

# Exploring the Unique Features of a First Nations Graduate-Level Social Work Program

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Tânisi kahkiyaw; mistahi ninanâskomon ôma e-wî-mâcihtayahk kiskinohamâtowin ohci atoskeyâkanak ka-,hssssatoskâwâcîk ayisiyiniwa kitaskînâhk pikwîte kehte-ayak mâna itwewak namôya wîhkâc kakaskihtânaw kîkway kâ-peyakokamâtoyahk pohko kamamâwokamâtoyahk anohc kiwâpahtenaw eoko mihcet ayisiyiniwak pe-atoskatamwak ôma kâ-ispayiniyik mîna kiyawâw kiskinohamawakanak kinanâskomitinân ôta sîpihtakanep kiskinohamâtowikamikohk e-nawasonamek kâ-pe-kiskinohamâkosiyek osâm pohko kâ-âhkameyihtamahk kinehiyawiwînaw mîna ka-kîhcehtamahk eoko e-kî-nakatamâkawayahk mistahi anohc nimiyohtehân ekosi pitamâ

– **Dr. Leona Makokis, President Blue Quills First Nations College. Alberta, Canada**

## Abstract

Recently, a one-time cohort of graduate-level social work students completed a unique MSW program. The program was delivered in partnership between the Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary and Blue Quills First Nations College and, of the twenty four graduates; twenty-one were of First Nations or Métis ancestry. The program honored traditional knowledge and ways of learning combined with a critical analysis of Western perspectives of social work knowledge. Strong fiscal resources enabled the program to establish a formal support network for the students and to support the development of Indigenous curriculum and programming that encouraged success for the students. The program was fundamentally different than urban on-campus programs while still maintaining graduate level accreditation requirements. This analysis of the program required the use of Indigenous Research Methodology to collect and create an understanding of the program. Instructors commented on the centered, empowered, balanced, and congruent students. The formal and informal, concrete and invisible supports to the students ensured the success of this program and this cohort of students. As one student commented, the program started in ceremony, ended in ceremony, and could not fail within the context ceremony.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In 2008, a cohort of students began their journey in a graduate-level social work program provided by the University of Calgary, Faculty of Social Work in collaboration with Blue Quills First Nations College. In June, 2010, twenty-four students completed this odyssey. The program was unique and demanding – the courses combined the accredited program from the Faculty of Social Work with the honored knowledge, protocols, and ceremony of the *nehiyaw* (Cree) people. After many courses, long hours in field education, cultural training sessions, and numerous ceremonies, celebrations and assignments, these graduates now have a complex and very unique understanding of graduate-level social work in a First Nations and Métis context.

In the following pages, after providing a background story related to the program, we will explore the meaning of the program as expressed by the participants, discuss some of the unique features of the program in comparison with on-campus offerings of similar programs, and then share some thoughts and interpretations about meaning and the lived experience as expressed by the students.

## The History and the Setting

In 1998 a group comprised of community members and faculty from the University of Calgary, Faculty of Social Work developed a proposal for Access funding from the Alberta

<sup>1</sup> Small portions of this article have appeared previously in *Indigenous Social Work Practice – miyo otôtemihtohiwew otatoskew – Creating Good Relationships*. Blue Quills First Nations College, Alberta, Canada. Comments and questions can be directed to Ralph Bodor at [rcbodor@ucalgary.ca](mailto:rcbodor@ucalgary.ca)

Provincial Government. Understanding the need for BSW education in rural, remote, First Nations and Métis communities throughout the province, this initial proposal (Rogers, 1998) was approved for funding by the Provincial Government in February 1999.

The proposal came as a response to the demand for social work education outside of urban centers. Students from rural, remote, First Nations and Métis communities had misgivings about urban-located coursework that was grounded in urban Western European assumptions that did not fit well with world views and helping practices in their home regions. Communities, agencies, and institutions in rural and remote regions of the province had expressed their demands for social work education with a geographic and cultural relevance (Bodor & Zapf, 2002).

In January, 2000, the new Access BSW program began delivering “culturally and geographically relevant curriculum” (Rogers, 1998) across the province in seven rural, northern and First Nations communities. Since that time, the Access program (later re-named “Learning Circles”) has graduated over 500 students in various communities in Alberta – including a high number of First Nations and Métis students in northern Alberta. The combined graduates of Access and the ongoing campus-based BSW programs has resulted in many BSW-level social workers in northern Alberta – a number of whom were interested in completing an MSW degree.

One of the early sites (est. 2002) selected for the Access program was Blue Quills First Nations College (BQFNC) located in northern Alberta just west of the town of St. Paul. BQFNC originally started as a Residential School in 1931 and, in 1971, control was turned over to the seven First Nations in the area and an era of Indigenous control over Indigenous education began. The Access site at BQFNC continued until 2007, graduating over 55 students with BSW degrees. Given the number of graduates and other social workers in the geographic area holding undergraduate social work degrees, it seemed logical that BQFNC would collaborate with the Faculty of Social Work and the University of Calgary to provide the MSW at Blue Quills.

Since 1971, Blue Quills First Nations College (BQFNC) has been a locally controlled Indigenous education center serving the academic and training needs of people of all cultures, encouraging everyone to experience studying in a unique socio-cultural and academic environment. As an Indigenous non-profit educational institution, a prime objective is to promote a sense of pride in Indigenous heritage and reclaim traditional knowledge and practices. In 2006, Blue Quills celebrated its 35<sup>th</sup> year as Canada’s first Indigenous controlled education center. Blue Quills is a founding member of the First Nations Adult and Higher Education Consortium (FNAHEC), partnering with other Indigenous institutions and programs to advance programming and educational opportunities for adults ensuring an Indigenous learning environment and content.

In 2008, Alberta Advanced Education, in response to a proposal from BQFNC, agreed to fund a one-time only MSW program at BQFNC. BQFNC then contracted with the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Calgary to provide a culturally relevant MSW. Potential students were interviewed during the summer of 2008 and started in the MSW at BQFNC Entry Camp that Fall. Classes began in February, 2009 and were completed in June of 2010. Of the original 33 students enrolled in the program, 24 graduated in June (one is a posthumous degree). Of the 24 students, 21 are of First Nations or Métis ancestry. This is the largest cohort of graduate-level First Nations and Métis students in Canada and provides clear evidence that, with the appropriate supports, curriculum and cultural components, First Nations and Métis students can be extremely successful.

## **Indigenous Social Work Education**

As social work educators, it is one of our responsibilities to reveal the unintentional or systemic oppression that exists in our profession and is often perpetuated through mainstream social work education programs. When we identify the reality of oppression in

social work education and practice, we improve our practices and we become more sensitive to the diversity within the communities and families. Western world paradigms, beliefs, and values – along with a colonial and oppressive curriculum - have been the dominant forces that inform social work education systems around the world. The process of integrating Indigenous knowledge into Western social work education programs as a valid and essential component remains a challenge.

Indigenous Elders remind us that in order to know where we are going, we must know where we have been. For many Indigenous people, their first encounter with social work professionals began when First Nations people became ‘wards’ of the federal government. “Social workers were tasked to accompany Indian agents onto reserves to remove children to residential schools” (Sinclair, Hart & Bruyere, 2009, p. 20). Dr. Leona Makokis (2009), a residential school survivor, speaks of this era: “thousands of our people were destroyed as through this process of legally enforced assimilation, our culture, our spirit, our identity, our language, our humanness, our traditions, our relationships, and our ability to parent were extinguished” (p. 1).

The first social work programs that contained any Indigenous content began to emerge in 1974 in a response to the demand from Indigenous leaders and Elders for social workers to be taught Indigenous culture and traditions directly within social work curriculum (Sinclair et al., 2009, p. 21). Despite these early and limited efforts, the term ‘social work’ still has negative connotations within Indigenous communities and is often associated with child stealing and purposeful oppression for many Indigenous people, families and communities (Sinclair et. al, 2009). Historically, it has been a challenge to bring forward knowledge systems that contrast or critique dominant Western approaches to helping within the social work profession. Indigenous peoples in Canada are faced with the challenge of creating space, *ethical space*, in academia and social work curriculum (Ermine, 2007).

Indigenous scholars describe Indigenous social work as “a practice that combines culturally relevant social work education and training, theoretical and practice knowledge derived from Aboriginal epistemology (ways of knowing) that draws liberally on western social work theory and practice methods, within a decolonizing context” (Sinclair et al., 2009, p. 23). There is still appears to be a professional preference towards Western mainstream worldviews and frameworks such as quantitative research are still seen as preferred approaches by funders. Empirical knowledge has precedence over cultural knowledge. Consequently, Indigenous knowledge and cultural practice methods are often excluded or absent from social work programs. In some cases, as suggested by Sinclair, Hart, and Bruyere (2009) “educational and professional institutions have, although still to a limited degree, accepted Indigenous perspectives and approaches as legitimate social work theories and practices” (p. 42). However, a systemic issue identified by Hart (2002) is the misrepresentation or partial representation of Indigenous teachings and that the sources of Indigenous knowledge are often not given credit in mainstream education settings (Sinclair et. al, 2009). Indigenous peoples are constantly faced with trying to educate non-Indigenous students within Western universities while, at the same time, struggling to decolonize themselves as Indigenous people. When these educational components are not placed in the forefront, all of us continue to facilitate the colonial exploitation of Indigenous worldview (Sinclair et al, 2009).

According to Indigenous belief, culturally-based education bridges the gap between the cosmos and us: the place from where knowledge is drawn (Wilson, 2008). Indigenous ceremonies, practices and teachings need to be the focus of practice and their approach to collective community issues. Without culture as the foundation of Indigenous social work education, all is lost. The loss of language through assimilation policies has resulted in the loss of a ‘moral compass’. Makokis (2009) states that “loss of language is equivalent to loss of spirit; without our sense of spirit we become vulnerable to illnesses such as the addiction and violence epidemic currently engulfing Indigenous communities” (p. 6).

Relationships and ceremony are at the very center and form the basis of Indigenous life. Indigenous centered social work - understanding the significance of relationships

founded in Indigenous epistemology - is a starting point in developing connections with Indigenous people. Wilson (2008) argues that academic research is a part of the Indigenous people's responsibility to create deeper understandings about Indigenous culture and ways of life. He also supports the Indigenous paradigm that knowledge is not owned or discovered but is merely a set of relationships within the Indigenous research paradigm. In *Nehiyaw iskwew kiskinowatasinahikewina-paminisowin namoya tipeyimisowin* (2007), Makokis shares her experience of coming to know and understand Indigenous epistemology through ceremonial teachings. As a social worker, understanding Indigenous ceremonies and purposes, and knowing what is required for healing are imperative to a decolonizing practice. Makokis (2007) explains that many Indigenous people practice their systems of knowledge and ways of being through language, teachings, stories, songs, and ceremonies. By practicing ceremonies Indigenous people are engaging in the deconstruction of colonization by calling on ancestors to remind them of the path they have created for the people.

It is the lived concept of "relational accountability" that ensures connections and belonging. In *Ethical Space of Engagement*, Ermine (2009, 2007 & 2000) describes the unspoken protocols of physical distance, observed silences, mental processes, the ability to experience other ways of knowing, doing and being, acknowledging differences in worldview, dress and lifestyle, mutual respect, reverence and material offerings. Within an ethical space, we discard many of our assumptions of what social work education that has taught us about 'cultural competence'. Most of what we have learned about a culture may be little more than a perpetuation of stereotypes (Sinclair, 2004). When presented out of context, holistic and Indigenous theories of social work practice and education may appear two dimensional with the complexity of the theories are often lost in language translations and "describing" the practices. For example, the often used "Medicine Wheel" appears to be a two-dimensional circle when drawn or viewed. However, the Medicine Wheel is a complex system of multiple dimensions based within the Indigenous worldview. Indigenous social work education must not offer reduced or simplified interpretations of highly complex theories.

The model proposed in the Indigenous MSW emphasizes educating students within a local context, as opposed to focusing on the global social work identity. The Indigenous Master of Social Work students were challenged to walk in two worlds. They were constantly challenged to break through their own colonized barriers and conventional paradigms through which they understood the world, in order to achieve a level of knowledge about Indigenous ways of knowing. They had to *experientially* learn how to integrate these ways of knowing into social work practice. The focus was on individual healing combined with collective learning within the context of Cree ceremony.

## Indigenous Research Methodology

Research and evaluation based within an Indigenous Research Methodology begins, occurs, and ends in ceremony. From this ceremonial place of centeredness, research comes from a place of humility and with respect, honesty and determination. The need for research and program evaluation from an Indigenous worldview is a movement against colonization, and is necessary because only through Indigenous methodologies can we fully understand the consequences of oppression and colonization – and it is only through Indigenous methodologies that we will understand the appropriate responses to oppression and colonization. Western models of research tend to not only reinforce the concepts and process of colonization; they may also exclude other methods of knowing and learning. Walker (2003) suggests that, "(a) growing number of Indigenous scholars maintain that valid research involving Indigenous people must be based in research paradigms that are congruent with Indigenous realities and ways of knowing" (p. 40). Baskin (2005) states that,

Gathering our own stories through Aboriginal research methodologies becomes our Indigenous medium. It involves how we gather our information, the stories we choose to tell, and how we communicate them. Indigenous research methodologies

also concern who does the gathering and communicating, for uppermost is the responsibility to anti-colonialism and the promotion of Aboriginal world views. (Baskin, 2005, p. 2)

The use of Indigenous Research Methodologies helps to ensure that the process and results of the study are useful to First Nations communities.

## Stories and Storytelling

Storytelling and story-listening provides insight into the distinct and sacred nature of Indigenous Research Methodology, data collection and data analysis. There is a relational process to storytelling and as suggested by Desmoulin (2006), when writing about Elder's stories, "stories do three things: orally convey cultural and personal experience through metaphorical language; set traditional practices known as traditional knowledge alongside narrative inquiry as complex understanding; and, opens up spaces of knowledge production within the academy of dialogue" (p. 122). It is in the process of storytelling and story-listening that we experience knowledge creation and understanding. The use of storytelling and listening as a conceptual framework towards reaching a deeper understanding of the lived experience of the social work program engages traditional First Nations knowledge-building approaches.

The equality and empowerment of being listened to in such a setting as the circle, gives voice to those who would not normally speak or otherwise express their true feelings. People are able to deal with their emotions and begin the process of letting go of past events. Respect for each person in the circle and especially the storyteller is the basis of storytelling as a knowledge building tool for Indigenous research and evaluation. (Berland et al, 2010, p. 36).

Story telling - and story interpretation – is inherently a subjective process. Every story is unique to the story-teller and is based within their reality and lived experience, as is also the interpretation of that story. The evaluation team strives to limit the potential level of subjectivity by using an inter-rater reliability process of independent interpretation combined with team-based analysis. Interpretation of the collected data is completed independently by various team members who then come together to create a synthesis of meaning. Ultimately, the validity of any program or organizational evaluation is determined by the participants, their sense of the "trueness" of the final report and by the final readers.

## Indigenous Research Methodology

Ceremony, Circle Process, and Relational Accountability seem to form the heart of an Indigenous Research Methodological approach. As stated in the *Blue Quills First Nations College Research Ethics Policy*:

Research is about seeking knowledge, about forming relationships with the ones who know, and the ethics that guide that search can only be understood in a spiritual context.... In ceremony, the ones who are learning, who are receiving teachings and knowledge, are *oskâpewisak ekwa oskîskwewak* this is the role of the researcher — the helper, the learner. They take direction from the ones with the knowledge. Once they have learned, their teacher will send them out to be a teacher, with a responsibility to carry the knowledge for future generations, and respecting the original practice, intent, and use. (p. 1)

Circle Process represents the heart of the research process. The circle is not a metaphor for understanding – it is an experience of understanding. It is only when all of the perspectives around the circle are brought together through open sharing and dialogue that we can truly

see and understand that which lies in the center of the circle. Relational accountability lies at the core of this research/evaluative process. First we create, form, and commit to relationships – these relationships define who we are. And it is these relationships to which we are held accountable – we are part of our research and everything we do must incorporate the principles of respect, reciprocity and responsibility.

## **Ceremony in Research and Evaluation**

Ceremony is understood “as our epistemology, our epistemological system, our way of knowing, our way of gaining knowledge; the method that we use to gain knowledge” (Makokis, 2005, p. 84). By aligning research with ceremony, core meanings of Indigeneity are brought to the surface. The research methodology is anchored in ancient ways of knowing including the Natural Laws and the Medicine Wheel. These ways of knowing are ways of “being and becoming” and flow through the research process in the context of day to day actions. “Not only do they have to go to ceremonies and pick up the knowledge but then they have to find a way to internalize the knowledge and turn it into a day-to-day lived experience” (Stewart, as cited in Makokis, 2005, p. 88).

Commitment to the transformative potential of the research is typically initiated in a pipe ceremony hosted by a traditional pipe carrier. The ceremonial pipe embodies the Natural Laws, thus intentionally invoking the Natural Laws into the research through ceremony. As suggested by Makokis (2005), “The bowl of the pipe is the rock (strength/determination), the stem comes from the tree (honesty), the sweetgrass (kindness) is used to light the pipe and the land/animals (sharing) are found within the pipe teaching itself.” (p. 46). Offerings of tobacco and cloth presented to the Elder during the pipe ceremony initiated the research process in a circle with members of the research team and research participants in attendance. With the sacred contract for the creation and transmission of knowledge sealed in a circle of ceremony, the research process continues in Circle Process with both research participants and the research team.

Sacred traditional ceremonial practices used in research invoke guidance and support from seen and unseen forces and spirits. Indigenous research and circle process makes faith an explicit part of the research process, intentionally welcoming and asking for complexity and depth of meaning, of surrender of the mind to the heart. Makokis (2001) states that “the journey starts from the mind to the heart” (cited in Makokis, 2005, p. 42). This place of surrender of the mind to the heart, of humility, of not knowing, is essential to Indigenous research methodology. There is a surrender to the greater knowing that is borne in the sacred transmission of knowledge through relationships embedded in the sacred circle.

## **Circle Process in Research and Evaluation**

Circle Process research is one way that Indigenous ways of knowing and being become manifest in action. Circle Process strives to make the unknown known through ceremony. Traditional iyiniw (first people, people of the land) knowledge systems are not objectively separate from life – they are embedded in life and the norms of being and knowing. As such, the Circle Process is a way of ‘being’ (as opposed to ‘doing’) research that manifests through ceremony. As a ceremonial process, Circle Process is fundamentally a transformative one (Schnarch, 2004) wherein the transformative impact of the circle research process touches all involved. Commitment to Circle Process is a subconscious and/or conscious commitment to the transformative potential of the research process.

Research participants are offered tobacco and cloth and then invited, literally or figuratively, to the circle. In the case of a literal circle, research participants are invited to a talking circle to share their stories around a guided topic after an opening prayer by an Elder. The circle process will proceed until it is felt that all has been covered. Sometimes this is one time; often this is two or three times around the circle (Makokis, 2005, p. 54).

In the case of a metaphoric circle, research participants are invited to the meaning of the circle, placing the item of scrutiny at the center of the circle. In this process, all vantage points to the object of scrutiny are invaluable. Circle process creates and transmits meaning through social construction connected intimately with action. Understanding is arrived at through communication, interaction, interpretation, ceremony, relationship, and negotiation – defined as the Circle Process.

The research team is subject to and works within the ceremonial circle process as well. Circle Process is transformative to the research team as researchers surrender to the potential transformation of personal beliefs and values. Circle Process is also manifest in the interpretation of the gathered stories where meaning is identified in a Circle Process of the research team which then later includes dissemination of the research findings to the circle of research participants.

### **Relational Accountability in Research and Evaluation**

Relationships are key in an Indigenous epistemology and ontology. Nothing exists outside of relationship. Knowledge does not and cannot exist without relationship between at least two beings. The relational aspect of Circle Process is vitally important. Without the relationships embedded in the circle, the knowledge cannot and does not exist. Attention to the sacredness of the relationships within the circle is tantamount. Ethical accountability in an Indigenous research methodology takes on a broader and deeper meaning to include accountability to the ancestors who transmitted the knowledge, to the participants in the circle process, to the larger community, and to future generations. Creation and transmission of knowledge is a sacred trust.

The concept of relational accountability is explored by Shawn Wilson (2008) in his book "[Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods](#)". Shawn is an Opaskwayak Cree from northern Manitoba and he suggests that "relationships don't just shape Indigenous reality, they are our reality" (p. 145). In our research we must be accountable to all of our relationships including our relationship to the Creator, the land and all living things. Relational accountability also speaks to the relationship of our ancestors and to the ones that come after us. Finally, it also pertains to the relationship between our friends, families and communities and to the relationship we have with ourselves. Shawn suggests that two Cree words form the basis of the concept of relational accountability. The first is "*otcinawin* (breaking of natural law)" (p.107). Simply put, "if one person deliberately mistreats other creatures, that action will invoke natural justice" (p.107). The second word is *pastahowin*, which means breaking the sacred law" (p.107). To summarize, humans "who are capable of knowing the difference, are accountable for all of their actions to all of their relations" (p.107). When we are working with people involved in our research and evaluation, we commit ourselves to the practice of relational accountability. We acknowledge that we will not work in isolation and that our approach is one that will be respectful of all our relations.

These three principles (Ceremony, Circle Process, and Relational Accountability) form the framework of the research process and, ultimately, should be visible in the final recommendations. Incorporating the results of research into the day-to-day operations of an agency, institution or program "closes" the Circle and acknowledges each participant's relational role within the evaluative process. Finally, the project should end as it begins – in the context of ceremony.

### **Understanding the Stories**

Each member of the Research Team autonomously reviewed the collected stories and determined themes. These themes were then shared (in ceremony) between the team members to explore commonalities and differences in understandings and interpreted meanings. Common themes and unique understandings were extensively explored in conjunction with an appreciation of the unique aspects of Indigenous culture, history, and context.



Participants were requested to consider the MSW program at the center of the circle and to share their perspectives and understandings from their unique point of view from around the circle. At the center of the Medicine Wheel is “balance, connection, and holism” (Hart, 2002). Thus, considering the program at the center is an attempt to assess where it is balanced, centered, connected, and whole and where it may have challenges in those areas. For an experience of balance, centeredness, connectedness, and holism, that which is at the center needs to hold equally the four aspects of physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual wellness.

In using the Medicine Wheel as part of Circle Process, the research team members make different connections and observations relative to wellness in the four aspects. Similarly, we are aware that each member of the research team brings their own unique balance of wellness that both impacts and is impacted by each of the four aspects. Therefore, an additional component of the research process is to consider and discuss how participation in this research has impacted each of us individually and as a team.

## Description of Program

All students admitted to this program had previously completed an undergraduate degree in Social Work from an accredited university. As in the campus-based urban program, these MSW students had to complete ten required courses:

1. Research I (Quantitative Research Methods)
2. Research II (Qualitative & Indigenous Research Methodology)
3. Social Work Methods I
4. Social Work Methods II
5. Diversity and Oppression in Social Work
6. Social Policy Along with two Option Courses
7. Rebuilding Person/Place Connections
8. First Nations Healing Practices and two community-based Field Placements totaling 600 hours
9. Field Instruction/practicum
10. Field Instruction/practicum

However, in addition to the accredited program provided in collaboration with the University of Calgary, these students were expected to also complete two “Professional Development Opportunities” that were fully focused on social work with First Nations and Métis peoples.

1. Entry and Exit Camps: these were two four-day land-based cultural camps at the beginning and the end of the program. The Entry Camp allowed the cohort to meet together prior to the program to create relationships and to participate in ceremony to begin the program. The Exit Camp allowed for the cohort to complete basic course work expectations and to conclude the program as a cohort and, again, to end in ceremony.
2. Cree and Métis Language and Identity: This four-day Block Course was language-based and focused on the understanding, meaning, and creation of Indigenous identity.

Finally, students participated in all of the seasonal ceremonies based within the *nehiyaw* (Cree) community including Sweat lodges, Give-Away ceremonies, Four-Fire Ceremonies, and various Culture Camps. In all, the program was highly demanding of students and expected a full commitment to the ideals and goals of the program. While only the ten basic courses were mandatory, in the end, the entire cohort participated on all of the courses, the Professional Development Opportunities, and the various ceremonies and events. Early in the program, at Entry Camp, the students had identified that this was not a program of competi-

tion. Rather, they identified that if they worked collaboratively and cooperatively, they could succeed as a group. This approach also seemed to fit better within the Indigenous worldview.

## Unique Features of the Program

### Location

The location of the program at BQFNC was important and students stated that had this program not been delivered at BQFNC, they would not have been able to participate. Many students indicated they were not able to relocate families or leave permanent positions to attend the MSW program at an urban center (Edmonton or Calgary). The ability to choose and participate in the set-up of meaningful practicums within the students' own communities was also important both to the communities and the students. This provided extended support both for community-based agencies and students.

Location of the program proved to be meaningful at a deeper level as well. Many of the students (and instructors and Elders) felt that the geographical and physical location of BQFNC and the surrounding land helped shaped the MSW program at a spiritual level. The 'place' and the spiritual significance of its history differentiated the program from urban delivery in the context of an Indigenous worldview where connection to ancestors is a conscious daily lived experience. Ceremonies performed on the land allowed for a connection to these ancestors – providing both direction and a sense of purpose to graduates. In this way, the embedded spirit and wisdom of this program is not replicable in other contexts as the connection graduates have to land and ancestors is relative to their geographic history and Cree culture. Had this program been run in a different Indigenous context, the cultural components (i.e. Elders, songs, teachings) would have necessarily been very different.

### History

There were some students who attended the MSW program who also had attended Blue Quills while it was still Blue Quills Residential School - and many had parents or grandparents who attended the Residential School. Students who either attended the Residential School as children or who had parents or grandparents who attended the Residential School felt that each day they attended the MSW classes, they were reminded of the importance of being successful (relational accountability) to those who lost their voices, suffered or died in this place. They felt that the program as an opportunity to both de-colonize themselves and to engage in a healing process from the impact of intergenerational trauma. They understood the program as an opportunity to reclaim who they were as Indigenous people "in this place" and to reclaim what was lost as a result of the emotional, cultural, spiritual and physical oppression experienced at Residential school. The history of the community, the geographical space of BQFNC itself, and the teachings and ceremonies within the MSW program created a space for healing and resolution. The fact that almost all of the classes – and all of the ceremonies – were held on the land was an essential component of the program.

### Associated Benefits

One other unique component of the program deserves mention. The existence of the program allowed the creation of a number of other projects and events that would not have occurred without the graduate program. For example, the Alberta Centre for Child, Family & Community Research contracted BQFNC and the MSW students to research, document, and present material regarding successful practices in Child Welfare with First Nations and Métis children. The initial presentation was done on-site at BQFNC in the context of ceremony and subsequent presentations have been used to inform changes within the Child Welfare system at all levels. In another instance, an entire edition of a refereed Australian Journal was dedicated to articles written by students in the program. Additionally, the existence of the program at BQFNC has supported the creation of a Research Team at BQFNC that has submitted a number of research proposals relevant to the processes of de-colonization and healing.

Other important “side” benefits include an increase in community capacity in the areas of research and knowledge transfer and providing sustainability for the research arm of BQFNC. For example, through the program and additional funding, students and team members were involved in a genealogy project collecting and documenting oral knowledge of historical relationships and families in the nearby First Nations community of Saddle Lake. Other students developed teaching modules addressing historical issues of colonization and assimilation from a social work perspective and presented those modules at numerous social work courses in Alberta. The program has had far reaching consequences over and above the main goal of providing an appropriate social work education for people working in First Nations and Métis communities.

Other elements unique to a program of this nature, and dissimilar to urban versions, include the following.

1. Program Administration and Ceremony: Even though the program was collaboration between the University of Calgary and Blue Quills First Nations College, the students needed to be, for degree purposes, identified as University of Calgary students. The agreement between the two institutions stated that academic and non-academic misconduct issues were required to be evaluated in reference to the University Calendar, which would set the expectations and standards. The coordinator of the program, although a U of C employee, had partnered with BQFNC for over 11 years coordinating the delivery of the BSW at BQFNC and was trusted by the College to coordinate the MSW on behalf of the college. In exploring the relationship between administration and ceremony, the experience of the program coordinator is particularly revealing. The coordinator participated in the initial Entry Camp Ceremony with the students, however, in consultation with the Elders, elected not to participate in any further ceremonies with the students until the conclusion of the program, two years later. Participating in ceremony with others is a relational experience, and fundamentally alters how you relate to those with whom you have shared ceremony. The University Calendar is not a relational document (this is not a negative thing – it is what it has to be). It would be impossible in the context of this program for a coordinator who has shared ceremony to enforce university expectations: especially the negative consequences when expectations are not met.
2. Administration and Circle Process: The Faculty of Social Work agreed, however, to the addition in each course outline of a description of an “Alternative Dispute Resolution Process” that would provide students, at their choice, with an alternative method to resolve any concerns. While, in the case of any unresolvable disagreement, the University Calendar would be the final arbiter, students were given the option to enter into Circle Process to resolve the issue. The guidelines for the Circle process were borrowed directly from the Blue Quills First Nations Ethics Approval Guide and are in full accordance with a First Nations worldview and resolution process.
3. Admission to the Program: There was an overload of applications for the program and the admission process became one of determining which applicants were willing to commit to a two year process and which applicants stood the best chance of completing the program successfully. On-campus, applicants undergraduate Grade Point Average (GPA) plays a significant role in determining eligibility for a graduate program. For this program, we were able to individually interview each applicant, go through the program with them in detail, and determine their readiness and commitment. Previous GPA is not the most reliable indicator for future success with Indigenous students. Past experiences, life stages, history, and issues such as a trans-generational trauma must be taken into consideration.

4. Convocation: The University of Calgary, the registrar's office, and The Faculty of Graduate Studies agreed, for the first time in the University history, to confer degrees off-campus at the BQFNC convocation ceremony. Every Convocation ceremony requires the students to recite a Pledge. In this case, permission was given for the graduating MSW students to re-write the Convocation Pledge in a manner more culturally appropriate for the program. The MSW pledge recognizes that knowledge is not owned and that the seven teachings are the core of an Indigenous education. A copy of the pledge is at the end of this article.
5. Cultural Relevance: Most campus-based programs include courses that focus on providing cross-cultural teachings for non-indigenous students. In the case of the MSW, the program was able to provide Cultural Teachings, education that was based within the cultural context of the Cree worldview and required the full engagement and participation of all the students.
6. Course Timing: As many of the courses included traditional teachings and were linked to traditional ceremony, the timing of classes was an important consideration. In the Cree worldview, specific teachings and stories can only occur at certain times of the year and sharing those teachings at the wrong seasonal time is to invite disaster. In the case of the MSW, the decision to cover a particular set of teachings resulted in an unusual late-summer snowfall.
7. Ceremonies: The seasonal progression of ceremonies and teachings were a vital component to the program. Students not only participated in the ceremonies, they were directly involved in building the lodges for the ceremonies and sharing in the teachings behind the ceremonies. Some of the ceremonies included the following: the Sweat Lodge, Give-away, Pipe, Four-Fire, Shaking Tent, Healing Lodge, Fasting, Medicine Bundle, Sun Dance, Pow Wow, Story Telling, Grass Dance, Chicken Dance, Horse Dance, Story Telling, Elders Teachings, Trickster Stories, Songs, Drums, Drum-Making, Rattle-Making, Art, Spiritual Connection to Land,
8. Graduation Requirements: Most on-campus programs require graduate-level students to complete a final project – usually an individually written essay linked to a verbal presentation/defense component. Often, after the verbal defense, students are asked to leave the room while the examining committee decides if the student has met the expectations adequately. In the case of the BQFNC MSW, and in accordance to the lived experience within an Indigenous context, permission was given for students to collaborate in common interest areas to produce capstone projects exploring specific areas of social work education and practice in Indigenous communities. In addition, at the conclusion of the program and the capstone projects, students were individually required to come before a council of Elders. While in ceremony, the students were then required to present what they had learned to the council and explain how they were going to take their learning back into the community.
9. Funding: One other significant difference between the on-campus program and this MSW was the funding arrangement. In Alberta, education funding is provided through the province and Advanced Education and Technology (AET). In this case, and for the first time in history, AET funding was provided directly to the College for a degree program. It was recognized that, for the program to have full validity, the funding needed to be held by the Indigenous Institution.

10. Student Support: Adequate funding also allowed the program to provide a wide range of student support. First, there was full-time on-site student support provided from the application/admission stage right through to the convocation. Support was provided in a number of areas including admission documents, instructor support, computer access, research, data-base training, ceremonies, etc. Other supports provided included a program therapist (research into colonization and assimilation had a strong personal impact on many of the students), a writing coach (providing APA format training), and program Elders. In addition, funding provided for the creation of a program specific website designed to meet the needs of this group of students.

## Student Experience Specific to an Indigenous Program

### Relational Accountability

Relational accountability was a pivotal concept within the program and contributed to the realization of the need to be personally successful in the program for the sake of future generations. Relational Accountability also created a sense of collective responsibility to the larger group. Because the program opened in ceremony and closed in ceremony, there was a strong belief that the program's success was inevitable. One student stated, "We cannot fail with ceremony and the Creator as part of process." The students felt a high degree of responsibility to make sure this program was successful for others, including classmates and future generations while many students understood the relational accountability they felt to their classmates to finish the program. In western institutions, the meaning of being successful is often based on individual responsibility. In this program, success was defined in terms of the collective; the honor of one was the honor of all. One student stated "It's not about grades. It was about learning culture, sharing and our accountability to each other". The students participated in the context of equal relationships, a non-hierarchical context, and a lived experience of inclusion. This strong sense of collectiveness was the driving force that kept students motivated and determined.

### Transformative Learning

Another key experience centered on the students own feelings of health and wellness in terms of feeling grounded and whole due the spiritual and cultural component of the program. The spiritual and cultural component had extremely positive effects in students' personal and professional lives. Many commented on the personal growth they experienced and it was not uncommon to hear things like, "This program changed my life." Many students experienced a high degree of personal healing through the ceremonies, sweat lodges, and other cultural gatherings. For the MSW students, education and healing were not viewed as separate entities as there was a pervasive belief that education *should* be a healing experience. One student stated, "We have a responsibility to be as healthy as possible and that's why education needs all four components (of the Medicine Wheel)...this program unified me as a spirit and brought me to wholeness." Another stated that "participating and learning ceremony was a reinforced way of learning traditional *iyiniw* (First People) values and knowledge." Ceremony permeated every part of the students' lives and relationships. One student stated, "Ceremony *is relationship*." Ceremony seemed to connect the students to their 'life force.' It connected students to lost loved ones and ancestors which was very powerful and healing for all involved, symbolically mirroring the collectiveness of the group and essentially taught relational accountability. One student affirmed, "Ceremony *is love*."

### Ceremony

All groups involved in the program (i.e. students, teachers, Elders) believed that by incorporating Ceremony, the spirit world became part of the program. One student stated that "ceremony allowed us to honor and respect the spirit world." Many felt that the program

was a process of spiritual growth. Several students reported a positive overwhelming sense of spiritual feelings that can't be explained or forgotten. The spiritual teachings became a part of many of the student's lives and they felt that their presence in the program was fate, destined by the spirit world. One student stated, "We are not in control. The Creator knows our paths." Another stated that she had "come to the realization that we cannot control everything in our lives and in our world; that is not our teachings. *miyo pimâtisiwin* (the good life) is not about material things or pleasing others, it's about trusting the spirit world." A strong sense of *purpose* resulted from these spiritual 'signs' or messages which were experienced by many of the students throughout the program. The program initiated a newfound sense of inner spirit or spiritual awakening in almost all of the students. One student commented, "Learning was done through mind and spirit simultaneously; this connection was powerful."

Many students talked about the strong relationships between classmates, with faculty and Elders. A strong sense of collective connectedness was identified. One student summarized this common theme when she stated, "Ceremony and my relationships to my classmates kept me coming back to class when I wanted to quit; there are no words to describe this spiritual journey. It's similar to how you feel in ceremony: you must experience it to understand."

### **Relationships**

Importance of relationships became extremely apparent from the interviews. The program was influential not only in terms of relationships between students, but also in personal and professional relationships. Many reported that the teachings they were learning permeated into their family life, resulting in healthier lifestyles or the decision to end unhealthy lifestyles. One student stated, "It was more than a program or course; it was a program that taught life lessons through traditional knowledge." The program was life changing for almost all of the students and all reported that they had newfound strengths, confidence, and the ability to make positive changes in their own lives and in their communities. There was a sense of transformational change. Many stated that it was the best academic experience they have had in their lives. One student stated, "This program allowed me to be who I am as a *nehiyaw iskwew* (Cree woman)."

### **Culture, Identity, Language**

The program allowed for reclamation of culture and identity and many students felt it gave them the power to find their 'voice'. One student stated in metaphoric terms that "This education is our buffalo." – suggesting that the resources once provided by the buffalo (food, housing, clothing) are now provided by education. The students learned new ways of knowing and thinking that challenged students and pushed their boundaries to find innovative ways of addressing issues within their communities and workplaces. One student states, "The program nurtured the gifts we all bring to the program as *nehiyaw* people. We *can* walk in two worlds." The program was also a sense of confirmation of the knowledge and gifts the students brought into the program. A student suggested, "I know my people and I have and I bring knowledge. It reaffirmed our values, our traditional knowledge and our ancestors."

The use of Cree language within the program and the opportunity to learn Cree for many was a strong component of program that was seen as healing. Students were empowered to use and speak *nehiyawewin*, especially during the *Cree Language and Identity* course. Ceremonies were also conducted in the *nehiyaw* language. To Elders and students, the *nehiyaw* language is a spiritual language. Dr. Makokis explains, "through ceremony - embedded in language - we gain a sense of purpose for living...language is our 'moral compass'. The ability to speak an indigenous language is an indispensable part of our identity, as these languages convey a sense of distinctiveness, a sense of responsibility, and a sense of spiritual relationship to the universe." (Makokis, 2000)

Being able to learn and practice *nehiyaw* and Métis culture also allowed for cultural reclamation and resulted in a stronger sense of identity for many. A recurring theme

of personal healing due to cultural learning's and experiences within the program was universal for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. The program provided time and 'space' for students to heal and allowed non-Indigenous students to not feel 'guilty' about colonization throughout the learning process. One student stated that the incorporation of culture was a necessity as "we must know who we are through our own culture, so we are able to help our communities." This was a strong theme that emerged in many interviews with both students and Elders. The traditional teachings were based on all parts of our humanness (the four parts) of *nehiyawiak* people.

Having the support from Elders was a key aspect and important part of the program, according to all students. They provided students with traditional Indigenous teachings, song, prayers, and other healing practices. Students had access to various traditional healing practices and could approach the Elders for support. Many described the Elders of the program as 'gentle' or 'humble'. The strong and revered relationships with, and between, students and Elders was astounding. Many students felt that the *nehiyaw kiskeyitimowina* (Cree knowledge) taught by Elders was equally as important as the academic material – if not more important!

### **Student Experience Specific to the Indigenous MSW Program**

At the beginning of the program at Blue Quills, one urban "on-campus" MSW student transferred into the MSW at Blue Quills. Although having already completed most of the first year of the two year program, the student felt strongly compelled to transfer and, if necessary, was willing to redo certain courses in order to experience the full BQFNC program. Having had the direct comparative experience, the student is in the singular position of being able to relate, from the "inside", the comparative differences between the two programs. She has agreed to share her experience.

*To honor the teachings of traditional knowledge holders and indeed my own learning, I offer this experience in first-person terms. Giving 'voice' to this experience is the ethical way to share this lived experience.*

*I have the unique experience of being in two different learning environments while achieving my MSW. I began my MSW in the on-campus "urban" program because, at the time, there were no other options. When the opportunity to learn in a rural setting materialized, I quickly made my transition to the rural learning environment. While I successfully completed one year of my MSW in an on-campus program I cannot say that I truly connected to the material or the people...at least not to the same degree that I did in the off-campus program!*

*Of paramount importance is that I repeated (relived) the first year of the two-year program. Little or nothing was the same in the way that I connected to the material and the people in my second year! The class room had a unique vibration...it felt alive. The syllabus, the texts, the instructors and the environment were all different. In the on-campus program, education came in 30 or so students and one professor. The off-campus Indigenous program offered 25 learners, an instructor and an Elder in every class. The environment was non-hierarchal. Learning suddenly was more attainable and accessible; our MSW more meaningful. The opportunity to learn was steeped in gentleness, guidance and the potential of success. The connection to 'something and someone' was a class room environment affirmation. The lived experience is that neither I (nor any of my class colleagues) were ever alone in this journey.*

*Social work as a profession honors systems. Western social work operates from a paradigm that observes or honors external systems such as families, agencies, or government(s). Indigenous social work works within system it is a profession of person, of place and of space. The distinct result is in my social work "heart". I have the guidance of external mentors and I have the responsibility of my own internal moral compass!*

*It was a gift to have the opportunity to do the same thing in two different places. To fit with the material is a social work goal. From the first moment of the Entry Camp, the stage was set for invitations to learn within context. The invitation was to develop relationships; with one's self, with each other, with knowledge holders (both Western and Indigenous) and with the cosmos.*

*It has been a gift to learn in both paradigms and in both places. Both the Indigenous and the Western paradigms had profound impact upon me; each for their own unique features. Where each varies is in their unique philosophies and pedagogies. Each is valuable. As Elder George Bretton shared, 'we have to find a way to transmit what we know....sharing stories in writing may be the way to bridge worlds'. Sharing stories (traditional wisdom) is the Indigenous way. Writing is the Western way. Ermine terms this as 'bridging the ethical space'; it is that space where two cultures prepare to engage with one another (2007).*

*Given this teaching, it is my axiological obligation to share my lived experience. It is my responsibility to demonstrate respect for those who shared their knowledge with me and for those who may wish to learn what I have come to know. In accepting the invitation to share my lived experience, I am making space for others to consider this way of learning. The choice to attend BQFNC to earn my MSW came intuitively; I this knew to be the right thing to do. From there began this marvelous journey that resulted in "learning" rather than "education".*

*It should be noted that I am not an Indigenous woman, however, an aspect never needed to be addressed in this context was 'how does a non-Indigenous woman fit into such a place, continue to walk with understanding and enact the lived experience every day in gentle practice? The answer gently came in story, as traditional wisdom shares, 'in the beginning, we were all one'. There was no separation, no segregation and no oppression. The teaching shares that 'in the beginning, we were all one...loved, included and the same'.*

*I came to a deep understanding of teachings through ceremony and the engagement in the process of going to Spirit. This immersion allowed me to connect within the class room, to class colleagues and to gentle practice. I found a place where love and gentleness was the accepted and indeed the expected foundation of good social work practice. In the class room and enacted through ceremony, I heard repeatedly and learned quickly that there was little space between learner and teacher. In the Indigenous way, both learn from the other. Each has something to learn; each has something to teach. The responsibility inherent in this reciprocity bonds the learner and the teacher at a visceral level. Once I learned that I was both learner and teacher, it became impossible to live or practice in any other way. My experience at BQ allowed me to connect at that 'we are all one' level. Once this occurs, then connectedness is possible.*

*As a result of this lived experience, evidence of my connectedness and groundedness manifests in that I have a multitude of endearing relationships that exist every day. I live and work in both the Indigenous and Western worlds. I have a connection to the people and colleagues, Elders and Spirit of both worlds, all of these connections come together and manifest in my practice! From the grounding, I learned of relationships. Reciprocity assures that these grounded relationships will carry on for generations. I operate with a deep sense of responsibility to and respect for those who have shared their knowledge and wisdom with me. This responsibility and respect is not enforced or forced externally. It comes from a place deep within my professional soul. Now that I know, I cannot practice in any other way. It just does not seem possible. For me; there is no other way. Social work can be and is a gentle profession. This is the way of a grounded professional and a grounded profession.*

*The MSW at BQ had an Indigenous grounding and was richly steeped in ceremony, protocol and teachings. Often, people who live outside of the urban areas seem to be unique in their connection to the land (to place). This groundedness asks for an approach that is connected... respecting where people come from and what they value. Respectful practice demands an ethical approach. A foundational pillar of social work is to 'start where the person is'. Having this fundamental understanding of the vitality in connection is an ethical way to work.*



*The difference between the on-campus program and the grounded, lived experience of BQ was Spirit; it was the encouraging and welcoming connection of the cosmos; and, ultimately in all endearing relationships. Relationship with all levels of existence set the course for a good life and ethical practice. However, I truly believe that both the Indigenous and the Western paradigms and pedagogies are necessary. We need both to bridge the ethical space in social work learning.*

## **Discussion**

Intention, spirit, and planning were woven into creating the web of support for the students to succeed in the MSW at BQFNC and various players spun different aspects of the web. Elders were intentional about spirituality and culture being foundations to the academic program; BQFNC invoked relational accountability in various forms and directions to own and direct the program; University of Calgary instructors and support staff were flexible and receptive to learning and transformation related to the Indigenous worldview. The success of the BQFNC MSW program and the 24 Indigenous, Métis, and non-Indigenous graduates is distinct and unique.

BQFNC is a reclaimed residential school and is thus literally and metaphorically emblematic of the radical transformation that touched all those involved with this program. Elders commented on witnessing the transformation of the students to reclaim their voices, culture, and identity. Instructors commented on the centered, empowered, balanced, and congruent students. The students were regarded as having a high degree of commitment, responsibility, resilience, and capability.

Relational accountability was one of the strongest and most frequently recognized focal point of the program. The students recognized themselves as a collective whose will it was to move forward and to create positive change within their communities. The relational connections to the community of lost loved ones and ancestors, to future generations, the land, the Elders, the Spirit World, Mother Earth, and the Universe were strong and intentional. The depth of practice of relational accountability left a huge impression on all involved in the program. School and life, personal and professional were not distinct and separate in this program and this practice of congruence deeply touched many. Witnessing and participating in a sacred learning environment transformed not only the students, but also instructors and support staff. Transformation was also recognized to be happening simultaneously and consequently in the present, past, and future families and communities attached to each of the students in the cohort. Seeing the ripple effect of this program in Indigenous communities inspired many of the students.

The formal and informal, concrete and invisible supports to the students ensured the success of this program and this cohort of students. As one student commented, the program started in ceremony, finished in ceremony, and cannot fail with ceremony. The depth of faith supporting this program is inexpressible. Tangible supports that were crucial included structures that not only enabled but encouraged students to bring their personal struggles forward to each other, the teachers, and the support staff. Oppression and the internalized residue of oppression were centrally addressed. The program needed to provide a safe haven in which students were supported in dealing with oppression and the importance of effective emotional and spiritual supports was clear.

As a final “chapter” to this program, the case studies completed by the students have been incorporated, along with the program evaluation, and a forward by Dr. Leona Makokis into a textbook for future students and programs. The chapters and the authors are listed below. BQFNC has chosen to self-publish this text as a statement of support for the graduates and the program and it is available through Blue Quills First Nations College.

- Chapter 1. MÂMAWOH KAMÂTOWIN (Working Together in the Community) Marilyn Sparklingeyes, Sandra Youngchief, Tracey Makokis, Donna Large, & Sharon Steinhauer
- Chapter 2. ISKE EWAK EKWA SAKIHITOWIN (Women and Intimacy) Wanda Swan, Louise Gadwa, Carol Melnyk-Poliakowski, & Cindy Nelson-Dumont
- Chapter 3. TRAUMA AND IYINIW PEOPLE  
Claudia Berland, Wanda Cardinal-Stone, Derek Chewka & Mary Shroeder-Prince
- Chapter 4. OUR WOMEN, OUR MOTHERS, OUR GRANDMOTHERS  
Denise D. Steinhauer, Margo C. Vermillion (Piyesiw e-apit iskwew), Gail Collins (Mihko Piyesiw iskwew), & Ginny Collins
- Chapter 5. FOUR 'OTHER WAYS OF KNOWING' BUILDING A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION  
Nadia Bourque, Alexandra Rattlesnake, Taunya Frank, & Monique Lefebvre Sundlie
- Chapter 6. TRAUMA, BRAIN DEVELOPMENT, ADDICTIONS AND TRADITIONAL HEALING PRACTICES  
Amber Dion & Connie Morin

An attitude and environment of unconditional belonging and acceptance with relational accountability were felt qualities of ceremony in this program. Many felt chosen by the Spirit World to enter the program. There was a common awareness and recognition of spiritual 'signs,' messages, and/or guidance from the Spirit World throughout the program and the Spirit World is now regarded as part of social work practice for many students.

It would be important to note that this article is not intended as a "model" for an Indigenous social work program. It is, however, important that traditional "mainstream" institutions recognize some aspects of the depth and breadth of the difference – of what is essential for Indigenous social work education that may or may not exist in other programs. In the larger context of Indigenous social work education and practice, the program described here is only a step in a particular direction. In the near future, there must be fully Indigenous programs, run by and delivered by institutions such as Blue Quills First Nations College and at the undergraduate, graduate, and Ph.D. levels. These programs should be open to all, regardless of ancestry, as we (non-Indigenous people) have much to learn from our friends. As the Elders state, it is prophesied that the Indigenous people will come to teach the rest of the world what we need to know to survive.

Hai Hai

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## Translation of passage at beginning of article

Greetings to all; I give thanks to Our Creator, the great mystery, our grandfathers and grandmothers and all those who have been involved in making the delivery of the Master of Social Work program at Blue Quills First Nations College possible. This could not have happened without the vision of our leaders of the 1970's, as well it is in the belief in ourselves, that we can collectively make the delivery the Master of Social Work in our community a reality. We are grateful to Advanced Education for their financial support and the University of Calgary for collaborating in this very important venture. We also thank all those students who applied to the program and who will make this program a success.

The staff of Blue Quills First Nations College and community elders is acknowledged for their hard work in bringing this into reality; they will be there to support the program in every way possible. This program will be different because we will have our iyiniw mamitoneyihcikan (Cree knowledge) incorporated in the studies along with the mainstream theories. This is the wishes of our people. Today, my heart is fulfilled, ekosi pitamâ.  
Dr. Leona Makokis, President, Blue Quills First Nations College

## **Convocation Pledge**

As graduates of the University of Calgary at Blue Quills First Nations College, wherever the Creator may take us, we share our knowledge and experience for the well-being of our communities and all life.

We take responsibility for our actions and we are accountable to our relationships.

We commit to life-long learning and kiskinohamâtowin (reciprocal learning within relationships).

We strive to strengthen our communities by honouring the seven teachings: sâkihitowin (*love*), kisteyihtamowin (*respect*), sôhkeyihtamowin (*courage*), kwayaskwâtisiwin (*honesty*), pimameyimowin (*humility*), kakehtaweyimowin (*wisdom*), and tâpwewin (*truth*).

We honour our University, our College, our traditional knowledge keepers and all others who have shared their wisdom with us.

In all our relationships we walk as people of honour and humility ever seeking miyo-pimâtisiwin (*the good life, a life of peace and harmony*).

ekôma e-tâpowakeyihitamahk. This is our truth.