



Aboriginal Students: Let's Take Our Future Further

by Trevor Phillips (*PhD'17 English Language and Literature*)

In the winter of 2016, The Council of Ontario Universities launched a campaign called 'Future Further'. The campaign seeks to celebrate the academic success of aboriginal students across Ontario universities. Trevor Phillips, a current Queen's student and active participant at Four Directions Aboriginal Student Centre on campus, shared his career journey with "What's Next?".

The first time I remember sitting in the parlour room of the Four Directions Aboriginal Student Centre (4-D) Mohawk activist Jessica Danforth-Yee was holding court after a talk she'd given on Native Sexual Health. She was so impressed with Jan Hill, the Director and spiritual and emotional centre of 4-D, that she was rocking back and forth on her chair and throwing her hands out toward Jan with every compliment.

I had only been in Haudenosaunee territory for a few weeks at that point, I had not yet figured out how special 4-D really was. I felt a connection to the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte in the way all Indigenous people feel connected, by a shared centre and worldview. But outside of that link, I was a novice on the values of the Longhouse, Clan structure, and the history of the region where Queen's sits.

All of that did not matter to Jan or Vanessa, Laura, Mary, and Ashley – the entire staff at Four Directions. They pulled me in, they fed me, and they made feel at home: four thousand kilometers east of the prairies.

It was not long after that Vanessa invited me to a SAGE (Supporting Aboriginal Graduate Enhancement) writing retreat in Picton. The annual writing retreat is a lavish five-day all-expenses paid trip for Indigenous graduate students to get away and work on their various deadlines. We would spend our mornings in ceremony guided by an Elder, our afternoons in sessions led by Indigenous academics, writers, and teachers and our evenings bent over our laptops working on endless papers. Meanwhile, the staff at 4-D take care of everything else: travel, accommodation, food, booking speakers, and even reminding us of what to pack.

That SAGE Nest and the relationships built with the other Indigenous graduate students from across campus, and across the country, became the nourishing Indigenous Intellectual community that I could build professional opportunities with. As a grass-roots initiative of collaboration and peer-support, SAGE gave me essential emotional, spiritual, and intellectual nourishment to be successful in my PhD program and get involved in the larger Queen's community.

From our little SAGE Nest at Queen's we connected with the other nests in Ottawa, Peterborough, and Toronto. Trips to speaking series, museums, and film festivals were just part of the excitement. Back in Kingston, we took on mentorship roles with undergraduates, organized socials, and were invited to speak at conferences and other events as representatives of the Indigenous community on campus.

Eventually, SAGE members were asked to participate in the new working group to promote Indigenous presence and awareness on campus: the Kahswentha Indigenous Knowledge Initiative (KIKI). It was with KIKI where my career in on-campus student centered programming was launched.

KIKI pulls-in contributors from across Queen's, with both Indigenous and



non-Indigenous faculty, staff, and students coming together to run programming that reconfigures and rewrites the colonial narrative of Kingston. Following the lead of Idle No More at the University of Saskatchewan, KIKI staged a series of teach-ins addressing problem areas in the institution. We took over the Union Gallery for an afternoon to talk about appropriation, another time we filled an auditorium in the Education building. As part of Indigenous Awareness Week in 2014, KIKI staged a massive concert in the Queen's Athletics and Recreation

Centre with A Tribe Called Red. As part of those festivities, KIKI and A Tribe Called Red in collaboration with CFRC 101.9FM ran a music workshop for local Indigenous Youth in the John Deutsch Centre. The experience I gained as a contributing member of SAGE and KIKI is what won me a year-long contract position with Western University's Indigenous Services as an Outreach Coordination running sports and arts programs for Indigenous Youth in Southern Ontario.

Once my contract was up, I went back home to spend a summer working in a Métis Settlement in Northern Alberta running sports and arts programming for the members there. But, in a strange twist of events I found myself back in Kingston in the Fall of 2015 working as a research assistant with KIKI again, helping to put together the Decolonization and Sport Gathering when an opportunity at the University of Manitoba arose.

At U of M with Migizii Agamik Indigenous Student Centre and the Faculty of Graduate Studies, I have been appointed the Indigenous Graduate Student Success Coordinator. My role is a unique position in the student support portfolio across the U15 where I offer Indigenous graduate students academic, financial, and professional advice as well as organize on-going support programs through the centre.

Here I combine the supports I received through 4-D and SAGE to help build supports for Indigenous graduate students in Treaty 1 and the Homeland of the Métis, so they can get graduate degrees to make a difference in their respective communities. My position gives me the flexibility to work on my dissertation while I work and I hope to defend in the spring of 2017.

Without Four Directions, SAGE, KIKI, Jan, Vanessa, Laura, Mary and all of my friends and co-collaborators, I would not have the professional position I have today.

For more information on the resources available to Aboriginal students, visit: queensu.ca/fdasc and futurefurther.ca

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