

Executive Summary

The disappearance and murder of Saint Mary's University student Loretta Saunders in February 2014 captured national media attention. Ms. Saunders' murder highlighted the tragedy of missing and murdered Aboriginal women in Canada. As a student, Ms. Saunders' experience also highlighted significant gaps in the programs and services available to Aboriginal students at Saint Mary's University. The murder of Loretta Saunders served as a catalyst for students, staff, faculty and administration to begin the process of building a better university experience for Aboriginal students.

At the Loretta Saunders Memorial Service, the President of Saint Mary's, Dr. J. Colin Dodds, committed to establishing a Task Force to provide guidance on how the Saint Mary's university community could enhance learning opportunities and the education experience for Aboriginal students. The Task Force completed its work during the Spring and Summer of 2014. The Task Force report has been organized around three major, and interconnected questions:

1. What are the structural/foundational elements upon which Saint Mary's University can start to build institutional transformation?
2. How does Saint Mary's University engage and support success among aboriginal learners, including those in university and those who aspire to attend?
3. How do we indigenize the academy?

Enhancing the learning opportunities and education experience of Aboriginal students will space, staff, resources and a sustained commitment to cultural change. The seventeen

recommendations contained in this report describe both concrete steps that can be taken immediately and longer-term goals that will promote positive cultural change, in collaboration with Aboriginal communities. The report is pragmatic and can lead to immediate action. Indeed, the Task Force recommends the immediate implementation of the following institutional supports and transformation:

1. Institutional Supports and Transformation

- 1.1. *That a space be designated immediately as an Aboriginal Student Centre.*
Moreover, the Task Force recommends that the current Faculty of Arts Graduate Study Commons (MM206) be repurposed as an Aboriginal Student Centre.
- 1.2. *That the University appoint a full-time Aboriginal student advisor immediately (for 2014-15). The Task Force further recommends that this position be included in budget deliberations as a permanent member of staff.*
- 1.3. *That the University create a permanent “Aboriginal Advisory Council” by the end of 2014.*
- 1.4. *That the University appoint a “University Elder” in 2014-15 and work toward creating an Elder-in-Residence (or more than one), to provide students with mentoring and spiritual guidance.*
- 1.5. *That Saint Mary’s ensure that Mi’kmaw people are included in the key ceremonies throughout the academic year.*
- 1.6. *That Saint Mary’s acknowledge the university’s place within Mi’kma’ki verbally at university and campus events, through signage and through flying the Mi’kmaq flag outside of the McNally Building.*

Once appointed, the Aboriginal Student Advisor will have a key role to play in fostering a culture of change, in collaboration with the Aboriginal Advisory Council and the university community. Specifically, we point toward our remaining recommendations as some of the ways to enhance the experience of Aboriginal students at Saint Mary's, while strengthening our connections with Aboriginal communities. The remaining recommendations are:

2. Outreach activities

2.1. *That the university develop a single, coordinated, university-wide outreach strategy that builds upon the university's existing strengths for younger Aboriginal students.*

3. Pathway mobility

3.1. *That Saint Mary's develop a mechanism for voluntary self-identification in the university's application procedures and for sharing information, when permitted, with other relevant units.*

3.2. *That the University create opportunities for including as many Aboriginal students as possible within existing learning communities, such as LEAP.*

4. A Strategy for Indigenization

4.1. *That Saint Mary's create a University Chair in Indigenous Studies.*

4.2. *That Saint Mary's University rededicate one of its existing Canada Research Chairs for further enhance the indigenization of the academy.*

4.3. *That consideration be given in the 2015-16 budget process to creating a University fund to encourage the participation of Aboriginal experts in*

classrooms and in special public lectures across the university and that such a fund be continued in subsequent years.

4.4. *That the University facilitate the creation, development, growth and delivery of curriculum that would be relevant to Aboriginal communities throughout the Atlantic Region in all of the undergraduate faculties.*

4.5. *That the University explore the creation, development and delivery of credit and non-credit programs that can be co-designed by Continuing Education, the Business Development Centre, relevant departments and programs, and the aboriginal community.*

4.6. *That the university support and expand the Office of Northern and Aboriginal Research through full funding the director and further support the mandate for the office that includes research, community liaison and other activities.*

5. Student Success

5.1. *That Center for Academic Instructional Development (CAID) be charged with developing a sustainable peer mentoring program or the development of a learning community for Aboriginal students that would extend beyond the first year experience.*

5.2. *That Saint Mary's University make every effort to identify Aboriginal alumni to re-establish a connection with them and to connect them to the current generation of aboriginal students.*

The Task Force recognizes that implementing all of these changes will take time. But the Task Force also recognizes that Saint Mary's is woefully behind other postsecondary

institutions in the region and nationally when it comes to meeting the needs of Aboriginal students. Some of the recommendations will require budgetary consideration, while others are revenue-neutral or achieved with little cost. Some can be achieved quickly, while others require longer-term effort and support. All of the recommendations must be part of a robust and comprehensive response to the needs of Aboriginal students and Aboriginal communities. There is, simply, a need for immediate and effective action, even in a climate of restraint.

The Task Force made a conscious choice to work quickly and to focus on pragmatic recommendations, some of which can be implemented immediately. The Task Force has consulted broadly, though not comprehensively, to learn about the best practices being used in postsecondary institutions elsewhere to engage Aboriginal learners and Aboriginal communities. We received submissions from faculty, students, staff and administration at Saint Mary's and elsewhere. The Task Force thanks everyone who took the time to meet with us, write to us or share their experience. The Task Force is also grateful for the support and co-operation of the President, Dr. Dodds, and Vice-President Academic and Research, Dr. Gauthier. We could not have accomplished our task without their support.

The Task Force also made a conscious choice to work economically. In a period of difficult budget choices, we did not feel that we would "spend freely" in the preparation of this report. Perhaps the economy we exercised in shaping this report will ensure that there are resources remaining to begin the process of institutional change.

We hope that the Task Force Report will provide the framework that will enhance the experience of current Aboriginal students and for future generations.

PRESIDENT'S TASK FORCE REPORT

FINAL REPORT

15 SEPTEMBER 2014

INTRODUCTION

The murder of Loretta Saunders deeply affected the Saint Mary's University community. When Ms. Saunders went missing on 13 February 2014, her family flew to Halifax to initiate a search. They appealed for help and volunteers responded, putting up posters around Halifax and effectively using social media. When her body was discovered in the late afternoon of 26 February, a collective grief was experienced by many in the community who knew Ms. Saunders as well as those who knew that since 1980, almost 1200 Aboriginal women have gone missing or have been murdered across Canada.

To put this in context, Aboriginal women made up about 4.3 percent of the female population in 2013 but they are disproportionately represented among murdered and missing women, accounting for 16% and 11.3% respectively. Ms. Saunders had decided in September 2013 that she would study the topic of missing and murdered Aboriginal women as her thesis project, under the supervision of Dr. Darryl Leroux. She likely would have graduated in May 2014 and was considering law school.

At the Loretta Saunders Memorial Service, the President of Saint Mary's, Dr. J. Colin Dodds, committed to establishing a Task Force to provide guidance on how the Saint Mary's university community can enhance learning opportunities and the education

experience for Aboriginal students. In the spring, he appointed a task force consisting of students, Aboriginal people, faculty and staff from Saint Mary's University. The Task Force is comprised of Dr. Paul Dixon (Associate VP, Enrolment Services), Mr. Roger Lewis (Board Member, Mi'kmaq Native Friendship Centre) Ms. Salina Kemp (Student), Ms. Amanda Kolwich (Student), Dr. Trudy Sable (Office of Northern and Aboriginal Research), and Dr. Peter L. Twohig (Atlantic Canada Studies and History, who served as chair).

There have been many reports and statements about postsecondary education and Aboriginal people generated by institutions, think tanks and Aboriginal people's organizations. Needs have been documented in countless reports and recommended actions have been described. There is a high degree of congruency among the various reports that have been consulted in the preparation of this Task Force Report.

Former Assembly of First Nations National Chief Shawn Atleo said "Public policy relating to our peoples has resoundingly failed – failed to achieve its objectives and failed our peoples." Atleo also said "Education has been an instrument of oppression used against us, emphasizing the removal of our identities, the fracturing of our families, and the elimination of our ways of communication, thinking and being ... Our challenge today is ... to forever turn education from an instrument of oppression to a tool of liberation."¹ Mary Simon, President of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK) described the combination of demographics (Aboriginal peoples are the fastest growing and youngest segment of Canada's population) and the socioeconomic struggles facing many Aboriginal peoples as a "recipe for social disorder."² The Principal of Queen's University,

Dr. Daniel Woolf, stated unequivocally in 2011 that improving Aboriginal education is “critical to the fabric of Canadian society today.”³

Education has been viewed as a key site of agency by Aboriginal peoples in Canada. The apogee of the paternalistic federal approach was, perhaps, the *Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian Policy* (the “White Paper”) presented in 1969. Among the recommendations put forward was that First Nations children be fully integrated into provincial and territorial education systems. Aboriginal people across Canada successfully resisted this approach. The National Indian Brotherhood (the forerunner of the Assembly of First Nations) issued a position paper entitled *Indian Control of Indian Education* (1972). This document signaled an important change in the colonial relationship and First Nation communities began to insist on a larger voice in shaping the educational experience of their children. In a general sense, Aboriginal education in the 1970s was concerned with the preservation of culture.⁴ The 1980s were a period when Aboriginal people became involved in postsecondary education through partnerships. Educational interventions targeting potential Aboriginal students became common, as did the delivery of distance courses.⁵ Efforts to reform First Nation education have continued in different ways in settings such as Northern Quebec (1975), Nova Scotia (1998) and British Columbia (2006). In each of these examples, authority for education has been transferred to First Nations as an essential building block in the process of decolonization. The Assembly of First Nations released *Tradition and Education* in 1998, a document that emphasized the critical role of postsecondary education in the transition to self-government.⁶

In the case of Nova Scotia, Canada's Parliament passed the *Mi'kmaq Education Act* (1998) that provided a statutory basis for the implementation of the *Final Agreement with respect to Mi'kmaq Education in Nova Scotia*. This was the first tripartite agreement to be concluded. It essentially replaced the education provisions outlined in the *Indian Act* in participating communities and granted First Nations full authority over education.

Reserve communities in Nova Scotia have been able to implement some specific changes in elementary, middle and secondary schools. Mi'kmaq immersion programs were created in communities such as Wagmatcook and Eskasoni. Graduation rates from band-operated schools climbed higher than the national average reported for band-operated schools and was over 70% for Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey students. Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey reported that there were 2700 on-reserve students from primary to grade 12, with two thirds of these on reserves. Four First Nations offered school from primary to grade 12, three others had a P-6 school and four offered a primary school.⁷

As developments in early 2014 highlight, education has been and continues to be a contentious issue in Aboriginal communities across Canada. What is clear is that there needs to be a collaborative, community-based, consultative approach to any initiatives. As Saskatchewan's Treaty Commissioner, Hon. Bill McNight, has observed there can be no return to the "paternalistic past."⁸

SAINT MARY'S UNIVERSITY

It is important to recognize these developments because these developments have established a solid foundation from which to grow educational opportunities across

Mi'kma'ki. The Saint Mary's University community has an opportunity to learn from the experience of Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey (MK) students, administrators, teachers and communities.

Canadian universities see potential in changing the relationship between Aboriginal peoples and universities. In part, this potential has been framed by an understanding that it is necessary to address the legacy of colonialism, to recognize and affirm the importance of Aboriginal peoples' ways of knowing, and to meet the needs of Aboriginal communities. It is routinely pointed out that Aboriginal youth are the fastest growing segment of the Canadian population and that Aboriginals have been underrepresented in universities. As the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) recently wrote "Increasing access to education for Aboriginal Canadians is a win-win situation."⁹

According to the National Household Survey data released in May 2013, the Aboriginal population of Canada continues to grow at a higher rate than non-Aboriginal Canadians (23% compared to 5.2%) and is a much younger population, with a mean age of 26.¹⁰ Beginning in the 1970s, Aboriginal people's enrolment rates in postsecondary programs rapidly increased. By 2001, 38% of Aboriginal people had attained postsecondary credentials (compared with 53.4% of non-Aboriginal people). But these figures mask some important variation. Most importantly for our purposes, it is important to note that PSE attainment in settings other than the university are almost equal to those of non-Aboriginal Canadians, while university completion remains a problem. About 18% of the non-Aboriginal population hold university degrees or certificates, while the figures are 5% for FN, 7% for Métis and non-registered FN people, and 2% for Inuit

people.¹¹ To put it bluntly, nationally we have a *university* problem, not a postsecondary education problem.

It must be acknowledged that the university is steeped in the epistemologies and the world-views of the dominant, non-Aboriginal society.¹² Many of the findings and recommendations that have been outlined in reports highlight strategies, initiatives and practices to better prepare Aboriginal students for their university experience.

Universities, however, must also be better prepared to serve Aboriginal learners. This includes enhancing supports, creating an Aboriginal student centre, creating a mechanism for ongoing consultation with Aboriginal communities. As a university community, indigenization of the classroom must include finding appropriate ways of incorporating experiential learning and traditional knowledge.

Expanding services for Aboriginal students on campus and enhanced outreach activities will require budgetary consideration. There is the possibility that such investments will be offset by increasing the number of Aboriginal students. Some of the recommendations herein could be supported through external funding opportunities, such as Nova Scotia government's Excellence and Innovation Fund.¹³ University resources are fragile for a variety of reasons, including concerns about enrolments, changes to provincial funding, negotiated salary increases or other factors. While these are all potential barriers to action, Saint Mary's University simply must move forward with a sustainable plan to enhance the educational experience for Aboriginal students. The Task Force asks the entire university community a direct question: what portion of your

privilege are you willing to give up to improve the quality of education for Aboriginal learners here at Saint Mary's University?¹⁴

The Saint Mary's University community needs to start with asking some of the right questions and entering into an ongoing dialogue with Aboriginal communities, students and other stakeholders to create the best path forward. Real change necessitates some understanding of what needs to be changed. We could, to use a metaphor familiar to residents of Halifax, simply rearrange some deck chairs. Or we could work toward changing some of our existing structures within our institution and begin a shared conversation with Aboriginal communities, organizations, educators and individual learners.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND THE LEGACY OF COLONIALISM

Section 91 (24) of the *Constitution Act* makes the federal government responsible for "Indians, and Lands reserved for the Indians", while education is largely a provincial responsibility (Section 93). Funding for postsecondary education is viewed as discretionary by the federal government, since it is neither clearly addressed nor prohibited by the *Indian Act*. First Nations reject this position and, instead, view education as an inherent Aboriginal Right or as a Treaty Right.

Some of the most compelling evidence heard through The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) process concerned experiences in residential schools. The TRC reported that 150,000 Aboriginal people were placed in these schools and many were forbidden to speak their language, actively dissuaded from continuing their cultural

traditions and physically, emotionally and sexually abused. The TRC estimated that 80,000 former students are alive today. This is important because the residential school experience is, for many communities, an intergenerational experience and one that continues to shape educational experiences of young people today.¹⁵

It is evident to even a casual observer that education has been a tool of colonization. Aboriginal scholars have argued that Aboriginal students have internalized a colonized consciousness that views them as both inferior and vulnerable.¹⁶ This results in a loss of self-confidence that needs to be restored and education has an important role to play in changing a person's consciousness of their community.¹⁷ Universities, therefore, have a social responsibility to foster this process of decolonization.

The legal relationship that has been created through the *Indian Act* and other policies has also meant that not all Aboriginal learners can access the same programs, funding or resources. There are important variations that exist – themselves a legacy of colonialism – and this report recognizes these variations. There is, simply, not enough money allocated to fully fund the growing number of Aboriginal students who aspire to postsecondary education.

The importance of the legacy of colonialism is multifaceted. Until the 1940s, a “status Indian” who wanted to attend university had to give up their status. Until the late 1960s, funding was available for postsecondary education but only in vocation and trades training. Colleges and universities were excluded until 1968, an important sign of where Aboriginal people were “supposed” to go and the kinds of work that they were “supposed” to do.¹⁸

Today, Canadian universities are more likely to see potential in changing the relationship between Aboriginal peoples and universities. In part, this potential has been framed by an understanding that it is necessary to address the legacy of colonialism, to recognize and affirm the importance of Aboriginal ways of knowing, and to meet the needs of Aboriginal communities. It is routinely pointed out that Aboriginal youth are the fastest growing segment of the Canadian population and that Aboriginal people have been underrepresented in universities. As the AUCC recently wrote “Increasing access to education for Aboriginal Canadians is a win-win situation.”¹⁹ The evidence for this is compelling. Nova Scotia has an aging population and a large number of postsecondary institutions. There is intense competition to recruit students. Aboriginal students are viewed as something of an untapped market.

TOWARDS A COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGY

A survey of ten organizations in British Columbia done a decade ago identified four best practices to guide the educational experience of Aboriginal students. These include: small class size to provide a comfortable but professional experience, creating culturally relevant curriculum and examples to engage Aboriginal learners, ensuring transferability of credits among institutions and providing time for student-faculty interaction outside of the classroom.²⁰

The University of Manitoba, to provide one example, has a number of different access programs and has found them to be effective for increasing the enrolment of Aboriginal students, helping students make the transition to universities and fostering

student success. The supports available at the University of Manitoba include a tailored orientation experience, individualized academic advising, an “Introduction to University” course that is a degree credit, and tutorials. These students also have access to academic advisors and counseling support staff.²¹

Saint Mary’s University may be well positioned to implement these best practices and to develop a robust engagement strategy for Aboriginal students that will help them realize their aspirations and ensure academic success. Saint Mary’s University has had a rich tradition of engagement with the Aboriginal community through curricular offerings, research relationships, extension teaching and graduate courses. This tradition dates back to the 1970s, and it must be renewed and strengthened.

The key to any strategy is that it be consultative, inclusive and comprehensive. From the perspective of Saint Mary’s University, there are structures that can be enhanced and developed to support Aboriginal students and new ones that will have to be created if the university is to succeed in enhancing learning opportunities for Aboriginal students. Eber Hampton (1988, p. 19) listed a number of qualities that he considered to be important to support Aboriginal education, including spirituality, service, diversity, culture, tradition, respect, history, and transformation.²² The Task Force has considered practical strategies through which some of these qualities can be implemented in the short- and long-term at Saint Mary’s University.

In 2010, the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada and the National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation co-hosted a National Working Summit on Aboriginal Postsecondary Education. Among the goals identified were the importance of

a holistic approach in ensuring student success and a collaborative approach to ensure that community needs are being met. The Task Force affirms the importance of both of these goals.

Saint Mary's needs to become proactive and commit to fundamental change that acknowledges the legacy of colonization. Only through this can the needs of Aboriginal learners be met. The university community must find ways to acknowledge, develop and support Aboriginal student culture and identity. In 2006, the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada described the challenges faced by Aboriginal university students. These challenges range across a wide spectrum, including historical, socio-cultural, geographic, and economic. In a follow-up report (2011), the AUCC reported that "First Nations youth face barriers that are distinct from their non-First Nations peers and therefore specific strategies are required for success."²³

A comprehensive access strategy for Aboriginal people²⁴ must include:

- Institutional Supports and Transformation
- Outreach activities
- Pathway mobility
- A Strategy for Indigenization
- Student Success

INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORTS AND TRANSFORMATION

Space

It is often observed that Aboriginal learning is a "highly social process." For this and other reasons, it is critical that a space on campus be designated as the "Aboriginal

Student Centre.” The AUCC also found that, despite a proliferating number of studies and analyses, there had been no significant change nationally in the number of universities that provided dedicated space for Aboriginal students between 2005 and 2010.²⁵ Space is fundamental to institutional change. The creation of such a centre can provide study space but also a sense of connection for Aboriginal students. When other universities have established such centres, they have quickly become a focal point of student activity. Importantly, spaces can serve a variety of purposes. In some cases, university librarians, writing centre staff, financial aid officers, advisors and others routinely go to the student space to enhance their availability and to further break down any barriers. In this way, the Aboriginal student centre becomes a “one-stop-shop” for the students. If possible, the Aboriginal student advisor should be located in or near the space, to further enhance a sense of community.

While the Task Force is sensitive to space planning processes within Facilities Management in consultation with other processes, there is a dire need to have such a space immediately. It is, furthermore, critical that such a space be located in a highly visible location. The Task Force recommends that the current “Faculty of Arts Graduate Study Commons” (MM206) be repurposed for the use of Aboriginal students immediately. The Task Force further recommends that some budgetary consideration be given to redesigning this space, following consultation with Aboriginal student users, staff, and Aboriginal communities. The Task Force recognizes that displacing graduate students from this existing space may be problematic but there are a number of common areas throughout the university available to them. Nevertheless, every effort should be

made to relocate Arts graduate students to another space on campus and to repurpose the existing space as an Aboriginal Student Centre.

RECOMMENDATION: The Task Force recommends that a space be immediately designated as an Aboriginal Student Centre. Moreover, the Task Force recommends that the current Faculty of Arts Graduate Study Commons (MM206) be repurposed as an Aboriginal Student Centre.

Space is fundamental to institutional change. But the provision of space cannot be the only response. Other important areas include inclusion and governance, the delivery of courses off-campus, the creation of relevant curriculum and programs, access to the full spectrum of university offerings, and financial support and flexibility. However, in the view of the Task Force, the appointment of an Aboriginal student advisor is absolutely critical.

Aboriginal Student Advisor

Aboriginal students at Saint Mary's University have been served for the past number of years by an Aboriginal student advisor who was also a student. Moreover, the position of Aboriginal student advisor was soft-funded and part-time, leading to significant gaps in access throughout the year. Consultations with students, advisors at other universities and others all raised serious questions about this service model. Student informants noted the lack of service, the lack of continuity and the lack of confidentiality embodied in a part-time position filled by another student. Saint Mary's University simply must do better.

The Native Post Secondary Education Counselling Unit is operated on the campus of Dalhousie University by the Confederacy of Mainland Mi'kmaq Education Department. The Unit is open to all Aboriginal students in the Metro area and is an important resource to students who make use of it. Despite the presence of this service, there remains a need for additional student services on the Saint Mary's.

Universities throughout Canada have appointed Aboriginal student advisors as full-time members of staff. Larger institutions have full-time staff meeting the needs of Aboriginal students. In the Maritimes, there are different models. Mount Saint Vincent University and three metro campuses of the Nova Scotia Community College, for example, share a single Aboriginal student advisor on a 40/60 basis. Other universities have contract employees in the role. As documented in this report, Saint Mary's has a good deal of work to do with respect to improving the learning environment for Aboriginal students. A skilled Aboriginal student advisor could play a significant role in the implementation of many of the recommendations contained herein.

RECOMMENDATION: The Task Force recommends that the university appoint a full-time Aboriginal student advisor immediately (for 2014-15). The Task Force further recommends that this position be included in budget deliberations as a permanent member of staff.

While a precise job description will need to be developed, the appointment of a full-time member of staff will enhance the quality of the Aboriginal student experience at Saint Mary's, ensure continuity of service, and allow the coordination of many of the

initiatives outlined in this report, in collaboration with the Aboriginal Advisory Council and other relevant committees at the university.

Aboriginal Advisory Council

Many universities across Canada have a committee that provides guidance on campus strategy with respect to Aboriginal people. The composition and role of these bodies vary widely. In October 2013, Carleton University established its Aboriginal Education Council. The Council reports directly to the President and, through the President, to the Board of Governors and Senate. The Council was charged with implementing Carleton University's Aboriginal Co-Ordinated Strategy.

RECOMMENDATION: The Task Force recommends the creation of permanent "Aboriginal Advisory Council" by the end of 2014.

The Aboriginal Advisory Council would provide advice to the highest level of the university (President's Office, Board of Governors and Senate) and serve as a resource to the entire university community. Saint Mary's University does not have a corpus of Aboriginal staff and faculty from which to draw upon. It is therefore recommended that the Aboriginal Advisory Council be comprised of a combination of internal and external appointments. There are precedents that could usefully be followed in creating such a committee. There are joint committees that include representation from the Board of Governors and the Senate, such as the Honorary Degree Committee. The Finance Committee of the Board of Governors has representation from outside of the university.

The Governance Committee of the Board of Governors could develop “Terms of Reference” for the Aboriginal Advisory Council and appointments made by the President.

Saint Mary’s University has a good deal of work to do in terms of enhancing the learning opportunities for Aboriginal students and only some of these can be achieved in the short-term. It is essential that the university develop a vehicle for listening to, and understanding, the perspectives of Aboriginal people in all their diversity and to respect the full range of their aspirations. The Aboriginal Advisory Council at Saint Mary’s would play a critical role in developing a strategy that would lead to the implementation of the recommendations contained in this report and develop new strategic priorities for the future.

Elders

As part of the transformation of Saint Mary’s, the Task Force recommends that a titular “University Elder” be appointed, in consultation with Aboriginal communities in 2014-15. Elders have a deep knowledge of tradition, culture and spirituality that can provide students with unique and culturally appropriate support. The presence of university elders would provide an alternative to the Aboriginal Student Advisor or to existing counselling services. Most importantly, the appointment of a university elder will be a tangible sign of Saint Mary’s University’s respect for, and understanding of, the important role that elders in the well-being of Aboriginal people. The “University Elder” could also play a role in important events throughout the academic year, such as convocation. Upon the advice of the Aboriginal Advisory Council, the roles and functions

of the “University Elder” could be refined and shaped. The University should work toward creating a “Elder-in-Residence” (or more than one) as a permanent resource to Aboriginal students.

RECOMMENDATION: That the university appoint a “University Elder” in 2014-15 and work toward creating an Elder-in-Residence (or more than one), to provide students with mentoring and spiritual guidance.

University Ceremonies

Like all postsecondary institutions, Saint Mary’s University is steeped in tradition, some of which are shared and some of which are unique. The traditions of the university are marked by ceremonies and events throughout the year. As a university community, we should acknowledge our place within Mi’kma’ki verbally when opening significant university events or events on our campus, such as conferences. The university should also use signage to indicate that the campus is situated within Mi’kma’ki and display the flag of the Mi’kmaq at Convocation and outside of the McNally Building. Members of the Aboriginal Advisory Council and the University Elder, as well as other Aboriginal people, should be included in the key ceremonies throughout the academic year (including Welcome Week, Convocation, Board Launch, new faculty orientation and other events). Numerous informants have cautioned the Task Force that the university must avoid what has been described elsewhere as a “beads and feathers” approach. By this, people who consulted with the Task Force mean that it is not sufficient to include Aboriginal people *only* in ceremonial ways. The Task Force nevertheless believes that

alongside of substantive participation in shaping the university, inclusion in ceremonies is important for the transformation of Saint Mary's.

RECOMMENDATION: That Saint Mary's ensure that Mi'kmaw people are included in the key ceremonies throughout the academic year.

RECOMMENDATION: That Saint Mary's acknowledge the university's place within Mi'kma'ki verbally at university and campus events, through signage and through flying the Mi'kmaq flag outside of the McNally Building.

OUTREACH

It is impossible to over-estimate the importance of relationship building. A 2011 conference on Indigenous Issues in Post-Secondary Education stated unequivocally that “Creating personal connections is a pillar of transitional programming, institutions increasingly recognize the importance of creating relationships with these students and their communities long before their application to post-secondary education as part of the continuum of support that includes the application process, the post-secondary experience, and beyond.”²⁶ Saint Mary's must recognize that enhancing access to postsecondary education must begin before students are in the final years of their schooling. Building a successful relationship must begin earlier and must expose students to the full range of the university experience, including academic, athletic, social and residence life experiences.

Community-based programs

Community-based programs have been developed in different settings. First Nation's University of Canada, for example, has developed programming based on community needs to deliver a range of courses on-site in different communities, including specialized teacher education programs as well as first year arts and science courses. Such courses allow students to stay in their local community.²⁷ Saint Mary's University has had a significant level of community engagement over the years. The Extension Department (now Continuing Education) historically delivered courses in Truro, attracting Aboriginal student learners. The Atlantic Canada Studies program, in collaboration with the Innu Nation, delivered courses co-taught by Innu people in Labrador in the early 2000s. The Office of Northern and Aboriginal Research, under the direction of Dr Trudy Sable, has had longstanding, funded research partnerships that have not only made substantive contributions to scholarship but which have also created significant mentoring opportunities for Aboriginal students. Saint Mary's, therefore, should embark on a new effort to mount community-based programs in partnership with Aboriginal communities with a high degree of confidence based upon this track record of success.

Campus Experiences

While community-based programs have proven to be a successful strategy, another strategy has been to bring Aboriginal students to the university campus. Increasingly, post-secondary institutions are working in collaboration with Aboriginal communities to provide meaningful, positive and pleasing campus experiences. Such experiences help to

build awareness of the range of programs available and, more importantly, build a relationship with students, their families and their communities. These encounters need to be regular, on-going, and sustainable and they are a critical component of any successful community engagement strategy.

Health, Math and Science Camps, Arts Camps and Athletic Camps for students in middle- and high-school can help to build the relationship between the university and Aboriginal people. In some institutions, individual faculties run camps and programs designed in collaboration with communities and which appeal to Aboriginal students. Others are university-wide or even inter-institutional. The University of Manitoba, for example, has offered the Inner City Science Centre, Kid-Netic Energy Science, Biz Camp, Engineering Camp and others over the years.²⁸

Saint Mary's has well-developed structures (Mini-U and Athletic Camps) that have proven to be cost-effective. Adapting such structures, in consultation with reserve communities, Aboriginal organizations and the Aboriginal Advisory Council, will be an important component of a university outreach strategy.

Outreach, bridging and transition programs are also operated differently. In some settings, they are provided through a resourced Aboriginal student services unit, comprised of dedicated staff or individuals who have responsibility for the "Aboriginal portfolio" within existing units. Larger universities sometimes organize access and retention programs that are Faculty- or even program-specific.

RECOMMENDATION: That the university develop a single, coordinated, university-wide outreach strategy that builds upon the university's existing strengths for younger Aboriginal students. This could include:

- a. Identifying a single person from among the recruitment staff who can serve as the primary liaison for the Aboriginal community;***
- b. Developing, in consultation with Aboriginal communities, a Mini-U program specific to Aboriginal learners;***
- c. Developing athletics camps that are specific to Aboriginal students***

PATHWAY MOBILITY

Outreach constitutes an important part of enhancing Aboriginal students' access to university. It is, however, important to recognize that Aboriginal students face some of the same challenges as other university students in making the transition to university, as well as some challenges that are unique. There is a need to ensure that a smooth admission process and a commitment to student success match enhanced outreach activities. The institutional supports and transformation described previously will ensure that Saint Mary's becomes a university wherein students can find the means to develop and support their Aboriginal identity and culture, thereby enhancing opportunities for retention and success. Moreover, student success and positive experiences will become a critical component in making Saint Mary's an attractive option for aboriginal students.

Admission Experience

Universities elsewhere have created a variety of admission policies to encourage and facilitate the enrolment of Aboriginal students. Queen's University, for example, offers students an "additional and alternative pathway for admission." Students who opt for this admission pathway are directed toward the usual academic and personal support services available to all students, as well as to additional resources such as the Four Directions Aboriginal Student Centre. In addition to meeting the general admission conditions of the university and of programs, students admitted under this pathway must "provide evidence of Aboriginal ancestry", a personal statement of experience, and other materials.²⁹

Creating such admission procedures, regardless of their particularities (and it is too early to consider these in details), is an important sign to Aboriginal communities and learners. It also provides an opportunity for greater continuity, insofar as Aboriginal Community Liaisons or Admission Coordinators can be identified and serve as a point-of-contact for potential students. An essential first step in this must be to develop a mechanism for voluntary self-disclosure with respect to Aboriginal identity. Universities in other jurisdictions routinely collect and share such information to facilitate communication, resource planning and appropriate budgeting. Information collection would have to conform to Nova Scotia's *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy* legislation and best practices within the university. The Task Force recommends a two-step process for paper and on-line applications that would (a) ask students to self-identify as Aboriginal and (b) seek their permission to share their name and contact

information with other units including Student Services, Financial Services, the anticipated Aboriginal Student Advisor, and other relevant units.

RECOMMENDATION: That Saint Mary's develop a mechanism for voluntary self-identification in the university's application procedures and for sharing information, when permitted, with other relevant units.

A study of best practices for postsecondary institutions in British Columbia noted that effective student intake practices must move beyond traditional recruitment techniques. Recommended strategies include direct community visits, word of mouth and targeting specific groups of learners through regular and ongoing contact with knowledgeable people in the band to target specific audiences.³⁰ Conversations with Aboriginal student advisors throughout Nova Scotia and at institutions elsewhere confirmed the importance of establishing ongoing relationships. This requires both the identification of staff and faculty contacts within the university, to provide critical continuity, and the cultivation of relationships in the community.

There will likely be a place for Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) as part of any alternative admission stream. PLAR is a well established process “that involves the identification, documentation, assessment and recognition of learning acquired through formal and informal study. This may include work and life experience, training, independent study, volunteering, travel, hobbies and family experiences.”³¹ PLAR is especially important for “non-sequential” students who may have acquired work

or life experiences beyond the classroom and who have been outside of school for some time.

Transition

Evidence suggests that thirty percent of Aboriginal students leave postsecondary education after their first or second year of study, compared to thirteen percent of non-Aboriginal students. The reasons for this are both financial and non-financial.³² One of the most common reasons cited are family responsibilities (broadly defined). This statistic suggests the necessity of ensuring that there are appropriate and meaningful institutional supports available to Aboriginal students.

Saint Mary's University is fortunate to have had a successful transition and bridging program in the form of LEAP. LEAP creates learning communities in each of the undergraduate faculties. Funded on a cost-shared basis until 2017, the LEAP experience may provide an important model for first-year Aboriginal students. Successful transition will also depend upon the presence of an Aboriginal student advisor, Aboriginal elders, peer mentors, and other student supports.

RECOMMENDATION: That the University create opportunities for including as many Aboriginal students as possible within existing learning communities, such as LEAP.

Funding

In 1977, in an effort to increase the number of First Nation and Inuit students, the Post-Secondary Educational Assistance Program (PSEAP) was established. This program

was replaced in 1989 with the Post-Secondary Student Support Program. In 2004-05, about 23,000 learners were assisted through federal funding, a tenfold increase since the late 1970s. But the imposition of a funding cap (2% of annual growth) has meant that funding has not kept up with demand.³³ In 2004, the Auditor General of Canada noted that at least 9500 eligible individuals were not able to pursue postsecondary education because of a shortfall in federal funding.³⁴ In the decade since that report, things have become worse.

In evidence given before the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, Darren Googoo, then Director of Education for Membertou First Nation, described how funding had increased from \$11,726 to only \$12,200 a decade later. Membertou was able to fund each student who wanted to go to postsecondary education. In nearby Eskasoni, approximately eighty students were being funded but there were another forty to seventy students each year who applied for support.³⁵

One of the ironies of the demography of reserve communities is that there will be increasing demand on band resources. In their recent assessment, the Six Nations of the Grand River, one of Canada's largest First Nation communities, found that rising postsecondary education costs "has meant fewer students" have been able to attend and are left "unable to realize their educational goals." First Nations individuals, therefore, are required to self-fund a portion of their education or the full cost, a significant barrier when upwards of 38% of First Nation families live below the poverty line.³⁶

Two different scholarships were organized in direct response to the murder of Loretta Saunders both at Saint Mary's and in the community. Funding is a critical

element for all students. Many Canadians hold erroneous views of the funding available to Aboriginal students for postsecondary education. At a 2011 conference at Queen's University, 175 education leaders concluded that there are "public assumptions that Aboriginal students have access to significant educational funding" but speakers and participants at the conference "spoke of the inadequacy of this funding to meet the growing needs of students."³⁷ Participants highlighted that some Aboriginal people, such as Métis students, were not eligible to receive government funds through the Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP). Nationally, organizations like the National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation (NAAAF) have raised significant funds to support students through bursaries, loans and scholarships. At the local level, individual bands have responded to meet the needs of their own communities. Membertou, for example, has sent 46 people per year to university and provided \$17,200 per student on average. Students from that community have achieved a graduation rate of about seventy percent.³⁸

In a 2010 survey, the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada concluded that although scholarships for Aboriginal students had increased bursaries had not. The AUCC concluded that funding for Aboriginal students is not keeping pace with the actual university costs.³⁹

A STRATEGY FOR INDIGINIZATION

The strategies described in previous sections provide a basis for improving services for Aboriginal students and for the participation of Aboriginal people in the life of the

university. There is little doubt in the view of the Task Force that such changes are both significant and meaningful. There must also be a strategy for indigenizing the faculty and the curriculum. Incorporating Aboriginal knowledge-holders into the university, as well as research methods, worldviews and philosophies, can be both “transformative and transforming”⁴⁰ for the entire university community. Universities have, in the assessment of Anishinaabe researcher Kathleen Absolon, “fences and gatekeepers” that effectively enforce a “conformity of approach” that reproduces the value systems of the privileged, while closing off paths that could foster “new learning and create new knowledge.”⁴¹ Saint Mary’s University must embrace a strategy for indigenization.

The Task Force recognizes that these are not objectives that will be easily achieved. Any effort to increase the number of full-time faculty who identify as Aboriginal will necessarily be a slow and long-term process. The Task Force agrees that continuing to work on the equity portfolio to increase the number of Aboriginal faculty (as well as women, persons with disabilities and visible and linguistic minorities) is an important goal. However, the Task Force recommends a more immediate strategy for indigenization.

There are well-established mechanisms at the university that can be used to pursue the goal of indigenizing the faculty, while conforming to the Collective Agreement. The Task Force recommends several actions that, taken together, will yield immediate results.

Indigenizing Faculty

The Task Force recommends the creation of externally-funded chairs that would be in addition to existing faculty complements. Two possibilities exist and the Task Force recommends that both be pursued.

A “University Chair in Indigenous Studies” could move among the three undergraduate faculties, departments and programs. Appointments could be made for one year and could be nationally advertised. A “University Chair” in contrast to one situated in a specific department or program offers a degree of flexibility and the ability to be responsive to the changing needs of the Aboriginal community. A campaign to endow the chair and a search for a major donor would have to be pursued but this nevertheless should be a goal of Saint Mary’s.

RECOMMENDATION: That Saint Mary’s create a University Chair in Indigenous Studies.

The Task Force further recommends that one of the existing Canada Research Chairs be dedicated to an individual with expertise in an Aboriginal content area. This could either be achieved by keeping the chair in its current “home department” or, through consultation with stakeholders within and outside the university, reallocating the chair to a new department or program.

RECOMMENDATION: That Saint Mary’s University rededicate one of its existing Canada Research Chairs for further enhance the indigenization of the academy.

The Task Force recognizes that creating an endowed “University Chair in Indigenous Studies” or rededicating an existing Canada Research Chair are goals that may take several years to achieve and, even when achieved, these appointments will have an impact in only some areas of teaching and scholarship. To further enhance the university’s ability to incorporate Aboriginal epistemologies, worldviews and ways of understanding in classrooms across the university, the Task Force recommends the creation of a fund that would encourage the participation of Aboriginal experts. Departmental budgets currently include resources that can be used to pay honoraria to guest speakers. We propose creating a separate fund that would be used exclusively to pay honoraria to guest speakers in the classroom and to cover travel expenses. The Task Force recommends that at least \$20,000 be set aside in the next budget year (2015-16) and in every year after that to bring Aboriginal expertise to Saint Mary’s. We recognize that this is an arbitrary amount but it would have an immediate and dramatic impact in the classroom.

RECOMMENDATION: That consideration be given in the current budget process (for 2015-16) to creating a university fund to encourage the participation of Aboriginal experts in classrooms and in special public lectures across the university and that such a fund be continued in subsequent years.

AUCC reported that the early 21st century has brought a substantive increase in the number of “native studies” programs, as well as a significant increase in the number of “established initiatives to support Aboriginal students who wish to pursue advanced studies.”⁴² Universities elsewhere have developed programs that are specific to

Aboriginal learners. These include a variety of “native studies” programs at universities across Canada usually situated in the humanities and social sciences, professional programs such as social work or education that have identifiable streams that lead to careers in Aboriginal communities or working among Aboriginal populations, a variety of “access” programs that increase the number of Aboriginal students in specific programs (such as engineering or nursing, to name two examples). First Nations University of Canada has a stated mandate to meet the needs of Aboriginal peoples across Canada. Other institutions have special relationships with Aboriginal communities, such as the Northern Ontario School of Medicine that has, since its founding, cultivated strong linkages to Aboriginal communities in Ontario and Manitoba.

At Saint Mary’s University, several programs and departments, including Atlantic Canada Studies, English, History, Religious Studies, and Sociology and Criminology, regularly offer courses that can become the basis for an “indigenous studies” stream. Indeed, a working group of faculty has begun to develop new courses that focus on aspects of indigeneity and to think about ways to bring new courses into a relationship with existing courses. While this is an organic development from faculty, the administration nevertheless has a role to play in encouraging a commitment to developing curriculum and course offerings that would be relevant to Aboriginal communities. While adapting developing new courses and identifying existing courses is an important step in establishing a new relationship with the Aboriginal community in the region and beyond, it cannot be the only response. Robust curricular development will depend upon “integrating language and cultural components, having experiential aspects (whether on

the land or in the institution), encouraging elder participation, [and] strengthening community relations ...”⁴³ There is, then, a specific need for the university to support the creation, development, growth and delivery of such courses through dedicating a portion of FCEs to courses with significant Aboriginal content or courses that are a priority for the Aboriginal community.

RECOMMENDATION: That the University facilitate the creation, development, growth and delivery of curriculum that would be relevant to Aboriginal communities throughout the Atlantic Region in all of the undergraduate faculties.

Continuing Education at Saint Mary’s has a critical role to play in transforming the university in the view of the Task Force. Continuing Education has a track record of working with mature students (over the age of 25), delivering extension courses, offering university-preparation courses, and offering professional and executive courses. All of these are relevant to enhancing Saint Mary’s engagement with the Aboriginal community. Continuing Education has expressed an ongoing interest in supporting the development of credit and non-credit courses that would meet the needs identified by the Aboriginal community itself. Other units of the university, such as the Business Development Center, have cultivated strong relationships that could be linked to course offerings and program development. Institutional support and transformation will occur only if senior administration, staff and faculty share responsibility for improving the learning environment for Aboriginal students. Building on existing initiatives and the historic strengths of Saint Mary’s provide the foundation on which we can build further institutional transformation. Continuing Education and the BDC have key roles to play if

Saint Mary's is to satisfy demand for business courses, professional and executive courses, and the development of lifelong learning opportunities for Aboriginal people.

RECOMMENDATION: That the university explore the creation, development and delivery of credit and non-credit programs that can be co-designed by Continuing Education, the Business Development Centre, relevant departments and programs, and the Aboriginal community.

Many of these trends are also evident in universities in the Maritimes. Saint Mary's University is, frankly, rather late in cultivating curricular linkages with the Aboriginal community, despite the efforts of many dedicated faculty, staff and administrators over the years. Other universities in the region have ably developed many of the recommendations described herein. For example, The University of Prince Edward Island Faculty of Nursing launched a program to "increase the number of "Academic Ready" Aboriginal students into the UPEI Nursing Program and other health related programs." The UPEI Faculty of Nursing allocates two seats each year to Aboriginal students who "have been identified in their high schools as having the potential interest to becoming nurses." Efforts within nursing were part of an overall university strategy that sought to increase the number of Aboriginal students admitted to UPEI and to transform the university into a school that is "supportive of Aboriginal students." The university also opened an Aboriginal student centre in January 2009.⁴⁴ St. Thomas University has a well-established native studies program, while Cape Breton University has established both a Mi'kmaq Studies program and the larger Unamaki College within the institution. Indeed,

Cape Breton University has established itself as a leader in creating partnerships with the Mi'kmaq community, with a suite of tailored program offerings. Following the recommendations of the Marshall Inquiry, Dalhousie University created the Indigenous Black and Micmac program within the Faculty of Law. This is not an exhaustive list but, rather, serves to illustrate the range of programs that have been implemented to meet the educational aspirations of Aboriginal learners.

With such a diversity of programs do opportunities still exist for Saint Mary's University? The short answer is yes and that any special undertakings should be responsive to community needs, mindful of existing programs and linked to the existing strengths of the university. The range of course offerings at universities across the region and beyond have been hard won over a long period of time. What has changed in the 21st century is the level of engagement, in many settings, between universities and the Aboriginal community.⁴⁵ There are certainly opportunities to develop, in collaboration with bands and organizations around the region, ongoing lifelong learning courses through Continuing Education. There may be opportunities within the Sobey School (through linkages with the BDC) and the Faculty of Science to meet the needs of Aboriginal entrepreneurs, administrators, business owners, managers, and others. There may be opportunities in the other faculties as well.

Such a collaborative approach will enhance educational opportunities and outcomes for Aboriginal students. It will also ensure that employment and career opportunities exist for those Aboriginal students who wish to stay and work in their local community. In this region, there have been compelling analyses of the role of universities in helping students

to “learn to leave.” That is to say that university education often provides an employment path that necessitates leaving one’s local, or even preferred, community.⁴⁶ A different approach is necessary, one that recruits students locally, promotes the delivery of courses in the community and allows students to make constructive contributions to their community in ways that are meaningful to them.⁴⁷

Through the Office of Aboriginal and Northern Research in the Gorsebrook Research Institute for Atlantic Canada Studies, Saint Mary’s University has had a longstanding relationship with communities throughout Mi’kma’ki and with the Innu nation. Saint Mary’s participates in the University of the Arctic, which provides a tangible connection to Aboriginal people in the North and the potential for further engagement. The Atlantic Canada Studies program and Continuing Education delivered a series of courses in Labrador as part of its commitment to the Innu nation and the Department of Sociology and Criminology attracts a large number of Aboriginal students. Dr. Tony Charles, who holds appointments in Finance, Information Systems & Management Science and is the School of the Environment at Saint Mary’s, served on the Fisheries Advisory Committee of the Atlantic Policy Congress of First Nations Chiefs from 2000 to 2005. Dr. Trudy Sable, who is the Director of the Office of Aboriginal and Northern Research in the Gorsebrook Research Institute for Atlantic Canada Studies, has longstanding and meaningful research collaborations with both the Mi’kmaq and the Innu.

The Office of Aboriginal and Northern Research (OARN) has operated for a decade. For the past eight years, the university has directly and generously supported a

portion of the Director's salary, while the remaining portion is generated through contract research. This puts the Director in a highly stressful situation. The OARN has supported a large number of Aboriginal student interns (twenty in the last four years) through its grant funding and through accessing other funding streams such as the Student Employment and Experience Program (SEEP) funding and funding through Canada Youth programs. Similarly, many First Nations researchers have been hired within communities to work on a variety of funded projects over the years. The OARN could be a key setting for the further development of student research experiences, mentoring opportunities and community engagement activities.

RECOMMENDATION: That the university support and grow the Office of Northern and Aboriginal Research through full funding the director and further support the mandate for the office that includes research, community liaison and other activities.

STUDENT SUCCESS

The Task Force sees the LEAP learning community model as a useful component of student success. However, LEAP is focused only on first-year university students and there is no provision within the program for on-going peer mentoring or support. Many Aboriginal students are older than non-Aboriginal students. Some may have familial relationships that include living off-campus, providing child-care, or caring for other relatives. There are other issues, including the transition to a larger urban environment, housing instability or uncertainty about funding. A university that is sensitive and

responsive to these issues will enhance the opportunities for students to realize their potential and their aspirations.

In universities outside of the region, different strategies have been used. In some settings, certain courses and instructors are recommended to Aboriginal students. In other settings, faculty are encouraged to take attendance and to follow-up when a student is absent. In still other settings, staff from the Aboriginal student center sit in on courses and play a role both in surveillance issues like attendance and participation, while also serving as peer mentors and/or tutors. Staff, faculty, and students at Saint Mary's will have to arrive at a shared understanding of how best to support Aboriginal students in their studies.

Student success is a vexing issue for the contemporary Canadian university. Student expectations are changing, often infused with a market sensibility that is, itself, reinforced by some of the university's own initiatives. There is no consensus among faculty on whether the new focus on students as "clients" is beneficial or productive. The university may need to rethink various aspects of student success. Program completion and attaining jobs are the primary measures of success. But Aboriginal learners may have less linear educational trajectories and these need to be supported, too.⁴⁸ One Aboriginal student said "Success is not about completing a program. If students experience change and growth while attending post-secondary that later contributes to development in their life and community, then that is success."⁴⁹

The success of Aboriginal students is dependent upon a range of changes to the existing university, including the creation of additional supports, recruitment and

outreach activities, academic innovation and other initiatives. It is equally true that the creation of learning communities or peer mentoring programs beyond the first year will be a crucial component of Aboriginal student success.

RECOMMENDATION: *That Center for Academic Instructional Development (CAID) be charged with developing a sustainable peer mentoring program or the development of a learning community for Aboriginal students that would extend beyond the first year experience.*

Saint Mary's University also has a strong track record of graduating people who identify as Aboriginal from a variety of programs. To highlight only one example, Eleanor Johnston, a Mi'kmaw woman from Eskasoni, completed her Master of Arts degree in Atlantic Canada Studies, graduating in 1992. Ms. Johnson's thesis was entitled "Mi'kmaq Tribal Consciousness" and is remarkable because it was written in her Aboriginal language. Such a tradition needs to be recognized and honoured. Aboriginal people have been an important part of our university community and are an important subgroup of our alumni community. The Task Force recommends that Aboriginal alumni be identified and be invited to a special event to mark the dawn of a new relationship between Saint Mary's and the Aboriginal community. The new Aboriginal Student Centre could include photos of past Aboriginal students as a tangible reminder that today's students are part of an important legacy (even if that legacy has been largely unacknowledged). Ideally, recognizing and identifying Aboriginal alumni in this way will create other linkages between past and present generations of students.

RECOMMENDATION: That Saint Mary's University make every effort to identify Aboriginal alumni and to re-establish a connection with them and to connect them to the current generation of Aboriginal students.

TOWARDS IMPLEMENTATION

Recent communications from the senior administration have signaled that Saint Mary's University is entering a difficult fiscal environment. The changing demographics of Nova Scotia, declining enrolments, increased competition to recruit students domestically and internationally, dependency on the differential fees paid by international students, increasing contractual obligations, and cuts in provincial contributions all contribute to a difficult fiscal climate. The Task Force recognizes that there are financial implications to many of the recommendations contained herein, especially with respect to the appointment of a full-time Aboriginal student advisor, the creation of an "Aboriginal Advisory Council" and efforts to create new research chairs. The financial implications, however, are not insurmountable barriers. In the case of an endowed University Research Chair and rededicating a Canada Research Chair, external funding would help to off-set the expenditures, though not fully. The appointment of a full-time Aboriginal student advisor is simply long overdue. Other universities have made this commitment, alone or in partnership with others.

The Task Force believes that three of the recommendations must be implemented immediately:

1. The creation of a proper “Aboriginal Student Centre”
2. The search for, and appointment of, a full-time “Aboriginal Student Advisor”
3. The appointment of an “Aboriginal Advisory Council”

Each of these initiatives will have an immediate impact on the university community. The student advisor and the Aboriginal advisory council would also have a critical role to play, in consultation with other university committees, in developing a strategic implementation plan for the remaining recommendations in this report. The strategic implementation plan should express the university’s ongoing commitment to achieving the recommendations set forth in this document and serve as an expression of a collaborative and respectful approach forward, while recognizing the critical place of the colonial legacy in shaping the present.

The university should explore funding to support these initiatives from sources such as the federal, provincial and band governments and pursue grant or foundation support for specific, targeted initiatives. Increasing the Aboriginal student presence on campus also brings the promise of enhanced student fees and, given the demographics in Aboriginal communities, this could be a way to stabilize or even grow enrolments and reduce the university’s dependence on tuition from other demographic groups.

Provincial governments elsewhere have launched coordinated strategies. Ontario, for example, launched the Aboriginal Education and Training Strategy (AETS) in 1991, under the auspices of the Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities. It was intended to increase participation rates, enhance cultural sensitivity and create opportunities for

Aboriginal involvement in institutional governance. In 2006, 13 Ontario universities participating in the Ontario Government's Aboriginal Education and Training Strategy (AETS) reported 3400 Aboriginal students. This ranged from 945 at Lakehead University to just over 100 students at universities like Brock, McMaster and Nipissing. To 2006, expenditures under AETS were \$87 million. Until 1996, funds were allocated on a competitive basis and thereafter, monies were allocated on a fixed share basis with 53% for colleges, 37% for universities and 10% for Aboriginal institutes.⁵⁰

What is significant in this model is that postsecondary institutions have been able to access funding from the government to support Aboriginal students, programs and programming. Nipissing University, a primarily undergraduate institution with about 6500 students in 2012, received \$485,000 in provincial government funding to support its commitment to Aboriginal students.⁵¹ In Nova Scotia, the Office of Aboriginal Affairs "is supporting several actions that help more Mi'kmaq youth reach their potential, find meaningful employment and contribute to the business activity of the province."⁵² This has meant working with other government departments to ensure that Mi'kmaq youth are well-positioned for jobs. To that end, a coordinated "Aboriginal skills and employment team" has been created by the Office of Aboriginal Affairs, Labour and Advanced Education and Economic and Rural Development and Tourism.

Another government priority for Nova Scotia concerns education and the province works through both the national Aboriginal Affairs Working Group and the Mi'kmaq-Nova Scotia-Canada Tripartite Forum Education Working Committee to match learning opportunities with employment. One recent illustration is the creation of scholarship

opportunities for Mi'kmaq students interested in working with Nova Scotia Corrections Services. There is interest in developing collaborative initiatives that help to facilitate employment of Mi'kmaq youth.⁵³

In some provinces, such as Saskatchewan, partnerships have been created among postsecondary institutions, the provincial government, and partner Aboriginal organizations to develop programs that are responsive to community needs and that facilitate student achievement. Some universities have ably cultivated relationships with the corporate sector to support specific initiatives. Although corporate involvement may seem attractive for a number of reasons, it also must be done with a view toward community values both within the university and within the Aboriginal community.

CONCLUSION

The Task Force was asked to provide guidance on how the Saint Mary's University community can enhance learning opportunities and the education experience for Aboriginal students. Saint Mary's has a substantial legacy of working with Aboriginal communities. This track record provides a solid foundation on which to build the initiatives described herein. We also conclude, however, that there is a profound need for structural and institutional change. Such change will enhance the learning opportunities for Aboriginal students and will enrich the entire Saint Mary's community.

Enhancing the learning opportunities and education experience of Aboriginal students will require space, staff, resources and a sustained commitment to cultural change. The seventeen recommendations contained in this report describe both concrete

steps that can be taken immediately and longer-term goals that will promote positive cultural change, in collaboration with Aboriginal communities. The report is pragmatic and can lead to immediate action.

The Task Force recognizes that the implementation of the recommendations contained herein will take time but there is a need for immediate and effective action. Saint Mary's is woefully behind other postsecondary institutions in the region and nationally when it comes to meeting the needs of Aboriginal students. The time for action is now to honour the memory of Loretta Saunders and the university's place with Mi'kma'ki.

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³² College Student Alliance (CSA), Ontario Student Trustees' Association (OSTA-AECO) and Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA). *Breaking Barriers*, p. 13.

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³⁴ Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development. *No Higher Priority*.

³⁵ Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development. *No Higher Priority*, p. 16.

³⁶ Six Nations of the Grand River. Grand River Post Secondary Education Office. *The Value of Post Secondary Investment: A case for increased investment in Post Secondary Education for Six Nations Students*. Ohsweken, Ontario: Grand River Post Secondary Education Office, June 2011.

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³⁷ Ellen Kachuck Rosenbluth, *Indigenous Issues in Post-Secondary Education: Building on Best Practices*. Final Report. Queen's University School of Policy Studies, June 2011, p. 17-18.

³⁸ Rosenbluth, *Indigenous Issues in Post-Secondary Education*, p. 17-18.

³⁹ Assembly of First Nations: Education, Jurisdiction and Governance. *Supporting First Nations Learners Transitioning to Post-Secondary*, pp. 44-45.

⁴⁰ Kathleen E. Absolon (Minogizhigokwe), *Kaandossiwin: How We Come to Know* (Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood, 2011), p. 63. See also J. Archibald, *Indigenous Storywork: Educating the Heart, Mind, Body and Spirit* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008), M. Kovach, "Emerging from the Margins: Indigenous Methodologies," in I. Brown and S. Strega, eds., *Research as Resistance: Critical Indigenous and Anti-Oppressive Approaches* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press, 2005), and C. Weber-Pillwax, "Indigenous Research Methodology: Exploratory Discussion of an Elusive Subject," *Journal of Educational Thought*, 33, 1 (1999): 31-45.

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⁴² Reported in Assembly of First Nations: Education, Jurisdiction and Governance. *Supporting First Nations Learners Transitioning to Post-Secondary*, p. 53.

⁴³ Storytellers' Foundation & Gitksan Wet'suwet'en Education Society. *Funding and Best Practices Research*.

⁴⁴ Dr Kim Critchley and Julie Bull, "Aboriginal Education at UPEI: Transitioning Toward a Positive Future in Health," NAHO Conference, Our People Our Health, November 2009.

⁴⁵ Assembly of First Nations: Education, Jurisdiction and Governance. *Supporting First Nations Learners Transitioning to Post-Secondary*, p. 57.

⁴⁶ See, for example, Michael Corbett, *Learning to Leave: The Irony of Schooling in a Coastal Community* (Halifax: Fernwood, 2007) and Stephen Nolan, *Leaving Newfoundland: A History of Out-Migration* (St. John's: Flanker Press, 2007).

⁴⁷ Jim Silver, "Aboriginal Adult Education: Combating Poverty and Colonization," in Jim Silver, ed., *Moving Forward, Giving Back: Transformative Aboriginal Adult Education* (Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood, 2013), p. 1-16.

⁴⁸ Shauna MacKinnon, "Healing the Spirit First," in Jim Silver, ed., *Moving Forward, Giving Back: Transformative Aboriginal Adult Education* (Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood, 2013), pp. 49-60.

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⁵¹ Nipissing University Aboriginal Council on Education. *Aboriginal Post-Secondary Education Strategy*, p. 13.

⁵² Office of Aboriginal Affairs, Statement of Mandate 2014-15. http://novascotia.ca/abor/office/what-we-do/business-plan/040214-OAA%20Statement%20of%20Mandate%202014-2015_FINAL.pdf

⁵³ Office of Aboriginal Affairs, Statement of Mandate 2014-15.