



RED RIVER
COLLEGE

SCHOOL OF INDIGENOUS
EDUCATION

Portage Community Forum

Final Report

Thursday, May 31st, 2012



Portage
Community Forum

Final Report

Thursday, May 31st, 2012



RED RIVER COLLEGE
OF APPLIED ARTS, SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

School of Indigenous Education

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	1
Executive Summary	2
Introduction	5
Barriers and Challenges	7
Strategies and Solutions to Overcome Barriers.....	11
Priorities to Enhance the Educational Success of Aboriginal People	16
Forum Evaluation and Next Steps	19
Conclusion.....	21
Appendix 2 Forum Questions for Participants.....	23
Appendix 3 Organizations Who Participated at the Community Forum	24

Acknowledgements

The Portage la Prairie Community Forum hosted by the Portage Campus of Red River College (RRC) on May 31, 2012 was realized through the leadership, support and assistance of many people.

April Krahn, Director, Aboriginal Student Support & Community Relations, and Jaime Richard, Aboriginal Liaison/Advisor, were the key leaders who planned and organized all aspects of the Community Forum. Marti Ford, Dean of the School of Indigenous Education, encouraged the development of the Forum. Stephanie Forsyth, President of the College, enthusiastically supported the Forum.

Appreciation is extended to Lori Grenkow, Regional Manager of the Portage Campus, who cordially agreed to host this event, Darlene DeMey, Office Manager who helped with all the logistics of the event as well as everyone at the Portage Campus who contributed to make the day a success. Thank you!

The Forum included guest speakers, student panel discussions and small group discussions and feedback. The Agenda for the Forum is included as Appendix 1. The presentations and the students observations helped establish a common framework for the Forum discussions. Thanks go to the speakers: Marti Ford, Lori Grenkow and Jaime Richard.

To members of the Student Panel: Chantel Hobson and Giselle Demach – our sincerest gratitude for sharing your trials and inspirational triumphs throughout your personal and educational journeys.

Nearly 30 individuals participated in the Forum and we thank them for committing their time and for providing their insights to improve the delivery of educational and support services to Aboriginal people. Thanks to all the staff of RRC's Aboriginal Student Support & Community Relations who agreed to be small group facilitators and lead the discussions. Appendix 2 provides the questions addressed by participants. Appendix 3 lists all of the registered organizations.

A special thank you to RRC's Elder-in-Residence, Mae Louise Campbell, for her guidance, prayers and thoughts at the opening of the Forum and at the closing of the day; and thank you to local Elder Grace Daniels for blessing our meal and her prayers at lunch and at the closing of the Forum. We also give much appreciation to both Elders for their insightful wisdom during the Forum discussions.

During the lunch break, Long Plain Dance Troup – Lisa Assiniboine, Preston Assiniboine, Emery-Rose Assiniboine, Garrett Tacan and Faron Sutherland performed for Forum participants. We thank them for their uplifting performance.

Executive Summary

Background

On May 31, 2012, the Portage Campus of Red River College hosted an Aboriginal Community Forum. The Forum brought together 30 representatives from the Aboriginal community, students, local agencies and the College. The purpose of the Forum was to help identify strategies to improve the role of the College in supporting Aboriginal people as they strive to achieve their post-secondary educational goals. The event featured several presentations, a student panel discussion and participant group discussions and feedback.

This is a summary of the discussion, highlighting the key points that emerged in response to specific questions.

Community Forum Participants' Overall Advice

Many of the participants praised RRC for its efforts in providing post-secondary education for First Nation, Inuit and Métis people and in its efforts to provide support programs to help with access, retention, graduation and the transition to the workplace or further education.

In addition, participants also believed that even more investments were needed. For continuing success, a participant said there was "need for capacity building in self, college and community", emphasizing that the College needs to increase its capacity to facilitate Aboriginal student achievement. There was a strong feeling at the Forum that everyone cares about the issue of Aboriginal post-secondary education and many are trying to make a difference. A participant appreciated the "willingness of RRC to improve." Another commented that because of the Forum, "as a student I feel a lot more positive."

Overall advice:

- Red River College implements an action plan to achieve the outcomes and strategies suggested at the Portage Community Forum.
- Red River College commits to continue its engagement with the Aboriginal community and through its advice and guidance, sustains post-secondary education founded on Aboriginal beliefs and Aboriginal ways of knowing and doing.
- Red River College advocates for more funding and finds ways to invest more in Aboriginal education, programs, services and supports.
- Red River College continues and expands partnerships with Aboriginal communities and organizations.

The theme of this report is: *A Spirit of Action.*

Barriers to Post-Secondary Education

During the morning group discussions, participants explored and identified many barriers Aboriginal people experience in their quest for post-secondary education. Often the barriers are interconnected. It is widely known that First Nations, Inuit and Métis people confront persistent

barriers that limit their learning opportunities. These barriers are far more difficult to surmount than those facing most non-Aboriginal Canadians.

Community Forum participants felt that Aboriginal participation and success in post-secondary education were mostly hindered by (elaborations on these are found in the body of this report):

- Un-affordability of post-secondary education
- Culture shock, dislocation and isolation
- Lack of academic preparation for post-secondary education
- Lack of safe, secure and affordable housing
- Lack of and cost of child care
- Inadequate transition assistance into the College
- Lack of acceptance of Aboriginal worldviews, history and the need for cultural awareness
- Lack of comprehensive, accessible and accurate information on post-secondary education opportunities and requirements for Aboriginal students
- Lack of family supports for Aboriginal students
- Need for ongoing social support and outreach services
- Need for more diversity and flexibility in academic programs
- Costs of transportation
- Need for more connections with communities
- Lack of college to work transition programming
- Need for more academic supports and workshops to help studies be successful

Key Strategies to Overcome the Barriers

There were two group discussion sessions in the afternoon portion of the Portage Community Forum. These discussions focused on the key solutions, strategies and models to overcome the identified barriers. Major themes were to focus on the basics: funding, housing, daycare, honour Aboriginal beliefs and worldview, and transportation; and to focus on partnerships with Aboriginal communities and include families in planning with students.

Recommended Strategies (elaborations on these are found in the body of this report):

- Develop and implement an action plan
- Expand financial support for Aboriginal students
- Establish a comprehensive Aboriginal student housing initiative
- Increase day care access
- Solidify partnerships with Aboriginal communities and organizations
- Provide transportation assistance
- Initiate a post-secondary education opportunities information program
- Build the academic preparedness of Aboriginal students
- Expand Aboriginal student support services
- Advance Aboriginal access initiatives
- Integrate Aboriginal culture/history into the fabric of RRC
- Establish a transition to college program for Aboriginal students
- Expand community based programming
- Establish an Aboriginal transition to the workplace program

This Executive Summary is just that – a summary. The voices of Community Forum participants and the full richness and wisdom of their ideas, thoughts and words are found in the following pages.

Introduction

The Portage la Prairie Aboriginal Community Forum was held on May 31, 2012 at the Red River College Portage Regional Campus. The purpose was to engage the community in a discussion on ways and means to improve access and success in post-secondary education for Aboriginal people. The Forum was an opportunity for RRC to hear and learn from the voices of the Community. RRC thanks all participants for attending and providing their insights and suggestions for improving the opportunities for Aboriginal students. The College is committed to listening to the community and acting on the advice and counsel given during the Forum.

Background to the Forum

Red River College is committed to increasing the post-secondary education opportunities for Aboriginal people. This means increasing access, supporting retention, and ensuring graduation and transitioning to further education or careers.

RRC Strategic Plan 2012-15 is a comprehensive plan shaping the future of the College for the next three years. The plan has four strategic themes

1. Fuel Manitoba's economic growth and community development
2. Lead Aboriginal achievement
3. Strengthen student achievement
4. Improve the College's triple bottom line: People, Planet, Profits

Two of these Themes emphasize Aboriginal learners.

The Theme, *Lead Aboriginal achievement*, includes the following strategic initiatives:

- Transform the culture and environment of the College to acknowledge and respect the Aboriginal worldview and enhance Aboriginal student participation and success.
- Develop a comprehensive College-wide plan to promote greater understanding and integration of the Aboriginal worldview throughout the College.

The Theme, *Strengthen student achievement*, includes the following strategic initiatives:

- Enhance the education and training practices of the College so as to engage, and incorporate the perspectives of Aboriginal communities in Manitoba.
- As part of Strategic Enrolment Management, develop student retention and success strategies for Aboriginal learners.
- Design and maintain an information management system to inventory and track College-wide initiatives and programs to assess the Aboriginal achievement strategy.
- Develop and inform curricula emphasizing Aboriginal teaching and learning methods.
- Establish expertise within the School of Learning Innovation for the research and study of indigenous methodologies for teaching and learning within a college environment.

Forum Intent

The intent of the Forum was to help plan for and provide a more seamless path for Aboriginal students into RRC through the various ways prospective students' access programs. This could be through community-based programs, Regional Campuses, distance education, or at one of the Winnipeg based campuses in either a part-time or full-time capacity. The College is committed to

supporting Aboriginal peoples' experiences at the College and help them achieve successful outcomes from their RRC studies. The Forum was designed to engage the community in a discussion of how RRC can help improve access, retention, graduation and subsequent success of Aboriginal people in addition to learn how we can work with communities and external stakeholders to do so. RRC wants to hear the voices of the community to help the College chart a course for the future to serve Aboriginal people and Indigenous education overall, both rurally and in Winnipeg.

The Forum goal was to help identify strategies to help the College improve post-secondary education access, retention, and graduation for Aboriginal people.

The Forum objectives were:

- Identify and broadly explore the challenges and issues for Aboriginal people as they strive to achieve their post-secondary educational goals.
- Explore the resources, strategies and models that Red River College could pursue to successfully enhance access to post-secondary learning opportunities and outcomes for Aboriginal people.
- Determine how best to encourage, support and improve the educational success of Aboriginal students.
- Explore ideas for supporting the successful transition of Aboriginal people from college to further pursuits.

Forum Process

The Forum focused on listening to the ideas, suggestions for improvement and personal experiences from participants. The day included facilitated discussions, interactive exercises and informative activities, with a focus on understanding how to make things better for Aboriginal students as they strive to advance their post-secondary education opportunities.

April Krahn emceed the Forum throughout the day.

The morning session of the Forum included welcoming comments and an overview of initiatives of the School of Indigenous Education from Marti Ford, Dean - School of Indigenous Education. Lori-Ann Grenkow, Portage Campus Manager, spoke about the programs, services and partners at the Campus. And Jaime Richard, RRC Aboriginal Liaison/Advisor, outlined the support and services available to Aboriginal students at the College.

After these presentations, participants met in small groups to discuss the barriers that Aboriginal people experience in post-secondary education, led by a facilitator. Individuals in the group noted their responses and then the group worked towards a consensus. Each group reported their key points to the overall Forum.

After the student panel in the afternoon session, participants again met in groups to discuss solutions to the barriers and what should be of the highest priority moving forward for RRC. Individuals recorded responses and then the group discussed ideas. These were reported to the entire Forum. Copies of individual and group reports were collected and compiled. This report summarizes the key points and recommendations expressed by participants. The report will be used to help inform and guide planning at the College.

Barriers and Challenges

Portage Community Forum participants, individually and as part of a group, considered and discussed the challenges and barriers facing Aboriginal people as they struggle to achieve their educational goals. Most individuals recorded their own ideas and groups prepared summary reports and provided feedback during the Forum.

This section provides a summary of the barriers and challenges identified by participants.

- **Un-Affordability of Post-Secondary Education**

Most participants said there was a lack of available funding for Aboriginal people trying to attend post-secondary education. Poverty in Aboriginal communities often makes the cost of post-secondary education impossible to meet. This is a very difficult barrier to overcome. There is a need for increased financial support for students to ensure proper living and family costs and to limit work hours and increase study time. More financial aid is needed for students and it must be accessible and timely.

Some representative comments: “Overall, there is a lack of financial resources;” “Never seems to be enough monies to fund all applicants;” “Current funding models are inadequate;” “Cost of post-secondary education is very high;” “Difficult to cope with all of the costs, such as transportation, housing, family and living costs;” “Lack of adequate funding makes it really hard to attend and stay;” “Training allowances sometimes are not enough;” “People returning after a number of years have difficulty getting funding;” and “Low income affects everything else.”

- **Culture Shock**

Participants at the Portage Community Forum said that leaving home, community and friends for post-secondary education is difficult for Aboriginal students. They experience cultural shock being away from home and family. For many there is no sense of belonging in a new and unknown environment that sometimes does not value Aboriginal values and heritage. There is a fear of losing their identity as they are submerged within a different worldview. Meeting expectations of family place an extra burden on many Aboriginal students. There is a need for supports to build confidence in their abilities and to develop positive study habits and establish new relationships. Some comments: “There is a dislocation of self;” “Need a sense of belonging;” “Reaching out and connecting and finding new supportive mentors is hard;” “Lack of inclusion;” “Need to feel valued and part of a larger goal.”

- **Lack of Academic Preparation for Post-Secondary Education**

Many participants felt there was a lack of adequate academic preparation for post-secondary education. Some students have poor educational foundations and have academic gaps. Some may not have the prerequisites or qualifications for academic programs. Some students may not know what the prerequisites are and have not been informed about the requirements. And some high schools do not prepare student for post-secondary education. The overall education system needs to collaborate more to prepare students for post secondary education.

- **Lack of Safe, Secure and Affordable Housing**

The absence of secure, affordable and accessible housing for Aboriginal students, and often their families, was a major concern for participants. Often Aboriginal people experience problems in finding safe accommodations. Many single parents find it hard to get secure housing in an unknown environment. A lack of on-campus or close to campus housing at RRC was seen as a main barrier. For many students the distance to post-secondary education locations is far from home and good housing is critical.

- **Lack of Child Care**

Many participants raised the lack of affordable and accessible childcare facilities as a major barrier to access and success in college.

- **Inadequate Transition Assistance into the College**

Going to college for Aboriginal students is a key life event. The transition into a new setting away from home and family is critical for success. There is a need for assistance in transitioning into post-secondary education. This transition means academic, social, personal, family, housing, and cultural shifts for students and they need help in adapting. This can be in the form of relocation assistance and support, and guidance through the expectations and standards of the College, and ensuring a sense of belonging and welcome, and helping with life-skills and transportation, accessing other city resources, and helping to make connections with good people to support each other throughout college life. There seems to be a lack of support for transitions. Some comments: "Need help in learning the ropes of PSE system;" "There is a lack of help to get on the right track, right away."

- **Lack of Respect for Aboriginal Worldviews, History and the Need for Cultural Awareness**

Forum participants expressed concern that the overall post-secondary education system does not embrace Indigenous worldviews. This leads to Aboriginal student isolation and can include discrimination.

The education system is still Western-European. There are supports and initiatives in place at the College but more is needed. There is a need for "more spiritual support through smudge/prayer." Indigenous peoples' beliefs and heritage must be respected and their cultural knowledge valued. The recognition must embrace all Aboriginal peoples, First Nations, Inuit and Métis.

Aboriginal languages are not recognized, creating communication challenges for Aboriginal students with staff and faculty. There is extreme loneliness for some students and a sense of being un-welcomed, hence the need for a supportive, culturally relevant place and environment.

A more complete awareness of Aboriginal history and culture is needed in post-secondary education institutions.

- **Lack of Comprehensive, Accessible and Accurate Information on Post-Secondary Education Opportunities and Requirements for Aboriginal Students**

There is a lack of information about post-secondary education opportunities in communities and for parents about options for potential Aboriginal students. This may be due to a lack of access to advisors and inadequate or hard to access information on options. There is a real need for culturally knowledgeable information and counselling on opportunities and what is required and what the outcomes would be for potential students. Some do not know about possible funding resources or bursary or scholarship options to provide financial support so “they can see post-secondary education as a real possibility for them and their children.”

- **Lack of Family Supports for Aboriginal Students**

There are not adequate full family supports for student, many of whom have family commitments. This includes the want of support for single parents, both Moms and Dads.

- **Need for Ongoing Social Support and Outreach Services**

Participants noted the need for more culturally relevant supports and outreach services for current and potential students. Easing pathways into college is critical for Aboriginal students. They also need ongoing academic, and social and cultural supports to adjust to post-secondary education in a new environment.

Proactive and early interventions will help students who may have low self-esteem, are shy, have communication problems, need academic help or have other personal and interpersonal issues, as well as needs for financial assistance and family supports.

Many students lack self-confidence and personal preparation for college. They require help with problem solving skills, decision-making skills, coping skills. Students also struggle with managing personal and family issues while away from their home community. Some students “need someone to speak with and confide in” to succeed in a new and challenging environment. Although there are supports, more are needed, including services for men. It may help to actively encourage students to come forward when in need. Ready access to advisors will help Aboriginal students.

Students also require continuous engagement with culturally relevant advising and counselling to stay in college and to graduate.

- **Need for More Diversity and Flexibility in Academic Programs**

Many Aboriginal students struggle with the full program course loads of traditional college programming. This includes financial challenges if students want to pursue studies part-time. There is little flexibility in program timetables.

Participants also noted the need for more diversity in college programming, including at the Portage campus where more diploma programs should be offered. Creative and arts based courses and other electives seem to be lacking and may enrich the learning experience of Aboriginal students.

All programs should establish relevance and connection with Aboriginal students, as much of the content is Western-European based with little connection to indigenous ways of knowing.

- **Lack of Assistance for Transportation**

Forum participants noted the need for help with transportation to post-secondary education campuses, both for the initial transition and then for ongoing attendance.

- **Need for More Connections with Communities**

Need was expressed for more connections and partnerships with communities. There should be more collaboration with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities on issues of access, retention and graduation, and the content of programs.

- **More College to Work Transition Programming**

Aboriginal students face barriers in the transition to the workplace. There is a lack of job and career information and assistance. Planning for the next steps after graduating is important for individuals and families and communities. More connections with employers and matching students with employers early during their post-secondary studies would seem to be beneficial. Perhaps more assistance in part time jobs, co-op placements and practicums and internships will help prepare students for the world of work.

- **Need for More Academic Supports and Workshops to Help Successful Studies**

Post-secondary education academic programs can be very demanding on students, especially students with family commitments and little experience in the post-secondary educational system. To stay in College, students need academic supports to develop and sustain general academic skills and course based specific learning outcomes. Students look for help to maintain grades, through a variety of means: learning study methods, tutoring, peer mentoring, study and support groups. In some cases this may be a lack of information on the availability of services.

Strategies and Solutions to Overcome Barriers

After identifying barriers, Forum participants generated ideas to overcome the barriers confronting Aboriginal students in their quest for post-secondary education. Participants were asked to think of what the College, the community and others could do to provide supports, programs or services.

This section is a summary of the ideas suggested by participants.

- **Increase Funding Supports for Aboriginal Students**

Forum participants agreed that the College and others should look for and find ways and means of increasing funding support for students.

It was suggested that the College demonstrate leadership and work with Aboriginal communities to lobby government for more post-secondary education funding for Aboriginal students. These students need support for all the costs, including family support related costs, with higher education and such funding is really an investment.

The College could also increase bursaries and scholarships for Aboriginal people and provide information and assistance in achieving all possible grants, awards, bursaries and other funding supports. Participants said: “Help make College affordable,” “Lead fundraising to ensure students can attend;” “Identify all available funding resources for students and network with them to ensure availability to students;” “Have a funding data bank accessible and communicated.”

- **Undertake a Housing Initiative**

Most Forum participants saw a comprehensive affordable, safe, subsidized and accessible housing program as critical for student access and success.

Elements of such a program could include specific apartment complexes for Aboriginal students who have not rented before. This would also help provide a sense of belonging. The College may want to consider a “housing access coordinator,” who could “assist students in securing housing.”

The College could also develop housing partnerships, i.e., with Manitoba Housing, for dedicated student housing. Family type residences would be very helpful. Some comments were: “Have a residence for families;” “Create subsidized housing for students;” “Build a “student housing program – affordable, safe and secure and close;” “Have affordable housing for First Nations students with dependents.”

- **Ensure Comprehensive Aboriginal Student Supports**

A key message from the Portage Community Forum was the importance of continuing and expanding supports and services for Aboriginal students. And these supports and services must be provided within an Aboriginal worldview. Such supports need to take a proactive comprehensive support strategy for students while in College to help them succeed. Many support services were suggested, including”

- Educational and personal advising, counseling on cultural conflict issues.

- Career planning and employment counseling and job search assistance.
- Linking students with alumni role models, peers and mentors.
- Help with grants, bursaries and scholarships.
- Initiate Breakfast clubs for all ages.
- Have family days at the College to reconnect with traditions.
- Ensure relevant support to all Aboriginal people: First Nations, Inuit and Métis students.
- Ensure access to Elders.
- Establish men's support groups.
- Have a Help Call Centre available 24/7 as an information, referral and advice haven, with knowledge on all aspects of student needs, such as: application procedures and forms; guidance on program choice and careers; contacts with Elders, counsellors and advisors; emergency personal issues support.
- Easy to navigate web site for bursaries, scholarships and awards available to students.
- Communicate widely the supports available for students.
- Ensure more one-on-one time with students to go over goals and help students plan for their studies and beyond. Establish a contact person for each student to support his or her needs; this person would be an open door student advisor available to help students about all aspects of their educational experience. Plan a strategy every year for each student that helps students stay in school and graduate.
- Follow-up on students throughout their college paths and beyond to see how they are doing, what job they have, how they feel about their education, what more could be done, and what advice they have; that is, make RRC connections life-long.

- **Improve Day Care Access**

Many Forum participants suggested the College and others do more to expand childcare. Perhaps partnerships could be developed to ensure more spaces for Aboriginal students. This is true in Winnipeg and at regional campuses. There is a need for a day care coordinator for Aboriginal students. Provide on-site day care facility in the evening for those who study and work.

A suggestion for the Portage Campus was to partner with other agencies to create a day care in the Portage campus and to use it as a practicum site for Early Childhood Education students.

Overall, more readily available day care would help increase access for those who continue to struggle with finding a safe and affordable day care for their children.

- **Build Partnerships Between Aboriginal Communities and the College**

Forum participants saw community engagement in post-secondary education as critical for success. This is a key theme from the Forum.

Working with communities is part of the model at RRC but more is needed. Some comments were: "Build and strengthen relationships;" "RRC work with First Nations communities; and "Engage the Métis community more;" "Network with Manitoba Métis Federation."

Partnership initiatives with communities could help with access, retention and graduation; and may be able to help with increasing overall funding. Having more community forums

would be beneficial to gain more ideas, expand knowledge on the issues and solutions and gain support. Aboriginal people will determine the future direction of their education.

- **Celebrate Aboriginal Heritage, History and Worldview**

RRC continues to celebrate Aboriginal heritage and to ensure the College is a welcoming environment for all Aboriginal students.

However, more should be done to support the spiritual, physical, emotional and mental aspects of the self.

This means embedding indigenous culture within the College. This includes: “use of Aboriginal languages,” and “building understanding of the Aboriginal outlook and traditions, such as smudging.” Forum participants suggested the College develop and run cultural awareness programs across campuses, provide workshops on indigenous ways of life, and host cultural events for families and friends.

Overall, participants urged RRC to continue to work to lessen prejudice and discrimination and keep the focus on student success. It was recommended that College faculty and staff should be culturally aware and sensitive to issues faced by the First Nations, Inuit and Métis people. Aboriginal values and worldview should be reflected throughout the College.

Widening the knowledge of indigenous beliefs and practices will help make a more welcoming place for Aboriginal students. As well participants believed that the College should create an environment that honours indigenous ways of knowing and doing and being. Elders were seen as essential for Aboriginal students. This will ground students in their tradition and honour their ancestors.

All need to know and understand indigenous history and the effects of colonization and residential schools to meaningfully move to healing.

The delivery of support services, such as counselling, should also reflect Aboriginal worldviews and be done with knowledge of that worldview and not just use Western European based therapy; it is important to integrate traditional support in counselling. More Aboriginal people should be in more types of positions in post-secondary education.

- **Lead a Knowledge of Post-secondary Education Campaign**

It is necessary to get more information out, sooner and to more Aboriginal people on post-secondary education. The College could help develop and deliver an awareness campaign and lead career exploration workshops in communities.

Participants said “Get the message out about the value of PSE [post-secondary education]” and provide an “Info program for families and communities.” The point is to expand awareness of post-secondary education opportunities and pathways.

Career forums would be helpful in the early years of high school to guide students toward a career path. High schools could have Aboriginal guidance counsellors, who can relate to Aboriginal students and link them to needed supports, such as Elders’ teaching and spiritual

support, emotional and mental and physical support; funding information; and help them develop personal goals and academic goals.

The Portage Campus should promote itself more to let people know it is in the community to stay.

- **Provide Academic Supports**

Ensuring comprehensive academic support for Aboriginal students is essential for success. Forum participants suggested that course loads being tailored for individual students' needs and strengths. Participants said: "Provide more flexible course loads" and "flexible academic programming."

Supports for students should include general academic skills and specific course based knowledge requirements through tutoring, special workshops, etc.

- **Expand Academic Program Access**

Participants said that it would help to increase the reach of academic programming into indigenous communities. More diploma programs and apprenticeship training should be offered at rural campuses.

It would be helpful to widen the program base and have more creative programs, such as music, vocal, dance, painting, clothing design, computer animation, interior design, styling, and arts and crafts.

- **Institute Transitional Programming**

Many participants suggested more transition to post-secondary education programs to ease pathways for Aboriginal students. Students would benefit from transition advice on relocation matters, budgeting, access to housing, funding sources, academic and social support services, and so on.

The College could work with communities to establish and implement such transition programs to assist people to address the challenges of going away to College. Pre-college workshops on life skills, volunteer skills, career surfing, and goal setting would help students establish grounding before starting a full-time program.

High schools could assist in this by providing tours of campuses and informing high school students on post-secondary education standards and expectations. When a new student first arrives, there could be a welcoming group, who would greet the new students and show them the facilities and talk about what it is like in PSE.

- **Build Academic Preparedness for Aboriginal Students**

Student preparation for post-secondary education is critical for success. RRC should work with high schools on post-secondary prerequisites and academic skills to ease the journey for Aboriginal students.

This would include working with guidance counselors to ensure students know the admission criteria and the programs and supports available at RRC. Career advising workshops could be held for high schools and perhaps younger students to help them identify needed prerequisites. An introduction to post-secondary education realities course would be helpful.

- **Establish a Transition to the Workplace Initiative**

The College could resource career connections programs. This should include industry and business and community organizations, along with non-profits to build relationships for practicums.

Key community people should be identified to build an advisory, mentoring and internship capacity for Aboriginal students seeking employment linkages. Employability skills could be built into programs. Co-ops and practicums engage students with communities, industry/businesses, government and Aboriginal organizations (such as the Manitoba Métis Federation) and provide valued experience in the workplace. Career fairs with private, non-profit and public employers could be held every year. Part of supports for student is employment assistance for graduating students.

- **Assist with Transportation Issues**

The College should look for methods to help assist with the transportation cost of students, through subsidies or by agreements with public transit or arranging car pools.

Priorities to Enhance the Educational Success of Aboriginal People

Participants concluded the Forum group discussions by identifying the key solutions, strategies and models to help overcome the barriers. They addressed the question: What initiatives or strategies should be given the highest priority to encourage and support the post-secondary educational success of Aboriginal people?

This section notes the key strategies suggested by Community Forum participants.

- **Develop and Implement a Plan**

A major conclusion of the Forum was that the College should take the advice of participants and put together a comprehensive strategy with clear and measurable goals, built on partnerships with communities and honouring Aboriginal values and beliefs and then implement the plan, evaluate results and report to communities.

A **Spirit of Action** is required to move forward.

- **Expand Financial Support**

As a priority, participants urged the College to help find ways to overcome the funding barrier.

The College should work with Aboriginal communities to lobby for more funding for students and for more funding to colleges for academic and social supports for students.

As well, all available resources should be identified and communicated to current and potential students, such as grant, bursaries, scholarships and awards. This could be coordinated with high schools. More flexible student loans, early financing options for potential students, and fast approval bursaries and scholarships, along with emergency sources of funding and more flexible tuition fees could increase access and success.

- **Establish a Comprehensive Housing Initiative**

Expanding housing support for Aboriginal students is a priority.

A housing complex would be beneficial. Ideally it would have traditional students' apartments as well as residences for families, along with common areas, spaces for traditional activities, such as smudging.

Participants recommended "a housing initiative" that ensures "safe, affordable and close" living space for students, perhaps through a partnership between Aboriginal communities, government and RRC.

- **Increase Day Care Access**

More day care spaces for students' families should be provided and on-campus sites would be best.

The Portage Campus should review the potential for an on-campus site.

- **Solidify Partnerships with Aboriginal Communities and Organizations**

Build stakeholder partnerships across communities and institutions to support students access and success initiatives.

This could take the form of strategic planning committees between First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities and RRC along with students. It could also be through formal or informal agreements to share resources and expand programs and services.

- **Provide Transportation Assistance**

Forum participants recommended that assistance be provided to students to manage the costs of transportation, both when initially relocating to attend College and with ongoing costs, perhaps through subsidized bus transportation or shuttle services.

- **Initiate a Post-Secondary Education Opportunities Awareness Program**

Participants advised the College to take action to inform potential students and their families on the value, the requirements for entry, program and career options, and the supports available at the College. A province wide communication strategy, developed with Aboriginal communities, would be helpful.

- **Build Academic Preparedness**

Information is not enough to succeed; students must also be academically prepared to take advantage of post-secondary education.

The College should help to “ensure academic readiness and preparation and knowledge of options.” This means working with high schools, families and communities.

- **Expand Aboriginal Student Support Services that Address Aboriginal Needs**

For Aboriginal student success it is essential that ongoing support be available for students once on campus.

All campuses should have equitable services, including: advising and counselling, and an Elder-in-Residence program, including the Portage campus.

Participants acknowledged the work of RRC in providing student support but felt that services should be increased.

A culturally relevant one-stop shop for Aboriginal student was recommended including such services as: an information haven, process and procedure help, contact sources, application help for awards, scholarships and bursaries, program advising and personal counselling, an advocate for funding for students, employment help, a safe location when in stress, and Elders.

Expanded support services for students need to be comprehensive to augment the recruitment, retention, and success of Aboriginal students in post-secondary programs.

Funding is required for a wide range of supports such as: preparatory programs, tutoring and mentoring, counseling services, sharing circles, Elders, Sweat Lodge, and other areas. Student supports should build connections among Aboriginal students in similar situations. Student supports can promote student involvement in their studies and their heritage if delivered within the Aboriginal worldview. Not only will there be academic success but students will honor their ancestors and the seven generations and proudly display their heritage.

- **Advance Aboriginal Access Initiatives**

Initiate more access and outreach programs to encourage Aboriginal people to attend post-secondary education. Increase recruitment efforts across the province.

- **Integrate Aboriginal Culture/History into the Overall Fabric of RRC**

Participants recommended that the College implement more programs, practices, spaces and processes to enhance further a welcoming environment for Aboriginal people.

This should recognize distinct Aboriginal cultures.

The College should ensure staff are culturally aware and sensitive to historic and current issues faced by the Aboriginal population.

- **Establish a Transition to College Program**

The College should focus resources on services addressing students' transition to college needs. A transition or orientation time will overview the expectations of post-secondary education, help develop study habits, provide information on how and where to find help, outline all available resources, help identify academic upgrading needs and provide a location for help to lonely students.

- **Expand Community Based Programming**

More academic programs should be available in home communities. These initiatives need to be planned and delivered in partnership with Aboriginal communities. More diploma and apprenticeship programs should be offered at all campuses, including at the Portage campus. Community delivery or programs offered closer to home will help increase access by lessening geographic barriers and also promote Aboriginal community awareness of faculty.

- **Establish an Aboriginal Transition to the Workplace Program**

A transition to the workplace program should provide assistance to students in finding employment when they complete their studies. While in College increasing co-op, internship and practicum experiences would enhance outcomes.

Forum Evaluation and Next Steps

Community Forum Evaluation

At the conclusion of the Portage Community Forum, participants were asked to complete a qualitative assessment of the Community Forum. The Evaluation asked: What are the key next steps for RRC? What are the key next steps for the Portage Campus? What were the key lessons learned at the forum to increase accessibility and success for aboriginal students? What did you like best about the community forum? What could be improved?

Twenty-two participants responded to the Evaluation. Overwhelming, participants were pleased about their experience at the Community Forum.

Participants commented on “the people and the energy in the room” and the “vast array of participants from all over” who worked together in a “positive co-operative atmosphere.”

The top five things that participants liked about the Forum were:

- Interacting and sharing ideas to reach solutions to the problem areas.
- Group discussions.
- Opportunity to meet and share with people.
- The Entertainment.
- Student Panel.

Thinking about improvements for the Forum, by far the most frequent response was that the Forum was well done. Participants said the Forum had a “very good format in everything” was “well organized,” and included a “good mix of participants.”

Improvements recommended include having a larger room, inviting more people and bringing more community members into the Forum, and having more time for discussion on issues and solutions.

Next Steps

The key next step mentioned most often by respondents was for Red River College to act on the outcomes of the Forum. Participants enjoyed the Forum but they want to see action.

Participants applauded RRC for initiating the Forum and recommended that a formal plan be prepared to define achievable outcomes and facilitate actions. Some specific comments were: “Move to action;” “Develop a strategy to begin to address challenges identified;” “Implement the outcomes and focus on the doable;” and “Develop a strategic plan to move forward.”

Participants urged the College to implement the key recommended strategies arising from the Portage Community Forum. They said, “Listen to the voices from communities.”

Participants also wanted to see more community forums across the province, perhaps involving more participants and at other regional campuses. They said: “Keep forums going;” “Continue the gatherings;” and “Great connections.”

Another key next step would be to continue to develop partnerships within communities and engage them in planning and evaluating.

Participants also wanted the Forum outcomes shared to help spur action.

For the Portage Campus, participants saw the key next steps as:

- Developing closer links with communities and continuing to reach out to the Aboriginal people for partnerships.
- Providing more student supports at the Portage Campus.
- Establishing a day care facility or helping with home assistance.
- Offering more programs, including diploma and degree programs, along with more workshops.
- Helping with funding assistance, e.g. through bursary and scholarship assistance.

Conclusion

The Portage Community Forum hosted by Red River College was another step on a pathway towards the full and equal participation of Aboriginal people in post-secondary education in Manitoba. The Forum brought together representatives from Aboriginal communities and organizations, students, local agencies and the College.

The purpose of the Forum was to engage the community in a discussion on ways and means to improve access and success in post-secondary education for Aboriginal people.

The Forum was an opportunity for RRC to hear and learn from the voices of the Community. Participants developed a number of positive strategies to overcome the barriers confronted by First Nations, Inuit and Métis people.

The barriers are financial, cultural, geographic, transitional, informational, and academic.

To ensure post-secondary education for Aboriginal people, that is, to achieve entrance, ongoing success, graduation, and a meaningful career, a number of programs and supports are required and investments are needed to provide these.

Community Forum participants recommended a number of initiatives (outlined earlier in this report) to undertake to overcome the barriers.

They repeatedly said that post-secondary education for Aboriginal peoples must reflect Aboriginal realities, visions, and aspirations.

Community voices at the Portage Forum concluded that time for action is now.

Appendix 1 Community Forum Agenda

Portage Community Forum Agenda

- 9:30 – 9:45 am** Continental Breakfast & Refreshments
- Opening Comments - Elder-in-Residence Mae Louise Campbell
Forum Overview – Master of Ceremonies April Krahn, Director, Aboriginal Student Support & Community Relations
- 9:45 am** Opening Prayer, Elder-in-Residence Mae Louise Campbell
- Welcoming Remarks & Mini Presentation on School Initiatives
Marti Ford, Dean - School of Indigenous Education
- Portage Campus Mini Presentation
Lori-Ann Grenkow, Portage Campus Manager
- RRC Programs Overview & Supports and Services for Aboriginal Students
Jaime Richard, Aboriginal Liaison/Advisor
- 10:15 – 10:30 am** Break
- 10:30 – 11:00 am** Jenga
- 11:00 – 11:45 am** **Facilitated Discussion Question #1 & Group Report**
- 11:45 am** Lunch Prayer, Elder Grace Daniels
- 11:55 am** Lunch & Entertainment
Long Plain Dance Troup – Lisa Assiniboine, Preston Assiniboine, Emery-rose Assiniboine, Garrett Tacan and Faron Sutherland
- 12:35 – 1:15 pm** Student Panel & Questions, Facilitated by Aboriginal Alumni Chantel Hobson
- 1:20 – 2:00 pm** **Facilitated Discussion Question #2**
- 2:00 – 2:10 pm** Break
- 2:10 – 3:20 pm** **Facilitated Discussion Question #3, Group Report & Evaluation Forms**
- 3:20 – 3:30 pm** Summation - Emcee
- Closing Prayer & Thoughts, Elder Mae Louise Campbell, Elder Grace Daniels

Appendix 2 Forum Questions for Participants

1. What are some key issues and challenges facing Aboriginal people as they strive to achieve their educational goals? Think of:
 - Barriers to accessibility to post-secondary education,
 - Barriers to staying in post-secondary,
 - Barriers to graduating

2. What are some ideas for strategies or solutions to overcome the issues and challenges and barriers you have identified?
 - Think of what the college, the community and others can do to provide supports, programs or services.

3. What initiatives or strategies should be given the highest priority to encourage and support the post-secondary educational success of Aboriginal people? Think of:
 - Accessibility to education,
 - Transitioning into & staying in college,
 - Graduating, and
 - Successful outcomes from college studies

Appendix 3 Organizations Who Participated at the Community Forum

Aboriginal Skills & Employment Training Strategies

Canadian Mental Health Association

Consultant – Council of Elders

Dakota Tipi First Nation

Educator – Council of Elders

Employment Manitoba

Louis Riel Institute

Manitoba Metis Federation

Manitoba Metis Federation – Southwest Region

Metis Child, Family & Community Services – Portage la Prairie

Partners for Careers

Portage Collegiate Institute

Portage Friendship Centre

Portage la Prairie School Division

Portage Learning and Literacy Centre

Regional Health Authority Student X 2

RRC Portage Campus

Sandy Bay Health Services

Sandy Bay Ojibway First Nation

Swan Lake First Nation - Employment & Training

Swan Lake First Nation – Post-Secondary



RED RIVER COLLEGE
OF APPLIED ARTS, SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

www.rrc.ca/aboriginaleducation

