WHAT WORKS:

Career–building strategies for people from diverse groups
A COUNSELLOR RESOURCE

Aboriginal Peoples

This is one of 13 chapters of an online resource for counsellors titled *What Works: Career-building strategies for people from diverse groups*. Visit **alis.alberta.ca/publications** to view, download or print other chapters.

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ISBN 978-0-7785-8836-8

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Statistics

Alberta population in 2008	2,796,800 working-age Albertans 101,400 Aboriginal workers[1]
2008 population rate of Aboriginals who are working age	3.6%[2]
Aboriginal peoples living off reserve who were 15 years and older in 2008	57% Métis people 41.4% North American Indian 1.6% Inuit or other[3]
Métis population in Alberta in 2006	85,000[4]
Métis population increase in Alberta from 1996 to 2006	+73%[5]
Alberta unemployment rate in 2008	3.6% of working-age population 8.3% of Aboriginal peoples living off reserve[6]
The unemployment rate difference between Alberta's Métis people and North American Indians in 2008	+2% higher for Métis people[7]
Albertans with less than a high school diploma in 2008	19.4% of working-age population 36% of Aboriginal peoples living off reserve[8]
Albertans with university degree in 2008	19.6% of working-age population 6.8% Aboriginal peoples off reserve[9]
Number of Aboriginal languages and language families in Canada	11 Aboriginal language families 50+ individual Aboriginal languages[10]

Context

What do I wish I had known when I first started working with Aboriginal clients?

"Even though my heritage is Métis, I wish I had known more about the history of our people, as well as the rights of the Métis people."

Diane Fehr
Métis Employment Services, Calgary

While persons belonging to a particular group may share similar backgrounds and cultural experiences, they are also unique individuals bringing their own beliefs, values and world views. The information included in this chapter applies generally to First Nations, Métis and Inuit, and may or may not apply to specific individuals within these groups.

Respecting differences

"Everyone's world views are entirely different. Go into each situation with an open mind. You can meet two people from the same community who will be very different. All generalizations don't apply to all individuals. Depending on how you are raised, it is different for each individual."

Crystal Kosa, Consultant
Corporate Training and Inclusion Strategies

Terminology and definitions

In this resource, the term *Aboriginal* refers to Indians, Inuit and Métis. This chapter uses the term *First Nations* rather than *Indian* except

- in direct quotations from other sources
- in reference to specific legislation that uses this term, such as the *Constitution Act, 1982* or the *Indian Act*
- when citing statistical information collected using this category, such as Statistics Canada data that uses the term *North American Indian*
- where the term is used to identify different legal categories of persons based on eligibility for government services such as *registered Indian* or *status Indian*

Counsellors are encouraged to become familiar with terminology described by Alberta Aboriginal Relations. These terms are derived from the federal *Indian Act*, the *Constitution Act*, *1982* and Bill C-31.[11]

Additional definitions can be found on the Indian and Northern Affairs Canada website at Words First.[12]

Aboriginal people

This term refers to the descendants of the original inhabitants of Canada. Aboriginal people are defined in the *Constitution Act*, *1982* as all indigenous people, including Indians, Métis and Inuit. The Constitution does not define membership of the individual groups.

Band or First Nation or First Nations

A band is defined in the *Indian Act* as a body of Indians for whom lands have been set aside or for whom monies are held by the Government of Canada, or who have been declared by the Governor in Council to be a band. Most bands prefer to be referred to as First Nations.

Band membership

A band member is an individual Indian who is a recognized member of a band and whose name appears on an approved Band List. Where a band has adopted its own membership code, it may define who has a right to membership in the band. Therefore, being a status Indian is not necessarily synonymous with being a band member. Status Indians who are not band members are included in the General List.

Band council

The band council includes band members who have been elected as chief and councillors, either under Section 74 of the *Indian Act* or by band custom, to govern the band and administer its affairs.

Métis

Métis refers to descendants of First Nation and European ancestry who identify themselves as Métis. The Métis are recognized as Aboriginal people in the *Constitution Act, 1982.*

Reserve

The *Indian Act* describes a reserve as lands set apart for the use and benefit of a band and for which the legal title rests with the Crown in right of Canada. The federal government has primary jurisdiction over these lands and the people living on them.

Status or registered Indian

A status or registered Indian is a person who has been registered or is entitled to be registered according to the *Indian Act*. Most registered Indians are members of a band. By virtue of the *Indian Act*, the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada is responsible for providing support and services to all registered Indians.

Treaty

A treaty is a legal document that was signed with Indian bands and various British colonial and, later, Canadian governments before and after Confederation in 1867. No two treaties are identical, but they usually provide certain rights, including annual payments for ammunition and annuities, clothing every three years, hunting and fishing rights, reserve lands and other entitlements. In signing a treaty, the Indian bands surrendered their prior rights, titles and privileges to the designated lands.

Treaty Indian

A treaty Indian is a person affiliated with a First Nation that has signed, or whose ancestors signed, a treaty and who now receives land rights and entitlements as prescribed in a treaty.

Treaty rights

Treaty rights are legal rights to lands and entitlements that Indian people have as a result of treaties.

The following are common terms that are not defined in legislation.

Aboriginal rights

There are a number of different views about what, in fact, constitutes Aboriginal rights. Aboriginal people believe they have rights because of their long and special relationship with the lands they have occupied over a long period of time, as well as their use of those lands. The legal rights of Aboriginal people must be determined on a case-by-case basis.

Non-status Indian

This term refers to a person who is not recognized as an Indian under the *Indian Act*. In the past, Indian people often lost their right to be registered as an Indian as defined by the *Indian Act*.

History and legislation

Royal Proclamation of 1763

The British government proclaimed that the interests of Indian people and their lands must be protected and the Indian people must be dealt with fairly. This proclamation was necessary to protect the interests of Indian people in these lands, as settlers occupied British North America.

Constitution Act, 1867

Section 91(24) of the *Constitution Act, 1867* states that legislative authority for Indians and lands reserved for Indians rests with the Parliament of Canada.

Indian Act

With the passage of the first *Indian Act* in 1876, and the amendments to that Act in 1879, the federal government was given great power over Indian people living on reserves. The Act stated who was an Indian and who was not; it controlled movement from the reserves; it dictated when and where children would go to school; and it denied Indian people the right to vote unless they first gave up their Indian status and treaty rights. Sections of the Act also gave the federal government authority over Indian people who had no reserve lands. It wasn't until the early 1960s that Aboriginal people were allowed to vote under federal law without losing status or treaty rights.[13]

Bill C-31

Bill C-31 is the 1985 pre-legislation name of the *Act to Amend the Indian Act*. This legislation removed discriminatory clauses against women and restored status and membership rights. Aboriginal people who have been reinstated as status Indians under this *Act* are often referred to as Bill C-31 Indians.

Aboriginal lifestyles

First Nations, Métis or Inuit people may be connected with their traditions in varying degrees. The following is a simplified description of possible Aboriginal lifestyles that remain relevant.[14]

Traditional

Aboriginal people in a traditional lifestyle live off the land by hunting, fishing and/or trapping. They usually have little contact with people outside this lifestyle.

Bicultural

Aboriginal people with a bicultural lifestyle are comfortable in both Aboriginal and mainstream cultures, but they may still have strong ties to tradition. For example, these people may live on a reserve and take part in the community's spiritual and cultural life, but they may be employed off the reserve in a non-Aboriginal setting.

Mainstream

Aboriginal people living and working in a town or city, with few ties to their Aboriginal heritage, may be integrated into the mainstream or dominant culture.

Transitional

Aboriginal people not strongly connected to either mainstream or traditional culture may be in a period of transition. They could be in the process of moving from a rural area or reserve to a town or city, or they may have been raised in a non-native family and may have only begun the search for their roots.

Aboriginal identity

The *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* states that "Aboriginal people explained to us that their various nations have distinct cultures, with unique knowledge and understandings of the world around them."[15]

In *Aboriginal Peoples in Canada: Contemporary Conflicts*, James Frideres describes three concepts of Aboriginal identity:

- *Traditional*. Traditional Aboriginal peoples are those who adhere to the teachings of the Elders and have a strong understanding of the old ways based on the symbiotic relationship with the earth.
- *Non-traditional*. This group includes Aboriginal peoples who adopt most of the norms and practices of the dominant society and choose conventional helping services if and when these are required. The group also includes those who are culturally alienated, defined as those individuals who have not adopted traditional ways and who are not successfully coping within either conventional or Aboriginal society. Individuals who are culturally alienated may experience periodic or constant states of crisis and exhibit internalized symptoms of colonization, such as depression, self-destructive behaviours or violence toward others.
- *Neo-traditional*. In this group, the Aboriginal person identifies with a blend of traditional spirituality and practices that reflect the dominant society and Christian beliefs.[16]

Members of the group who live a traditional lifestyle are more likely to use the services of Aboriginal agencies or Aboriginal social workers. If a client is more traditional, it is important for counsellors to understand that the individual is guided by the practices of that choice. These practices may include the following:

- use of the pipe
- traditional medicines
- healing practices, such as the sweat lodge
- guidance by Elders
- the healing circle[17]

Values

Values will, of course, be unique to each client. While it is helpful to have a general appreciation of common values that may be found within a particular cultural group, counsellors are encouraged to take time to understand what is fundamentally important to each individual and help clients use those values as a framework for the career-building process.

Aboriginal community

From rural to urban life

"Although it is a slow process, change is taking place. Now when someone leaves their Aboriginal community to pursue work or go to school, there is more of a support system with the families and community. However, in some cases, even when there is support, students, in particular, will return home, often due to the feeling of being overwhelmed and intimidated by the transition from their rural home communities to the urban settings."

Melissa Gillis
Concordia University College

Aboriginal people hold strong values related to children and family, including extended family. Aboriginal clients who highly value family ties, or who may be very involved in family events, will require time away from studies or work to maintain family relationships. Counsellors can help clients anticipate such circumstances and help them plan for family events.

Aboriginal clients trying to create life changes involving further education or relocation may also face a variety of challenges. While families and community leaders may be more supportive than in the past, it is a challenging adjustment.

Clients who feel less supported by their communities may be receiving subtle or direct messages that suggest they are

- abandoning their families
- trying to become better than others in the community
- facing the possibility of assimilation

These messages may be discouraging to Aboriginal clients and may affect their self-esteem. The message may also raise troubling fears of loss of community.

Health and social challenges

Aboriginal people are overrepresented in the number of Canadians suffering from social, emotional and physical ill health. The *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* documents struggles with the breakdown in community and family order that underlie social and emotional challenges. It suggests that cultural and material losses experienced historically by Aboriginal people have contributed to anger, grief, damaged self-esteem and a sense of hopelessness. Addictions and substance abuse, which can be related to cultural disruption and enduring hardship, have become additional challenges for some Aboriginal people.

Responding to Challenges: Strategies and Practices

Counsellors emphasize the importance of working with the whole client and not just their employment or education needs. This process includes understanding cultural backgrounds and the challenges associated with being a member of a distinct cultural group, as well as the personal challenges faced by each individual. Counsellors may want to draw from multicultural counselling approaches, as well as from approaches that connect with Aboriginal traditions.

Qualities of effective counsellors

Counsellors who are effective with Aboriginal clients

- recognize and respect the diversity among First Nations, Métis and Inuit
- are bicultural, either of First Nations, Métis or Inuit ancestry, or have a deep knowledge of Aboriginal culture and world views
- present themselves in an informal, friendly, interested, respectful and trustworthy way
- are accessible—tend to use a drop-in and a quick-response approach rather than appointments
- build and maintain a network of contacts (parents, band officials, Elders, Aboriginal role models, other helpers) in the Aboriginal community and participate in community affairs, such as sports, ceremonies and feasts

- use a holistic and culturally relevant approach
- have a capacity to respond to a wide range of needs, such as
  - in-school adjustment
  - cultural demands and practices
  - spirituality
  - lifestyle and cultural identity issues
  - loss and grieving
  - violence
  - sexual abuse
  - transitions
  - cross-band rivalries
  - suicide
  - poverty
  - interactions with the criminal justice system
  - discrimination and racial conflict and bias
  - substance abuse[18]

Communicating with Aboriginal clients

To be effective with clients, counsellors need strong communication skills, including listening, synthesizing information, paraphrasing and responding to meaning and feeling. Of these skills, listening may be the most important when working with Aboriginal clients. Aboriginal people may pause longer before responding. Counsellors are encouraged to become comfortable with periods of silence as their clients reflect on the discussion.

Counsellors need to take the time to build clients' trust and rapport. Some clients may disclose information regarding personal issues that they are experiencing. If in doubt, counsellors can ask the following questions of clients:

- Do you have any concerns regarding your family?
- Are there some things in your background that you haven't had an opportunity to deal with?
- How can we help you with that?
- Who might you go to for help with that?

First build trust

"Take long enough to get to know the person. It may be hard for some Aboriginal people to open up. Take time to build trust. Find out what challenges clients face. Ask clients—don't make assumptions. Get to the core of personal challenges. Point people to appropriate resources. It's very important to help clients identify and address personal challenges prior to dealing with employment."

Crystal Kosa, Consultant
Corporate Training and Inclusion Strategies

Being in treatment is not uncommon for clients. If clients are in professional counselling or in treatment at the same time as career counselling, you may want to discuss the situation. Sometimes making progress in career planning or work search can have a positive effect on addressing personal issues. If clients are not in professional counselling but would benefit from additional support, counsellors can help clients by providing referrals to community resources, such as Elders and community agencies.

Strength-based approach

An effective strength-based approach, also known as solution-focused counselling, involves asking questions to prompt client identification of strengths. Because self-esteem and self-confidence are, in many cases, challenging to Aboriginal clients, asking the following questions may be helpful:

- *Survival questions.* Given what you have gone through in your life, how have you managed to survive so far?
- *Support questions.* What people have given you special understanding, support, guidance?
- *Possibility questions.* What are your hopes, visions and aspirations?

- *Esteem questions.* When people say good things about you, what are they likely to say?
- *Exception questions.* When things were going well in your life, what was different?[19]

These questions can be woven throughout the career-building process to help clients focus on the positive aspects of their lives as they move forward.

Multicultural counselling approach

Because Aboriginal clients represent a minority of the dominant population, it is useful to draw from multicultural counselling theory. This approach identifies the importance of counsellor competence in three dimensions: counsellor's self-awareness, knowledge of other world views and counselling skills.[20]

Counsellors' personal beliefs

Culturally aware counsellors focus on their own belief system by

- examining their own assumptions on human behaviour, values, biases, preconceived notions and personal limitations
- becoming aware of their own world view
- understanding how their own cultural experiences relate to their beliefs and attitudes
- examining how their own world view impacts their interactions with Aboriginal clients[21]

In addition, counsellors need to be aware that their cultural background may, at times, result in their beliefs and world views contrasting with those of their clients. The process of professional reflection about personal culture supports the development of self-awareness, identified as a core competency in the domain of multicultural counselling.

Knowledge of other world views

Culturally aware counsellors broaden their own world view by

- attempting to understand the world view of Aboriginal clients without making negative judgments
- respecting and appreciating the world views of Aboriginal clients
- accepting client world views as a legitimate perspective[22]

There are many ways to gain knowledge of other world views. Counsellors may

- be open to clients and learn from them
- talk to career counsellors who are experienced in the field
- attend workshops or training events
- seek out and learn from resources in the community
- read books, journal articles and information on websites

Counselling skills

Culturally aware counsellors seek skill development by

- practicing appropriate, relevant and sensitive intervention strategies and skills
- acknowledging the cultural values and life experiences of clients
- incorporating the values of clients into the counselling process, as appropriate[23]

Connecting with Aboriginal traditions

Having cultural knowledge and an understanding of traditional methods is important in retaining Aboriginal identity. A number of Aboriginal traditions can be used in counselling. Underlying these methods are three levels of empowerment:

- *Intrapersonal.* These methods involve the enhancement of self-esteem and self-confidence.
- *Interpersonal.* These methods involve the construction of knowledge and social analysis based upon experiences shared with others.
- *Community.* These methods involve pursuing resources and strategies for personal and collective benefit.[24]

Importance of healing

"Healing is something many Aboriginal peoples work toward. For many, it is dealing with history, loss of culture, change of lifestyle and the force of systems. Some approaches individuals may choose to promote healing include

- healing circles
- healing camps
- sun dances
- discussions with Elders
- treatment by physicians who incorporate natural approaches and who are knowledgeable about Aboriginal culture."

Norma Giroux
Alberta Employment and Immigration

Counsellors may suggest that clients explore traditional symbols and approaches. It will be important to confirm with clients that particular approaches are relevant and meaningful. Two examples of these levels of empowerment are the medicine wheel and the sharing circle. Although the medicine wheel and sharing circle may be less meaningful to Métis clients, any Aboriginal individual may relate in varying degrees to the use of Aboriginal traditions.

Medicine wheel

Medicine is defined as something that affects your well-being, and *wheel* is the circle inside which everything is connected and can change direction. The medicine wheel symbolizes completeness and interdependence and represents the circle of life. It also represents the balance that exists among all things.

The teachings of the medicine wheel are a way of life and include the four aspects of human development: mental, spiritual, physical and emotional. The concept assists clients to focus on the whole self in order to make realistic choices and decisions. This is a useful tool to use in career planning, problem solving and action planning.[25]

Sharing circle

The healing circle or talking circle is often referred to as having a sharing circle. The group forms a circle where participants "share personal experiences and reflect on hopes and aspirations for personal and collective change. This is a traditional healing concept and a major method for sharing and resolving personal issues and problems."[26] This traditional practice is often used by Aboriginal facilitators, especially Elders. Social support provided in sharing circles is important to individuals in that it empowers group members and creates knowledge that change can happen.

Before looking for work

"It's so important to be aware of issues and concerns of clients and to know how to address concerns. When the expected outcome is employment, time is an issue, but we are setting people up if we don't help them deal with their personal concerns first. If they are not job-market-ready, then we need to help them with that, then move to employment."

Norma Giroux
Alberta Employment and Immigration

Helping Aboriginal clients with career planning

Identifying career goals may be a challenge for Aboriginal people. While career planning is a common challenge among clients in general, it has particular impact on Aboriginal people because they are a group whose traditional career opportunities have changed considerably. Some clients may be challenged with balancing their desire to give back to their community while trying to achieve personally satisfying work.

Other clients may have limited exposure to the variety of occupations they might consider and may be inclined to focus on occupations they have had direct contact with or have seen other Aboriginal people involved in.

It is important for counsellors to help clients consider a variety of careers in order to broaden their view of work options. Participation in job shadowing, co-op experiences and internships provides hands-on exposure to a variety of work options.

Guiding Circles

Aboriginal clients who have not had the opportunity to gain work experience frequently have difficulty relating their life experiences and skills to the opportunities in the labour market. Culturally sensitive counselling tools will help Aboriginal clients make appropriate career choices.

Guiding Circles offers an effective approach to holistic career planning with Aboriginal people. The tool combines traditional teaching with sound contemporary career development exercises to arrive at a better understanding of one's self in terms of possible career goals.[27]

Counsellors who use the *Guiding Circles* program may consider these areas:

- *Approach*. Use a client-centred approach that engages clients wherever they are at in life, at the moment. Be creative, flexible and innovative. Use a holistic approach and involve clients at all levels.
- *Working relationship*. Find common ground with clients. Set clear goals and objectives. Emphasize it is a collaborative process and ensure that it is.
- *Reflection and action*. Encourage clients to take time for reflection. Ask clients if what they have been doing is working. If not, ask them if they might want to try something different. Emphasize the importance of the journey to clients who don't think they have time for reflection and are anxious just to get a job.
- *Boundaries*. Create a climate of emotional safety for clients. Encourage clients to share only what they are comfortable with. Give clients permission to stop if they seem to reach an uncomfortable level of self-disclosure.
- *Connections*. Encourage clients to focus on what they have, not what they are missing, especially with regard to family, social groups and friends.
- *Patterns*. Encourage clients to talk about their involvement in hobbies or leisure activities. Facilitate the storytelling process; don't direct it. Capture clients' stories and details with their permission.
- *Values*. Help clients identify values that are important to them.
- *Understanding*. Help clients review and understand what they have learned about themselves. Help clients become aware that who they are relates directly to what they might do in both work and life.
- *Planning*. Help clients articulate where they want to go (their vision) if they have not yet done so. Help clients relate their action planning to their vision. Any action that they take has the potential to move them closer to or farther from their vision.
- *Clients' journeys*. Help clients understand that their journey is not likely to be in a straight line. Emphasize that people don't need to know everything before they start taking small steps. Let clients know that their vision will evolve as they learn more. Their career journey is a walk taken one step at a time, with each new step helping to clarify the next steps.[28]

In addition to the *Guiding Circles* resource, the Aboriginal Human Resource Council also provides supports for career counsellors and several programs through partnerships to advance the Aboriginal workforce.[29]

Combining Aboriginal values with careers

When making a career decision, Aboriginal clients may wish to consider how they will continue to maintain their cultural identity while living and working in the dominant society. Achieving this goal requires a commitment of time and energy that must be factored into clients' career decisions and work lifestyle.

It may be helpful for counsellors to raise the issue by asking clients these questions:

- What kinds of activities do you want to be involved in?
- Where do these activities take place?
- Do they require a rural lifestyle or an urban lifestyle?
- Do these activities place a limit on the distance you might want to be away from your family or from a particular reserve, settlement or organization?
- If you are in an urban area, will you encourage your family to speak an Aboriginal language at home?
- How will you maintain emotional closeness with your extended family while living away from them?
- How will you ensure that the customs, values and attitudes that are important to you are passed from one generation to the next?
- What cultural activities can you participate in, in the city? [30]

Knowing who you are

"Never create a 'greater than and less than' dynamic. Know who you are and where you come from and know your own boundaries and effectively maintain them. Listen, let go and be a role model."

Joanne G. Pompana
Red Road Healing Society, Edmonton

Helping Aboriginal clients with education

Statistics support the assertion that education is a critical factor that relates to employment success. Education and training are the keys to increased employment.

Many adult Aboriginal people have not completed secondary education. In order to complete the post-secondary training required to enter many occupations, Aboriginal clients may need to

- repeat or upgrade their secondary education
- compete to enter programs for which quotas exist and entrance requirements are rising
- prepare for long periods of extensive study[31]

Counsellors can help clients prepare for remedial secondary and post-secondary education by ensuring that they are aware of

- various post-secondary institutions' non-matriculated student policies
- the availability of programs in each institution
- the institutions' acceptance of adult upgrading programs
- the format and flexibility of programs at both the adult upgrading and post-secondary level
- how flexibility may allow them to complete a program with fewer restrictions and with a higher rate of success[32]

Aboriginal clients who have not observed students facing the challenges of a post-secondary program may not have a clear picture of the commitment and work required. Talking with a role model will help to ensure they don't underestimate the challenges involved.

Many programs are now available that focus on providing Aboriginal people with opportunities to gain skills through education and training. Alberta Aboriginal Relations works with industry, Aboriginal groups and provincial departments to develop partnerships to enhance training, employment and business opportunities for Aboriginal people.

Increasingly, companies are encouraged to participate in co-op, summer placements, mentorships, internships and apprenticeship programs that provide opportunities for Aboriginal students to have hands-on experience. Many industries involved in developing new business projects are now required to give back to affected communities. Partnerships between private and public sector organizations that provide employment and training to Aboriginal people are becoming more common.

Eligibility and funding for training and education

Program eligibility and funding guidelines vary from program to program. Because eligibility and funding issues can be particularly complex, counsellors have a responsibility to help clients understand what programs they may or may not qualify for. It is also very important for counsellors to understand the differences between First Nations, Métis and Inuit in order to assist clients with the self-identification process, if necessary.

The following are some criteria that may have an impact on program and funding eligibility:

- residency for First Nations individuals (whether they live on or off reserve)
- status for First Nations individuals (whether they are status or non-status)
- self-identification for First Nations, Métis and Inuit individuals (identifying the Aboriginal group they are a member of; some clients may not be sure which group they belong to)

Becoming a student involves expenses, including cost of the program, commuting or moving, taking up a different residence (rent) and basic living expenses. Both the status of Aboriginal clients and their planned program of study influence the financial support that might be available. It is important for counsellors to be aware of

- funding opportunities for status Indians from Indian and Northern Affairs Canada and individual bands
- sponsorship programs at both the federal and provincial level
- scholarships and bursaries
- current students finance policies[33]

Timelines for training and education

Timelines are another significant consideration for clients planning to enter education and training programs and to apply for funding. Many programs require applications well in advance of start dates—in some cases, up to one year. Counsellors are in a position to help clients understand the importance of these timelines and to help clients plan to meet them. As entrance to various programs becomes more competitive, clients must become extra diligent in the application process.

Alternatives to full-time education

While continuing their education will be of great benefit to clients, the traditional approach of full-time, on-site attendance may not be the most suitable choice. Clients should become aware of the variety of approaches that are available to them:

- Part-time, evening and weekend studies allow students to maintain ongoing family and/or work responsibilities.
- Distance learning or correspondence, including Internet-based schooling, allows students to study without moving to a new location.
- Co-operative education programs, including internships or work experience, combine classroom or distance learning studies with hands-on experience.
- Apprenticeship programs combine formalized on-the-job training, classroom instruction and standardized examinations.
- Short-term courses focus on specific skill development.

Providing supports for Aboriginal students

A challenge following enrolment is to provide an environment where Aboriginal people can be successful. Loneliness or lack of a support network may cause students to drop out and not complete their course of studies. Many Aboriginal people are still experiencing poverty that affects the mental, spiritual, emotional and physical aspects of the individual and, therefore, their possibility of success.

Strengthening Aboriginal students

"When Aboriginal students enter post-secondary institutions, it is important to connect with them early. They need to know someone cares about them being successful. Some institutions foster a sense of community by providing a place for Aboriginal students to connect with each other, meet with Elders, hold sweet grass ceremonies and access computers."

Diana Blackman
Northern Alberta Institute of Technology

To increase student retention, educational institutions provide instruction and support in a variety of ways. Some post-secondary institutions have used these strategies:

- developed courses taught from an Aboriginal perspective and by Aboriginal instructors
- scheduled regular social events, including smudge ceremonies, feasts and student council meetings
- employed Aboriginal liaison staff
- sponsored cultural centres that provide group support and inclusive activities especially for rural and off-reserve students

Aboriginal community resource list

A resource list of persons, agencies and programs that assist Aboriginal people is a useful tool that will need to be updated on an ongoing basis. A comprehensive list of resources will include the following:

- *Community networking.* Contact information for colleagues and supervisors.
- *Employment centres.* Contact information for local Aboriginal, provincial and/or federal employment centres.
- *Government departments and agencies.* Contact information for government departments and agencies, including federal government departments such as Indian and Northern Affairs Canada. Provincial departments of Aboriginal affairs, human resources, education and social services, as well as municipal social service agencies, may also be helpful.
- *Native Friendship Centres.* Contact information for Native Friendship Centres, which are often involved in lobbying, liaising with government departments, undertaking advisory tasks and preparing proposals for government programs. Staff members are excellent sources of information.
- *Online and print resources.* Sources for magazines and newspapers (local, Aboriginal, national) and directories, databases and catalogues. Internet websites of organizations, published research and articles and relevant social media.[34]

Focusing on Employment

Having a clear understanding of the challenges Aboriginal people face when preparing to look for employment or take part in further education is important. These challenges are very real and may contribute to lower labour force participation and higher unemployment rates for Aboriginal people. There are, however, many Aboriginal people who have overcome challenges, achieved educational goals, developed solid job search skills and enjoyed positive work experiences.

Counsellors will need to consider how to help Aboriginal clients with work search and employment discrimination. Counsellors may also need to support employed clients as they learn to manage the transition to the workplace.

Helping Aboriginal clients with work search

A handbook for Aboriginal job seekers is available with practical information on the challenges and tools for securing a job and insight on how to keep it. *Finding and Keeping a Good Job: A Handbook for Aboriginal Job Seekers* was developed by the Aboriginal Business Development Services and The Business Link.[35]

For current and appropriate work search guidance, see the Aboriginal Human Resource Council's website, which includes a dedicated job site for the Aboriginal community. This job site connects employers and job seekers who can post jobs/resumés, search databases and create online profiles.[36]

Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship is growing in Aboriginal communities, with opportunities developing through ventures and collaboration with existing companies. There are over 30,000 Aboriginal businesses in Canada.[37] As with the majority of Canadian businesses, most Aboriginal enterprises are micro-businesses since they have anywhere from one to four employees. And most of these enterprises produce goods and provide services to local consumers.[38]

Helping Aboriginal clients with discrimination

While measures have been taken to address discrimination and improve employment opportunities for Aboriginal people, continuing efforts are required to reduce issues of discrimination. Discrimination can feed a destructive cycle in which an Aboriginal person withdraws or else responds with hostility. Negative stereotypes for both sides may be confirmed.

Discrimination can be a serious impediment to Aboriginal employment. The factors that contribute to discrimination include

- overt racial intolerance
- ignorance of Aboriginal customs
- prejudice as a result of stereotyping
- misinterpretation of Aboriginal shyness and lack of assertiveness

To help Aboriginal clients deal with discrimination, counsellors are encouraged to become familiar with provisions set out by the following legislation:

- *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*
- *Canadian Human Rights Act*
- *Employment Equity Act*
- *Alberta Human Rights Act*

To help clients overcome racism and stereotyping, counsellors can encourage clients to

- find and/or foster a strong sense of community among other Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people
- educate others about racism by dispelling myths and false images
- focus on accurate facts and details
- practice assertive communication to deal with concerns as soon as they arise
- rehearse situations by role-playing
- record specific events in a diary to relieve stress and to maintain records
- work through negative feelings with family, friends and Elders
- contact an appropriate authority, including the Human Rights Commission (federal or provincial)[39]

Talking about Aboriginal heritage with potential employers

Aboriginal clients may need some support in thinking ahead about how to present their heritage to potential employers. Encourage clients to plan in advance whether or not they will talk about their Aboriginal heritage. Be sure clients understand that it may be of benefit to acknowledge Aboriginal heritage. Many employers may be seeking Aboriginal employees.

Providing employment supports

Aboriginal workers usually can be placed into one of two groups: those who are relatively familiar with the dominant society and its customs and those who are not familiar with the work ethic and social customs of the dominant society. Both groups commonly experience racial prejudice and discrimination.

Family values

"Aboriginal values that place families and children before competitive advantage and financial gain may be in conflict with some work environments."

Crystal Kosa, Consultant
Corporate Training and Inclusion Strategies

Typical workforce culture and the traditional culture of an Aboriginal job seeker or employee are often strikingly different. Many Aboriginal people are accustomed to a co-operative work style. An environment that involves a more competitive work style is likely to be less satisfying to Aboriginal workers. Conflicts between family and workplace values can be a source of confusion, stress and isolation. Many Aboriginal people are accustomed to the support of a close network of family and friends. This fact, coupled with the relocation that they often experience in order to take work, can magnify their feelings that the workplace is unfriendly, cold and unsupportive.

Two key retention strategies to help Aboriginal employees are job orientations and mentoring relationships.

Job orientations

Counsellors can help new employees by making them aware of the importance and benefits of orientations. Orientations provide valuable information on workplace safety. They also clarify policies, such as how to report absences due to illness or family events. Some smaller organizations may not have formal orientations to the job. In that case, it is helpful when employees are aware of questions they can ask to obtain organizational information.

Counsellors can help clients anticipate challenges they might encounter in the workplace and identify strategies to address such challenges. For example, a client may have family obligations to a large extended family and attendance at family events may conflict with attendance at work. Through orientation, clients are made aware of organization policies on absences and overtime. Therefore, they will more likely to understand expectations, to have confidence to ask questions about the policies and to make conscious decisions regarding work/life balance and responsibilities.

Introducing clients to mentorship

Mentorships can help new employees become successful by providing social support and useful information, such as where to go for coffee and lunch breaks. Otherwise, new employees might not ask for social information at work and may end up feeling isolated and lonely.

Finding an experienced employee in the workplace to act as a mentor can be both an encouragement and vital form of support for your client. Counsellors can facilitate this process with employers, especially in the absence of a formal mentorship program. It is important that mentors that volunteer are committed to the mentoring relationship and are familiar with the informal side of the organization.

When orientation and mentoring are in place, new employees are more likely to stay and succeed in the workplace. Orientations, provided by the employer, address the more formal side of employment; mentoring relationships take care of the informal side and establish a more inclusive environment.[40]

In Conclusion

The success of Aboriginal people continues to grow as they achieve higher levels of education and employment. Counsellors can support this growth by continuing to take time to get to know their clients; to become aware of Aboriginal culture, while not assuming that all individuals subscribe to any or all traditional cultural practices; and to maintain a list of community resources and opportunities to help clients develop their careers.

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