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Academia is failing First Nations

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I recently attended a session at the University of New Brunswick titled "How the Mi'kmaq and Maliseet peoples are key to our future." As if this title was not offensive enough, it was billed as a "conversation to focus on the ways in which First Nations people contribute to and enrich all aspects of society, and the means by which First Nations can realize their full potential in New Brunswick, particularly through education."

Quite frankly, there is something deeply disturbing about the idea of wanting to awaken the potential of First Nations people without acknowledging and restoring what has been and continues to be stolen from them. For example, the theft of our lands which occurred in blatant violation of the Royal Proclamation continues to serve as the main source of our impoverishment and so-called undeveloped potential.

As purveyors of truth and knowledge, universities have a responsibility to teach this fact. As long as they fail to do so, they effectively stand against the one thing that has the greatest potential for enhancing the potential of First Nations people in this province - the restoration of our lands.

Not only have universities failed to teach this truth, but some elements within universities have also actively worked against it, i.e., some faculty have served regularly as expert witnesses against us, while at least one unit on campus has taken major funding from the province to assist the government in resisting our claims. Where are the voices from academia supporting us in our claims, if it is truly concerned about our potential?

Even though we have won several important cases in the Supreme Court pertaining to our treaty rights to natural resources, the N.B. government still refuses to recognize those rights and still arrests our people. Again, where are the voices from this university community if it is truly

concerned about our potential?

The theft of our form of life continues through education and its pressure on our people to assimilate. As long as our children are forced to attend schools conducted in the medium of English or French, with no option for an education in the medium of their mother-tongue, the destruction of our language and traditions will continue. If this university community cares about the potential of our people, it needs to cease teaching our future teachers to teach only in English or French; and it needs to support and assist us in achieving our human right to publicly-funded mother-tongue medium schooling.

As long as western economic values of individual entrepreneurship and corporate development are taught in business education programs for First Nations, it will constitute an assault on our most fundamental communal values.

As long as pan-Indian or invented traditions (such as the Medicine Wheel and the Concordat) are taught as our tradition, our own traditions will be displaced.

As long as provincial schools assume the right to teach our children our language, and culture (in English or French), they hijack our right and obligation to do so, and subject our children to errors, distortions and misinformation.

As long as our spirituality is treated as an academic subject in academia, it will constitute an inappropriate, offensive and unwarranted attack on our belief systems.

The theft of our oral traditions and practices compounds our impoverishment. Since Canadian copyright law allows non-natives to acquire ownership of our oral traditions, languages, and practices simply by collecting them, copyright in many aspects of our culture is now vested in non-natives, both individuals and governments. If academia is serious about developing the potential of First Nations, it would ensure that primary ownership of stolen traditions is returned to our people and that ethics protocols for research in First Nations specifically forbid the ongoing theft of First Nations' traditions under the provisions of Canadian copyright laws.

In short, this university community needs to speak out against the ongoing dispossession of our people, and cease serving as a vehicle for it. And it needs to cease participating in the ongoing theft and destruction of our languages, oral traditions and forms of life, before talking about "awakening our potential" in any other way.

Without our lands, resources, languages, and forms of life there can be no development of our potential, only continuing exploitation, injustice and impoverishment.

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