

# **Respectful Relations:** Enacting Reconciliation in Canadian Universities

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On June 11, 2008 Stephen Harper in his role as Prime Minister offered the Indigenous people of Canada an apology for the residential school system that separated Indigenous children and youth from their families, communities, and cultures. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was tasked with uncovering the truth about the residential school system and survivors of that system were provided with opportunities to give testimony about their experiences. The TRC released its final report in June 2015 and issued 94 Calls to Action. More information about the TRC can be found in the following documents: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report and its Implications for Education and Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action. The TRC identified education as one of the key areas that would move reconciliation forward. This was not a surprising outcome as the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) issued a report in October 1996 that also identified education as a key area and offered over 400 recommendations. The key difference is that the TRC's calls to action have gained much more attention and momentum than the RCAP report.

In the TRC video about reconciliation ([What Is Reconciliation](#)), the act of national reconciliation is seen to be a long process during which Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples need to establish

how to go forward in relationship together. Seven generations of Indigenous children were exposed to the residential school system where they were taught that their people, languages, and cultures were inferior and flawed. At the same time non-Indigenous children were taught to devalue Indigenous peoples and to see their own people, languages, and cultures as superior. Reconciliation is about changing how we educate children and young people and about confronting what we have been taught, deconstructing those lessons and examining them in conjunction with the treaty history and the testimony from residential school survivors. Canadians need to critically examine how the country of Canada and Canadian citizenship came to exist and not shy away from the realities of what was done historically to accomplish those goals. Reconciliation at its simplest form is a restoration of friendly relations that involves a bringing together and a settling of those things that resulted in animosity and separation. Reconciliation or a return to friendly relations cannot be accomplished without an understanding of how those relationships have been damaged or broken. It is not enough to issue a national apology, Canadians must recognize the pathologizing tendencies, racism, biases, structural inequalities and other elements within society and institutions that continue to damage the relationship between





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Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples even as we talk about reconciliation and make plans to address the calls to action.

What role are Canadian universities taking in reconciliation? The mission of a university is to provide education within an environment that fosters curiosity, creativity, and research. Universities provide students with opportunities to engage in critical thinking, explore new ways of analyzing information, and make room for new intellectual growth as students question all that they have been taught and all that they know. It would seem that universities would offer an ideal place to begin work on reconciliation and yet universities continue to face tensions and challenges when attempting to address the TRC’s calls to action. There are

new initiatives, new policies, the expression of a commitment to Indigenize universities, and at some institutions new mandatory courses on Indigenous content that students in certain programs (education) or all students are required to take as part of their degrees. However, the implementation and uptake of these attempts to address the calls to action are meeting with multiple levels of resistance and are at risk of being more talk without meaningful action or change. Universities cannot be successful in engaging in reconciliation by taking a check box approach to addressing the TRC.

Current realities suggest that there may be some growing awareness within universities of the complex issues with which they will have to engage. The following examples from both within university contexts and

outside university contexts demonstrate the complicated tensions and challenges that universities must navigate if they engage in reconciliation. It is will be messy and complex with no simple answers.

Lakehead University addressed the TRC calls to action directly by hiring the first female Indigenous Dean of a law school in 2016. In the spring of 2018, Dean Angelique EagleWoman announced her resignation citing systemic racism and discrimination. In interviews about her resignation she stated that she had hope that Lakehead could accomplish its goals in time but that she could no longer continue the work given the levels of racism and discrimination she faced. I do not claim to know the particulars of the situation at Lakehead. An examination of what is revealed by multiple news stories and interviews suggests that the situation can be explained by the difference between surface responses to the TRC and deep carefully thought through responses to the TRC. Knowing university contexts it is fair to say that the decision to hire a female Indigenous Dean for the law school and the decision to embed Indigenous content throughout the law program were subject to lengthy discussions, consultation, and could be argued to have been carefully thought through. However, I would argue that given the outcome of those decisions the lengthy discussion that may have taken place were not able to get to the roots of the matter and address the systemic and structural racism and discrimination that such decisions were likely to encounter when enacted within the university. While it is not possible to think through every possible issue that could arise, university administrators owe it to their students and to all who work within the university to consider the issues that

are likely to arise and have a plan to address those issues. There should also be a level of commitment to the decision and a willingness to work through issues that arise.

In May 2018, Mount Saint Vincent University was criticized for assigning a non-Indigenous professor to teach a course about the residential school system. The decision triggered a debate about who was able to teach Indigenous content courses and how such decisions should be made. Several articles made it clear that the criticism was not directed at the particular faculty member assigned to teach but that the criticism was about the importance of Indigenous faculty teaching indigenous courses, which falls in line with the 'nothing about us without us' position that argues Indigenous content should not be taught without Indigenous peoples. This debate identifies a number of deep issues that have to be explored when universities make decisions. There are a number of aspects that need to be considered. Institutional positions such as academic freedom and the right of departments to assess instructor suitability and assign courses have to be considered with the importance of an Indigenous scholar teaching about the complex levels of discrimination within residential school experiences from a lived experience approach. It is also important to consider the burden that is placed on Indigenous instructors and to question how that burden can be shared so that the work of decolonizing is not solely the work of Indigenous scholars. The response of Mount Saint Vincent to the controversy over the assignment suggested that they were willing to engage in tough questions and issues that emerged out of their decision. They held a consultative session with Indigenous and non-Indigenous faculty and decided to support the assignment stating that the

instructor's background and approach to teaching was consistent with their commitment to engaging in reconciliation as a partnership.

There are also significant events outside university contexts and have impacts on how universities engage in reconciliation. In this year alone there were two important court cases that undermined reconciliation and exposed the roots of the issues that need to be addressed in order to move forward towards reconciliation. The Colten Bushie court case in Saskatchewan in which a white farmer was acquitted of both first degree murder and manslaughter on February 9th, 2018 which was quickly followed by a verdict out of Manitoba on February 22nd, 2018 finding a white man not guilty of second degree murder in the death of 15 year old Tina Fontaine. Both verdicts sent shockwaves through Indigenous communities and had significant impacts within higher education contexts. Combined with the long-standing disproportionately high overrepresentation of Indigenous people in Canadian correctional facilities, these cases have reinforced the reality that Canadian Justice systems do not offer justice for Indigenous people whether they enter the court system as an alleged perpetrator or victim. If our education systems included a thorough education about the history of how Canadian justice systems have treated Indigenous peoples then perhaps we might have individuals within the system that were able to examine their own biases and takes steps towards addressing the systemic racism embedded in these systems. Research conducted by university professors and others has proven that the system is flawed and biased against Indigenous peoples and yet despite our talk about reconciliation there has been no

significant overhaul of the system that continues to damage the relationships that we are trying to reconcile.

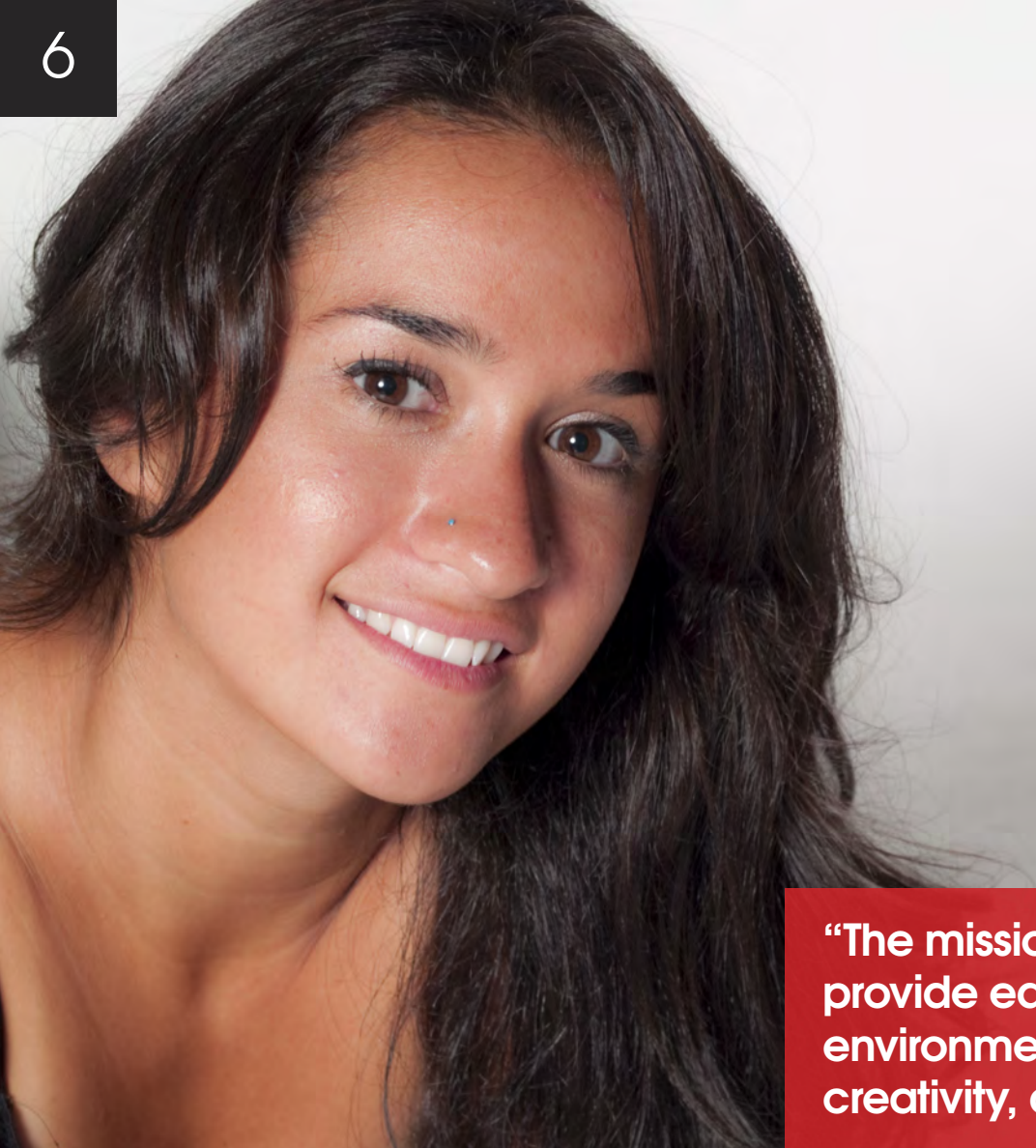
These examples offer a snapshot of how universities might choose to engage in reconciliation and offer cautionary tales about what can happen and will continue to happen if Canadians choose not to engage in the deep work of reconciliation. The work of seven generations cannot be undone by surface level action and thought. It will require the willingness to engage in deep deconstructive work and the examine the roots of the elements such as structural racism that continue to undermine reconciliation. Such elements are like weeds, if we continue to take an approach that is like mowing the lawn without removing the weeds by the roots we will continue to achieve surface results and the weeds of colonialism will continue to reassert themselves and undermine reconciliation.

### **Indigenous Scholars Offer Insights On Reconciliation**

At the 2018 Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences Indigenous scholars offered insights on reconciliation within higher education contexts. Marie Battiste, Jacqueline Ottman, Jan Hare, and Catharyn Andersen shared their perspectives on how to move forward towards reconciliation within Canadian higher education contexts.

Marie Battiste argued that reconciliation is about restoring respectful relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Drawing on the work she has done in the area (Battiste, 2013; 2016; 2017) she spoke about how Indigenous and non-Indigenous people have been





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“marinated in eurocentrism” and that universities must unpack Eurocentric discourses and privilege if they expect to move forward towards reconciliation. She called for a return to the treaties which laid out those respectful relations. She outlined how Canadians are citizens through their national connection with the British monarchy and through the treaties that exist. It is the treaties that create Canadians thus it makes sense that changes to education need to start with an understanding of those treaties and treaty relationships as well as the knowledge that while all non-Indigenous Canadians are treaty people not all Indigenous peoples are treaty people as there are both ceded and unceded lands. Battiste stressed the importance of understanding that Indigenous peoples are not a charter

group but that relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples within Canada must operate on a nation to nation basis.

Jacqueline Ottman agreed that the treaties provide a framework for respectful relations, adding that longstanding Indigenous philosophies also supported respectful relations. She spoke to the hidden curriculum and codes that continue to be taught and provide unconscious bias training that undermines respectful relations. Ottman stressed the need for an end to silencing the important questions that need to be asked and addressed and affirmed that such silencing has a long history and continues to be perpetrated against Indigenous peoples. She called on the importance of place and land and

encouraged a return to those teachings. Ottman also stated that it was time for non-Indigenous people to lift up the concepts around respectful relations and to work toward respectful relations walking alongside Indigenous peoples.

Jan Hare spoke about the need to find a way to integrate Indigenous community knowledges into the academy in meaningful ways that are adequately compensated. She spoke to the crushing workloads experienced by Indigenous faculty and the need to expand the number of Indigenous faculty within higher education. She also commented on how while there is more recent attention to Indigenous issues, faculties of education have been involved in significant Indigenous programming for some time. The programming has been and continues to be marginalized and needs to be more effectively supported within higher education. Hare highlighted the importance of thinking carefully and methodically about systemic changes within education. She challenged non-Indigenous colleagues and students to consider what role and responsibility they have in advancing Indigenous priorities.

Catharyn Anderson identified reconciliation as critically important work and emphasized the importance of understanding and appreciating the range of perspectives and teachings within the whole realm of Indigenous knowledges. She agreed with the other Indigenous scholars on the importance of place and treaties and introduced some complications. Andersen identified that

it is not enough to consider the location of the university in terms of traditional lands but that it was also important to consider how Indigenous students not from those ancestral lands might be supported. She offered the realities of Inuit students as one example. Inuit students do not have the option of attending a university on their traditional territories but must travel south to attend university. This makes it challenging for them to find supportive resources and Inuit elders are not usually called upon to interact with the university, as they are not located nearby. Andersen emphasized the continued structural and institutional racism both within universities and the communities that surround them and stressed the importance of having non-Indigenous colleagues who were willing to walk alongside and carry some of the burden.

These strong Indigenous scholars all offer important insights and perspectives that can help guide universities in the challenging journey toward reconciliation. Each pointed towards the depth of Indigenous knowledge and the importance of understanding place and respectful relationships in moving forward.

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**Dr. Dawn Zinga**  
**Associate Professor and Chair**  
Department of Child and Youth Studies  
Brock University

[dzinga@brocku.ca](mailto:dzinga@brocku.ca)

Tel: +1 905 688 5550, ext. 3152

[www.brocku.ca](http://www.brocku.ca)