

THREE THREADS OF COMMITMENT: RYERSON STUDENT AFFAIRS RESPONSE TO TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION

In the preface to the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC), Justice Murray Sinclair declares that “reconciliation is not an Aboriginal problem; it is a Canadian one”. We are Student Affairs professionals at Ryerson University in Toronto, we are educators, we are citizens, we are mostly non-indigenous, and we agree.

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Reconciliation is a contentious and complex term. To reconcile can mean different things, all of which are relevant to us. Some examples from the Oxford Living Dictionary: to restore friendly relations between, to make or show to be compatible, to make (one account) consistent with another, to make someone accept (a disagreeable or unwelcome thing), to cause to coexist in harmony.

It is this last one – to cause to coexist in harmony – that feels the most lofty, the most hopeful, and the most germane to our work as educators in Student Affairs. This goal of harmonious coexistence is obviously bigger than our work alone, involving a more far-reaching acknowledgement of so many things: that the scars of colonization on Indigenous people are deep and profound, that the ugly realities of our shared history have been ignored for too long, that the way forward is through education and a willingness to see the truth of things. As educators, we commit to being active and willing participants in this thorny process of greater reconciliation in all its forms, but we commit ourselves especially to what is closest to us: our belief in the value of education as a force for truth and peace and a more just world. This particular reconciliation work involves a commitment to transformative learning, a reckoning with our habits of interpretation and muted awareness, to disrupting our inherited truths and accommodating new ones. At the heart of our effort towards this purpose, we commit ourselves to shifting colonial attitudes still present within our places of work, our policies, our practices and creating an education system that, in the words of the TRC “...treats Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian knowledge systems with equal respect.”

THIS IS OUR PROJECT, OUR WORD.

But how to proceed? We in Ryerson Student Affairs appreciate the complex and nuanced territory that is embodied in reconciliation work. It can be a thicket that paralyzes. We need markers, signposts that will help guide us forward, not with fear or fragility, but with confidence and humility. To that end, we pull on three threads of commitment to this process.

1. **Thread one: we commit to telling our story.** We will continue to try things in Ryerson Student Affairs that aim to be inclusive of Indigenous frameworks, and then we will reflect upon and recount those things we try - our humble beginning.
2. **Thread two: we commit to action.** We will imagine ways to advocate, to participate, to amplify and do real work in the world as a direct response to the Calls to Action – our willingness to engage.
3. **Thread three: we commit to learning.** We will proceed from where we are and learn how Indigenous ways of knowing and learning can meaningfully inform and ground our work in Student Affairs – our pledge to a more inclusive pedagogy.

THREAD ONE - some of what we are already doing in Ryerson Student Affairs towards these ends: staff participation in the Blanket Exercise, reading, thinking about and discussing the TRC Final Report, a curation of resources and culturally relevant education and career-planning tools for Aboriginal students, indigenizing* orientation events and other parts of our programming, connecting with community partners, many of us registering for Indigenous Knowledge courses, sharing of resources related to indigenous epistemology and pedagogy, a blog series by Ryerson Student Affairs' own Deena Shaffer called "Heeding the Calls" of the TRC, and the beginnings of better and more thoughtful conversations in the hallways and in our offices with each other and with students about this complex work – we are planting seeds of openness, humility and partnership.

OUR WORD: *We will engage in meaningful collaboration with Indigenous staff and student communities at Ryerson in the development of our programming and will tell stories about our attempts, feeble or not, at being partners in these efforts.*

THREAD TWO – we seize upon this moment of shared interest to take longer, bolder steps towards real action in the world. From our particular place in a Student Affairs context, we imagine ourselves as another site of conscience for students, to do Student Affairs work in a more inclusive way, to engage in more culturally relevant and diverse staff recruiting processes, to participate in a more indigenized campus, to amplify voices of students and the wider community, to evolve our staff training, to better understand and acknowledge the complicated history of the Ryerson name, to push, where we can, government agencies to make systematic changes in education policy that help close education gaps. At present, our staff complement does not include many self-identified Indigenous voices. We need, as an early step, to change that.

OUR WORD: *We will implement programming and professional policies both on campus and in the wider community aimed at promoting access, retention and success for Indigenous students and we will advocate loudly for resources to better support these efforts.*

THREAD THREE - we must, at the very outset, acknowledge the presence of what critical theorist Antonio Gramsci describes as an "ideological hegemony" in the academy that deeply privileges traditional western ways of knowing. Student Affairs finds itself inside a tension formed from a commitment to both the traditional western approach to education and also to other forms of knowing that better acknowledge the full range of the student experience - rationality *and* emotion, product *and* process, the objective *and* the subjective, the material *and* the spiritual. We seek theoretical underpinnings to our work that can somehow accommodate this broader, more harmonious conception. We believe that Indigenous ways of knowing and learning can contribute to this greater harmony and we make it our commitment to learn from them to meaningfully broaden the theoretical base of our work. Our hope is that this will enable the creation of programming that contains something that is, not only familiar to Indigenous students, but resonates with all students.

OUR WORD: *We will make Indigenous ways of knowing part of the foundation of our pedagogy.*

We proceed on the premise that it is through the building of relationships that we can most fruitfully begin – by engaging in what Indigenous scholar Gregory Cajete calls "Tapestries of Relations". We imagine our three threads of commitment as contributing to that tapestry. We fully acknowledge that our efforts are imperfect and incomplete but we proceed with open minds to connect, to learn, to evolve, and, heeding the advice of Wurundjeri elder Colin Hunter, to take small steps often.