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Institutional engagement with Indigenous communities: the First Nations Partnerships Program and the use of a borderland space

Alan Pence, James P. Anglin and Fran Hunt-Jinnouchi

Abstract

This article provides an example of the long term impact of a values-based initiative to create change for Indigenous educational outcomes within a 'mainstream' university. The authors reflected on Institutional Leadership Paradigm (ILP) values, partnerships and institutional transformation as they described the development of an educational partnership program that evolved between First Nations communities and a 'mainstream' university

Alan R. Pence is the former Director of the School of Child and Youth Care and has established three specialised units: the unit for Early Learning and Child Care Research, the First Nations Partnership Programs for Community Based Aboriginal Child and Youth Care Education (www.fnpp.org), and the Early Childhood Development Virtual University (www.ecdvu.org). In 2003 Dr Pence's work with Aboriginal communities and in international development was awarded the University of Victoria's inaugural Craigdarroch Research Award for Societal Contribution and the Canadian Bureau of International Education's International Education Leadership Award 'to recognise extraordinary contributions'. Dr Pence's work currently focuses primarily on leadership promotion and capacity building in the majority (developing) world.

Since 1986, Dr James Anglin has made presentations in over 20 countries on issues related to his research and professional work on the care and well-being of children and youth in the context of their families and communities. Many of his keynotes, papers and workshops have resulted from his role as the representative for Canada to the Federal Council of FICE-International, a UNESCO affiliated organisation focusing on the care of young people.

Fran Hunt-Jinnouchi is the Director of the Office of Indigenous Affairs at the University of Victoria. She brings to the role diverse experience in Indigenous education. She was director of the Saanich Adult Education Centre for seven years before becoming acting principal of the K'ak'ot'latsi School in Quatsino, near Port Hardy and being elected chief of the Quatsino First Nation. She has served on several high profile provincial and national boards and committees, and was founding chair of the Indigenous Adult and Higher Learning Association in British Columbia. Fran specialises in Aboriginal adult Education program development.

in western Canada called the First Nations Partnership Program
(FNPP) at the University of Victoria. At the time the program
was initiated in 1989/90, the university had very limited direct,
engagement with Indigenous communities and few opportunities
on-campus that were specifically designed for Aboriginal
students or that were supportive of Aboriginal interests. Twenty
years later, the founder of the program, a senior administrator
(Associate Vice-President Academic and Student Affairs—who
served as the Director of the School of Child and Youth Care. in
the early stages of the FNPP program), and the Director, Office
of Indigenous Affairs (and Indigenous community leader) look
back at the history of the program, which the founder describes
as evolving in the *borderland* of the university (Pence 2006). From
their three different perspectives, the authors reflect on the degree
to which the University of Victoria, and tertiary institutions more
generally, have evolved to address issues of educational concern to
Indigenous communities and the degree to which the experiences
of the FNPP are still relevant and useful today. The experiences of
the FNPP can be seen to reflect the values expressed in the ILP and
they are related here in fulfillment of this university's participation
in the ILP project.

Comments by Dr Alan Pence

This article explores an approach to the creation of an Indigenous
program using the borderland of a mainstream university—
purposefully seeking distance from the centripetal forces of power but
still benefiting from certain aspects of its presence. The borderland, as
understood in this institutional analogy, is a place near the periphery
of the university, deemed more accessible to, and more able to be
influenced by, *others* external to the university. Borderlands in human
history have served as places of creative intercourse, yielding directions
and ideas not conceivable within established centres of power, nor
possible either, in remote, undisturbed locations. They are places of
interaction, uncertainty and change. This particular borderland sought
limited visibility and low obstruction from the institution, but high
visibility and high viability with external community partners. The
FNPP experience led the lead the authors to believe that structural
program space and knowledge content space are not independent of
each other. Positioned and balancing between different worlds, the
temptation to grasp a singular 'regime of truth' (Foucault 1979) is
reduced and a position of openness enhanced.

The FNPP experience

The FNPP owes its existence to several leaders of an Indigenous Tribal Council who understood well the interaction of power and knowledge. The administration and leadership of the Meadow Lake Tribal Council (MLTC), located in northern Saskatchewan, Canada, appreciated the two-worlds nature of their existence, referred to by one tribal Elder as 'two sides of an eagle feather — both are needed to fly'. The Council felt that an understanding of, and an ability to live and work in both worlds, was essential for their people's well-being. In the late 1980s the Council approved a motion noting:

> The First Nations of the Meadow Lake Tribal Council believe that a child care program developed, administered, and operated by their own people is a vital component to their vision of sustainable growth and development. (Meadow Lake Tribal Council, 1989 p. 1)

To address their education and training needs, MLTC considered various options: expanding the offerings of a non-Aboriginal regional college program already available to them through a local distance education centre; partnering with an Aboriginal institution located several hours to the south; or creating a new relationship with an out-of-province university two provinces and 2000 kilometers away. They chose the third option.

Thus, in the spring of 1989, the lead author received a call from the Executive Director of the MLTC requesting a meeting at the university to discuss early childhood training needs within their nine communities (the text will use first person for this section). I questioned how useful such a meeting would be given that my university department did not have an Aboriginal curriculum and the university itself had virtually no programs focusing on Aboriginal education. The Executive Director, however, was insistent that a meeting take place. It became clear at that meeting that the community had given early childhood care and development and a partnership with our university, a good deal of thought. We were being asked to join as 'technical members' — not the ones who would steer the planning and development of services for the young children in their communities. The fact that the Council was clearly in the driver's seat, with our role clearly defined as supportive, felt absolutely right. By the end of the meeting, MLTC had my commitment to do what I could to support their initiative.

It was sometime later that I came to more fully understand the reasons behind the request and why MLTC had traveled so far to find a partner. They had approached other academic institutions, and several of those institutions had an 'Aboriginal program' which they indicated they would be pleased to deliver. None, however, were interested in creating an educational program that followed a particular council's vision —

because that was the prerogative of the institution and several already had their own Aboriginal vision.

The FNPP story has been told a number of times and numerous facets of it have been explored. The earliest articles highlighted the partnership nature of the work and the creation of a Generative Curriculum Model that allowed knowledge from both academia and the communities to come together through appropriate voices (typically Elders from the communities and locally available instructors approved by the university) allowing a space where new perspectives and ideas might be generated (Pence, Kuehne, Greenwood & Opekokew 1993; Pence & McCallum 1994). Later articles focused on the importance of culturally and developmentally appropriate practice (Ball & Pence 1999), co-constructing knowledge (Ball & Pence 2000), and postmodern understandings of early childhood care and development (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence 1999, 2006). In 2002, the program was included by UNESCO in *Best practices using Indigenous knowledge* (Ball & Pence 2002); it was one of only 22 programs to be recognised internationally. An overarching publication that discusses the history, dynamics and learning achieved across all ten FNPP deliveries with nine different tribal organisations was published in 2006 (Ball & Pence 2006).

Institutional borderlands

The decision to locate the FNPP program in the borderland of the university was partially planned and partially fortuitous. Space had become available that was consistent with a desire to maintain a low profile from the campus centre and which allowed at the same time a less impeded view *outside* to the communities. Both positives and negatives flowed from the decision, but ultimately it is believed that the programs were able to be truer to their partners by strategically establishing a place on the *edge* of the institution. It was believed that the nature of the program would have been more fundamentally influenced by the voice of academia if its structural base had been fully situated within the mainstream of the institution and subject to the forces that daily mould perspective, priorities and energy. In placing the program in the borderland it was understood that certain structural issues would arise that would need to be addressed in regards to interactions with the institution, but we were also to learn that placement would influence, to a degree not fully anticipated at the outset, the nature of the knowledge and knowledges that would characterise the program over time.

As is the case on most campuses, with space being always in short supply, one of the first questions asked when project funding is approved is 'where will the staff be housed?' The timing of the FNPP project was propitious, as the School of Child and Youth Care was preparing to move to a new building. The FNPP was able to stay behind

in a building complex that had changed from housing a faculty with five departments/schools to becoming a building of 'odds and sods'. The project, though an academic activity, found itself located outside the mainstream of academia—to appear on the FNPP doorstep, one was either lost or had made a special trip.

Such a placement below the institutional radar allowed the program's attention to fall primarily on the partner communities—Aboriginal communities far removed from the university. From the FNPP's perspective, the communities were our primary partners; the university was a welcome and important base but not the main focus of our creative and interactive attention. Funding for the project came from federal sources through the MLTC. In essence, the communities were our employers and the FNPP would be judged successful or not, by the opinion and events in the communities.

The program's allegiance towards the *other* was not flaunted or treated provocatively on campus. We depended on both the institution and the communities for our success. From the university's perspective, any activity based on, accredited by, or emanating from the physical plant of the university should identify itself first and foremost with the institution. But clearly, a program like the FNPP required both a firm linkage to the communities, as well as to the institution. The FNPP evolved a multilevel linkage system to connect itself with the university and the partner communities. The role of Project Director became that of chief liaison with university administration (at various levels from departmental to senior administration) and with the leadership group at the tribal council. All other positions (course writers, administrative support, community liaison, locally based instructors) had virtually no contact with the university and focused only on the communities.

The fact that the program itself was delivered off-campus (typically far from the university and often in remote areas) greatly reduced the potential for on-campus visibility. All interaction with the students and the communities took place through the FNPP offices. This included the establishment of initial agreements. Typically, communities or councils located funds and then contracted with FNPP for program redevelopment and delivery. These agreements were then taken forward by the Project Director for signature by the university administration. Students were registered as a cohort, with forms gathered by the FNPP and conveyed en masse to the Registrar's office; negotiations regarding mature student admission (in cases where a student had strong life experience but was missing some aspects of her academic background) were similarly handled via the FNPP office. Numerous related administrative issues were handled by the FNPP. In essence, the FNPP was the agent of both the student and the community in their interactions with the university. Given the program's uniqueness, such a

singular interface for the students with the university was essential for the smooth operation of the program.

This responsibility assumed by FNPP was understood as one of the key elements of the partnership—that the FNPP was best positioned to act on behalf of the partnership in regards to university procedures and requirements, and the tribal council was best positioned to act on behalf of the partnership in regards to First Nations community and tribal matters. This division of responsibility and expertise was acknowledged early in the FNPP process and transgressions were addressed. Similarly, tribal interaction with university faculty or administration was rare, typically taking place only at the end of a program as part of a graduation ceremony—to which, on various occasions, the President, Chancellor, Registrar, Dean, and various School directors were invited to attend and provide congratulations on behalf of the university.

As noted earlier, the connection with the university was vested in the Project Director, and that connection was primarily through the administrative line (Director, Dean, Registrar and Vice-President primarily). It was not deemed helpful to attempt high visibility across broad faculty member structures. For example, detailed discussions at faculty or university levels were engaged in only as required for various program approvals. However, full transparency and prior notification were seen as essential along the administrative line. A program mantra was 'don't surprise the administration'—and the practice served FNPP well. A combination of program success (which was apparent once evaluation data were available after the first delivery) and keeping the administration informed, won on-campus advocates for the programs and allowed the establishment of certain unique, facilitative procedures that saved many hours of time. Time that might have been spent engaging with diverse faculty members and committees who were unfamiliar with the FNPP's approaches and rationales, and not necessarily sympathetic of same, was avoided. On the other hand, time spent updating administrators and engaging in planning and problem solving was typically time well spent. In such a project, it is important that the project leader be able to engage, when necessary, in academic debate, as faculty questions are never fully avoidable, nor is the practice always counterproductive. It is also important, once data are available, that a project be able to defend its work in terms of both academic and community merit. Evaluation and scholarly publication should be considered as critically important activities for the overall project. This academic evidence, and the respect it engenders, enables one to more easily move through various aspects of academia. In the FNPP, such work was always vetted, and often co-authored, with community members.

There are, as one can note above, a multitude of challenges that projects like the FNPP must address in their interface with the university. The bulk of these challenges are best handled through limiting the points of interaction between the project and the institution and having clear rationales and protocols for whatever contact points are necessary (e.g. student registration procedures or the bookkeeping function within the project and its counterpart at the university). For such key and ongoing contacts, it was desirable to have a specific and sufficiently senior contact, at the decision-making level, to cooperatively plan the procedures that could become routine.

As noted earlier, there are downsides to being located in the borderland of an institution. The same lack of visibility that allows a program to focus more fully on its external partners, also allows the university to forget that the university's student body is more than those visible from the campus clock tower, or that the sum of all programs offered is evident in the substantial brick, stone and concrete buildings that form the pride of the campus. The fact that funding was almost entirely external for the FNPP, and that it seemed—from the university's perspective—to flow with artesian regularity, allowed the university to avoid base-budgeting the programs, thus accepting the 'milk of praise without the cost of feeding the cow'. This too is part of the lived experience of the FNPP. Indeed, the FNPP has been forced into a state of hibernation as of 2006, a victim of the ongoing challenges communities face in securing tertiary education funding.

Nevertheless, a great deal was accomplished over its seventeen years. The programs cut new ground academically and pedagogically; its work is being sustained through two colleges that participated in early deliveries of the program and continue their work to the present; other opportunities for partnering on child and youth activities emerged through the initial FNPP partnership; a subsequent Aboriginal program on-campus adopted the FNPP community-based approach in its own successful development and delivery; the program's visibility and successes supported the expansion of on campus Aboriginal programs; a good percentage of graduates from some communities with accessible educational institutions have moved on to complete bachelor's degrees, and a number of master's degrees as well; evidence of its impact is still apparent in the communities that participated in the program; and its philosophy is being carried forward through other programs within the School of Child and Youth Care.

From the earliest meetings with the MLTC it was clear that 'education as usual' was neither what was sought nor what was needed for the communities to claim a leadership role in planning and providing for their children and families. MLTC and many other tribal organisations across the country, have a multitude of experiences with various forms

of tertiary education—both within their communities and outside. Beyond the severe issues of 'brain drain' by young people forced to pursue their education away from home communities, and the dislocation of one and two year programs provided on- or near-reserve that fail to articulate with four year degree programs off-reserve, the council was also concerned with the content of what was being learned as well, in particular, the absence of cultural and tribal voices and values in the curriculum.

Through a series of meetings with community members, project team members, and one meeting with an international advisory group, the FNPP developed an approach that came to be called the Generative Curriculum Model. This model was based on a co-construction of knowledge, respecting both local and traditional knowledge as well as Western knowledge (Ball & Pence 1999; Pence, Kuehne, Greenwood & Opekokew 1993). For such an approach to work, it was essential that local knowledge come directly from respected community members—not as a distillate from Western sources and Western voices. Meadow Lake, and subsequent tribal partners, identified an individual who would serve as an Intergenerational Coordinator ensuring that appropriate community members were invited to participate as contributors to, and co-instructors in, the program.

The two-year pilot program with MLTC exceeded both partners' expectations. The council hired a trusted Elder from another tribal group to undertake an evaluation at the end of the program. Debbie Jette (1993) noted in her report that:

> ... some of the greatest benefits of the Meadow Lake Tribal Council's Indian Child Care Program are those that were not included in the list of eight basic objectives. These spinoffs have made a significant impact on the lifestyle and community spirit. ... The involvement of the Elders in the Indian Child Care Program and subsequently into all community events and undertakings has led to a revitalization of cultural pride and traditional value systems. These individuals are those that hold the fabric of community life together (p. 57, 59).

Ensuring space for borderlands in tertiary education

The creation of a borderland space at the university was a combination of strategic assessment and planning, as well as serendipity. From the first interactions with the Council it was clear that they had a vision; a vision that required key partners who were prepared to fully support that vision. Shortly after a university-communities' agreement was forged to support that vision, a space on the periphery of the university became available. From that place on the borderland, unique relationships became possible—ones that balanced power and contributions in ways too seldom found in university-community

partnerships. From that left-behind space it became possible to focus more intently on our work beyond the physical entity of the university, to ensure that the bulk of our attention could be on the partner outside, rather than on the academic dynamics and forces inside. And, through the intensity of that focus and the freedom to align with the wishes of the communities, we were able to enter not only a different physical space (of the *other*), but a different conceptual space as well. It is a space that allows one to observe the ways and thoughts of academia, but also come to appreciate the ways and thoughts of those outside academia. It is the borderlands that open up to other possibilities.

At a point in time when combinations of information technology, media and globalised education threaten to overwhelm social diversity, impacting not only Indigenous peoples, but all non-Western societies, the concept of the borderlands as a place of change, transition and contested realities is an invaluable resource. It is a place for the generation of new ideas and a place for the unexpected to arise. Universities are predominantly homogenising and colonising agents, but they can also be places supportive of social invention and social preservation. Such places do not thrive within the core structures, the orthodoxy of the university, but in spaces protected from such pressures. It is critical that educational institutions consciously and conscientiously work not only to preserve such spaces, but to create them when they do not exist. It is in such places that there is hope, a possible third way, for Indigenous communities and academia to find ways forward that serve both interests.

Comments from Professor James P Anglin

It is my pleasure to add both a collegial and an administrative perspective to the intriguing narrative and analysis of Dr Alan Pence. I still recall quite vividly the School of Child and Youth Care faculty meeting when Alan brought forward the request from the MLTC to partner with them to develop an early childhood education and care curriculum. At that time, we were a small school with six tenured or tenure-track faculty members and no Indigenous faculty members. I am pleased to say that the school now has two faculty members of Canadian Indigenous heritage and a total tenure/tenure track complement of fifteen faculty plus sessional instructors. I recall that my personal reaction, which I stated at the meeting, was to the effect that 'we don't know where this will lead, but it is a privilege to be asked and we have a moral obligation to assist if we can.' As this article documents, much has been learned over the subsequent 20 years and the initial partnership spawned a stream of innovations and further partnerships.

The story, as Dr Pence outlines, is one of venturing into uncharted territory and taking risks in pursuit of a unique post-secondary vision; the vision of a culturally appropriate curriculum that would meet mainstream accreditation standards while also respecting and incorporating the cultural values and traditions of the sponsoring Saskatchewan Indigenous tribal council. The article speaks to working in 'the borderlands of tertiary education' and I think all of us involved in supporting Alan in taking on this task appreciated we would be bringing together two knowledge traditions—two intellectual and cultural *homelands*, in fact.

Over time, and based upon a review of relevant literature and much discussion and analysis, Alan and his colleagues developed the notion of a 'bi-cultural and generative curriculum'. This has proven to be a marvelous breakthrough and can perhaps be thought of as a kind of 'engine for co-constructed curriculum development.' In addition to this innovative curriculum development approach, there was a commitment to the Indigenous community, as represented by designated elders and community leaders, that they would be in 'the driver's seat' in terms of ensuring that the final product would be culturally acceptable and appropriate. While the university partners had the responsibility for the academic integrity of the mainstream content, the community had responsibility for the Indigenous curriculum's cultural integrity.

Shortly after the FNPP was initiated, I became Director of the School of Child and Youth Care, the academic home for the FNPP. A few years after taking office, I had the pleasure to introduce the FNPP model to the largest First Nation in British Columbia, north of Victoria, and I attended a series of meetings where the collegial relationships were developed and mutual trust was being established. That process took time, but the day the First Nation's representatives referred to 'our curriculum' and 'our program', we knew we were on the way. That community-based initiative has developed and expanded, and still runs very successfully to this day under the sponsorship of a community-based post-secondary institution and the local First Nation.

Looking back over two decades, the FNPP proved to be well ahead of its time. Many of its core themes have now become mainstream at the University of Victoria (UVic) as well as at other Canadian and international universities. Some of these themes include: community-based research, Indigenous knowledge and curriculum development, community partnerships and civic engagement, experiential education, and flexible/distributed learning. Over time, the FNPP gradually became more 'respectable', visible and celebrated. One key development was the Faculty of Law at UVic acknowledging the FNPP model and its successful experience as part of the foundation for a program to educate Inuit lawyers in the new territory of Nunavit in the far north of

Canada. The greater visibility and recognition of the FNPP was assisted when the former Dean of Law became the Vice-President Academic and Provost, the most senior academic position in the University reporting directly to the President.

To my mind, one of the most delicate balances for the program to achieve, involved getting faculty colleagues on board while not drawing too heavily on scarce staff time. This tightrope had to be skillfully walked and was critical in gaining collegial support. An ongoing challenge was finding a way to inform colleagues and administrators without unduly raising fears and perhaps bringing forth negative responses that could hamper program development. The strategic sharing of information, sometimes only when activities were already well underway, sometimes raised questions and concerns relating to the amount of disclosure and adherence to university procedures. Getting key middle managers (i.e. Academic Deans, the Registrar, etc.) on board was crucial to success, as a number of processes had to be modified to make the innovative delivery model workable.

Finally, what solidified the reputation of the FNPP, was the degree of success of the students. As students completed courses and gained credentials, these added to the achievements of the university as a whole without impacting upon base budget resources. The innovative funding model which depended on external sources, allowed the FNPP to function without competing directly for university resources. Naturally, this also had its downside in that the program struggled for sustainability in the absence of such a base budget, and some communities questioned the level of university commitment when resources beyond in-kind were not forthcoming. Since that time the university has expanded its on-campus Indigenous offerings and has made a commitment in its Strategic Plan to:

> increase the number of Indigenous students graduating from all faculties at UVic, building on our commitment to and our unique relationship with Canada's First Peoples (Objective 3).

In the end, it needs to be said that without the dedicated hard work, creativity, persistence and strategic thinking of Dr Pence, this program could not have been developed. Any pioneering effort relies on the qualities of the pioneer, and while the experiences of the FNPP can be helpful in other contexts, one should never overlook the need for pioneering spirit and effort to make such innovations successful.

Comments from Fran Hunt-Jinnouchi

From the perspective of Indigenous communities, the essence of borderlands work is essentially 'relationship building'. This is a new

way of thinking, a new approach and one recently being resourced and supported by the British Columbia Ministry of Advanced Education (AVED). The UVic received funding from AVED to develop and implement an Aboriginal Service Plan (ASP) which essentially provides resources to facilitate collaborative community-university planning to enhance relationships and to allow the Indigenous voice to be heard in a formal way. At its inception in 1989/90, the FNPP may have been seen as program development and implementation, but in reality it was an initiative before its time because its success relied heavily on relationship building. Although there were initiatives with similar objectives to the FNPP, the concept of stepping outside the university was quite new because the FNPP process created space for the direction to start and be maintained within the community. As has been pointed out, the community was truly in the driver's seat.

My experience over the past twenty years working in education at the community level has shown me that university and community partnerships have been characteristically based on an unequal power balance where authentic relationships were not the focus, nor fostered. Typically, universities parachuted in and out to deliver a program they owned and developed, and once the funding was exhausted, it meant they were off to the next First Nations community who had money. This didn't leave room for longer term visioning or relationship building. With the FNPP, even where a program was completed, the relationships developed were strong and laid the groundwork for other UVic community projects.

The process is slowly changing. UVic's ASP work, based on consultations with First Nations' political leaders, elders and students, strongly points to a new and bolder direction from the communities. Communities are asking for a genuine commitment on the part of public institutions and they are looking to partnerships that extend outwards by way of field centres and community-driven and community-delivered programs where the control rests with the community and local knowledge holders.

In British Columbia, there are a number of Aboriginal-controlled post-secondary institutes and adult centres, some of which have been operating for over thirty years. All are required to partner with public post-secondary institutions to accredit their programs. Currently there are 34 Aboriginal-controlled member institutes of the provincial Indigenous Adult & Higher Learning Association (IAHLA). The opportunities for genuine partnerships are great but require universities to explore a broad range of possibilities, including the borderland approach advanced by the FNPP. The development of IAHLA has provided an avenue for post-secondary Aboriginal-controlled institutes to network and share resources. They are comparing services with

public institutions in their respective areas, and some public institutions are being recognised as friends of the communities while others are not.

The evaluation of services is summed up by the relationships that have been built and maintained over time and not necessarily the actual program that was delivered. This is forcing public institutions to take notice and re-evaluate how they are doing business with First Nations communities or question why they are not—if they haven't established relationships in the past.

IAHLA institutes serve to address the unique needs of the communities and are geographically and culturally specific. These centres allow for direct involvement of multi-generational community members. The approaches and practices are distinct. FNPP embraced the spirit of what has come to be the norm in many cases today in community-based education within First Nations. However, public institutions weren't always willing or prepared to accommodate community needs which meant creating programs that helped to build community capacity while ensuring the programs were culturally, spiritually and academically relevant.

The ASP process has made me acutely aware of the need for strong internal leadership, leaders willing to step outside of the box to grapple with how and why we should share power and resources; but most importantly, leaders willing to continuously re-evaluate the how and why of relationship building. A leader in this case must be willing to allow him or her self to be vulnerable and not always have the answers. They need the ability to listen first and speak later.

Despite the long history of the FNPP approach, it remains a very relevant model for current university-community work because it is one way of decolonising the relationship between mainstream post-secondary institutions and Indigenous communities. The emergence of government-directed partnership building, along with many nations calling for authentic partnership building, suggests that now, more than ever, the timing is right to take this new direction.

Conclusion

The UVic has come a very long way in regards to support for Indigenous education. This is particularly evident in the increased profile of on-campus programs for Indigenous students, since the FNPP was first conceptualised in the *borderlands* of the institution. That space proved useful as the FNPP sought to create strong and mutually supportive relationships with community partners at a time that the university had relatively few Indigenous programs and off-campus partners were rare. In the intervening years the university has

dramatically increased the number of Indigenous-focused programs, both on- and off-campus. The number of Indigenous professors has increased significantly and an Indigenous House of Learning, designed to reflect a traditional structure, has recently opened at the centre of the campus. These changes and advances are very much a part of the goals identified in the ILP. The values embodied in the ILP—*partnerships* and *transformations*—are reflected in this historical overview of the FNPP programs. Although academic institutions can be colonising structures whose procedures, processes and purposes are at odds with communities that do not share those institutions' socio-cultural and historical backgrounds, they can also be transformed. Through purposefully utilising the edge or borderland of an institutional structure, the ideational centripetal forces may be sufficiently overcome to allow other perspectives, values, beliefs and knowledges to emerge.

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