July 15, 2015

“Onikaniwak – for those who lead”

The University College of the North (UCN) successfully co-hosted the second Summer Institute for educational leaders on First Nations, Metis and Inuit histories, worldview, and knowledge during the week of July 3 – 9, 2015 at Egg Lake, Manitoba. This institute was a collaborative effort by UCN, the University of Manitoba (U of M) and the Opaskwayak Cree Nation (OCN). The fifty participants who attended this innovative learning experience could choose to take this institute for: a 3 credit hour master’s level course at University of Manitoba or Brandon University; or for professional development. Participants were also awarded 50 hours of credit towards the Principal’s certification requirements for the Province of Manitoba. As we had three students from the Blackfeet Nation in Browning, Montana attend our institute, we made arrangements for them to complete an undergraduate three credit hour course at UCN.

Participants for the summer institute represented Louis Riel School Division, Winnipeg One School Division, Seven Oaks School Division, Evergreen School Division, Assiniboine Community College, River East School Division, Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Centre, Mountainview School Division, UCN, University of British Columbia, Blackfeet Community College, and the Aboriginal Education Directorate Advisory Committee.

The Onikaniwak summer institute is designed to integrate academic presentations alongside of cultural teachings and learnings. As such, we had a range of prominent scholars speaking alongside of cultural advisors and Elders. For example, the academic presenters included:

- Dr. Verna Kirkness on the history of Aboriginal education in Canada;
- Dr. Shirley Myran on contemporary Aboriginal education;
- Allen Sutherland and Connie Wyatt Anderson from the Treaty Relations Commission of Manitoba;
- Co-commissioner Wilton Littlechild from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission;
- former Grand Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, Mr. Ovide McCreedi, on the topic of treaties;
- Leo Nijssen of UCN on the constitutional rights of Aboriginal people;
- Dr. Myra Laramie and Helen Settee-Robinson of the aboriginal Education Directorate; Theodore Fontaine – residential school survivor and author of the book, “The Broken Circle”; Drs. Stan and Alexandria Wilson on Indigenist paradigm for education;
- Grant Kreuger from Frontier School Division on the Engaged learners program;
- Janet Head, Alice Young and Edwin Jebb from the Cree Nation Tribal Health department on the topic on intergenerational effects of residential schools;
- Wilfred Buck from the Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Centre for his teaching on the constellations and the relationship to creation stories.
The UCN Council of Elders representatives that that participated for the entire week and provided wisdom and support for students and staff were:

- Martha Jonasson of Wabowden
- Nick Halcrow from Cross Lake

The Cultural advisors who participated and provided numerous teachings over the course of the week were:

- Kevin Lewis, Derrick and Clifford Stick, Elvis Broken Nose from Onion Lake, SK., who held morning pipe ceremonies, assisted participants with rattle making, set up and held nightly sweats or purification ceremonies, taught us various traditional songs and teachings;
- Beetle Okameasis, Joe Partridge and the members of the tipi set up crew from OCN who demonstrated how to set up the tipi and the meaning of each of the poles, and the teachings associated with the tipi;
- Shirley Nepinak of Camperville, MB. who conducted beading classes every night.

As the University of Manitoba contributed funds from the Teaching Learning Enhancement Fund via a grant that Drs. Wallin and Peden were able to secure; we were able to offer a variety of family activities in addition to the academic and cultural events. These activities included a four day camp for approximately ten kids from the Family Enhancement Program at OCN. These recreational and educational activities were developed and led by Darryl Shotten of Career Trek, Keira Reimer and Leo Nijssen.

Onikaniwak was considered to be a tremendous learning experience as indicated in comments such as:

- “it didn’t feel like learning” yet I learned so very much;
- “most powerful to learn about the Indigenous version of Canada’s history as well as the survivor and inter-generational survivor stories”; 
- “Experiencing the tradition and culture that fosters love and the relationship between all people and allows us to share our own stories, no matter how difficult. My heart is leaving here more nourished and lightened than ever before”;
- “there is a whole world up north that I was not aware of – continue doing this very important kind of learning”.

Events like can Onikaniwak only happen because of collaboration and a will to try different ways of learning in authentic ways. Special thanks go out to the planning and host team: Dr. Dawn Wallin from U of M; and Dr. Sherry Peden and her Executive Assistant, Lori Munroe of UCN and the planning team from UCN who worked tirelessly to host this event: CBS Vice President Donna Carriere, Aboriginal Advisor to the President, Doris Young, Director of the Center for Aboriginal Language and Culture, Esther Sanderson, Dean of Student Services, Florence Watson, as well as Camp Manager and logistics, Leo Nijsssen. We also need to salute our UCN Chancellor, Mr. Edwin Jebb of OCN who helped us develop a wide range of connections and collaborations that helped Onikaniwak become a reality.
Corey Kapik, Aboriginal Educational consultant for Louis Riel School Division had an opportunity for a little recreation one evening!

Ovide Mecredi speaking about treaties.

Our Onikaniwak classroom for the week of July 3 – 9, at Egg Lake, MB, situated on Opaswayak Traditional territory.

On the beach at Egg Lake --- note sweat lodge in background!
Participants on a medicine walk, picking sweet grass.

For more information please contact:
Jim Scott, Director
Department of Communications
University College of the North
P: 204-627-8244
E: jscott@ucn.ca