Aboriginal Studies and Centre for Aboriginal Initiatives, University of Toronto
Academic Plan, 2010-2015

1. Vision:

Aboriginal Studies and the Centre for Aboriginal Initiatives are committed to achieving a unique program guided by the University of Toronto’s principles of excellence, equity, and outreach, and by a further set of principles that guide Aboriginal teachings and research, namely relationships, respect, responsibility, and community. Our long-term vision is to be recognized as a national and international centre of excellence for work in Aboriginal Studies, within the top five such University centres in the world, with exceptional graduate as well as undergraduate programs, distinguished by the cultural, social and geographic environment of the University of Toronto, the city of Toronto, and its urban and surrounding Indigenous communities. We envision ourselves as a place of both cultural and intellectual values, a place where careful, rigorous work and study is recognized and rewarded and where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students are nourished and supported as they strive to complete their programs and go on to excel in their working lives, thereby giving back to Aboriginal people and to Canada. We aim to be a place of choice for graduate and post-doctoral students from around the world.

2. Key Strengths:

a. What distinguishes this unit from its peers in Canada and abroad?

i. Research and scholarship:
The Centre for Aboriginal Initiatives (CAI), established through the Academic Initiatives Fund in 2005 and opened in 2007, has as its mandate to develop innovative participatory research with urban Aboriginal populations and support research partnerships; develop collaborations with Aboriginal communities and community organizations; develop pedagogy that focuses on Aboriginal peoples as cultural workers, social change agents, leaders, and thinkers; develop research and pedagogy on Aboriginal methodologies and epistemology; support the recruitment and retention of Aboriginal graduate and undergraduate students and enhance the visibility of the Aboriginal presence at the University of Toronto. Since its inception, it has undertaken a number of initiatives to meet these goals. These include developing a support program for graduate students (Supporting Aboriginal Graduate Enhancement [SAGE]), a community-based language learning program (Ciimaan) to do research on language teaching and develop pedagogy, working with community organizations, a science initiative (Pathways to Aboriginal Worldviews in Support of Science), an outreach collaborative initiative (Canadian Roots) to engage Aboriginal rural communities in Canada, and a Group on Indigenous Governance (GIG) of University scholars concerned with Aboriginal issues.

CAI has worked with representatives of faculties across the campus, including the Faculty of Arts and Science (Centre for Ethics, Department of History, School of Public Policy and Governance), the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, the Faculty of Law, the Faculty of Social Work, the Rotman School of Management, and other units to establish a Memorandum of Understanding with the National Centre for First Nations Governance (NCFNG), signed by the Provost of the University of Toronto and the President of the National Centre for First Nations Governance, to develop joint teaching and research initiatives. The University of Toronto is the first university in Canada to develop an MOU that involves the university as a whole, not just a unit within the university. CAI has begun work together with the Anishinabek Nation as well, exploring ways in which the two groups can cooperate in research. CAI also partnered with First Nations House (student life) to chair a committee to create a vision for Aboriginal initiatives at the University of Toronto as a whole over the next five year period, spurred by the opportunity to submit a proposal to the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities for funds for access, retention and completion of Aboriginal students; funds
have now been received from MTCU that will enhance Aboriginal initiatives across the campuses.

Individual faculty members with appointments to Aboriginal Studies are highly productive, sought after scholars with strong research records. The faculty is overall young and are recognized both across Canada and internationally for their research.

ii. Undergraduate education

The undergraduate Aboriginal Studies aims to introduce students to the languages, cultures, histories, creativity and well-being of Indigenous Peoples and their knowledges within Canada and globally. With 120 students currently enrolled in its undergraduate programs (44 majors, 51 minors, 25 specialists), and close to 400 total class enrolments in courses each year, Aboriginal Studies at the University of Toronto is among the largest in North America. In Canada, only Trent, University of Alberta, Lakehead, and Lethbridge list comparable or higher enrolments in this undergraduate specialization. In the U.S., only the following Universities have comparable or larger size programs: Arizona State; University of Colorado; University of Hawaii – Hilo; State University of New York at Buffalo; Cornell; University of Wisconsin - Madison; and University of New Mexico.

Aboriginal Studies at the University of Toronto is well enough established that other universities are looking to it for support and advice as they establish their own programs, due to growing student demand and awareness of responsibility. The University of Ottawa, the University of Western Ontario, York University, and Algoma College, for example, started programs in recent years, and Queen’s and others are looking into establishing programs, and have consulted with ABS/CAI faculty.

The following are key strengths of the undergraduate program.

Connection to the Community and Leadership of Aboriginal Faculty

The Director, administrative staff, and most of the teaching faculty of both ABS and CAI are Indigenous people. As well, we have had leading support from Elders and the Aboriginal community in Toronto since our earliest days. A strong, and unique, collaborative spirit exists between First Nations House (part of student life), the urban Aboriginal community, the Native Students Association at the University of Toronto, and ABS/CAI, with jointly sponsored lecture series, writers-in-residence, feasts, and other activities as well as ongoing discussion of academic and non-academic strengths and challenges for Aboriginal students.

There are strong connections with other departments and centres at the University of Toronto. ABS/CAI has recently connected with the Archaeology Centre for ways to collaborate with the language work of the Ciimaan research project. Various science departments have been involved with ABS in the development of PAWSS (Pathways to Aboriginal Worldviews and Support in the Sciences) and the recently accepted ABS science course. Further cross-university and community partnerships are outlined above under research, with the highlight being the development of the MOU with the National Centre for First Nations Governance.

Academic Excellence

Aboriginal Studies distinguishes itself in the respect it has achieved for its academic rigor, discipline, and research as well as by its leadership by Aboriginal faculty and staff and collaboration with the local Aboriginal communities. Students have given exceptionally high ratings and evaluative comments regarding courses since the program’s inception. An extremely high average of 94% responded that they would retake the course even if it was not required for their program (based on Self study information for Academic Units). On both questions # 11


2 Ibid.
(professor’s overall performance, (B3) and # 19 (overall learning experience), students have rated our courses significantly higher than the average at the Faculty of Arts and Science almost every session (based on Self study information for Academic Units). We regularly receive student comments such as “eye-opening”; "This course actually changed my life, and I can't thank you enough”; "If it were up to me, I would make this course a mandatory course at University of Toronto because Canada's history is a Native history”; "the best class I've ever taken in my entire university experience. ... When I become a physician, I will definitely invest my time and skill in Canada's Aboriginal community"; "Outstanding professor."

b. What has your unit done over the past five years to enhance these strengths?

There has been enormous growth in the past five years: (i) establishment of specialist program in ABS; 2005; (ii) move from governance through University College to governance through the Faculty of Arts and Science; 2007; (iii) establishment of the Centre for Aboriginal Initiatives; 2007; (iv) dedicated and appropriate space made available for ABS/CAI in the North Borden building, housed in the same building as First Nations House; 2007; (v) hiring of one CLTA in Aboriginal Studies and Social Work; (vi) hiring of tenure-stream faculty; (vii) CRIF for PAWSS, 2008, which resulted in approval of an ABS science course; 2009; (viii) redevelopment of curriculum for Ojibwe language courses, 2009; (ix) development of partnerships across the University of Toronto, beyond those established through joint appointments (there are now joint appointments with English, Geography, and Political Science as well as the CLTA joint with Social Work) including support for a hiring in Aboriginal History and cooperation with OISE on appointments in Aboriginal Healing and Sociology and Equity Studies as well as work on the NCFNG initiative with several FAS departments as well as other faculties; (x) development of partnerships outside of the university including local Aboriginal agencies, Anishnabek Nation, NCFNG; 2009; (xi) hiring of coordinator for NCFNG initiative, supported by FAS, Office of the Provost, OISE, FSW, NCFNG, administered through CAI, 2009; (xii) new ABS course accepted on politics and process of reconciliation, 2009; (xiii) approval of new joint course between ABS/POL, 2009.

c. How have resources been used effectively by your unit to enhance these strengths?

CAI/ABS has been active in obtaining funds to support its initiatives. It obtained $130,200 in external support from Miziwe Biik (Aboriginal employment agency), NCFNG, MTCU, and an individual donation to support activities and build research. We also secured resources from the Jackman Humanities Foundation for a jointly sponsored event (with Drama), the Academic Initiatives’ Fund to establish CAI and provide it space, the Graduate Enhancement fund to enhance the learning experience of graduate students, and CRIF to establish PAWSS. A course on the north was taught by Gita Laidler under the auspices of a University of Toronto post-doctoral fellowship.We secured internal funding for our newly created Program Coordinator for the joint University of Toronto-NCFNG Initiative on Indigenous Governance through co-sponsorship of various departments and centres. A course on Aboriginal health systems was funded in its first year through Wellesley Central, and has been funded since then by Kue Young (Dalla Lama School of Public Health) through a CIHR Aboriginal health training grant. The graduate Collaborative Program on Aboriginal Health, funded by Kue Young’s grant, has also been run out of CAI. With one full-time staff member we run the various programs, train work-study students to support our programs, conduct research and help raise external funds. We are constantly pursuing new funding sources.

3. Priorities:

We recognize several major priorities for the next five years.

3.1 Taking advantage of our breadth

In the next five years, CAI intends to continue working with its partners to solidify the relationships with NCFNG and Anishnabek Nation. FNH and CAI, together with Jill Matus,
Vice Provost Students, have been working to develop an educational and research initiative with Moose Factory through the Lieutenant Governor’s literacy program. We will continue to work with partners to enhance science offerings; work with FNH to develop and implement the MTCU initiative for access, retention, and completion of students; continue to build SAGE; and work to develop a program with Political Science that will enhance NCFNG and Anishnabek Nation initiatives on the U of T side.

3.2 Rebuilding the student experience

The student experience based on course evaluations is very strong in ABS. We will continue to build in areas of necessary need, especially science and governance. We will refocus some of the undergraduate program, making it more responsive to Indigenous foundations. We are working with the Centre for Community Partnerships to develop service learning courses, a long-time goal of ABS in working with the community outside of the university as well as within. Daniel Justice (English), in agreement with the previous Chair of the English department, offers an ABS course every other year.

We need to continue strengthening the language programs as they are core to Aboriginal Studies.

3.3 Graduate education and research excellence

Over the past several years there has been considerable talk both within Aboriginal Studies and more widely about starting a graduate program in Aboriginal Studies. Many students who complete undergraduate degrees in Aboriginal Studies would like to do a Masters and Ph.D. degree in ABS. We also receive inquiries from many undergraduates from other universities about the possibility of doing a Masters or Doctoral degree. This goal is consistent with University of Toronto’s Towards 2030 objective to “maintain our research-intensive culture…global reputation for the generation of new ideas and transformative discoveries reinforcing our strengths in research and scholarship.”

With more Aboriginal students pursuing undergraduate degrees, a demand for graduate education in Aboriginal Studies is expected to grow. According to Alex Usher of the Educational Policy Institute, INAC (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada) supported 3,600 post-secondary students in 1977-78 and 27,000 in 1999-2000, and this number is expected to be 26% larger than that in 2010. Aboriginal peoples are the fastest growing segment of the population and efforts of colleges and universities to recruit and retain Aboriginal students are expected to grow.

There are other signs that this area of study will become increasingly popular at the graduate level. John Ralston Saul, recently named President of the international writers’ group P.E.N., said he would make Aboriginal language revitalization a main focus in this role. Canadian Institutes for Health Research has an Institute for Aboriginal Health that invests millions of dollars per year for research in Aboriginal Health, and the Social Science and Humanities Research Council has an Aboriginal research program. The government will be investing much time and effort in land claims, residential school compensation, governance and many more Aboriginal issues in the future. With an increasing population (the Aboriginal population is increasing at almost six times the rate of the rest of the population), it is understandable that this area is one of the most important of our time, and growing numbers of Aboriginals and Canadians generally will seek advanced studies in Aboriginal areas. The University of Toronto has the experience and capacity to help in developing an Aboriginal Studies graduate program.

A dedicated graduate program within Aboriginal Studies/CAI is a high priority. We have concluded that there needs to be some restructuring of the undergraduate program to accommodate a graduate program, and that another Aboriginal faculty member is needed for it to be successful. The creation of this program is a high priority in the next five years.

3.4 Colleges
Aboriginal Studies/Centre for Aboriginal Initiatives is dedicated to help create Aboriginal studies courses on the Mississauga and Scarborough campuses as well as engage faculty and students on all campuses in research. It is also dedicated to helping faculty across the university understand Aboriginal ways of teaching and learning.

3.5 Engaging the broader community – globally and locally

ABS/CAI have strong ties to both local and global communities, through their work with local agencies, NCFNG, and the Anishnabek Nation. As above, there have been discussions with the Centre for Community Partnerships about developing service learning courses, something that several students do each year as independent study courses. Development of a program with Moose Factory, if successful, will further engage students with the broader community.

3.6 Space

When the space for CAI/ABS was allocated, work was to be done in two phases, the first being office space and the second space for classrooms, a computer lab, study carrels, a language lab, and a library. This second phase is urgently needed. All offices created in phase 1 are assigned to full-time faculty in Aboriginal Studies with an office for the Director and another for the Admin Assistant, and there is shared space for part-time instructors, teaching assistants, research associates and visiting fellows. As well a journal office is needed for *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, edited by Daniel Heath Justice, as well as an office for student leaders of the Ciimaan program, and an office for the University of Toronto Aboriginal Governance program. Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux shares her office with leaders of the *Canadian Roots* project. However, phase 2 has not yet been started. Phase two is essential. We are now using every possible space available and we do not have enough space to accommodate appropriately the many activities initiated by CAI (SAGE, Ciimaan, Canadian Roots, NCFNG partnership). The language programs are in need of the language learning labs and classroom space that are part of phase 2 in order to enhance the learning experience of the students. We are also looking to increase the number of visiting fellows and we do not now have sufficient space to accommodate them (there are currently three visiting scholars).

4. Plans for achieving priorities

a) with the current level of resources

- Continue to offer excellent undergraduate experience and document the need for graduate program and additional faculty and space to support this.
- Continue work begun on restructuring the curriculum through the language courses and through the introduction of science courses.
- Extend restructuring to other undergraduate courses
- Overall reconsideration of the undergraduate program to be able to introduce graduate program
- Increase retention and graduation rates, especially for Aboriginal Students through the extension of SAGE to the undergraduate level and other activities below
- Support NCFNG initiative, development of Anishnabek Nation initiative, support Ciimaan initiative in fund raising

We have made the following plans towards this end:

- Hold an Orientation week for Aboriginal Students, led by First Nations House and Native Students Association.
- Ensure students know they can access help with writing academic papers and personal issues through First Nations House writer in residence and the college writing labs.
- Continue to meet with Aboriginal students and faculty and other staff each quarter.
• Create a Mural Wall calendar advertising events at First Nations House, ABS, and CAI.
• Create a collection of essays about the undergraduate experience by current and past Aboriginal students – accessible to new students
• Develop ethics protocols for faculty and students about Aboriginal research and Aboriginal students.
• Make a case for required courses in Aboriginal Studies as a part of other programs (e.g. Canadian studies, history), and distribute a list of suggested readings from Aboriginal world views.
• Form an Elders Council, and create a “lumi” (face yourself) initiative to support students.
• Seek funding from the Jackman program and other sources to support activities, and recruit post-docs to help with our teaching and supervision goals.
• Continue to seek ways of leveraging outside funding to support initiatives.

There are still challenges that need to be worked through with being a unit on its own, in particular with understanding of the financial details, and gaining control over these is a high priority.

b) with modest additional financial resources

With modest additional resources we could do the above, plus create a vibrant graduate program. We would need:

1. One more FTE (A1)

   In 2008-2009, FAS negotiated with FSW for the joint ABS/FSW position to be moved to a full-time ABS (FAS) position. I have worked with David Cameron, Chair of Political Science, about using these funds for a partnership between ABS and Political Science, with an Aboriginal Studies faculty member having their tenure home in Political Science and teaching a half course at the graduate level in POL. Such an appointment would provide the undergraduate program with teaching strength that is badly needed and is also critical to the development of the graduate program. Funds for such a position were committed through the AIF to CAI, and maintaining this commitment of funds will allow the development of the graduate program quickly as well as ensuring that the undergraduate program will continue to flourish. Without this appointment, it will be very difficult to even offer a full undergraduate program as there is only one full-time ABS appointment, and it is extremely difficult to ensure the offering of the core courses with the teaching staff available.

2. Funds for space/renovations

   There are funds left in the AIF for phase 2 of the space that was committed through the AIF, and we have been informed that any additional costs for renovations and/or a move would be funded through these funds and the Faculty of Arts and Science.

   This Academic Plan was developed through widespread consultation with faculty, staff, and students involved in ABS/CAI, as well as with members of FNH and other departments involved with ABS/CAI.