

External Reviewers' Report - Aurora College Social Work Diploma Program Review

“And now we’re retaking back our own destiny.
It’s really about language and cultural way of
life, nothing else.” (Dr. John B. Zoe, 2017)

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the Elders, students, faculty and staff that shared their time with us and to Kimberly Mackenzie who coordinated the virtual meetings.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The review of the Aurora College Social Work Diploma Program was somewhat unique. Although the program review of April 2018 acknowledged the societal need for a social work program, the program was discontinued. There was no active program during the time of this review. This review will attempt to not replicate the previous review but add to those results. However, many of the findings of this review are echoed in the April 2018 report.

The 2018 program review was extensive and noted the importance of the program; however, it appears the program was discontinued due to a budget decision. In general, social work programs are costly to deliver, oftentimes not 'breaking even' for an academic institution; yet the importance of social work delivered in a culturally respectful way is vital to the health and well-being of Indigenous communities. Any financial cost-benefit analysis of social work programs should acknowledge the need for Indigenous approaches to social work for communities in the Northwest Territories (NWT).

As noted in the previous review, there is a strong societal need for a social work academic program. It is recommended that the two-year diploma be redesigned and offered at Aurora College. This review also recommends not only the 2-year diploma program, but of a four-year Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree program. This laddering program would offer students completion of a diploma after two years and the option to continue for two more years to obtain the BSW degree. Students who have completed the previous program (or other social service-related diploma) and have not yet obtained a BSW degree could be offered admission into an advanced standing option, completing the final two years of the degree.

Consideration of a Master of Social Work (MSW) program is also recommended as many social work positions require an MSW. Aurora College offering an MSW will contribute to retention of northern students in the north.

Since Aurora College is now a degree granting institution, it is highly recommended that Aurora College offer this program directly and not in partnership with another degree granting institution. This will allow more academic freedom to develop a very specific curriculum based on the Indigenous knowledges of the territory. In addition, offering the four-year degree BSW at Aurora College will address the overwhelming feedback received regarding students leaving the community for their education, losing their housing, and never returning home.

Accreditation can be considered via the Canadian Association of Social Work Education (CASWE) 2019 agreement with the National Indigenous Accreditation Board (NIAB). It is recommended that a Curriculum Committee be established to develop the program ensuring accreditation standards are met.

The design of the future program must consider accreditation standards and community needs. Aurora College has a tremendous opportunity to design a social work program that is authentically driven by Indigenous knowledges specific to the communities in the North. For instance, Indigenous approaches to psychology, policy studies and sociology can provide the foundation in years one and two of the curriculum. In order to ensure this inclusion, it is vital to have knowledge keepers hired to help develop the curriculum, as well as deliver course content. A further recommendation is to hire, not only social work educators but knowledge keepers as tenured/tenure track faculty.

A Curriculum Committee should be established to create the course content for years one to four of the program. It is recommended that Indigenous individuals with knowledge of accreditation standards for social work be part of this curriculum committee, as well as knowledge keepers and social work educators.

The governance of this program is critical to its success. This program will fail if it is not accountable to the people. Therefore, it is recommended that a Governance Committee or Program Management Committee be instituted after the development of the program to ensure ongoing quality assurance and response to community needs. This Governance Committee should be composed of past students, current students, knowledge keepers, faculty and administration. It is essential and a standard of accreditation that this Committee be engaged and met regularly throughout the year.

REVIEWER BIOGRAPHIES

Gus Hill (Waase Gaaboo) is Anishnaabe from Obadjiwaan (Batchawana) First Nation, near Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. He is a member of the Neveau clan. He journeyed from home to study Indigenous Social Work at Laurentian University (HBSW), continued on his journey to study Advanced Social Work (MSW) at Wilfrid Laurier University, and stayed at Laurier to embark on a doctoral journey in Social Work (PhD). Gus is part of the Indigenous Field of Study MSW Program at Wilfrid Laurier University, and currently its Associate Dean. Gus is a knowledge carrier and engages ceremonies, medicines, and Elders in his ongoing healing journey.

Lynn Lavallee (Miniido Nibi Qwe) is Anishinaabe Metis registered with the Metis Nation of Ontario. She is of the Deer Clan. Lynn is a full professor in the School of Social Work at X University. She has been involved in university administration including vice provost Indigenous Engagement at the University of Manitoba and at X University has held the following positions: Interim Director of the School of Social Work, Interim Director of Field Education, Associate Director of the School of Social Work, Chair of Research Ethics Board, Senator, and Strategic Lead Indigenous Resurgence. Gus and Lynn were not paid to conduct this review.

Katherine Minich (Nunavut Inuk) was hired as an editor to ensure appropriate cultural perspective. Katherine is a lecturer/assistant professor in the School of Public Policy and Administration at Carleton University. She is a doctoral candidate in the Policy Studies Program at Ryerson University.

REVIEW PROCESS

Initial conversations with Dr. Lynn Lavallee began in September 2020 with the second reviewer, Dr. Gus Hill in November 2020. On November 13, 2020, the reviewers met with the Vice President, Education and Training (VPET), Dr. Glenda VardyDell to plan the review process. The reviewers met on December 14th, 2020 to further discuss the review and the documents received.

The process for the review was not pre-established. Rather, the reviewers along with the VPET designed the process, in a reflexive manner, on an ongoing basis. As a result, the consultation interviews occurred from February to May 2021.

The following subsequent meetings were arranged by Kimberly Mackenzie and were held via Microsoft Teams Meeting. Except for one occasion where there were technical issues, Kimberley did not remain on the call. In total, the reviewers met with 28 individuals who comprised a cross section of faculty, alumni, administrators, employers and government officials.

January 15, 2021

- Glenda VardyDell, Vice President Education and Training, Aurora College

February 19 2021

- Bruce Cooper, Deputy Minister GNWT Department of Health and Social Service
- Colette Prevost, Territorial Executive Director, Child and family Services, Health and Social Services Directorate

February 24, 2021

- Glenda VardyDell, Vice President Education and Training, Aurora College

April 12, 2021

- Jodi Brennan, Chair of the School of Health and Human Services, Aurora College and co-author of self-study
- Kimberley Mackenzie, past instructor and co-author of self-study

Friday April 16th 2021

- Kristy Jones: Territorial Director Child, Family and Community Wellness, NWT Health and Social Services Authority
- Nathalie Nadeau: Executive Director Child, Family and Community Wellness
- Jenna Scarfe: Director Mental health and Community Wellness
- Sara Chorostkowski: Director Mental Wellness and Addictions, Recovery Division, NWT Health and Social Services

- Andrea Brown: Territorial Manager Mental health and Community Wellness, NWT Health and Social Services

April 19, 2021

- Three alumni

April 20, 2021

- Four alumni

April 22th 2021

- Sandy Little, past instructor of the program, Aurora College
- Susan Fitzky, past instructor of the program, Aurora College
- Heather Fikowski, past instructor of the program, Aurora College
- Tina Dumont

April 22, 2021

- Four alumni

April 29th 2021

- Knowledge Keeper

May 4th 2021

- Elder of the program

May 4th 2021

- Knowledge Keeper

General Interview Questions

The interviews with the various constituents were conversational, addressing the following general questions:

1. Do you see value in re-establishing the social work diploma program or a social work degree program?
 - a) If no, why not?
 - b) If yes, probe
2. Is there a need for social workers in the north?
3. If there is a future program, what should be the key priorities in the redevelopment?
4. What needs in the communities should be addressed by a social work program and the college?

Documents Reviewed

In addition to the interviews, the following documents were reviewed:

1. Aurora College 3-Year Strategic Plan
2. Aurora College Initial Areas of Teaching and Research Specialization for the Polytechnic University
3. G.08 Program Review Policy
4. G.08 Program Review Procedures
5. Aurora College Foundational Review 2018
6. Government Response to the Findings and Recommendations of the Aurora College Foundational Review
7. Northwest Territories Labour Market Forecast and Needs Assessment (2016)
8. Child and Youth Care Counsellor job posting (2020)
9. Manager, Community Cultural Development job posting (2020)
10. Policy Analyst job posting (2020)
11. Maintenance Enforcement Officer job posting (2020)
12. Community Social Worker job posting (2020)
13. Community Social Worker job description (2017)
14. Family Resource Worker job posting (2020)
15. Child Youth and Family Counsellor job posting (2020)
16. Regional Clinical Supervisor, Mental Health and Addictions job posting (2020)
17. Child and Youth Care Counsellor job posting (15 positions) (2020)
18. Social Work Diploma Self Study (November 2020)
19. Review of the Social Work Diploma Program Final Report (April 2018)
20. Report of the Auditor General of Canada to the Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly (2018)
21. Aurora College 3-Year Strategic Plan
22. Aurora College Initial Areas of Teaching and Research Specialization for the Polytechnic University
23. G.08 Program Review Policy
24. G.08 Program Review Procedures
25. Aurora College Foundational Review 2018
26. Government Response to the Findings and Recommendations of the Aurora College Foundational Review
27. Northwest Territories Labour Market Forecast and Needs Assessment (2016)
28. Child and Youth Care Counsellor job posting (2020)
29. Manager, Community Cultural Development job posting (2020)
30. Policy Analyst job posting (2020)
31. Maintenance Enforcement Officer job posting (2020)
32. Community Social Worker job posting (2020)
33. Community Social Worker job description (2017)
34. Family Resource Worker job posting (2020)
35. Child Youth and Family Counsellor job posting (2020)

36. Regional Clinical Supervisor, Mental Health and Addictions job posting (2020)
37. Child and Youth Care Counsellor job posting (15 positions) (2020)
38. Social Work Diploma Self Study (November 2020)
39. Review of the Social Work Diploma Program Final Report (April 2018)
40. Report of the Auditor General of Canada to the Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly (2018)

FINDINGS

The following themes emerged from the interviews:

- Labour Market and Societal Need
- Accreditation by Aurora College
- Program and Curriculum Design
- Non-Academic Supports and Funding
- Governance

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Labour Market and Societal Need

As reported in the Program Review Self-Study (2020) and the Review of the Social Work Diploma Program Final Report (2018) the reviewers found both a labour market and societal need for a social work degree program at Aurora College. Further, the *2018 October Report of the Auditor General of Canada to the Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly - Child and Family Services, Department of Health and Social Services and Health and Social Services Authorities* also substantiates the need for social workers in the north.

The reviewers spoke with alumni working in the field, social service management and government officials and all noted that more social work practitioners are needed. The reviewers were perplexed as to why the program was discontinued given the overwhelming labour market and societal need substantiated by the interviewees, previous review, Auditor General’s report and Self-Study. This review will not belabor the point. Please refer to the above noted documents for further information substantiating the labour market and societal need.

We want to emphasize that there is a need to train people from the NWT in the NWT to become social work practitioners. The reviewers heard about the challenges with southerners taking positions in the north but not remaining committed to staying in the NWT. Retaining NWT practitioners in the north when students go south to complete their BSW was a challenge. Students leave and do not return for a number of reasons, including loss of housing when having to leave the community for so long. The future

program needs to provide more supports to students to stay in the north (i.e. funding, housing, etc) outline later in this report.

Accreditation

“I have asked for a school to be build... on my land... and that the school will be run by my people, and my people will work at that school and our children will learn both ways, our way and the whitemen’s way.” Chief Jimmy Bruneau (1881-1975)
(Bruneau, 1971)

A strong recommendation from the reviewers is to design and deliver a program by and at Aurora College and **NOT** partner with another academic institution. This recommendation differs from the 2018 review. This is being recommended for two reasons. First, there is an opportunity for Aurora College to develop a truly Indigenous social work degree program and partnering with another academic institution will not allow for this creative approach. Second, students having to leave the community for any part of their degree leads to financial hardships, loss of housing and students not returning to the NWT once their degrees are attained. Of lesser note, a partnered BSW degree program means that Aurora College’s program is tied to the accreditation of the partner institution; this could mean suspension of programming based on performance at the partner institution.

As noted in the Executive Summary, accreditation can be considered via the Canadian Association of Social Work Education (CASWE) 2019 agreement with the National Indigenous Accreditation Board (NIAB). A strong Indigenous social work administrator familiar with the accreditation standards could be brought in by Aurora College to help guide this process, along with an Accreditation Committee composed of community members, knowledge holders, alumni and Aurora College administrators.

Program and Curriculum Design

Indigenous-Based Bachelor of Social Work Degree - This is an exciting time for Aurora College to develop a truly Indigenous-based Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree program. A program developed by Aurora College with community, and not in partnership with another academic institution, will allow for a unique program that other

institutions would look toward. If Indigenous ways and knowledges are not central to the BSW program, it will fail the people it is intended to serve in NWT.

The objectives of the program need to be clear, hold integrity, be respectful of the original people, attend to land-based relationships, be respectful of first people's ways, embody the values of the NWT and its original people

As part of the governance structure and process to develop the program, courses, placements, etc. it is essential that a Program and Curriculum Design Committee (perhaps the same people who are involved with accreditation, as well as Indigenous social work and other social services related scholars can assist in designing) be put in place to develop the curriculum.

While this review is not focused on repeating what was found in the previous review, it is worth noting that the previous diploma program paralleled year three and four of typical BSW programs, versus providing foundational knowledge. It may be that this was done to allow graduates to work as licensed social workers as per the government guidelines. However, a four-year program will require foundational studies in year one and two in order to give a breadth of knowledge to students, as well as contribute to student academic success and achievement.

While the Program and Curriculum Design Committee would provide further structure, we recommend the following with respect to curriculum.

Laddering of Curriculum - Curriculum needs to be designed to allow laddering. For instance, creating year one and two programming that would allow for students to graduate with a two-year diploma and obtain employment, similar to the previous diploma program but it is essential that foundational courses be offered (similar to typical social service worker college diploma programs). This ladder could provide an avenue for diploma graduates of the previous program to return to complete the final two years to attain a BSW degree.

Foundational Courses in Year One - Foundational courses in year one would include general university level courses that lead to future success, such as writing, and critical thinking, courses.

Indigenous and Land-Based Curriculum - There is an excellent opportunity for Aurora College to create Indigenous psychology, Indigenous sociology and Indigenous political science courses that can be required and/or elective courses.

Land-based programming needs to be first priority, building comfort out on the land, be in relationship with the land, respect the land, pay the land back for all it offers. Healing comes from the land; therefore, social work education must be land-based.

Culture Camps should be offered with a minimum of two-weeks. Students need to learn the culture so they know what they are doing, in context. Teachers, students, and staff should attend culture camp. This holistic approach is critical to the students' success. Students who see their instructors and staff people engaged in genuine learning on the land might *believe* in the program more fully, and therefore, engage more fully. In sum, it is critical for the success of the program that the curriculum reflect the lived/living reality of the people it is intended to serve.

Hiring of Indigenous Knowledge Holders/Elders - Drawing on the knowledge of Elders and Indigenous knowledge holders is essential to the process of delivering Indigenous curriculum.

There are strong indigenous knowledge holders who should be offered tenured employment as faculty to teach social work students about “wholistic self”, “working in community”, and “working with knowledge in meaningful ways.” Indigenous people who are recognized as Elders within their communities have earned a level of competency at life that cannot be attained by academic credentials. The pitfall of credentialing Elders must be avoided in this situation. The Social Work department needs Elders to guide the program, and lead in matters of helping, healing, and community engagement. Elders can help students answer the question “What does it mean to be a community member?”

The program needs to remain in Yellowknife in order to support practicum demands. The Program needs to be independent of nursing; yet, equal in structure and status. The Chair for social work should be separate from nursing.

In terms of curriculum, the reviewers behoove Aurora College to build a curriculum from the ground up that reflects the values, beliefs, culture, and lived experiences of Indigenous people in the NWT. It would be a tragedy to look to other institutions in other contexts for models of curriculum development; they are irrelevant. In situ programming makes much more sense than using a template of social work from “the south.” This design process must necessarily include local Indigenous people, Indigenous practitioners working in context, Elders who know the spirit of the land.

Non-Academic Supports and Funding

Tuition, Financial Supports and Housing

It was unclear to the reviewers why Inuit students did not have full tuition, housing and other supports completely covered by the government. We understood that some students who were funded had to remain in the North after graduation to not have to repay the loan/bursaries.

The reviewers heard accounts of significant financial hardships and housing challenges as two of the greatest barriers. With the development of this new program, all Inuit, and NWT Indigenous students should have funding (tuition, books, and housing) covered, regardless of if students remain in the North. Funding being contingent upon remaining in the North sounds quite similar to the forced relocation of Inuit in the high north so Canada could establish sovereignty over the land. Funding for Inuit students should not bear this oppressive criterion. Further, student completion of their diplomas or degrees is a reflection of the institution and its supports, or lack thereof. Students are not separate from or unaffected from the context of their communities and attending post-secondary institutions is not an easy choice to make. Program pathways should have flexibility and choice and not be predetermined, especially when there is lack of guidance when in the program.

Retaining of quality students in the north is essential and part of this is ensuring housing that is not taken away if students attend school at Aurora College. It seems impossible for a graduate of social work to remain in the north and work in their community if their housing has been stripped from them and reallocated. Aurora College should lobby government to make this important change to loss of housing when students leave for educational purposes. Elders also echo the plea from Indigenous leaders to remove barriers to education for young people.

Physical Infrastructure and Land-Based Learning

Some of the Elders who have worked with Aurora College had tremendous vision for a future building, right down to locations, but notably, a vision where Indigenous peoples do want to lose themselves when stepping into the boxes of the college. Spaces at the college are too small for effective learning. Students need to learn the culture so they know what they are doing, in context and the physical infrastructure is key. The college needs to create a natural environment for students to learn. Future efforts must include these Elders and other community members to ensure space meets cultural needs and

is seen as a welcoming place. At a minimum, the college needs to create a natural environment for students to learn.

Consideration of circle pedagogy, using large circular rooms, atria, spaces for ceremonies, spaces for quiet reflection, all of which bring the outdoors inside must be a priority. Daily ceremonial practices such as smudging should not be impeded because of building codes - at the design phase of construction there are considerations that must be heard from the people who know something of the cultures and practices in the territory. There are examples of greenhouse-type atria that are built around trees, and this might go some way to addressing the concerns about being stuffed into small boxes with four walls, a window, and a door. Concourse outdoors spaces are important for ceremonial lodge construction throughout the seasons, and sacred fires, for example. The key task here is to consult the Elders and Traditional Knowledge Keepers about ways to build curriculum around the healing practices of cultures; not just in academic-textual-theoretical ways, but in real embodied ways. The reviewers recognize that social work is a small part of a larger academic ecosystem. This ecosystem is at a place and time that authentic consultation can yield fruit that will benefit the entire ecosystem of Aurora College. In sum, make space for the wisdom of the Elders from that land - they know how to teach, they know what environments best serve learners, and they know how to be in relationship with the land.

The teaching, learning and financial environments are foundational to the non-academic supports for students. Objectives of the program need to be clear, and hold integrity, be respectful of the original people, attend to land-based relationships, be respectful of first people's ways, and embody the values of the NWT and its original people. For a successful restart to the program, the first year of "Program" should be student free. This will afford the department to build the team of faculty & staff, build the culture before admitting students, practice curriculum delivery within the team, learn the curriculum inside-out, teach one another, interchangeability amongst faculty in the event of life emergencies, learn ins and outs of administration of BSW.

Governance

Governance refers to structures and processes that are designed to realize desirable outcomes. In the academic setting, governance is multidimensional. Interviewees noted differences between academic, institutional and program governance. Institutional governance needs to learn, promote and understand the program to best represent the social needs and desires. In the northern context, and within social work more generally, program governance does not exclude the Indigenous communities that are

the sources of students as well as the recipients of the program outcomes. Below are governance related findings uncovered during the review.

The reviewers of Aurora College's social work program heard an important academic governance concern. This pressing concern refers to the student facing structures and support needed to realize program completion. In particular, the retention of quality students. Labour market conditions suggest high vacancies attract students to the workforce prior to completion of the program.

Secondly, institutional governance was mentioned not only as promotion but as priority across key stakeholders, such as governments and communities. The institution plays a role in promoting the program, in particular promoting the program objectives to the government. In addition, reviewers heard that the Aurora College was being called on to speak truth and honour verbal agreements.

And third, the program governance itself fosters identity and values of the program. Reviewers heard how objectives of the program needed to be clear, and hold integrity, be respectful of the original people, attend to land-based relationships, be respectful of first people's ways, and embody the values of the NWT and its original people. This values-based program can only be achieved by including Elders and community in the governance of the program, both development of the program and on-going delivery.

The social work program must have an active advisory council that is not a figurehead, tick box, council. These should be paid positions (stipend), and work must be performed by its members.

The social work program must make space in its governance structure for Elders; not one Elder in a tokenistic fashion. Elders understand the long history of the NWT, Aurora College, the people of the land, and the needs of the people of the land. The reviewers spoke with three different Elders, all of whom could serve in such roles. These positions must be paid, non-precarious positions, with salaries and benefits. These Elders could serve dual roles in instruction and governance. One of the key findings in the meetings with the Elders was that there is a history of exclusion of Elders at the College. With a fresh start at developing a social work program, there exists the perfect opportunity for their active inclusion; bringing them into the fold, so to speak.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

The reviewers strongly recommend a 4-year Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree program. We recommend that this BSW program be an Aurora College Independently controlled program; not a partnership with another academic institution. This recommendation comes with experience and insight into the development of degree programs. Local control over local curriculum development affords reflexivity in response to local community needs. Furthermore, when one tethers themselves to another institution, so too is their accreditation tethered.

The reviewers recommend a 2-year exit point for those seeking a diploma in social work, with the possibility to return for the final 2 years to earn the BSW degree.

Accreditation

Aurora College should work toward accreditation of the recommended BSW program. There are many examples of how to achieve accreditation. One of the cautions is to not chase accreditation. This program has a rare opportunity to blaze a trail in social work, and through intentional design, culturally responsive delivery, and the preservation of the integrity of the program, accreditation will naturally follow.

Resourcing

The resourcing for the program must be robust. A full complement of social work-dedicated staff, that are not shared across departments is critical. A practicum coordinator must be a dedicated position, with support staff. As the program progresses through the four years toward full operating capacity, faculty members will need to be onboarded very intentionally. Mentoring is a critical process to ensure the highest standard of education, retention, and accreditation. At a minimum, there must be an Elder-in-Residence, who works alongside Elder Instructors who are well-acquainted with the healing traditions of the territory.

Land-Based

Programming must be land-based. The reviewers heard stakeholders speak to the value of land-based delivery and conclude that this should be a more prominent feature of the program. Lengthier, and more frequent, land-based learning opportunities that reflect the values, culture, ceremonial practices, bolster the seasonal relational accountability with land, and brings into sharper focus the healing power of the land and its modern-day relevance to social work practice.

Indigenous Led

The social work program must be Indigenous led, reflecting the demography of NWT. The Indigenous Elders in the NWT carry vast knowledge of wellness, healing on the land, ceremonies, medicines, traditional knowledge, and relational accountability amongst all of Creation. They must be consultants, collaborators, designers, instructors, and periodic reviewers of the social work program. This is an opportunity to build social work with, for, and by Indigenous people, to whom the program will be accountable, whom the program will serve, and in the territory of the people. There is a call, here, to de-centre whiteness; white pedagogy, white curriculum, white building design, white administration, in favour of Indigeneity. Non-Indigenous people are guests in the territory. Imposing white values, beliefs, curriculum, and pedagogy only perpetuates a dominance that has created toxicity, terrible relations, and a downward spiral of social conditions for all people of the NWT, including Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. A social work program that is truly Indigenous from the ground up will serve all people well; this is universal design. Non-Indigenous people studying the brand of social work that the reviewers are proposing will learn something of how to be in the north, live alongside the original people, and help in meaningful ways.

Future Considerations

One future consideration is the development of comprehensive programming. Once the BSW has earned accreditation, has successfully found equilibrium, a logical step forward is to develop a MSW program that furthers students learning, into advanced practice and management, and remains focused on local, Indigenous, congruent, and relevant curriculum.

Relations

Aurora College must immediately take audit of its relationships with Indigenous groups, locally, and across the whole of the territory, make reparations, honour verbal agreements, hold to its commitments, and engage more intentionally to bring Indigeneity into the centre of its mandate. Several stakeholders shared about the exclusionary practices, the irrelevance of the learning, while highlighting the richness of the land-based learning via culture camps, the time with Elders, the life-changing learning that came out of the Indigenous-focused aspects of the program.

REFERENCES

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