

AN EDUCATIONAL TRADITION IN THE MAKING

KIUNA – FIRST NATIONS POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTION

Kiuna Institution was inaugurated in 2011 as a *Centre d'études collégiales* designed by and for First Nations. Its goal is to facilitate access to postsecondary studies for Aboriginal students. In so doing, it is contributing to improving graduation rates and hence to closing the postsecondary education gap, which, in spite of noted progress, persists between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals.¹ The institution, whose name means “ours” in Abenaki, is an initiative of the First Nations Education Council (FNEC). The Council represents 22 Quebec Aboriginal communities belonging to eight different nations, and is mandated to defend its members’ interests with a view to improving the quality of educational services offered to Aboriginal students throughout the learning cycle.

For almost a decade, the FNEC promoted the importance of creating a First Nations Postsecondary Institution (FNPI) whose educational project and programs would align with the views and values of Aboriginals in Quebec, as well as meet student needs and expectations.

NEEDS

- Facilitate students’ transition from a community education institution to a postsecondary education institution
- Increase the number of Aboriginal students who obtain a postsecondary diploma
- Develop Aboriginal students’ sense of pride and belonging
- Provide high-quality, recognized educational programs that promote and integrate the historical and modern realities of Aboriginal peoples
- Develop ambitious service delivery models that respect the Aboriginal context
- Have all the latitude required for the institution to manage its own educational services

Inspired by the FNPI model adopted in the rest of the country, FNEC carefully analyzed the need for, value of, and ways of creating such an institution. These efforts led to the creation of Kiuna Institution, whose mission is to “shape competent First Nations citizens in their respective fields, proud inheritors



PRUDENCE HANNIS
Associate Director
Kiuna Institution

of their culture, socially responsible, open to the world and concerned for the well-being of their communities”.² The college also hopes to become a leader in Aboriginal postsecondary education in Eastern Canada.

THUMBNAIL HISTORY

Although the dream of a college designed specifically for young Aboriginal persons was fostered over a long period of time, it wasn’t until 2006, subsequent to the First Nations Socio-Economic Forum held in Mashteuiatsh, that such a postsecondary institution, under the management of the FNEC, was approved. In the context of the Forum, the provincial and federal governments confirmed their interest in the project and promised to supply the financial support needed to make it a reality. It was agreed that this FNPI would be managed as a *Centre d'études collégiales* (college centre) and that, as a result and consistent with the *General and Vocational Colleges Act*, a partnership with accredited CEGEPs would be needed to secure recognition for the quality of the institution’s education, management, and programs.

As the result of a bidding process, CEGEP de l’Abitibi-Témiscamingue and Dawson College were named as the partner CEGEPs and selected to be involved in the project over a five-year trial period. Subsequent to that, Kiuna Institution would be able to achieve the status of an autonomous postsecondary education institution. In 2007, the Ministère de l’Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport (now the Ministère de l’Enseignement supérieur, de la Recherche et de la Science or MESRS) set out the distribution of responsibilities between the three partners.

In order to make Kiuna accessible to all Aboriginal students, and out of respect for their language situation, the programs and services would be offered in both French and English; hence the need to associate with two accredited CEGEPs, one for each official language. Kiuna’s courses and services would be offered in a fully bilingual context, and this particularity needed to be taken into consideration in choosing its location.

¹ For more information on discrepancies in graduation rates between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals, see the article by Roberto Gauthier and Miriam Blackburn in this issue of *Pédagogie collégiale*.

² [<http://www.kiuna-college.com/apropos.aspx>]



The bilingual Abenaki community of Odanak—home to 400 inhabitants and located in a rural area of the Centre-du-Québec administrative region, between Sorel-Tracy and Nicolet—became the institution's host community. Odanak was chosen as a strategic location for its many advantages and because it met the related FNEC criteria, namely bilingualism, proximity to urban centres, and the presence of Aboriginal organizations within its jurisdiction. Construction of the institution's student housing and education facilities began in March 2011.

The years leading up to Kiuna's inauguration were devoted to clarifying its educational project and to designing a program of pre-university studies that would meet the needs of Aboriginal students. The cornerstone of this mission would be the promotion of Aboriginal culture, identity and values. Although educational activities would be managed under the authority of the partner CEGEPs, the founding agreement gave the FNEC the latitude to define its own educational project, subject to existing educational laws and standards of the province of Quebec, so that it could develop an institution designed for and managed by First Nations.

Kiuna offers a unique college education that respects the history, perspectives, values, and aspirations of Aboriginal peoples, all of which are favourable conditions for its students' academic success.

EDUCATIONAL PROJECT

Kiuna Institution's educational project, which is to design a college environment adapted to Aboriginal realities, comprises three broad focus areas.

FOCUS AREAS

- Educating leaders who will contribute to the economic and social well-being of their communities
- Promoting Aboriginal culture, identity, and values
- Improving educational accessibility, as well as the retention and success of Aboriginal students of all ages, in a postsecondary context

This educational project would be fulfilled in a unique environment in which programs, student services, human resources, teaching methods, and instructional materials would all take into account Aboriginal culture and traditions, as well as offer a vibrant model of social and cultural success.

PROGRAMS

Kiuna offers a unique college education that respects the history, perspectives, values and aspirations of Aboriginals, all of which foster conditions for its students' academic success. Its programs are officially recognized by the MESRS. In addition to an orientation and integration term (081.05) and a transition term (081.03), Kiuna offers a First Nations' Social Sciences program (300.B0). This program was collaboratively developed by many professionals in the field of education, namely from Dawson College, CEGEP de l'Abitibi-Témiscamingue, and FNEC, with assistance from the First Nations Advisory Committee and Aboriginal consultants.

While remaining open to the world, the First Nations' Social Sciences program includes courses whose contents, structure, and instructional approaches have been completely revised and adapted to emphasize Aboriginal cultural heritage and relationship to the collective heritage. The intent is to help students forge a strong identity, which is a key component in academic success. Examples of courses that are offered in the program include Aboriginal Literature, History of the First Peoples of the American Northeast, and Indigenous Political and Legal Issues.

The social-sciences program proved to be the best choice for the institution's inauguration, as it offers a wide range of avenues for students to pursue in university, while being broad enough to introduce students to political, social and identity-related issues.

The program is centred on the following themes of the past and present: identity (traditions, cultures and languages, and arts and expression); community (First Nations' social and political development); and society (Aboriginal communities in the world and civic and social responsibility). These three themes are geared toward cultivating students, preparing them to live responsibly in society, and encouraging them to share knowledge of their culture.

The institution also offers an attestation of collegial studies (AEC) program in Specialized Education in Aboriginal Contexts (JNC.17). This ad hoc program offered to a cohort of Atikamekw students is providing training to 13 resource persons, who will be receiving their diplomas this year. Over the years, Kiuna plans to establish other educational programs that will be consistent with the standards and competencies required by the MESRS and that will meet the educational needs expressed by the communities.



CLIENTELE

During its first term, in 2011, Kiuna had a cohort of only 26 students. Today, its student body consists of 69 students from the Abenaki, Algonquin, Atikamekw, Inuit, Malecite, Mohawk, and Wendat nations. Over the past three years, the college has also welcomed Cree, Inuit, and non-Aboriginal students. Currently, 61% of Kiuna's students are from the regular secondary school sector and 39% are young adults who are finishing or going back to college. Almost one-third of the students are English-speaking, all from the Mohawk Nation, and 28% of the students are male. In addition, 90% of the students are from the communities, while 10% come from urban settings such as Trois-Rivières and Montréal.

All these realities require us to facilitate the transition not only from secondary school to college, but also from home community to host community. This support is especially important for the students who are having their first experience outside the Aboriginal community, and for whom the first weeks of integration can be critical. The profile of the AEC students in Specialized Education in Aboriginal Contexts is unique: the group is made up exclusively of women, all from the Atikamekw Nation, and all of mature age. Over three-quarters of the students in this program are parents. The challenges they face, therefore, relate to balancing school with family life.

STUDENT SERVICES

Generally speaking, distance from family, community, and friends raises major challenges. Several strategies are needed to reassure students (and their families) that they are safe and supported. It is also important to keep in mind those who are having their first experiences as adults (for example, paying rent, going food shopping, cooking meals, budgeting, etc.) and who sometimes need basic support to develop greater autonomy. For some students, the transition to a different and more demanding educational lifestyle can be a stumbling block. A range of academic and psychosocial support services are needed in order to facilitate the shift from secondary to postsecondary education, as well as to build upon already acquired competencies. Kiuna offers students an environment that is intended to ease the shock of integrating into a new setting, as well as promote their retention and success. The institution has been designed as a community that promotes fraternity between students, faculty, and staff, and that offers much more than academics, including student residence, shuttle service, sports and cultural activities, jobs, student radio and student council, weekly collective meals, an awards gala, and on-campus security.

The students can also take advantage of a variety of academic support services aimed at creating a college culture that is conducive to success, such as supervised study sessions, a French-language help centre, academic assistance, multimedia services, computer labs, and a documentation centre. One of the most important aspects of student support is the presence of elders and community members, who are regularly invited to the institution to share their knowledge and expertise, thereby enriching the youths' experiences and creating a sense of belonging that facilitates learning. With each academic term, we look for new ways to enhance our educational approach so that Kiuna will be a rich and positive experience for all of its students.

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TEAM

Today Kiuna Institution has 37 employees, all categories combined. More than 80% of the administrative staff (including non-teaching staff and support staff) belongs to Aboriginal nations and almost 70% of the teachers are Aboriginal persons. Kiuna's strength lies in its strong team spirit, which has allowed it to adopt an integrated approach to its programs and organization, as well as to its services and their delivery.

The success and especially the persistence of students relate directly to the commitment of the team, which guides, motivates, and supports students in the learning process. Our actions are based on the conviction that all students are capable of succeeding if they fully commit to their studies and supply the effort that is required.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Kiuna Institution stands as a symbol of Aboriginal pride in creating its own educational institutions for greater autonomy. At the end of its third year of operations, the institution will boast almost 30 graduates. These graduates, as well as future students, will contribute to developing economic, legal, and political institutions with a view to achieving First Nations self-determination. The institution will also contribute to developing the political and social maturity of up-and-coming generations, in addition to serving as a common platform for discussion and information exchange on the future of Aboriginal peoples.



In a word, Kiuna is an exciting collective and societal project, of which we are extremely proud. 🌱

Prudence HANNIS is a member of the Abenaki Nation and a native of the Odanak community. She holds degrees in sociology (UQAM) and public management (ENAP), and has been Associate Director of Kiuna Institution since February 2011. She has dedicated more than 15 years to various First Nations initiatives and issues. Among other things, she has worked with women and young Aboriginal persons. The diverse initiatives that she has pursued over the years have led her to work closely with each of Quebec's First Nations, as well as with numerous Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal actors from civil society, community groups, and government authorities in the province and beyond. She has also played a significant role in developing numerous government and Aboriginal strategies and policies at the provincial and national levels.

prudence.hannis@kiuna-college.com

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