

NATIVE UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

A RESPONSE TO THE UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN'S "ISSUES AND OPTIONS"
DISCUSSION PAPER (SUMMER 1986)

Presented by the Gabriel Dumont Institute
of Native Studies and Applied Research

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In the enlightened western world of the 1980's, fully forty-five percent of the Metis and Non-Status Indian people of Saskatchewan are functionally illiterate. Fewer than two Native¹ persons per one-hundred have a university degree. The present numerical position of Metis and Non-Status Indian people attending universities is one of grave underrepresentation when compared to the non-Native population. Less than 2% of students in Saskatchewan universities in 1985 were Metis and Non-Status Indians. In consideration of this situation and in response to the "Issues and Options" Discussion Paper of the University of Saskatchewan, the Gabriel Dumont Institute of Native Studies and Applied Research formally submits this document for the consideration of the governing structure of the University of Saskatchewan.

Leadership, economically, socially, culturally and politically is urgently needed in order to begin to improve the current socio-economic condition of the majority of Saskatchewan's Native people. The average level of formal education for most Saskatchewan Natives is approximately one-half of that of non-Natives. Seventy-five percent do not have a grade twelve education. This single factor is a prime underlying cause for a 32% unemployment rate, a 49% labor force participation rate, substandard housing and the host of devastating conditions which accompany poverty. A reduction of these widespread and insidious conditions will only occur if an enlightened general population and leadership emerges within the Native community. Sources as diverse as John Dewey, Karl Marx, Adam Smith, the Royal Bank of Canada and Canada Employment and Immigration Commission all recognize and point to a similar conclusion, that economic development must be preceded by education.

Added to the need to improve the economic situation of the Native people is the human need to retain the best of ones culture and tradition and further, to share it with one's fellow citizens. The loss of one piece of Canada's cultural mosaic is a loss to all Canadians.² If the rich and varied tradition, including values, mores and customs of the Natives are to be retained, it must begin to be done at the formal academic level. If not, it will most certainly be lost with the passing of the old people.

Finally, there is the matter of simple, arithmetic equitable representation. In a true democracy, protection of the rights of minorities is a responsibility of the majority. Rights and privileges of the majority are equally applicable to minorities. When a segment of the population representing 4% of the total population accounts for less than 2% of the university population, equity is not being realized.

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1. For the purposes of this paper, the term Native will be taken to mean Saskatchewan people of Indian ancestry who are not classified as Treaty Indians.
 2. Consider Donne's "No Man is an Island" sermon.

In the University of Saskatchewan's, "Issues and Options Discussion Paper, the major issues raised are questions of concern to all residents of Saskatchewan, regardless of racial background. The Gabriel Dumont Institute, representing the Metis and Non-Status Indian people of Saskatchewan in the educational and cultural realm, has opinions on many of the questions raised but will limit its response to those issues of direct significance to Saskatchewan Natives.

The need to re-evaluate the future role of the University of Saskatchewan in light of changes which have occurred over the past generation raises several key issues of concern to the Gabriel Dumont Institute.

Having assumed a mass teaching function has led to certain exigencies not conducive to a Native approach to education. Economic considerations notwithstanding, the de-individualization which has, of necessity, occurred eliminates many potential Native students simply because the total student numbers preclude the degree of individual attention which is required. Coming from situations of endemic poverty, geographic isolation and culturally different backgrounds, Metis and Non-Status Indian students are often very much alienated by the physical size, bureaucratic structure and impersonal functioning of a university. Dropping out is almost a foregone conclusion unless an organizational structure is in place to reduce the impact of these facts of university life. The first of the areas in which Gabriel Dumont Institute seeks to assume a function at the University of Saskatchewan is in the provision of a comprehensive support system for Native students. This support system would include the right to have input into the selection and intake process. Providing such a service will automatically increase Native enrollment and retention rates.

The assumption by the University of Saskatchewan of a specialized teaching function at the graduate level has resulted in Native course content being decided upon and delivered, in many instances, by well-intentioned, well-educated and knowledgeable non-Natives. In a situation where no suitable Native instructors are available, this situation has been, obviously, unavoidable, but has contributed to a certain sense of disaffection among Native students. The second area of involvement sought by Gabriel Dumont Institute is participation in a research function in the areas of Native culture, history and political, social and economic development.

The Native Studies Program currently operating at the University of Saskatchewan is the third major area in which Gabriel Dumont Institute seeks input. Allowing the Native Studies Department to be formally associated with the Gabriel Dumont Institute, which is the official educational and cultural arm of the Association of Metis and Non-Status Indians of Saskatchewan would increase the program's

credibility and allow it to become a program to which the general Native population could contribute.

Designated government and industry funding is a dangerous precedent in its inherent limitation of University autonomy. Issues of economic concern or political expediency may result in a reduction of academic decision making power based upon philosophical bases, thereby resulting in an educational system dictated to by powers beyond the academic community. Native educational organizations must be free to make decisions free of constraints from beyond academic considerations and further, if these decisions are to be tampered by economic realities, the economic condition of Native people must be the overriding factor. Politically and economically expedient measures tend to be short term, whereas the decisions made at a university, for both Native and non-Native students, must look well into the future.

Many of the six major issues raised in the Discussion Paper deal with Native concerns incidentally, as part of a larger question, but not as issues in themselves. Therefore, Gabriel Dumont Institute's response to these will be generic rather than specific and will thereby address all of our concerns which arise from these six major issues.

Gabriel Dumont Institute recognizes that during recent years the University of Saskatchewan has taken positive steps in the direction of rectifying the imbalance of too few Native students and in the provision of Native course content and instructors. Such initiatives as the Indian Teacher Education Program, the Native Studies Department and the Indian and Northern Education program are not to be dismissed without merit. However, three significant facts continue to be unresolved. Firstly, the continued underrepresentation in terms of numbers. Secondly, the emphasis has been upon Indian programs far more than upon Metis programs. And thirdly, the programs have been administered and staffed primarily by non-Natives.

It is time now to begin to move toward the integration of a system which will allow these conditions to end. An increased Native student body must be sought, due emphasis given to Metis and Non-Status Indian programs and some measure of control over administration and staffing handed over to a responsible and credible organization which officially represents Native people. Drastic and large scale structural changes are not required. What is required is basically a shift in emphasis and a re-direction of authority.

The Association of Metis and Non-Status Indians of Saskatchewan, in 1980, mandated the Gabriel Dumont Institute of Native Studies and Applied Research to be its educational and cultural arm and specifically to improve, via education and cultural retention, the standard and conditions of living of Saskatchewan's Native Community. Toward the fulfillment of its mandate, Gabriel Dumont Institute has sought, during its six years of existence, to become an integral part of the overall Saskatchewan Education System. A formal structure for

participation in the elementary and secondary school system, the community college network, the technical institutes and the universities is now developed. In all four of these areas, Gabriel Dumont Institute has clearly defined and detailed plans for the implementation of Metis and Non-Status Indian specific education.

In none of these parts of the education system does Gabriel Dumont Institute propose radical changes. Rather, providing complementary institutions or becoming a part of existing institutions will be its format for educational development.

The Metis and Non-Status Indian people of Saskatchewan want to be educated, but in a manner conducive to success. The delivery of educational programs with built-in success factors is the basis of Gabriel Dumont Institute planning.

At the university level, these factors are comprised of three essential elements; a strong and comprehensive, on-going support system, a well-defined Native Studies component and essential living skills. In addition to providing these guarantors of success, Gabriel Dumont Institute conducts ongoing research into the past and present history of Native people. This research, because it is conducted by Native people for Native people assumes a validity not found in other, similar research done by non-Natives.

The provision of a support system for Native students has been identified as the first area of Gabriel Dumont Institute involvement in the University of Saskatchewan. A research function has been identified as a second function to be assumed. The development and delivery of Native Studies programming, based upon the research findings is the third area of involvement sought by the Gabriel Dumont Institute.

In addition to these three specific areas of involvement, Gabriel Dumont Institute will seek to provide any required upgrading of Native students to bring them to acceptable university entrance levels. The takeover of the University Entrance Program for all Native Students, into which lifeskills can be integrated would accomplish this goal. Any upgrading to university entrance standards would preferably be decentralized to the community level whenever such a system of delivery is possible.

Further clarification of the Gabriel Dumont Institute position on the, "Issues and Options", paper will be provided by a direct response to seven specific questions raised by the paper.

How Should the University Select Students? Given the Native underrepresentation at the University of Saskatchewan, it is obvious that the selection process vis a vis Native students requires alteration. Gabriel Dumont Institute proposes that it be allowed to participate in the selection and intake of Metis and Non-Status Indian students and that this participation be extended to include

the provision of required upgrading, life skills and support services.

Are the Criteria Used to Select Students Fair and Equitable? Gabriel Dumont Institute, as mentioned in the preceding paragraph proposes that it participate in selection and in the processes whereby the selection criteria can be met. The entrance requirements need not be relaxed. Rather, a program whereby the entrance requirements can be met should be implemented. This programming should, whenever feasible, be delivered at the community level.

Should the University of Saskatchewan Search out Native Students With Outstanding Ability? Gabriel Dumont Institute, through its close association with the Association of Metis and Non-Status Indians of Saskatchewan's network of regions and locals already has substantial information about prospective university students. The Institute's needs assessment process has given it a base of valuable documentation relevant to this question. Gabriel Dumont Institute is, at present, in a position to assist in the function of identifying outstanding prospective Native students and proposes that participation in this role be included within the context of the larger selection and intake function.

Are there Areas of the University Requiring Special Assistance to Develop Research Programs? Expertise in the development of Native research can, by its very definition, be improved through Native participation. If the University of Saskatchewan seeks to conduct research into Metis and Non-Status Indian matters, such research should allow for the input of Native people. To facilitate this research function, Gabriel Dumont Institute proposes that it consider a source of readily available information. The existing Gabriel Dumont Institute Research and Development Program is capable of providing direction and knowledge. The library and archives departments could be utilized as sources of original documentation and relevant Native research materials.

How Should the University Support the Economy? The Gabriel Dumont Institute has chosen to digress slightly from the intended focus of this question in order to reiterate its position regarding education and economic progress. Only when a people possess educated leaders, knowledgeable in the economic and political processes of the country will that people be able to move into the mainstream of the nation's economic advance. Further, it is through education that welfare payments, unemployment insurance benefits, and losses, both monetary and human, associated with endemic poverty, will be reduced. Native people obviously want to enjoy the amenities of life, but not at the cost of losing their culture and tradition. Therefore, it is essential that education systems, to some extent, allow for agreements whereby Native organizations may enhance the educational opportunities for Native people. University support of the Canadian economy would be a fact if University decisions contributed to the educational and thereby economic advance of Native people.

What Role Should the University Assume in Extension and Community Service? The Gabriel Dumont Institute has a history of successful delivery of community level programs, at all educational levels. Therefore, Gabriel Dumont Institute proposes that administrative agreements related to the provision of decentralized programs in areas which are predominantly Native be worked out which allow Gabriel Dumont Institute the right to deliver these programs.

Should There be Larger and More Representative Board? The Native population of Saskatchewan should have a seat on the University of Saskatchewan's Board of Governors in order to ensure Native representation in University decision making. Therefore, Gabriel Dumont Institute suggests that the University of Saskatchewan allocates one Native seat on the Board of Governors.

The accomplishment of the objectives of the Gabriel Dumont Institute outlined herein could be realized by coming to terms with the University of Saskatchewan and forming a federation agreement.

In consultation and co-operation with the University of Saskatchewan, Gabriel Dumont Institute seeks to undertake the steps required to federate with the University. A target for the completion of the federation process is tentatively set for 1988.

The areas in which Gabriel Dumont Institute proposes to assume some responsibility are those which directly affect Native students. Specifically, these would include: University Entrance Programs; Counselling Services; Selection and Input; Research into Native History and Development; and the Native Studies Department. This would be accomplished by having Gabriel Dumont Institute physically housed on campus and having been given jurisdiction by the University of Saskatchewan in specific, agreed upon areas.

If conditions facing Saskatchewan's Native people are to be rectified, bold and innovative steps must be taken. The realization of federation such as has been proposed in this paper would be such a step. Through increased educational opportunity, many of the worst conditions would begin to disappear. Economic, social and political advance are the fruits of expanded educational opportunity. The University of Saskatchewan has the opportunity to be a vital part of the advancement of Native people and thereby, the advancement of us all.