



**The Indigenous  
Framework for  
York University:  
A Guide to Action**

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# The Indigenous Framework for York University: A Guide to Action

## OUR JOURNEY

*The Indigenous Framework for York University: A Guide to Action* is the result of cumulative efforts involving Indigenous and non-Indigenous York community members over several years. While the Framework was created in January 2017, it is important to acknowledge the significant contributions made by those who courageously stepped forward, convened dialogue and prepared earlier drafts. York initially started working on a draft Aboriginal Education Strategy and visioning exercise with its former Aboriginal Education Council several years earlier, and many of the original ideas and principles mirror those in the current Framework. Although the original draft was not formally adopted, the expertise, insight and aspirations shared during those early years were not forgotten. They helped to build a foundation upon which the Framework was created.

York University, like other postsecondary education institutions across the province, has benefitted from funding support and policy directives from the government of Ontario. Over the years, this support has taken various forms, including but not limited to the Aboriginal Education and Training Strategy (1992), Reaching Higher Access to Opportunities

Strategy (2005), Multi-Year Aboriginal Action Plan for Postsecondary Education (2009) and, most recently, the Aboriginal Postsecondary Education and Training Policy Framework (2011). These government policies also included the creation of new special enveloped funding programs that York has been able to access. As a result, York created a dedicated Aboriginal counsellor position and then, through the Postsecondary Education for Aboriginal Learners (PEFAL) grant, York established the Centre for Aboriginal Student Services (CASS).

The principles and Calls to Action following the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada have created a sense of urgency. Over the past several years, many colleges and universities have been developing their own institutional Indigenous and/or Aboriginal education strategies or plans in consultation with their Aboriginal education councils. In 2014, the Vice-President Academic and Provost sponsored a two-day symposium that included a public forum on *The Future of Indigeneity in the Global City*, followed by an internal workshop for York academic administrators and Indigenous scholars focused on improving recruitment and retention of Indigenous faculty at York.



The Vice-President Academic and Provost also established a new position – Academic Director, a role focusing on Indigenizing curriculum and the academy, working closely with CASS. Professor Susan Dion (Faculty of Education) served as the inaugural Academic Director in 2014/15 and Professor Bonita Lawrence (Faculty of Liberal Arts & Professional Studies) assumed the position in 2015/16. In 2015 Lawrence attended a conference in Saskatchewan where discussions on institutional strategies were held. Upon her return she worked with Professor Ruth Koleszar-Green (Faculty of Liberal Arts & Professional Studies) who was recently appointed Aboriginal Education Council Co-Chair to develop an Indigenous strategy for York University.

In January of 2016, Osgoode Hall Law School Dean, Lorne Sossin, led discussions between the Office of the Vice-Provost Academic and York’s Indigenous faculty, staff and students on the creation of an Indigenous strategy. A working group referred to as the Writing Committee was established to review previous strategies, formulate ideas and establish priorities. In March 2016 the Writing Committee presented its first draft of the Indigenous Strategy to the Aboriginal Education Council (now the Indigenous Council). The draft strategy was reviewed and approved in early January 2017.



The Writing Committee, in mid-January 2017, met with the then Vice-President Academic and Provost, Indigenous student leaders, student representatives and members of the Indigenous Council, to garner feedback and input on the strategy. The group discussed the strategy, the impact of colonial education and the possibility of creating a York University Wampum Belt.

The strategy, which was endorsed by the Vice-President Academic and Provost, was circulated and discussed amongst senior leaders from both the administrative and academic sides of the University. A plan for community engagement was developed, and the strategy was renamed *The Indigenous Framework for York University: A Guide to Action*.



# The Indigenous Framework for York University: A Guide to Action

*The Indigenous Framework for York University: A Guide to Action* builds on the University's distinct values, traditions, history and vision. Specifically, the Framework addresses the [University Academic Plan \(UAP\)](#) and its call for a pan-university Indigenous strategy. The Framework also echoes broader initiatives within the postsecondary educational system in Ontario and Canada, including the [Principles on Indigenous Education](#) developed by Universities Canada in 2015.

In developing this Framework, the Indigenous Council has been mindful of the dire situation in which we find ourselves. While the United Nations' quality of life index ranked Canada 6th in the world, its ranking of First Nations people fell to 63rd. Approximately 10,000 Indigenous students are on waiting lists to attend post-secondary institutions in this country, and the disparity in public school funding on First Nations reserves continues to limit their educational aspirations: The Canadian federal government spends on average \$6,000 per child on reserve, but spends \$10,000 per child in the public school system. Less than 10 per cent of Indigenous people have a university education – one third the national rate of 27 per cent<sup>1</sup>. Equally disturbing, Indigenous communities represent 4.3 per cent of the Canadian population, but 24 per cent of its prison population.

<sup>1</sup> These figures are drawn from the Assembly of First Nations Grand Chief Perry Bellegarde, at the Call to Universities to Respond to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Final Report, held at the University of Saskatchewan on Nov. 12 to 14, 2015.

Numerous documents support the development of an Indigenous plan for postsecondary institutions: *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling the Future: Summary of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* (2015), *The New Buffalo: The Struggle for Aboriginal Post-Secondary Education in Canada* (2006) by Blair Stonechild, *Best Practices in Increasing Aboriginal Postsecondary Enrolment Rates* (Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, 2002) and *The Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (1999), among others. Moreover, the development of this Framework takes place against the backdrop of Indigenous treaty relationships and Canada's constitutional and human rights obligations, making its public institutions

responsible for providing a range of educational services to Indigenous communities.

Integral to our pan-university Framework is the need to engage Indigenous communities both inside and outside York. Engaging Indigenous students, staff and faculty, will help to enrich teaching and research, as well as all students' learning experiences. To this end, engagement with Indigenous communities must be a priority for the entire University.

Furthermore, the Indigenous Council has emphasized the concept of reconciliation as core to the Indigenous Framework. Reconciliation embraces new projects and processes arising out of our response to, but not limited by, the Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action. The council's goals are set out in the principles of the Framework. The principles are not listed in order of importance, but are connected to the overarching goal of advancing reconciliation.



## Principles

**1. EXPAND THE ROLE OF THE INDIGENOUS COUNCIL (IC).** The IC was created in 2002 as a mandated body for universities that accept Indigenous funding. The IC has representatives from urban, First Nations, Métis organizations and communities and Indigenous faculty from the University. The IC is well positioned to provide guidance to the University in implementing Indigenous programming and curricula, and in hiring Indigenous faculty. The IC can play a pivotal role in helping to advance the University's reconciliation and Indigeneity agenda; however, to do so, it should be included in the university's governing bodies, such as the Board of Governors and the University Senate.

**2. INCREASE THE NUMBER OF INDIGENOUS FACULTY.** Indigenous Peoples represent 4.3 per cent of the Canadian population, but are woefully under-represented in terms of educational achievement at all levels. Currently systematic barriers exist; this is reflected in the National Occupational Classification (2015), which reports that Aboriginal Peoples represent 1.3 per cent of the availability pool for academic positions. Increasing the number of Indigenous faculty is important from an equity perspective; it will help create welcoming conditions for Indigenous students and transform educational institutions for all students. Indigenous faculty members bring culture, community and knowledge to the University; moreover, they strengthen curricular objectives and learning outcomes by offering advice in curriculum planning and implementation that non-Indigenous faculty members rely on. It is often argued that it is difficult to increase the number of Indigenous faculty because of the small pool of qualified Indigenous people available in Canada. While it is important to address the current systemic barriers and improve outcomes, the United States, by comparison, has significantly more Indigenous faculty. As such, the United States can be viewed as a place from where we can hire Indigenous faculty to help address our urgent need. Canada's past shortcomings in educating Indigenous people should not be used as a reason to limit future opportunities.

**3. ENHANCE THE RECRUITMENT AND ACADEMIC SUCCESS OF INDIGENOUS STUDENTS.** Programs should focus on proactive recruitment of Indigenous students, the admissions process, financial accessibility, academic supports, and wellness of Indigenous undergraduate and graduate students. Recruitment and retention strategies should be developed in collaboration with CASS, the Faculty of Graduate Studies, other

offices, and Indigenous political, territorial and treaty organizations.

**4. EXPAND INDIGENOUS PROGRAMMING AND CURRICULAR OFFERINGS WHICH EXPLORE INDIGENOUS LIFE, CULTURES AND TRADITIONS.** Most Faculties at York have developed Indigenous programming, some are more developed than others and, in some instances, Indigenous programming does not exist. As a priority, the University should conduct an in-depth review to identify and address gaps in existing programs and opportunities for new programs with an Indigenous focus. Indigenous languages have been systematically eradicated, as such; the University should intensify its efforts to provide access to Indigenous languages and align with the goals of reconciliation.

**5. FACILITATE RESEARCH THAT IS RELEVANT TO INDIGENOUS LIFE, AND RESPECTS INDIGENOUS APPROACHES TO KNOWLEDGE AND LEARNING.** Focus should be placed on policy, economic and legal areas that shape Indigenous experience. Collaboration is needed in exploring Indigenous and non-Indigenous approaches in these areas, as well as making room for Indigenous research and/or Indigenous forms of disseminating research. Research should include a commitment to listening to and learning from Indigenous Peoples' knowledge, ecology, spiritual practice and experience. All Faculties, divisions and organized research units can play a role in this.

**6. ENGAGE WITH INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES TO ENRICH THE LEARNING PROCESS.** University courses should incorporate Indigenous content into the curriculum; this can open up opportunities for experiential learning. An excellent example of such educational learning experiences is Osgoode Hall Law School's Anishinaabe Law Camp, which started in the fall of 2014. The annual camp involves Indigenous and non-Indigenous students who travel to Neyaashiinigmiing (Cape Croker, Ont.) for a four-day weekend exploring Indigenous approaches to law and its connections to the cultural life of the community. Other Faculties have explored or are exploring similar programs that are relevant to their disciplines, either within or outside their formal degree programs.

**7. ESTABLISH SPACES FOR INDIGENOUS CULTURES AND COMMUNITY WITHIN THE UNIVERSITY.** Space in this context refers to physical as well as linguistic spaces, and spaces within existing ceremonies, such as convocation, where Indigenous life at York can flourish. CASS, the Tipi in front of Skennen'kó:wa Gamig, the renovation of Skennen'kó:wa Gamig, and the



proposal for specific practices and ceremonies for Indigenous students are examples of how this commitment can be (and has been) put into action at York.

**8. ENSURE THAT THE PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY MEMBERS ARE REFLECTED IN THE CLASSROOM, ON CAMPUS AND IN UNIVERSITY LIFE.** There should be university wide educational and professional development opportunities for students, faculty and staff, about Indigenous world views to help foster a culture of inclusion. This will help to combat discrimination and stereotypes. Protocols should be established to acknowledge traditional Indigenous territories and to invite Indigenous community members to participate in university life at York; this includes recruitment and retention of University staff from Indigenous communities.

**9. DEVELOP AND EXPAND EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES.** There should be consultation with Indigenous communities to develop and expand educational opportunities; this could include the development and/or expansion of bridging programs to and from university studies, and lifelong learning and professional development programs intended to engage and support Indigenous communities. York University's Indigenous alumni should be included and engaged as part of the strategic imperative.

**10. ENSURE THE PROCESS FOR DEVELOPING, IMPLEMENTING AND EVALUATING THIS FRAMEWORK INVOLVES INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY MEMBERS BOTH WITHIN AND OUTSIDE THE UNIVERSITY.** How this Framework is implemented is as important as the Framework itself. *The Indigenous Framework for York University: A Guide to Action* is a living document that will evolve, adapt and guide the University in the future. Consequently, implementation should involve key roles for the Centre for Aboriginal Student Services and the Indigenous Council, and those organizations demonstrating our accountability to broader communities and governments. Implementation should engage students, faculty, and staff and their representative organizations. Given the breadth and depth of the commitments set out in this framework, the University will need to establish appropriate governance and leadership over the advancement of reconciliation, which may include a dedicated associate vice-president.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF THE WRITING COMMITTEE

The development and writing of *The Indigenous Framework for York University: A Guide to Action* involved the hard work and dedication of faculty, students and staff from across the University. Over several months, and in close consultation with the Indigenous Council, the Writing Committee met and prepared numerous drafts. The University acknowledges the contributions of:

Liz Brule, *Course Director, Department of Equity Studies*  
Karissa John, *2016/17 President, Aboriginal Students Association at York*  
Ruth Koleszar-Green, *Assistant Professor, School of Social Work and Co-Chair, Indigenous Council*  
Bonita Lawrence, *Associate Professor, Department of Equity Studies*  
Sabrina Molinari, *2016/17 President, Osgoode Indigenous Students Association*  
Yvette Munro, *Director Academic Partnerships & Planning, Office of the Vice Provost Academic*  
Randy Pitawanakwat, *Coordinator, Centre for Aboriginal Student Services*  
Lorne Sossin, *Dean, Osgoode Hall Law School*

## NOTES

The University Academic Plan 2015-2020: <http://secretariat.info.yorku.ca/files/UAP-2015-2016-Final.pdf>

Universities Canada—Principles on Indigenous Education:

<https://www.univcan.ca/media-room/media-releases/new-principles-on-indigenous-education/>

**York University acknowledges its presence on the traditional territory of many Indigenous Nations. The area known as Tkaronto has been care taken by the Anishinabek Nation, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, the Huron-Wendat, and the Métis. It is now home to many Indigenous Peoples. We acknowledge the current treaty holders, the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation. This territory is subject of the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, an agreement to peaceably share and care for the Great Lakes region.**

*Endorsed by Vice-President Academic and Provost Jan. 24, 2017.  
Endorsed by Indigenous Council at York University March 9, 2017.*