indigenous support centers and cultural programming, but their services may feel generalized or uncomfortable for some students due to pressures to discuss sensitive topics. Private colleges, while offering more personalized attention, typically lack Indigenous-specific services unless they are explicitly Indigenous-focused.

Career-focused bootcamps and polytechnic institutes, on the other hand, tend to prioritize targeted, hands-on training and industry-aligned support, with some being more open to incorporating specific services for Indigenous learners, especially when partnering with Indigenous organizations. However, institutions that cater to a wide variety of cultural backgrounds often struggle to provide tailored Indigenous support unless it is explicitly integrated into their programming.

Overall, while smaller schools and polytechnics appear to offer more accessible and specific services, the level of support across different institutions varies significantly depending on their resources and commitment to culturally inclusive practices.

On a scale of 1 to 5, how important is it for career counselors to have cultural competency training when working with Indigenous learners?



The respondents believe the biggest barriers Indigenous learners commonly face when accessing career counseling services are:

- Indigenous learners face barriers such as limited culturally relevant support, geographic isolation, systemic racism, financial constraints, and low awareness of resources. Addressing these challenges requires culturally sensitive counseling, outreach efforts, and financial and logistical support to ensure equitable access to career opportunities.
- Unclear understanding of career counseling, and hesitate of being asked too many questions.
- A lack of understanding of where the client is coming from and if they have to come into the city they don't always have the support they need and of course there is culture shock of coming from a smaller community to a large urban setting
- Overcoming addictions or getting them under control in order to move forward - to complete education or training or obtain employment otherwise they are unsuccessful. So in most of these cases, they need referrals to other resources to help them.
- Having no idea what they want to do, no ambition, no goals, no support from family/others to encourage them. They do not realize what counseling can do for them so they avoid it or are not honest with the process.
- The absence of Indigenous counselors, which can make it difficult to find someone with shared lived experiences. Counselors who lack cultural competency or DEI training may also struggle to understand the context and nuances of Indigenous learners' needs. Additionally, logistical challenges such as transportation barriers, limited internet access for virtual sessions, or the lack of career counseling services at certain schools further hinder their ability to receive support.

When asked how career counselors can incorporate Indigenous culture, traditions, and values into their guidance; respondents stated:

To better support Indigenous learners in career counseling, it is crucial for counselors to build cultural competency and learn about Indigenous cultures. This includes incorporating Indigenous traditions, values, and perspectives into the guidance process, such as acknowledging the importance of community, land, and spiritual practices.

Counselors should create space for storytelling and traditional knowledge sharing, connecting career aspirations with cultural identity. Including Elders and Indigenous mentors in the counseling process, offering Elder support, and incorporating cultural practices like smudging or the Seven Grandfather Teachings (honesty, respect, love, bravery, truth, humility, and wisdom) can create a more culturally relevant and supportive environment.

It's essential for counselors to view students holistically, building trusting, professional yet personable relationships, and ensuring confidentiality. Providing opportunities for students to access Elders on-site or virtually and giving them the choice to engage with these services, including safe spaces for smudging, can further enhance the support offered. Ultimately, focusing on the individual and their needs, rather than just career guidance alone, will help foster a more inclusive and respectful environment.

When asked how career counselors can better assist Indigenous learners in navigating scholarship or funding opportunities, respondents stated:

To effectively support Indigenous learners in the application process, counselors should stay informed about available resources, eligibility criteria, and deadlines for various opportunities. They can assist students in exploring their interests, while ensuring that application materials like personal statements and resumes reflect both academic achievements and cultural experiences. Providing ongoing support, such as reviewing documents and offering encouragement, can help enhance the chances of success.

It's important for counselors to be available to assist with the application process and ensure they are aware of all relevant scholarships and bursaries, especially those relating to specific Indigenous identities, whether from organizations, schools, or government sources.

Respondents provided the following examples of programs or practices that have been particularly successful in supporting Indigenous learners' career development:

- Successful programs and practices supporting Indigenous learners' career development often involve a combination of personalized support and community engagement. Regular check-ins with career counselors help ensure that learners feel valued and supported throughout their journey.
- Nominating learners for community or academic awards—both within educational institutions and broader community circles—can boost their confidence and highlight their achievements.
- Strong partnerships with Indigenous organizations, businesses, and mentorship programs provide learners with real-world connections and opportunities to apply their skills.
- Ensuring that the client is supported and the path they choose is appropriate for where they currently are, with a realistic path to get to their goal.
- Having a more diverse work force in house that offers more support for Indigenous Learners and compliments career counseling services, such as Wellness programming to support learners with disabilities, addictions, mental health issues, etc. where they can be referred to.
- Having Elders available for support, Mental Health Counsellor, etc. on staff would be great. Although this is not always possible, at least having knowledge of and access to those external resources is beneficial for referral purposes and building closer relationships with those resources.

Respondents provided the following relevant success stories that highlight a cultural component:

1. I assisted a client who applied for a grant to support the growing of local medicines in a sustainable way. This initiative involved creating a growing dome to provide year-round access to traditional Indigenous plants and medicines, promoting cultural revitalization and self-sufficiency. By aligning the project with Indigenous values of connection to the land and the importance of traditional healing practices, we were able to support the client in accessing funding that not only benefited them personally but also strengthened the cultural heritage of the community. This success story emphasizes the power of integrating traditional knowledge with modern tools to ensure the preservation and accessibility of culturally significant resources, showcasing how career development can be enhanced by connecting to one's cultural identity and community needs.
2. One of our trainers incorporates pre-employment preparation that includes cultural components that support the client and provides them with a better understanding of themselves and their goals.
3. Our Elders in Residence program, whereby we have Elders in house on a regular rotational basis, is a very successful cultural component of services for clients, staff and the Elders themselves. Elders can provide traditional knowledge and teachings, teach language and provide guidance and support both in group settings or one on one. This program is also very beneficial for the Elders, providing them with the opportunity to get out, be social, interact with others and provide their knowledge and support - sense of wellbeing and importance.

Respondents provided the following relevant success stories that highlight scholarship and additional funding bridging with ISET funding:

1. My nephew has applied successfully for numerous scholarships and bursaries to bridge his funding - not many students do that. I think it is because the process is intimidating but once you do one application the rest are easy.
2. Not aware of any scholarship opportunities but several funding opportunities are available to help bridge gaps that ISET funding alone cannot provide. Those funding opportunities are both from provincial and federal governments; as well as, from time to time from private or public corporations such as banks and other organizations. These opportunities help to provide group training including the tuition or training costs and the ability to provide additional supports such as living/training allowances, meals, accommodations, transportation, etc. that otherwise would not be available under ISET or limited. Plus, it frees up ISET dollars to support individual and community initiatives.

Some important considerations and changes in mainstream career counseling techniques our respondents noted that are required when counseling Indigenous Career Development Seekers included:

It is essential to understand the individual's unique barriers and challenges, including geographic isolation and financial constraints. Counselors should adapt mainstream techniques by incorporating cultural sensitivity, a holistic approach, and a focus on building trust. Recognizing the importance of community and cultural values, counselors should acknowledge that career paths for Indigenous learners are often connected to family and collective responsibilities. Storytelling can be used to help students align their personal experiences with career goals. Offering flexible support and connecting students to mentors and community resources is crucial.

Additionally, counselors must be aware of the value of traditional roles and careers rooted in Indigenous knowledge, ensuring that career development is both culturally relevant and empowering. Being mindful of potential relocation challenges and providing a support system for students are also important aspects of effective counseling.

When asked how respondents make adjustments to their practice to ensure that their service and delivery are trauma-informed, they shared that:

It is essential to create a safe and supportive environment that fosters trust and respect. This includes adjusting the approach to address potential trauma from historical, cultural, or personal experiences. Counselors should prioritize active listening and offer flexibility in service delivery, ensuring that clients feel heard without judgment. Language and practices should be culturally sensitive, and regular check-ins should focus on empowerment, allowing clients to feel in control. It's important to reduce re-traumatization by modifying interactions and policies to prevent further harm, create emotionally and physically safe environments, and promote resilience through a strengths-based approach.

Understanding the impact of trauma on behavior and fostering collaboration, choice, and connection are key elements in trauma-informed care. Counselors should continue to train in trauma-informed practices, ensuring referrals are vetted for trauma sensitivity, and create spaces that make clients feel safe and respected. Offering grounding techniques when clients feel overwhelmed and allowing them to express their strengths and career goals collaboratively can help support healing, growth, and resilience.

When asked how truth and reconciliation is implemented into our respondents practices, they noted:

- Learning the history and acknowledging the calls-to-action.
- Acknowledging the historical and ongoing impacts of colonization on Indigenous communities and striving to build trust through respectful relationships. While I am Indigenous, I recognize that I do not know everything, and I approach each person's journey with cultural humility. I make it a priority to learn about the diverse traditions and experiences of Indigenous communities and apply that knowledge to my work. I also collaborate with Elders, community leaders, and Indigenous organizations to ensure that the services I offer are culturally appropriate and supportive of healing and empowerment.

Responses continued on next page

- Through our partnerships, we work to ensure that the employers that we work with have an understanding of truth and reconciliation and that they are truly a partner.
- Visualizing a future of skilled Indigenous workforce.
- Implementing a mission to provide guided education and training pathways, towards inclusive employment opportunities respectful of culture.
- Supporting Indigenous Clients with Education, Training and Employment, Career Counseling, Counseling and Support through a Wellness Program, Integration of Elder Support with Traditional Knowledge and Teachings; as well as, providing staff with Cultural training and knowledge.

Survey Results:

Polytechnics Canada Findings

When asked how the respondents institution communicates and engages with Indigenous learners, businesses and communities seeking continuing education, they said:

1. At the time of the survey, there were no targeted communications that I could confirm.
2. The Centre for Indigenous Learning and Support (CILS) team has an email list of Indigenous Learners enrolled in part-time and full-time studies. CILS offers a variety of communications and engagement opportunities through email blasts, social media and the Indigenous Virtual Community. There are 3 Indigenous Student Centres spanning across 3 campus sites, offering spaces to connect, gather and quiet study time.

Sheridan College also has a dedicated Admissions Adviser to offer transition support Indigenous Sponsorship and Band Funding inquiries for incoming and current students.

When businesses are interested in connecting with Indigenous learners, they connect with CILS and we cross-promote job postings on the Indigenous Virtual Community and Sheridan's Career Centre job board.

3. The First Peoples at Seneca Polytechnic engages with students, businesses and communities through our social media accounts that highlights a video series called the 'The Red Road' where our program coordinator and resident elder gives cultural teachings and makes announcements about the events and opportunities, such as trips, bursaries, cultural events and ceremonies.

A student list is also used to send important information or personal information to students. We also use a linktree for students and community to know what the First Peoples in Odeyto are doing. We are currently updating and expanding our website that will provide links to students, faculty and stakeholders on education, events and resources.

Responses continued on next page

4. Working closely with our partners in Continuous Professional Learning (CPL), Indigenous Education & Engagement focuses on building trusting relationships within the Indigenous community by actively encouraging learners to enroll in one of our 500+ online courses, 140+ certificates or 40+ micro-credentials.

Whenever possible, CPL and the Office of Strategic Partnerships at Humber also connect with industry partners who care about and are interested in establishing stronger ties with our local First Nations.

CPL has actively engaged in dialogues with First Nation Educational Directors to share information about lifelong learning's potential to bridge gaps within learning pathways and reduce barriers leading to full-time academic experiences. As part of its broader efforts to improve the lives of those who take CPL programs, subject-matter experts are actively encouraged to develop programs that reflect Indigenous knowledge, values and traditions. This is especially true in courses that involve clean energy, sustainability, mindfulness and ecology.

Over the past three months, CPL has focused on programs that address specific community goals, such as economic development, skills for local industries or leadership training. While these programs have not been fully deployed, they are the first step toward integrating Indigenous ways of 'knowing and doing' into the broad context of professional learning at Humber.

5. Our institution meets our Indigenous partners where they operate the most comfortably. We spend most of our time in community discussing our future partnerships. We also spend a lot of our time participating in ceremonies, pow wows, treaty days, career fairs and other community-hosted events. The face-to-face conversations that stem from these meetings are difficult to replicate.

Survey respondents noted the following programs and approaches are most impactful:

1. Regular Indigenous student events around community-building and connection are well-received and result in further in-person engagement with CILS. Some examples of events include monthly Soup Days, movie or game nights and beading workshops.
2. We find that our Red Road program had the most attention and views on our social media. Other programs include our Curriculum Integration project that has the Odeyto First Peoples team provide reconciliation curriculum to every program and course across the polytechnic. In the past, we had a program called Skoden and Stoodis which is a cultural awareness program for non-Indigenous faculty to take and learn about becoming an ally.

Cultural programming is also very impactful for students who have multiple opportunities to attend feasts and ceremony in Evergreen Brickworks learning lodge and our annual ice fishing trip and, of course, cultural learning circles on medicines from our garden at Odeyto.”

3. Open, active and timely communication amongst and between internal partners and units at Humber is the most impactful approach toward enabling and improving the quality of student life for our Indigenous learners. Students can often become frustrated by the array of processes, procedures and regulations that all postsecondary environments pose. While we continue to improve, Humber’s CPL learners are further burdened by their primarily online and remote connections to campus services and professionals.

For these reasons, ongoing discussions are underway to identify and mitigate friction points for all 13,000 CPL learners. Universal design principles, when applied in and outside the classroom, ultimately improve the experiences of everyone, especially those who may already feel as though postsecondary education is outside their reach.

4. Programs that are most impactful at this time are our introduction to trades training, emergency medical training, project management and environmental monitoring.

Survey respondents noted the following supports available to Indigenous learners while they are on campus:

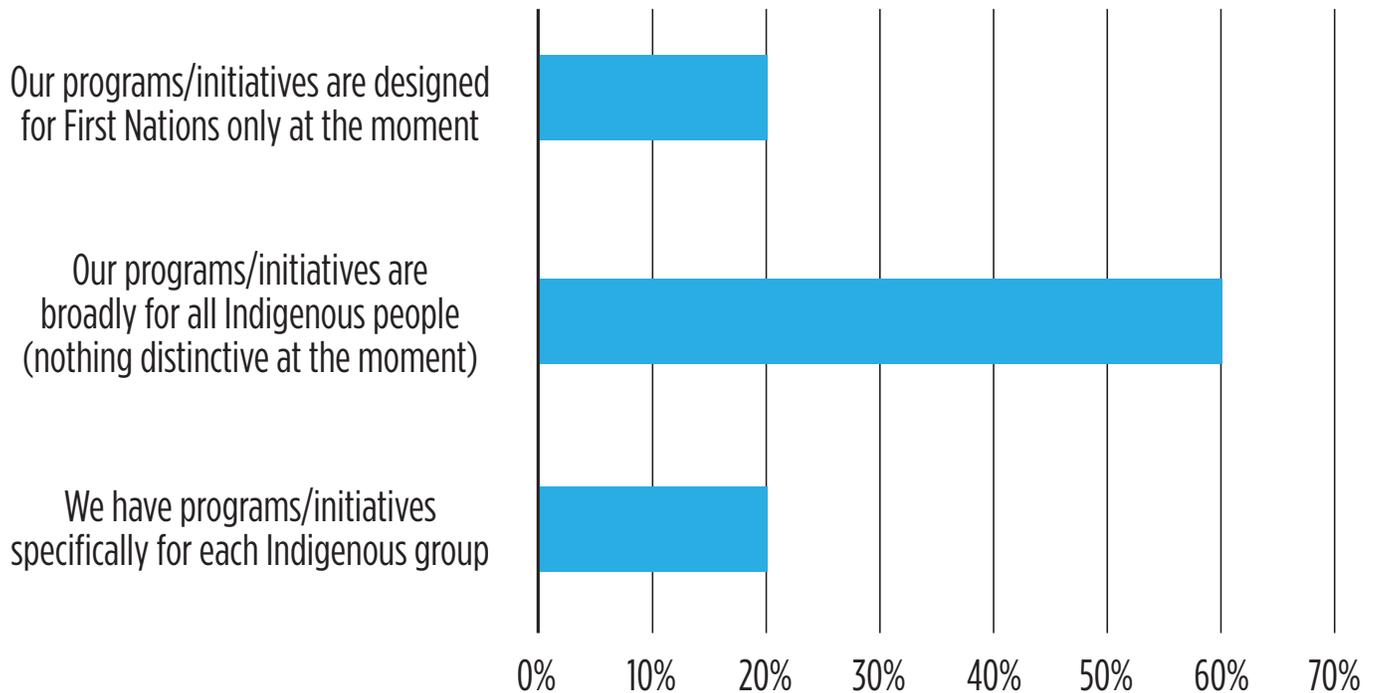
1. All Indigenous learners have access to our Indigenous space – Be Dah Bin Gamik. There they can find a comfortable place to study, relax and speak with our Indigenous coordinators, an Indigenous Wellness Advisor or the Indigenous Services manager.

In addition to dedicated space, our Indigenous Services have access to any of our learning support services which include tutoring, math services, writing services, research services and learning & study skills.

Partnerships with Learning Services have taken place with Indigenous services to provide dedicated sessions to our Indigenous students.

2. The Centre of Indigenous Learning & Support has an Indigenous Student Adviser to offer support and respond to Indigenous learner concerns. We want to help Indigenous learners navigate their intersectional needs while connecting to campus and community supports.
3. Seneca Polytechnic has invested in creating an architectural award-winning building called Odeyto. It is the place of gathering for the First Peoples team and First Peoples students, staff and faculty at Seneca Polytechnic and the community. We are a cultural centre that provides opportunity to participate in cultural activities. It is designed to reflect our teachings and to honour the journey Indigenous students make within the institution. The doors to Odeyto are always open and Indigenous students have access to our counselor for mental health and guidance, our elder for cultural teachings and programming and to our faculty for academic support and to the manager of Odeyto for student advocacy and support.
4. Some of the services we provide include peer tutoring access, quiet computer and study space, bursary and funding applications, Indigenous advising, community referrals, work-study & volunteer opportunities, and cultural events & workshops.
5. At NAIT, we have an Indigenous student outreach centre called the Nísôhkamâtôtân Centre. This centre provides space and support for students who are on campus. With a study lounge and a number of liaisons, there is a considerable amount of support dedicated to Indigenous learners.

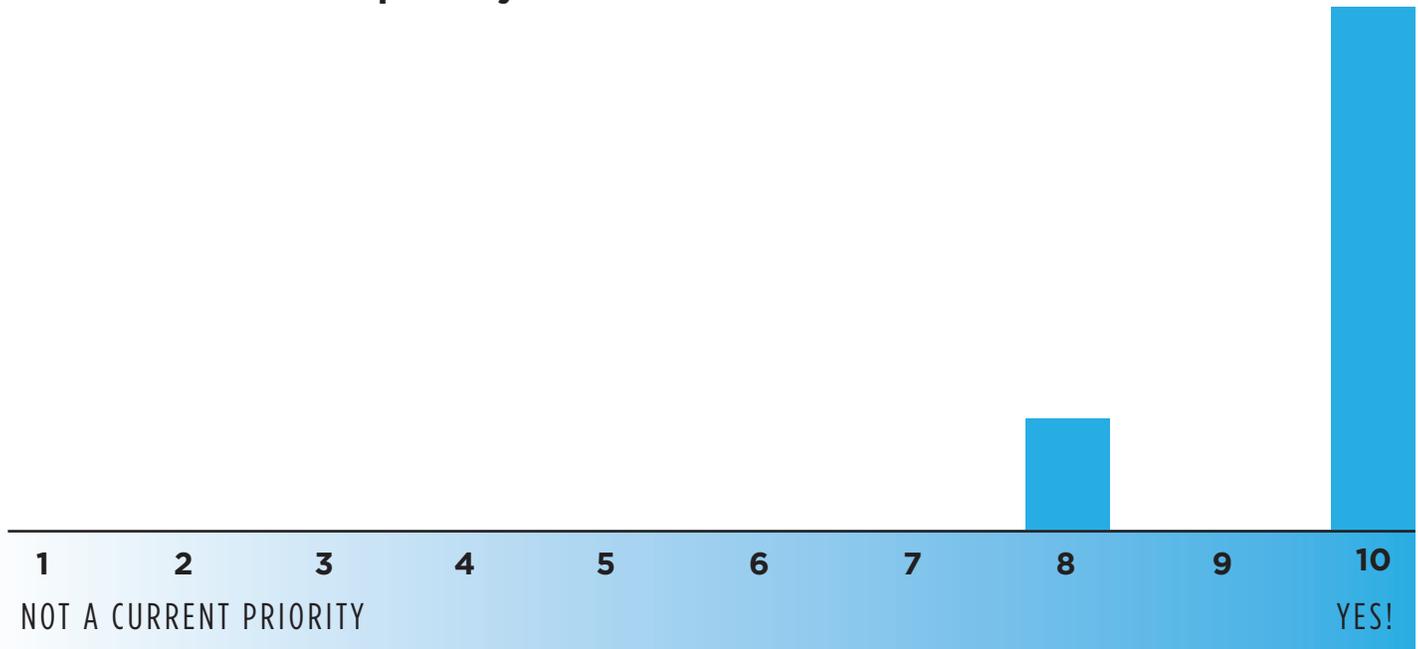
How asked how their institution provided support or systems distinctively to First Nations, Métis and/or Inuit learners (Distinctions-based approach), they provided the following insights:



Respondents explained what their programs/initiatives specifically look like for each Indigenous student:

We participate with the Infinite Reach program through the MNO to support our Métis students. We are currently looking to expand our partnership with the Inuit community. Otherwise, the majority of programming is done for First Nations.

On a scale of 1-10, respondents rated their agreement with the following statement: “My institution is currently looking to expand its Indigenous support systems.” 10 = Yes! My institution is actively looking to expand its Indigenous support systems and 1 = This isn’t a current institutional priority



When asked how the respondents institution communicates and engages with Indigenous learners, businesses and communities seeking continuing education, they said:

1. I chose 10 because we have made significant investments in the past two years in our Indigenous Services programs and support (spaces, positions, etc). We are also currently finalizing our Indigenous Success Strategy which focuses how we can improve Indigenous Student Success at Conestoga. Most of which include a way to expand or build upon existing services which should positively impact our students.
2. An Indigenous student recently graduated in Spring 2024 and has completed 3 programs at Sheridan. Their confidence has significantly grown since their first year entering college. In their final year, they held a part-time position within their program of study, were nominated as the valedictorian and received an Indigenous award of recognition. At their graduation, 15 family members traveled from the community (10+ hour plane ride) to celebrate this significant milestone. Their continued commitment to their studies and active participation with the Indigenous Student Centre has greatly shaped and inspired other Indigenous learners.

Responses continued on next page

3. We are very proud of one of our current success stories of a student who supports the Toronto art community and is currently working on a very big project with the art committee of Toronto and still finds time to support the Native Canadian Centre and is our lead student taking a leadership role within Odeyto for all Indigenous students across the Polytechnic. Seneca Polytechnic has made a commitment to Indigenous ways of life by design. It is stated in our Reconciliation and Inclusion report. You will find Indigenous architectures, storytelling and art throughout each campus hosting some of the most revered Indigenous artists in Ontario.
4. In June 2024, Humber announced free tuition for 8 local Indigenous communities. This has been a major success to Humber as we've been collaborating closely with these communities to ensure a smooth transition for these Indigenous students.
5. We currently have a number of success stories but the ones that have been very exciting lately have been those of students who have taken our ConEd courses who are now in their next steps of advanced education. We currently have two previous students who have advanced into diploma programs at NAIT while a number of others are now pursuing their apprenticeships. Additionally, we have been working with specific Nations to train their management members. Many of these members are directing departments within their respective Nations and are doing so supported by our training.



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Polytechnics Canada is a non-profit association representing 13 leading research-intensive, publicly supported polytechnics, colleges and institutes of technology. We advocate for federal action where the interests of our members overlap with those of federal departments and agencies.

Among the areas where polytechnic education offers impactful solutions, we focus on Research & Innovation, Skills & Talent, and Diversity & Inclusion. These priorities speak to intersecting interest on topics such as applied research, career-relevant training, Indigenous teaching and learning, international education and upskilling/reskilling.

Learn more about Polytechnics Canada at polytechnicscanada.ca/about-us