

UNB gets First Nations governance degree

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Students at the University of New Brunswick are the first in the country to have an opportunity to study for a degree in First Nations governance and management. The bachelor's degree was announced on Jan. 6 as part of a series of Aboriginal post-secondary initiatives for the province of New Brunswick for which the government is allotting \$1 million.

The standalone degree, the first of its kind in Canada, is being implemented at the request of First Nations communities, says Dr. Linda Doige, director of the Mi'kmaq-Maliseet Institute at the UNB Fredericton campus.

She says the process that's being followed to form this degree is just as important as the final product.

"We have already held a series of conversations with First Nations communities regarding the needs, the ideas, what the content might be for a degree, and what would be the topics that First Nations people feel are necessary to explore in a degree in governance."

The degree, Doige says, will assist First Nations people to "govern themselves as opposed to being dependant on other forms of governance, by giving them understanding of how governance functions.

"This will assist First Nations people with self-governance within their own communities."

Details of the degree are still in preliminary stages, but it will be interdisciplinary in nature, including courses from a variety of different faculties. The degree will be granted through the school's faculty of education.

The First Nations education funding will be split between New Brunswick's major post-secondary institutions, including UNB Fredericton and Saint John, St. Thomas University, l'Université de Moncton, the New Brunswick Community College campuses and the New Brunswick College of Craft and Design.

The money is intended to recruit and retain Aboriginal students, as well as developing programs to help them pursue an education.

Donald Arsenault is New Brunswick's minister of post-secondary education, training and labour. He says the making of this degree program goes along with the province's action plan to "transform post secondary education" in the province.

"Part of the action plan is to give access to more individuals," says Arsenault. "The Aboriginal community has tremendous opportunities. This program respects that community and gives them a wealth of opportunity. It's also the first of its kind in Canada, so that speaks volumes as well. I'm very proud to provide the funding in order to do this."

Jonathan Dutcher is part of New Brunswick's Maliseet community and is currently pursuing a degree in music at St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, N.S. He says the creation of this degree is an important step forward.

"I think it's a good initiative. There hasn't been a real attempt towards First Nations governance anywhere in Canada. It's a big step forward for UNB to be doing that," says Dutcher. "Aboriginal communities need better educated leaders."

Jaden Keitlah, national aboriginal caucus chairperson for the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS), says he "applauds the government for recruiting," but that there are funding problems at the federal level.

"Status First Nations and Inuit paying for school only have a 2 per cent increase per year since '96. The government has failed to keep pace with a rising cost in education," he says.

Despite this, Keitlah calls the developments in New Brunswick "a huge step towards getting First Nations in the door."

Arati Sharma, national director of the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA), says the new degree is a step in the right direction.

"From CASA's perspective, we think this is great. It fulfills the need for a unique program. It's filling a niche for underrepresented students. Inuit, First Nations, Métis—aboriginal students need access; any sort of programs catered towards their group is fantastic."

Doige says that UNB has also been given funding to evaluate and design a pre-service teacher curriculum in core subjects such as English, math and science that would be "culturally appropriate for First Nations students."

Anyone planning to teach First Nations students would take these courses, the details of which would be developed in the same way as the governance and leadership degree.

"We'll be asking First Nations people what exactly should be in these courses. What we're doing is decolonizing content."

Doige says that material currently being taught in public schools will have to be looked at from a different perspective and taught in a different way in order to respect First Nations cultures.

"This is not a bunch of people who know about governance saying 'This is what it should be.' It's First Nations people saying 'We want this, this is what's important to us.' It's been listening, not talking."

The degree will be kept inclusive, and it will be open to all students interested in learning about its subject matter, not only First Nations students. The First Nations governance and leadership degree is expected to be available for enrolment in the next two years.