

## **The power of partnering: Offering a culturally relevant BSW program to Inuit students in Labrador**

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**Abstract:** The authors review the process and development leading to the creation and completion of a Bachelor of Social Work program offered by Memorial University of Newfoundland to Inuit students based in Labrador. The program was developed in partnership with the Nunatsiavut government and aided by the Labrador Institute. This is a successful example of engagement by a university with an Indigenous self-government territory – an example of indigenizing practices that worked.

The Nunatsiavut Government, a regional Inuit government in Newfoundland and Labrador, identified a need for social workers in its communities through a needs assessment that highlighted difficulties in recruitment and retention of social workers in Nunatsiavut. The Nunatsiavut Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP), which facilitates access to education through funding and support for Nunatsiavut beneficiaries, was tasked to engage with a university to develop a social work program which was to be offered entirely in Happy Valley-Goose Bay (HVGB). However, initial explorations were unsuccessful in finding a partner who could meet the expectations of the Nunatsiavut Government in relation to having a comfortable level of control and influence over the program. The Government's commitment to upholding the principle of controlling their own destiny led to the PSSSP department approaching Memorial University of Newfoundland to explore the possibility of partnering for a social work program.

A rapid and intense three-month planning period occurring within an Aboriginal government-university partnership led to the implementation of a Bachelor of Social Work program for Inuit students in Labrador. Thirty eight students applied, were screened, and thirty two were admitted to the university to commence pre-social work courses which were offered in winter and spring of 2010. Nineteen students were admitted to the Social Work program and commenced their studies in Happy Valley-Goose Bay, Labrador in fall of 2010. The students who were accepted into the program were all beneficiaries of the Nunatsiavut Land Claims Agreement. The program was offered by the School of Social Work, MUN with the Nunatsiavut government as the funder. The design and implementation occurred with support and input from the Nunatsiavut PSSSP, Nunatsiavut Government, Memorial University administration, academic units and programs, the Labrador Institute of Memorial University, and with assistance from the College of the North Atlantic.

It is clear to those involved in the program planning and delivery that creating a culturally relevant program was achieved because Inuit-specific principles, beliefs, communication styles, and approaches to partnering were infused into all aspects of the program including the course content. Nunatsiavut's main goal was to have social work graduates with a degree enabling them to work with both Inuit and non-Inuit populations. The government also emphasized the expectation that all graduates would be competent professionals who met all the standards of an accredited social work program. Nunatsiavut insisted that the program be delivered in a manner that avoided reproducing practices that have sometimes arisen as a result of colonization. This article describes the ways in which the planning process and program content were designed to respond to Inuit cultural needs while maintaining the mainstream BSW program as the core.

### Planning

Nunatsiavut PSSSP identified goals and obtained funding prior to approaching the School of Social Work in October of 2009. They were seeking a program that would be offered in Labrador primarily in a classroom format. They requested the existing Bachelor of Social Work program with the inclusion of Inuit cultural content. The School of Social Work faculty and staff initially wondered if existing Aboriginal social work programs in other provinces might be a better fit for Inuit students. However, it was quickly determined that Nunatsiavut officials had already considered their options and were in the best position to determine their needs.

The preparation for the offering of pre-social work courses occurred between October 2009 and January 2010. This process required the university to work much more quickly than usual to design the program outline and obtain commitment from the various schools, faculties and units that contribute to a degree program. This was achieved due to the commitment of the university community to find ways to make it happen. The planning was effective partly because of the establishment of trusting relationships within which people were content to proceed without having all the planning questions answered. Relationship building was essential at all levels and was especially important between the School's faculty and staff and the PSSSP staff.

The planning process was also aided by the cooperative approach established by the university administration and Nunatsiavut government officials. These bureaucracies vested the responsibility and accountability for the program with the School of Social Work and PSSSP. These programs in turn identified lead people who regularly engaged in transparent communication and collaborative planning. The type and frequency of communication responded to Nunatsiavut's expectation of honesty, sharing and respect and its preference for consensus-based decision making (Nunatsiavut Government 2012). These expectations were readily met by the School which upholds similar values as reflected in the social work Code of Ethics (Canadian Association of Social Workers 2005).

The School's faculty and staff were made aware of the need for in-person contact with Nunatsiavut staff in order to engage in effective planning. Meetings were held in St. John's and Labrador to meet this need. School personnel also quickly acknowledged their need for guidance in relation to cultural matters in order to create a culturally sensitive program. This acknowledgement, which reflected Nunatsiavut's valuing of respect, proved to be a fundamental factor in relationship building (Nunatsiavut Government, 2012).

A steering committee comprised of representatives from the Nunatsiavut Department of Health and Social Development (HSD), Nunatsiavut PSSSP, the School of Social Work and the Labrador Institute of Memorial University oversaw program development and delivery. These representatives were instrumental in ensuring that challenges were met with efficient responses by respective organizations. They also monitored the progress of the program in relation to the official agreement between the university and the government.

The School also created an internal planning committee and designated a coordinator to address any issues and routine operations that were outside the usual matters addressed by existing school structures. This new layer of planners was accommodated within the School structure in recognition of the complexity of working with another culture on a program in a remote location.

The Labrador Institute staff provided their insights on the factors important in offering a program to Inuit students in Labrador. Staff also agreed to facilitate identification of local instructors who could quickly be available to teach in the program. The Institute also committed to providing space for instructor offices

and providing consultation as needed. The Labrador Institute's Associate Director served on both the planning and steering committees.

### **Modifying university procedures to foster cultural sensitivity**

A number of procedures were modified to achieve a more culturally sensitive experience for students as well as create program content that provided more than the basic social work program. These modifications are outlined below.

The social work admission process was modified to enable students identified by PSSSP to complete the social work program prerequisites with the understanding that those who could be considered for admission would be competing for 20 seats reserved for this group only. The competition for seats occurred only among these students. Applicants were also permitted to apply based on the completion of 24 of the required 30 prerequisite hours with the agreement that the remaining six credit hours would be completed as a graduation requirement. All other admission requirements remained unchanged. The criteria and process for assessing applicants were those applied to all applicants to the four-year BSW program.

The application process involves a written exam. The exam for the Nunatsiavut students was created with input from Aboriginal social workers. The process was also modified to include an oral as well as the usual written admission exam. This acknowledged the oral traditions within Inuit culture. The oral exams were administered by school faculty and local Inuit social workers with the understanding that the Inuit social workers could interpret culturally embedded communication styles that might be unclear to those outside the culture. The written and oral exams were developed and scored in collaboration with Inuit social workers.

The Social Work program is normally offered only in fall and winter semesters. This schedule did not fit well for Nunatsiavut students who were being funded to be in school and would have no source of income for part of the year if the two semester system was applied. PSSSP also advised that students would have an improved chance of success if they were able to do four rather than five courses whenever feasible to do so. Therefore, the program was designed to be offered over three semesters each year with the students doing four courses in each of seven semesters and completing five courses during each of three semesters.

The selection of social work and non-social work elective courses occurred as a consultative process involving Nunatsiavut PSSSP, the Labrador Institute and the School. Whenever possible courses were chosen that had direct relevance to Labrador and/or Inuit realities. The appropriate academic units were then contacted and asked to offer the course in Happy Valley-Goose Bay. This resulted in a program that in addition to the core social work and entry level courses also offered courses on topics related to Inuit culture, the Inuit language, Inuktitut and Labrador society.

Nunatsiavut PSSSP staff advised on the learning style and strengths of students, past successful teaching methods and lifestyle issues that needed consideration. This advice led to a program that offered only one course by distance, provided all daytime course slots for classroom teaching were delivered in part by local instructors and Inuit social workers, and would include on the land experiences and elder participation, and emphasize local examples. One elective course was offered by a faculty member who flew in from Memorial's Grenfell Campus in Corner Brook, Newfoundland, to teach for several days on three occasions during the semester. Social Work faculty members also flew to Labrador to teach in a condensed schedule at regular intervals. Three Social Work faculty members moved to Happy Valley-Goose Bay for the semester in which they were teaching. These arrangements necessitated changes in usual work assignments for faculty thus requiring flexibility on the part of faculty members as well as the affected schools and faculties.

The living arrangements for the Social Work faculty were facilitated by Nunatsiavut through provision of an apartment in Happy Valley-Goose Bay and local transportation needs were met through the rental of a vehicle for faculty use.

PSSSP staff also provided cultural orientation to university faculty and staff and field instructors. These sessions occurred at the beginning of the program and were repeated as new people became involved with the program.

### **Student services**

Past experiences of the PSSSP staff and Nunatsiavut officials indicated that support services would be essential to student success. It was determined that support would be needed to address the following areas: gaps in student education, lack of preparedness for university level performance, unresolved trauma that could be triggered by Social Work program content, stresses in family life that interfere with the student role, lack of practical resources such as study space and housing, lack of access to resource materials, and impact of personal problems. There was also disparate awareness of cultural knowledge among some students and there were instances where cultural values and beliefs clashed with social work approaches. Supports were established through the university and Nunatsiavut with input from the Labrador Institute and the College of the North Atlantic. The team working to support the students included: a part-time School of Social Work student services coordinator, a part-time skills development instructor, a full-time Nunatsiavut program coordinator and a full-time Nunatsiavut cultural consultant/counselor.

Student services capacity available on the St. John's Campus had to be created in Labrador since they did not exist there for university students. A number of required services were made possible through a service agreement between the Nunatsiavut Government and the College of the North Atlantic. This agreement contracted for the provision of classroom space, equipment, library services and student housing. Students' needs for quiet places to study were met by providing access to their classroom during evenings and on weekends.

The program augmented these services in several ways. Regularly scheduled and on demand tutoring was available throughout the program. A skills development instructor with a graduate degree in English had primary responsibility for this role and offered tutoring through regularly scheduled group and individual meetings. Special seminars were also offered to assist students with skills related to writing, analysis and critical thinking. The instructor customized an approach to tutoring that reflected needs specific to this group of students.

The School of Social Work supplied a part-time student services coordinator to provide supports and guidance similar to those offered to all students in the Social Work program on the St. John's Campus. This person provided guidance related to regulations and policy, assisted the students in navigating university services, intervened in student crises that arose, consulted with students to create class schedules that met their needs and assisted in facilitating any required program changes.

The Nunatsiavut Government hired a Nunatsiavut beneficiary with a degree in education as their program coordinator. Her role was diverse as she had responsibility for implementing and monitoring policies and procedures of PSSSP while also offering a variety of direct support services to students. These included: referring students to services related to academic performance, providing tutoring, assisting with organizational skills, assisting with problem solving around practical personal issues, troubleshooting issues related to students access to services such as library and study space, providing guidance about

study skills, assisting with writing challenges, clarifying feedback from professors and ensuring that information was circulated in a manner that supported student progress.

A Nunatsiavut beneficiary with a graduate degree in social work filled the role of cultural consultant and counselor. Individual and family counseling and referrals were regularly provided on request. She utilized circle work including sharing circles as well as teaching circles on a variety of topics including maintaining boundaries within northern social work. She offered services such as: assisting students in understanding social work concepts and methods, helping students consider social work knowledge and skills in the context of the Inuit culture and providing group opportunities for student to discuss cultural issues. The consultant also facilitated regularly scheduled, mandatory cultural integration circles as part of specific courses during the final two semesters of the program. This process involved guiding students in the development of their own Inuit-specific social work practice framework.

The coordinator and the consultant followed university guidelines in their interaction with students and used the School of Social Work Suitability Policy to develop their expectations of student conduct. Their attentiveness to university policies and procedures strengthened and clarified the centrality of the university in the student experience and contributed to the creation of a social work professional identity among the students.

#### *Cultural Content in Program*

Cultural content was identified as a required element of course content at the onset of the program. Several courses were specifically selected because they presented opportunities to integrate local and Inuit-specific content. These courses included:

- Social Work 3230      Culture Camp
- Philosophy 2591      Restorative Justice
- Linguistics 2025/26      Introduction to Inuktitut
- Sociology 2200      Communities
- Geography 1050      Introduction to the Principles and Practice of Geography
  - (The Social Effects of Mining)
- Sociology 2220      Labrador Society and Culture
- English 2012      Introduction to Professional Writing

All faculty and instructors were also asked to include cultural content in their courses. Instructors met this request using a variety of mechanisms including:

- Involving the cultural consultant in course design and classroom discussion
- Incorporating on the land experiences into selected courses
- Providing opportunities for students to make presentations in recognition of the oral traditions of the Inuit
- Using case studies and examples that were relevant to practice with Aboriginal peoples
- Using texts and readings that reflect Aboriginal traditions, issues and ideas
- Designing discussions that compare Labrador/Aboriginal perspectives with other world views
- Involving local guest speakers and elders in classes
- Designing group assignments to respect the Inuit value of working as a collective
- Creating assignments that required knowledge of culture and region
- Incorporating on the land experiences to embrace the Inuit respect for the power and value of the land

- Using videos and resource material with Aboriginal content
- Including an assignment designed and graded by the Cultural Consultant which focused on creation of individual Aboriginal frameworks.

The Aboriginal content within courses was supplemented with special learning opportunities focusing on obtaining cultural and local knowledge, and practice knowledge relevant to Labrador issues. These opportunities included:

- A meeting with Inuit social workers to discuss their experience of integrating social work knowledge with their culture and to hear about their experiences of working in their own communities
- Travel to the Vale mine site at Voisey's Bay to gain increased appreciation of the impact of mining on culture
- Attendance at a Truth and Reconciliation hearing to observe the process and the impact of these hearings
- Travel to coastal communities during field internships to gain an appreciation of the manner in which social work services are delivered in these communities
- Participation in a session on healing in an Innu community
- Participation in a training program focused on intergenerational trauma and using culture as healing
- Participation in a first aid program
- Participation in an Applied Suicide Intervention and Skills Training

Students were required to complete two field internships. The selection of internship sites was a complex matter because many dual relationships existed between the students and the agency staff who would provide mentoring and field instruction. Many students were related to agency staff. Others had received services from those who could become their supervisors. Several students were already working in agencies where they might have been considered for an internship. These various connections created the potential for conflicts of interest and uncomfortable professional relationships. Another complicating factor was a scarcity of social workers in the region who met the School's qualifications for provision of field instruction. All of these factors were further influenced by lack of available housing in several communities identified as preferred sites for internships.

The Nunatsiavut cultural consultant and the Nunatsiavut program coordinator provided advice to the field coordinator in selecting agencies for individual students. The field coordinator benefited from the consultant and manager's knowledge of the students, the agencies and the cultural dimensions of these agencies. The contributions of both the manager and the consultant were essential to finding good fits for the students. The collaboration also strengthened one of the core principles underpinning the program that being the existence of a collaborative partnership that privileges Inuit knowledge. The cultural consultant and the field education coordinator also travelled to Nunatsiavut communities to meet with agency personnel who would accommodate student internships.

Students were placed primarily in programs and departments operated by the Nunatsiavut Department of Health and Social Development, Labrador Grenfell Health and the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador. Several community-based agencies provided internships and one student worked with the NunatuKavut Community Council. All but one student were placed in the Labrador region for both internships.

Students continued to have access to student services throughout their internships. They also participated in group and individual discussion with the cultural consultant to continue to integrate their cultural and professional knowledge.

The basic internship experience was also augmented by special learning opportunities aimed at increasing cultural knowledge and information about local needs and services. The PSSSP and HSD provided funding enabling several students to travel to coastal communities in Nunatsiavut to provide services and observe programs. These trips introduced students to the practical and philosophical challenges related to offering services in the diverse communities in the Labrador region. The HSD also provided housing to facilitate student internships in one coastal community.

### *Challenges and Lessons Learned*

The depth and scope of challenges associated with offering this program could not have been known at the onset of the program. They are outlined here as sources of the best learning about how to create a program that meets the needs of Inuit students.

The Memorial campus where the School of Social Work is located is on the island of Newfoundland in St. John's, while Happy Valley-Goose Bay is approximately eight hundred kilometres away on the mainland of Canada with air travel as the most efficient and feasible method of transportation. The issue of distance between the School and the students' location presented many challenges from seemingly small matters like getting text books to students to bigger issues like finding faculty prepared to teach courses in a location so far from their normal place of work.

It was clear that existing infrastructure and resource people in Happy Valley-Goose Bay were essential to the program's success. The existence of the Labrador Institute in Happy Valley-Goose Bay facilitated the hiring of local instructors. The Institute also made faculty and staff available to teach, contributed to program development and supported the work of visiting faculty and staff. The Institute staff members were also effective in identifying local resources to assist with teaching and other tasks.

The assumptions, principles and relationships that had been key to the design and dynamic of the program were weakened as staff changes occurred within the School of Social Work. New players did not have the history required to share the norms and approaches developed among the original team. This created difficult collaborations, trust issues and barriers to progress.

Continuity of collaborators emerged as one of the most important factors in program efficiency and effectiveness. This factor is linked to the importance of relationship within the Inuit community. The Indigenization of the program required shared vision, and beliefs and a knowledge of unspoken understandings achieved through team building.

University personnel, including social work faculty and staff, recognized their own lack of expertise in the provision of a professional social work program to Inuit students. This reality meant that many staff and faculty needed information about Inuit culture, effective teaching styles and Aboriginal content relevant for courses.

This lack of cultural expertise was acknowledged at the onset of planning and although identified as a challenge, it became one of the factors that convinced Nunatsiavut that Memorial had an approach which fit their needs. Nunatsiavut was concerned that the university might take an "expert" role and perhaps a colonizing stance. This concern was relieved when the School, in recognizing its own limitations, also acknowledged the expertise of Nunatsiavut and the reliance on Nunatsiavut to take the lead in cultural matters. It also helped that the Labrador Institute had personnel who were experienced in delivering

courses to Inuit students and were willing to share their observations and skills. The School's forty plus years of experience in delivering social work programs gave it confidence in its areas of expertise and a readiness to enter into a partnership where it could add to existing capacity.

There were many occasions when plans and procedures did not work as anticipated and as a result the program intent was jeopardized. These incidents inevitably led to frustration. Issues would arise such as not having housing for student going to the coast, lack of funding for students to travel, lack of instructors available to teach, library hours that did not meet student needs, proposed schedules that violated university rules, on the land excursions that created risk management concerns and course content that created stress and discontent among students.

The solution-focused attitude of all partners was essential to overcoming this challenge. Nunatsiavut values include a belief in the importance of resourcefulness in problem solving and this was evident in the approach of the Director of PSSSP who always responded to large and small disasters with "Let's see how we can make this work." The Labrador Institute was able to provide help to broker solutions to local issues due to their experience in the Labrador region. Social Work faculty and staff sought ways to work around the barriers in their way using social work beliefs and principles which mirror many of the values of Nunatsiavut. University academic and support units stretched their rules and procedures to accommodate unusual and often unprecedented situations. The flexibility of everyone was key to success and fit well with the flexible and fluid implementation style that is characteristic of Aboriginal organizations.

### **Conclusion**

The experience with the Inuit Bachelor of Social Work program provides a potential template for other cohorts seeking programs that can be delivered in rural locations and especially those designed for Aboriginal peoples. The development and delivery of this program has been an education about cross cultural education that has enriched the knowledge of all involved.

A major lesson emerging from the creation of this program is that meaningful and effective creation of culturally relevant curriculum requires much more than development of curriculum content. The entire approach to planning and delivery must privilege Aboriginal knowledge, practices and traditions. The partnerships supporting the program must include the essential elements of respectful and collaborative relationships and an inter-professional generosity allowing for shared responsibility in fixing the inevitable mistakes encountered in cross cultural education. The students in the program require supports that are sensitive to their lived experiences. Perhaps most importantly, the program must be led by Aboriginal people who share their own expertise while welcoming the expertise of a university community that embraces the opportunity to create a partnership with an Aboriginal government.

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