

Indigenous Specializations: Dreams, Developments, Delivery and Vision

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This article documents the establishment of the Indigenous Specializations program in the School of Social Work at the University of Victoria. In the absence of funding for Indigenous programs, First Nations professors Robina Thomas and Jacquie Green developed the Indigenous Specializations program 'off the side of their desk'. This article describes the process of creating a culturally specific program for Indigenous students in a mainstream university. Many of the challenges depicted in the article are ongoing, alongside various successes and victories for Indigenous graduates.

■ **Keywords:** Indigenous education, pedagogy, Indigenous worldview, social work programming

In spite of many who have succeeded by embracing western education, Indian people must question the effects modern education has had on their collective cultural, psychological and ecological viability (Cajete, 1994, p. 22).

As members of the Indigenous Circle in the School of Social Work at the University of Victoria, we thank you for engaging with us as we share our process of dreaming, developing, delivering and continuing to envision the Indigenous Specialization program. We acknowledge the Coast Salish elders of Vancouver Island and the traditional caretakers of the land on which we live, breathe, work and write. As you follow with us in this journey, please note that the terminology in this article includes a number of terms used currently and historically to describe Indigenous people in Canada, some imposed and some from our own people. In this paper you will see the words 'native', 'Indian', 'First Nations', 'Aboriginal', 'Indigenous', as well as reference to our own peoples and the 'Coast Salish' on whose territory the University of Victoria is located. According to the Constitution Act of 1982, there are three separate and unique Aboriginal peoples in Canada: the First Nations, the Metis, and the Inuit. Due to its location on Coast Salish territory, the program was originally called 'The First Nations Specialization'. In 2007, the title was changed to 'Indigenous Specialization' to be more inclusive of Metis and Inuit students. Throughout this article, we use the terms listed below interchangeably, but we also use the term(s) that would have been used in a specific time or era. We acknowledge that the colonial enterprise

of renaming local peoples and places has been contested and that the development of Indigenous education is one strategy of decolonisation among many.

As Indigenous peoples, it is time to strategise collectively the ways and means of creating Indigenous educational programs, particularly in the area of social and human service work. Our interest in social work is broad, and is based on a desire and commitment to replace activities of 'helping' as 'fixing' and 'reshaping' Indigenous people with culturally based processes of respect to help restore what has been taken from people spiritually, emotionally and socially. By revisiting our histories and moving forward with the strengths from our ancestors, we as Indigenous peoples *will* build Indigenous programs, which are rooted in Indigenous values and beliefs. This article focuses on the vision, development and implementation of the Indigenous programs in the School of Social Work at the University of Victoria. The article also includes the joys and challenges, or perhaps what one could call the dreams and the nightmares, of teaching the specialisation courses, and concludes with our collective vision for the Indigenous programs.

The Indigenous Specialization program in the School of Social Work is itself considered a form of Indigenous resistance and a response to the lack of cultural attention to

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the needs of Aboriginal students. This program does what Canadian Metis educator Fyre Jean Graveline says about Indigenous circle pedagogy and curricula as 'laying the foundation to establish this work as a contemporary act of Aboriginal resistance to prevailing Eurocentric world-views' and 'transforming Euro-centric consciousness in education' (Graveline, 1998, p. 19).

There are a number of reasons for describing the specialisation as Indigenous political resistance, enacted by First Nations scholars and non-Indigenous allies at the university. First, The Indigenous Specialization program is situated within several 'colonial containers'. By this we are referring to the European Canadian university being contained within European Canadian society, a container held together by British laws, parliamentary democracy and a British legal system implanted in the late 1800s. Those who have studied empire are aware that the re-shaping of an Indigenous world into a British colony was conducted with great violence and strife (Adams, 1995; Alfred, 2007; Archibald, 1997; Churchill, 1998; Harris, 2004; Jamieson, 1978; Said, 1993). While there is no time or scope to outline the intense levels of violence and imposition that occurred during the process of forced assimilation, suffice it to say that many colonial strategies were used to disrupt and displace Indigenous communities. The goal of empire in Canada was to transfer title and ownership of lands and resources, seemingly by whatever means necessary, from Indigenous people to the British crown. While many European institutions were transplanted in Canada, the university system was one of many colonial arms. Education, coupled with colonial discourse, is one tool that has been used to rework the truth and eradicate the imperial violence from Canada's founding myth. Canada sees itself as a nation of peace and refuge on the global stage, while being called to task by the United Nations and Indigenous people for unresolved violence and violations of human rights. These violations relate to the low standard of living, services and resources accorded to Indigenous people in Canada, where very high rates of child poverty, infant mortality, diabetes and compromised health exist in many communities; the high levels of violence against Indigenous women together with an inadequate police and justice response (Amnesty International, 2004); alongside the federal disrespect towards sovereign Indigenous nations according to tenets of international law (Alfred, 2007). Much of the Indigenous land in Canada, particularly in British Columbia, was never ceded to the Crown, or was acquired through illegal or disreputable means (Adams, 1995; Archibald, 1997; Churchill, 1998; Harris 2004; Tough, 1999).

Development and Implementation

The opportunity to reflect on the vision, development and implementation of the Indigenous program in the School of Social Work has been rewarding. It was comforting to

recognise that from the onset, the School of Social Work has been committed to meeting the unaddressed needs of Indigenous social work students and communities. The School's Second Annual Report (1978) stated that they had applied for funding from the Donner Foundation to 'determine the need and demand for social work education by Native Indians'. This particular project was not funded; however, a successful application was funded in 1980 by the Donner Foundation:

- to research and develop material related to native peoples which may be integrated into the existing curriculum of the School of Social Work
- to determine if a new elective focusing on working with natives in rural communities is required and, if so to develop course materials
- to research and prepare credit-free course materials relevant to native groups.

In 1982 the School of Social Work received another grant from the Donner Foundation to examine the prospects of delivering the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree program to native communities. This examination produced the following recommendations:

- That the School of Social Work proceed to establish Native Studies within the social work curriculum.
- That, using these materials as a base, workshops and non-credit courses be developed both on-campus and on a distance education basis.
- That the school encourages agencies and organisations to undertake cross-cultural in-service training where a proportion of the client base is a minority.
- That the school undertakes to advocate within the university system both locally and nationally for the support of Indian aspirations for self-determination in human service delivery.

In 1986, a project funded by the Vancouver Foundation, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada and the University of Victoria Extension Division saw 35 First Nations students of Vancouver Island begin a decentralised BSW program, coordinated by Marjorie Martin.

In the fall of 1989, the School of Social Work made a commitment to make Native Studies a permanent theme within the BSW program. As a result, the school received financial support to hire the first native faculty member — the late Elizabeth Hill. Concurrently, the school entered into negotiations with the North West Band Social Workers Association (NWBSWA) of Terrace to deliver the BSW program in Terrace, BC. The first course was offered in the summer of 1990. As students from the North graduated with their degrees, the school was again to examine the feasibility of offering a Master's degree. By 1997, the School of Social Work was offering a decentralised Masters of Social Work (MSW) in Terrace to the NWBSWA.

As part of the school's commitment to accessibility for First Nations students, the school partnered with Nicola Valley Institute of Technology (NVIT) in the early 1990s to offer the BSW program in Merritt. Students in the BSW at NVIT received a degree from the University of Victoria until 1998 when the University College of the Cariboo, located down the highway in Kamloops, became the partnering institution.

With a continued commitment to First Nations education, in 1999 Jacquie Green conducted a study to determine if the existing social work curriculum was meeting the needs of First Nations students and communities. Jacquie travelled throughout the province of British Columbia and spoke to resource people in First Nations agencies, former graduates and continuing students. She used a qualitative, interview-based methodology with a thematic analysis situated in a social context of colonialism. The conclusions of this report and the experience of First Nations students within a special topics course were used to develop a curriculum proposal for the First Nations Specialization. The Specialization, launched in September of 2000, consists of a series of designated courses within the general structure of the BSW degree. The Specialization was expanded the following year to support First Nations students interested in working in delegated agencies and the First Nations Child Welfare Specialization was born.

The school's reputation for delivering social work education to First Nations students has brought many inquiries from communities who want us to offer the BSW or MSW to them. At the advice of our First Nations Advisory Committee, we have put a priority on responding to requests close to home. In 2004, the school admitted a cohort of MSW students who were employed as social workers in First Nations child welfare agencies in the Cowichan Valley geographical area. New curriculum was piloted and led to a proposal to the Dean of Graduate Studies to offer a permanent Indigenous MSW that will be a combination of distance and on-campus studies. This proposal was approved and we admitted our first students in the summer of 2009. As for the future, the school continues to be committed to meeting the needs of Indigenous students and communities.

The BSW program at UVIC has been instrumental in providing and creating space for our Indigenous Specialization program to confront and resist historical colonial policies that have been inflicted on our families for generations. We acknowledge the support from various forms of leadership such as our previous directors, our faculty dean and importantly the president of our university. Through many years of resistance by the prior social work faculty, we have been successful in developing and implementing Indigenous courses and programs relevant to Indigenous knowledge.

Rooted in the dreams of former Indigenous students and faculty, our specialisation draws upon revolutionist thinkers such as Arundhati Roy, Kathy Absolon, Taiaiake

Alfred, Franz Fanon, Paulo Freire, Fyre Jean Graveline, Martin Brokenleg, and many others for its foundation. These revolutionaries encourage educators to centre Indigenous knowledge in all aspects of academia. Drawing on these critical Indigenous thinkers, and in consultation with our Indigenous advisory council, we began a conversation about how our program should look. How could we transform the dream into reality? But, more importantly, we asked: How do we root our teachings in culture and tradition? The research undertaken by Jacquie Green confirmed that our courses must be grounded in Indigenous values, beliefs and philosophies. The following are the key recommendations from Green's research:

- There is a need for a culturally relevant social work program.
- Throughout the social work curricula current and historical Indigenous policies and practices must be included.
- Indigenous students need cultural and spiritual support.
- We must implement a process whereby past experience is acknowledged through prior learning.
- Our social work program must be community-based.

These results showed that our classrooms needed to provide space for students to explore their own traditional teachings, places and histories. Importantly, our courses must be a space for students to work through their own places of resisting colonial structures and racism. For example, many mainstream courses did not provide appropriate histories about Indigenous peoples and many Indigenous students felt 'disappeared' as a result. Many non-Indigenous students and instructors relied on Indigenous students to share with the class Indigenous knowledge, thereby forcing the 'student' to become the 'teacher'.

The recommendations also showed the need to create space for ceremony. Because the University of Victoria sits on traditional Lekwungen territory, we begin our year with a *Brushing Off Ceremony*, which is unique to the traditional people of that territory. Our advisory, along with community, has recommended that our program be unique and 'different' for Indigenous social work and that we continue to centre Indigenous knowledge. Hence, ceremony, community and healing are the essence of how our program operates.

With a view to maximising cultural safety for processing insider Indigenous experience, the three Indigenous Specialization courses are only offered to students who self-identify as being Indigenous. Due to colonial policies, many of our people have been forcefully removed from their families, communities and traditional places. As such, our admission policy does not impose an identity policy such as in the Indian Act. Over the last decade many of those who were 'lost' are returning to their Indigenous places. In our program many Indigenous students have

been raised away from their traditional teachings and now have an opportunity to reclaim and regenerate their identities through certain courses that we offer. Our course and program evaluations have shown us the importance of offering such unique courses to our students. Our students have shared in their evaluations of courses how they valued the opportunity and space to relearn their traditional accounts, identities and histories. What is more exciting to see is that 80% of our students continue with higher education into masters and/or law programs. Presently, a few of our graduates from our specialisation now teach as sessional instructors and work in our program!

We also offer two courses that are core course requirements for all BSW students. In total, our BSW program has five Indigenous courses that offer Indigenous content and analysis and are taught by Indigenous faculty or instructors. One other aspect of our program is that 90% of our students now prefer to obtain their BSW through Distance Education (DE). All our BSW courses are offered through a blackboard web site. In our specialisation, the instructors of the three specialisation courses teach both the on-campus and DE simultaneously. We provide creative alternatives for our DE and on-campus students to integrate with one another through technologies such as PowerPoint introductions and teleconferences. When we invite special guests, sometimes our DE students can participate via teleconference. Once, a DE student mailed braids of sweet grass prior to our on-campus class to present to the elders who came as guests. The DE student, via teleconference, spoke to the elders, and someone from the on-campus class presented the elders with sweet grass on behalf of the DE student. Of course there are challenges to what relationships look like between our program and students who are DE; however, we do provide alternative opportunities for our students to explore their 'indigeneity', their cultural sense of self and their relationships throughout their studies.

What is important for our school at UVIC is that all Indigenous courses offered must be taught by Indigenous instructors. This position was taken with a view to creating cultural safety and exploring lived insider Indigenous perspectives and embodied Indigenous epistemologies. While students have appreciated the increased safety for holistic exploration, there continue to be challenges for instructors and staff. For example, not only do our instructors teach, there is a need to be in community, provide support for students, and become involved with administrative duties and course preparation. The positive aspect is we currently have four tenure-track faculty, two staff and four sessional instructors. Our Indigenous faculty and staff continue to be in demand to students and community. Our specialisation is grateful to have the support of not only our social work director, but also the School of Social Work faculty, the Dean, and the president of our university. It is through the relationships maintained with UVIC leaders that we are able to continue to implement,

develop, revise and solidify our Indigenous Specialization program.

In writing this article, we conducted various researches to find out how Indigenous retention is calculated. It seems this is not a straightforward topic. Since writing this article, the University of Victoria has implemented a number of services that have assisted with the nationwide (or perhaps British empire-wide) issue of Indigenous education (e.g., cultural appropriateness, retention, completion). A recent Lenonet Research project showed that their interventions lead to success as defined by withdrawals (only 13%), Continuity (55%) and Graduation (32%) of Indigenous students enrolled in their program. There is now an Office of Indigenous Affairs concerned with issues of retention as well as a completed First Peoples House. The university has now arranged for an Indigenous student counsellor to be available in an Indigenous environment. These services were not available at the time of this presentation/article. Also, there have been major changes in how Indigenous students are identified, as well as shifts in the language from 'First Nations' (which is exclusive to First Nations, excluding Metis and Inuit), from Aboriginal, to Indigenous (which is inclusive of the three groups in Canada, with hopes of being a less colonial term). It is not clear whether earlier references to 'First Nations' included Metis and/or Inuit, but probably not imposed colonial identities and labels are often replicated in the university. This issue represents many of the educational struggles that are situated alongside some of the joys we have experienced as Indigenous educators.

Joys and Struggles

Within the School of Social Work, there was significant support for Indigenous issues, students and programming, while none or little existed before the evolution of the Indigenous Specialization program. However, such programs offer tend to 'fly in the face' of Canadian liberal values. As Henry and Tator (2009) point out, Canadians are said to value equality and therefore cannot address outstanding issues of racism and oppression against Aboriginal people if it means treating certain Canadians 'unequally', that is, by offering them anything perceived as special or different. The university administration, while supporting Aboriginal programming to some extent, is not exempt from this 'double bind' and does not always manage to 'free up' the needed resources for the Indigenous Specialization program. In fact, the struggle for uniformity and consistency in terms of the dominant Euro-Canadian culture has created challenges for the Indigenous Circle, who have faced institutional displeasure and censure when seeking to create unique logos and promotional materials. Yet, the fact the specialisation continues to exist is a testament to the determination of the Indigenous faculty and their supporters the extra work needed

to sustain the program is picked up voluntarily by those who believe in the program.

Throughout the development and delivery of courses we are reminded that many Indigenous students come from families who have been hurt by colonisation, both historical and recently, and require extra support practically and emotionally throughout the program. These issues may include financial issues and poverty, after losing land and family members due to colonial violence. Emotionally, Indigenous students may be living with issues such as post-traumatic stress, related to violence, forced internment in 'residential schools' and negative child welfare situations. Recent attempts by the federal government to address and apologise for political internment have aggravated pre-existing wounds related to violence that many families have been trying to forget and transcend. As is clear globally, it can be difficult to heal without justice. So particular acts of Indigenous resistance in this program include working as a collective with all faculty and staff to advance our collective principles and students' success at times when the university puts up institutional barriers. In order to maintain our program, it means that Indigenous faculty has many more meetings than mainstream faculty, because of all the additional aspects we must contend with.

Creating safety to contest issues of racism (institutional, structural, and personal) takes a lot of time because without this container of safety we would lose many of our students and faculty. Attending to Indigenous culture and ways of being has been helpful in this process. Ceremonies and rituals, such as opening classes or events with prayers, acknowledging Mother Earth and the ancestors, are processes that have helped students and faculty to remain balanced and experience a sense of belonging. Many Indigenous students are at risk of being forced out of academic programs due to a lack of cultural safety and having to work across worldviews.

Students, as well as faculty, translate much of the university experience and content into their own cultural terms in order to make sense of the process for themselves. This reality of Indigenous students having to work within a European worldview, with its assumptions and cultural blind spots, juxtaposed to their own Indigenous worldview, values and identity means that many Indigenous students must adopt a form of biculturalism in their academic work. Graveline problematises the Euro-centrism in education in referring to 'ethnoscience' (Graveline 1998, p. 32). This term relates to 'the study of beliefs and belief-holding groups', which in a Western culture tend to be presented as unquestionable scientific facts rather than culturally subjective versions of reality. Blaut states: 'The question of whether a person believes in the validity of an idea is not at all the same as the question whether the idea is in fact a valid one' (Blaut as cited in Graveline, 1998, p. 18). For the reasons mentioned by Graveline, many Indigenous students have been silenced or judged negatively for trying to articulate their academic work in their own cultural

terms rather than those of the academy. Graveline refers to this lack of psychological safety as 'pedagogical violence', although her term encompasses much more than this. She writes: 'Pedagogical violence as it was enacted historically would be briefly noted, as it is influenced and continues to impact on all our educational lives as Aboriginal teachers and students' (Graveline, 1998, p. 19).

Although the reality of this pedagogical violence or silencing of Indigenous students may not be fully understood by some educators or administrators, it is felt tangibly by many Indigenous students. In the doctoral dissertation *Becoming Metis: The relationship between Metis self, creation and cultural stories* (Richardson, 2004) a number of participants spoke about feeling excluded, silenced and 'not-belonging' in mainstream settings, many of these settings educational. While there is much research, including that conducted by Green, about the educational needs of Indigenous students, many of these needs continue to be overlooked in Canadian educational settings. The Indigenous Specialization program was created in response to the reported needs of Indigenous students, as an act of resistance against a learning climate that was unsupportive and accounted for the low completion rate for Indigenous students. Many educators are now using the term 'forced outs' instead of 'drop outs' to acknowledge the subtle violence of exclusion and racism that inspires some students to leave the formal education system. In contrast, the Indigenous Specialization program provides opportunities, dreams and culture to solidify and regeneration ancient Indigenous philosophies.

Since 1999/2000, the University of Victoria has implemented many programs and services to address the educational inequities for Indigenous people. While university statistics related to Indigenous participation were gathered and recorded somewhat haphazardly in the past (e.g., many Indigenous students did not identify as such for reasons of cultural safety), there is currently more effort extended to capturing the Indigenous experience. A University of Victoria Student Information System and Ministry of Education Data Match shows that in 1999, there were 84 Indigenous undergraduate students at the University of Victoria and three Indigenous graduate students. These numbers have grown consistently and in 2009/2010 there were 549 undergrads and 148 Indigenous graduate students. We know that the majority of these enrolments are in Social Work and Education, but this breakdown is not represented on this graph. Also, these figures represent only enrollment numbers, not rates of completion. A 2010 study published by Le,nonet, a University of Victoria program designed to support Indigenous students, showed the following levels of engagement for Indigenous students: withdrawal 13%, continuation 55%, graduation 32% (Le,nonet Research Project, 2010).

However, these issues are nationwide, extending also more broadly for Indigenous people across North America. According to Kirkness and Barnhart (1991), only

1.3% of the Canadian First Nations population had completed a university degree, compared to 9.6% of the general population. This meant that non-Indigenous people were 7.4 times more likely to have successfully completed a degree program than Indigenous people (Armstrong, Kennedy, & Oberle, 1990). Similarly, in 1986, only 25% of the First Nations population in Canada completed high school compared to half of the non-Indigenous population. Only 25% of First Nations students who started university completed a degree compared to 55% of non-Indigenous students (Armstrong et al., 1990). While we continue to see improvements, these issues are systemic and will likely persist until we have addressed issues of ongoing colonisation in a broader and more consistent manner.

In the Indigenous Specialization program we may focus curricula and pedagogy on how Indigenous peoples have advanced their own survival in the face of violence, theft, forced assimilation and white supremacy in order to get to where they are today, and to actualise their dreams for future service in communities. Students in our specialisation revisit their traditional teachings simultaneously with mainstream knowledge, thereby enriching their professions as Indigenous social workers who will create change for our people and communities. The Indigenous Specialization program is an artefact of hope, and like post-colonial writer and activist Roy reminds us: 'Another world is not only possible, she is on her way' (Roy, 2003). On a clear day we hear her breathing these powerful words in our classrooms.

Vision

The Indigenous Specialization program has a vision to nurture and develop Indigenous student capacity to teach within our unique programs. In 2001/2002, the Indigenous circle developed a policy by which only Indigenous faculty will teach Indigenous courses. With the inclusion of a permanent Indigenous MSW program in the fall of 2009, the need for Indigenous instructors is upon us. In fact, we have the ability and responsibility to develop our own capacity for Indigenous faculty and staff through this program. Emerging faculty will be grounded in Indigenous knowledge and be able to provide the essential core of cultural relevance, academic knowledge, research capacity and service experience. Separate Indigenous support staff is needed to meet the unique needs and worldview of our people. This includes student advisors, counselling service, and so on. We have a vision of developing a PhD in Indigenous Social Work within the School of Social Work in the future, and to develop an Indigenous School of Social Work department within the university setting. As Green often states: 'Reach for the sky, we want it all' (Green, 1999). As we move towards this, we realise the importance of development and retention of core Indigenous courses for non-Indigenous students within the

School of Social Work to develop their understandings of working with Indigenous people, communities and Nations. We attend to issues of retention by putting supports in place, including opportunities for writing support, compassionate leave and work extensions to attend to the high rates of deaths and funerals. Emotional and psychological supports are offered to Indigenous students to assist in times of stress and difficulty. Building in ceremony to curriculum also assists students to maximise their wellbeing and experience connection during their studies.

We also have an ongoing responsibility to the communities that we serve and are surrounded by. Many of our students are from the local territory (Coast Salish) and there are traditional social work practices that are based upon the three surrounding nations on Vancouver Island (Coast Salish, Nuu chah nulth and 'Kwa Kwa ka Wakw) which need to be validated. We acknowledge that there is a need to recruit and retain students from the territories, and that traditional teachings from their perspective will help attain this. In order to include local traditional teachings, the Indigenous Specialization program has included, and will continue to include, the communities as part of our overall development, as well as members of our advisory council, curriculum development committee members, and elders. We will continue to vision how we can provide courses in the communities as we know that many students in remote communities do not have access to Internet, or are not able to move to Victoria and take classes at the university.

In conclusion, we believe that if universities are to respect the cultural integrity of Indigenous students and communities, they must adopt a posture that goes beyond the usual generation and conveyance of literate knowledge, to include the institutional legitimisation of Indigenous knowledge and skills. As Indigenous educator Goody writes, we must foster 'a re-valuation of forms of knowledge that are not derived from books' (Goody 1982, p. 201). Such a responsibility requires an institutional respect for Indigenous knowledge and a belief in its legitimacy equal to all other cultures of the world. This responsibility involves helping students to appreciate and build upon their customary forms of consciousness and representation as they expand their understanding of the world in which they live. Finally, this responsibility entails acknowledging that many existing practices are also damaging and colonising Mother Earth in ways hitherto unprecedented. Studying, working and living in right relationship means attending to relations of interconnectivity, for the benefit of all. As revolutionary teacher Martin Luther King Jr. reminded us: 'All labour that uplifts humanity has dignity and should be undertaken with painstaking excellence' (cited in Ganz, 2010). To this we are committed in the Indigenous Specialization program in the School of Social Work. Hych'ka Siem, Mussi, All our relations!

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Naadli, Todd Ormiston (Wolf Clan) is from Yukon and Alaska. He holds BSW & MPA degrees. Todd recently completed his Doctorate in Education at the University of British Columbia. His dissertation is titled, "Yan gaa duunek: An examination of Indigenous transformational leadership pedagogies in BC higher education." Currently, Todd works at the University of Victoria as a sessional instructor. In addition, Todd currently is the program leader and instructor at Camosun College in the Indigenous Studies Program. Todd's lengthy career as a social services worker included working with youth involved in the criminal justice system. His teaching and research interests have a strong focus on Policy Issues and Indigenous Peoples.