

Excellence in Practice 2019

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How applying indigenous culture to deliver entrepreneurship education contributes to economic reconciliation

Over 200,000 Indigenous people in 203 distinct First Nations live in British Columbia, Canada. Their ancestors lived there thousands of years before it became a province in 1871. While each Nation has its own unique history and traditions, they all experience ongoing personal, cultural, ecological, and economic impacts of colonizations.

Mistrust in government, formal education and industry among Indigenous communities are some of the ripple effects of colonialism that extend across generations and can create barriers to participation in the Canadian economy. The Aboriginal Canadian Entrepreneurs (ACE) programme was developed to capitalize on economic reconciliation opportunities recognized by Indigenous community members. The programme provides entrepreneurs with the skills, knowledge and mentorship to start and grow their own businesses.

A considerable amount of resource development is happening in British Columbia (BC) Canada, much of it in remote northwestern Indigenous traditional territory resulting in numerous economic opportunities: industry supply, corollary support services, tourism, and general goods and services. Indigenous communities are keen to tap into these economic opportunities, develop their ideas, passions and skills – or expand their existing ventures – and create culturally meaningful participation in the Canadian economy.

In 2010, Dr. Frank Parnell, CEO of Tribal Resources Investment Corporation (TRICORP), invited Dr. Brent Mainprize, entrepreneurship professor at the University of Victoria's Peter B.

Gustavson School of Business (Gustavson), to produce a study called *Economic Opportunities in the Northwest*. After a Leader's Forum attended by 25 First Nations in the TRICORP service area, Parnell and Mainprize saw potential for an entrepreneurial education programme in northwest BC. TRICORP and Gustavson collaborated with Indigenous Elders and leaders to co-create the programme, supported by industry and government bodies.

Aligning Indigenous Elders, academics, government and industry groups with diverse – and sometimes disparate – goals was essential to create mutually beneficial relationships and build a cohesive support structure. "Partnering with the federal government, industry and a post-secondary institution allows for full validation of the programme, accessibility to our members, and the business expertise and mentorship of professionals in entrepreneurship," Parnell explains.

Each partner is interdependent and helps bring the programme to life. TRICORP, an Indigenous-owned lending institution, provides funding, marketing and various administrative roles for the ACE programme. Additionally, graduates with viable business plans can secure loans from TRICORP to help them as they launch their ventures. Gustavson facilitates and delivers the programme, tailoring to the needs of each cohort and improving the





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overall programme based on feedback. Federal and provincial governments provide funding to support and expand the programme.

The close collaboration of all partners involved helps bring the programme to life, including looking at programme delivery in a new and exciting way. "ACE gives business professors the opportunity to view entrepreneurial concepts and tools through Indigenous lens," Mainprize explains. "It has meant moving from individualism (building personal wealth) to collectivist thinking, where the wealth of the community and preservation of culture is a priority and often a central objective of Indigenous Entrepreneurship."

That paradigm shift has generated one of the ACE programme's key innovations: "we work together and learn from each other by bridging Indigenous culture with the key principles of entrepreneurship," says Parnell. For example, traditional Indigenous learning incorporates symbols and storytelling. Working with Indigenous artist Richard Shorty, Elders, business leaders and Gustavson developed the analogy of Eagle and Salmon, both important figures in Indigenous cultures in BC. They help students visualize the steps in launching a venture in a culturally relevant way with "the Seven Ss": Seeing, Spotting, Selecting, Shaping, Seizing, Soaring, and Sharing. Identifying one's capabilities to recognize an opportunity or idea to fine tuning it into a viable business relates to the eagle hunting the salmon and finding continuation and sustenance.

BC covers a large area, though, and sustenance can look different from one region to the next. To this end, the 163 instructors and mentors in the programme – 30% of whom are Indigenous – meet with each student to tailor the material to their needs, ideas and interests. ACE educators can also individualize the programme by moving beyond theory. Experiential learning components include the 3C Challenge, where groups of four are given \$1000 and must decide how to create value in the three areas of community, culture and cash (profit). The implications of each decision are eye-opening, with ensuing discussion.

Within that individualized approach, the end goal is the same. After about 11 weeks of intensive course work followed by a 12-week mentorship, graduates have created solid business plans that can secure financing. While doing so, they have connected to their Indigenous culture and brought prosperity and opportunities to their communities.

Crucially, students do not have to leave their homes to participate in the ACE programme. This was a key decision made during the co-creation process. Gustavson faculty deliver the programmes to communities far and wide, remote and urban. This is important for a few reasons. Due to time and financial constraints, it isn't viable for many students to travel long distances to a university campus. By holding courses in community, participants also do not need to be separated from their family and community members while they study.





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309

To date, the programme has seen 309 graduates and counting. The 84 businesses launched thus far range from bakeries to art, industry support to publishing houses – and an additional 120 new businesses are about to take flight

“It is a tremendous honour to be invited into an Aboriginal community to deliver education,” says Mainprize. “By going into communities, the ACE programme has taken a new approach to ensuring success. We are customizing the courses and building what the communities want, an approach that is unique among Canadian business schools, offering Aboriginal education programmes on their terms in their territory.”

The first ACE programme was in May 2013 at the TRICORP offices on Metlakatla reserve lands of Wilnaskaucad, near the northern coastal BC town of Prince Rupert. By December 2018, the 21st cohort graduated from among the villages and small urban centres the programme had expanded to reach. There are 13 more cohorts in development, as well as offshoots tailored to artists and youth. To date, the programme has seen 309 graduates and counting. The 84 businesses launched thus far range from

bakeries to art, industry support to publishing houses – and an additional 120 new businesses are about to take flight. Plus, 39 graduates have gone on to pursue further education.

As graduates continue to use their culture to achieve economic self-sufficiency, they will benefit their communities with employment opportunities, possibly becoming mentors themselves, and inspire others to turn their dreams into livelihoods. Indigenous people will be able to take their rightful place in the Canadian economy in empowering ways that strengthen their culture. In the end, the whole country is stronger in awareness and prosperity. These are the kinds of ripple effects the ACE programme is all about.

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