

Braiding Sweetgrass:

A Framework for Indigenizing Graduate Studies



“Vitality” mural by Chief Lady Bird, Interdisciplinary Graduate Student Space, Daphne Cockwell Health Sciences Complex.

As we enter into a new Ryerson University Academic Plan (2020-25) which further articulates the goal of advancing Indigenous initiatives, YSGS is committed to Indigenizing its offerings and creating specific supports for Indigenous students. A model for Indigenizing graduate studies that we have developed builds on teachings about sweetgrass braids (based on the book, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*, by Indigenous scientist and author Robin Wall Kimmerer, 2013).

Whereas individual strands of sweetgrass can easily break, a braid is stronger and thus symbolizes unity; braiding is easier with more than one person, thus encouraging collaboration; braiding is an act of healing, it makes use of plant medicines and brings clarity to the mind or heart; and when braiding sweetgrass one weaves together the past, present and future into a collective whole.

This is the inspiration for our framework. Indigenization needs to simultaneously accommodate and support Indigenous students’ past, present and future, represented by three strands:

1. Getting Indigenous students here

- Building relationships with communities for long-term recruitment.
- Exploring an application review process that accounts for special considerations and/or holistic evaluation for the purpose of admissions.
- Fundraising for awards, grants, fellowships and scholarships.

2. Supporting Indigenous students when they are here

- Building awareness and cultural competencies for faculty and staff.
- Creating respectful learning environments that honour Indigenous knowledges.
- Expanding counselling and academic support services.
- Advancing collaborative Indigenous scholarly, research and creative (SRC) projects.

3. Making sure Indigenous students thrive when they leave

- Expanding professional development supports with Indigenous organizations.
- Nurturing ongoing and reciprocal relationships with Indigenous alumni.
- Assisting Indigenous students’ transition to further graduate education.



Recommendations

It is our hope that members of the Ryerson graduate studies community think about Indigenization using the braided sweetgrass model and by engaging with members of the Indigenous community to guide their efforts.

After consultation with the graduate program directors, associate deans with graduate responsibilities, the Indigenous Graduate Student Leadership Circle and the wider Indigenous community, the following recommendations have been identified:

- Develop an Indigenizing graduate education action plan to address the complete list of recommendations.
- Enhance recruitment efforts and increase enrolment of Indigenous students across all programs.
- Create signage for the YSGS reception area that includes education about the land/territory that we are situated on.
- Provide training for staff and faculty connected to graduate studies on Indigenous issues and supporting Indigenous students.
- Increase the number of Indigenous faculty who have YSGS membership.
- Identify opportunities to make current Indigenous faculty's course offerings more accessible to students across programs.
- Work with University Advancement to identify possible funding sources for Indigenous graduate student awards and scholarships.
- Develop a network of Indigenous graduate alumni to provide guidance and advice to current students, and inform Indigenization at YSGS.
- Build partnerships with Indigenous organizations and communities for course offerings, research collaborations and work placements.
- Create a student employment position that acts as a contact for current and prospective Indigenous graduate students and supports the coordination of Indigenous student engagement.
- Establish an open and transparent method of ongoing dialogue, consultation and representation between the vice-provost and dean of YSGS, the Office of the Vice-Provost and Dean, Graduate Studies and Indigenous faculty, staff, undergraduate students and graduate students regarding matters of policy, process, initiatives and strategies.