



UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN

College of Graduate
and Postdoctoral Studies

CGPS.USASK.CA



Telling the Story

Phase 4 ohpahotân | oohpaahotaan: The Gift Past, Present, and Future

Date: June 15, 2026



UNIVERSITY OF
SASKATCHEWAN

BE WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS



Introduction

We serve a community of 451 Indigenous scholars, enrolled in over 40 different disciplines across campus.

From certificates to master's to PhD to postdocs, these students often come to us later in life - many having established careers and families. These students are also joining us in person and remote. They are becoming professionals through entry-to-practice degrees or research trainees pursuing masters and PhDs.

Serving such a wide breadth of students provides unique challenges and creates a vivid tapestry of backgrounds and experiences to draw upon. We hope this report will share the story of how, guided by the gift of ohpahotân | oohpaahotaan, we are working to 'walk the walk' of allyship and decolonization leading to reconciliation, celebrating the gains and reflecting on the challenges in doing this important work.

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To tell the story of how CGPS is engaging with the gift, this report offers select examples of changes, initiatives and learning aligned with various calls to action and markers embedded within each of the seven commitments.

A MESSAGE FROM THE DEAN



I arrived at USask before the release of ohpahotân | oohpaahotaan.

At the time, my understanding was influenced by seminal writing by Adam Guadry and Danielle Lorenze “Indigenization as inclusion, reconciliation: navigating the difference visions for Indigenizing the Canadian Academy” (AlterNative 15(3):218, 2018) and the wisdom Adam had share with me during our time together at the University of Alberta (UALberta) and the various teachings I had received.

As I began to develop goals for CGPS in Indigenization, I was guided by the University Plan 2025, by the emerging CAGS (Re)conciliation Task Force Report (2022), and the TRC Calls to Action. To start to understand the context for graduate students at USask, I initiated monthly meetings with the VPIE, Jacqui Ottman, and we started to envision what we could do to better support Indigenous graduate students. We went on to speak with Jan Hare at the University of British Columbia (UBC) about the SAGE program. With the support of Dr. Ottman, I was able to connect with several faculty and students and I am very grateful for their sharing of their experiences of racism within USask. These conversations left a deep impression on my understanding the tension between the aspirations of USask to be at the forefront of Indigenization and decolonization with the stark reality of what several members of the community experienced.

I wanted to learn more about how things worked on the ground and formed the **CGPS Indigenous Student Supports Advisory Group**. Much gratitude to the participants Graham Joseph, Meika Taylor, Stryker Calvez and Simon Lambert for the time they spent sharing the needs of USask Indigenous graduate students and the opportunities to increase supports and services. From those early conversations, I resisted pressure to focus on recruitment and enrolment targets before I was satisfied that we provide a sufficient accessible environment for Indigenous students to thrive and it was clear there was much to do to get to that point. The launch of ohpahotân | oohpaahotaan provided focus to setting priorities for the college.

I strive to engage with training opportunities, sessions and literature that will further my understanding. I was fortunate to be part of first cohort of SLF Anti-Racism/Anti-Oppression training led by Verna St. Denis and Liz Duret. The work was tough, emotional and revealing. Through the experience, I gained a deeper grasp of racism and oppression and reaffirmed my commitments to lead with respect and continue the learning journey.

This report provided a meaningful opportunity to reflect on the progress we have made as individuals and a collective. CGPS leadership approached implementation of the gift from various sides. We made changes to representation within our governing bodies; we devoted time to learning together with our staff; we revised the CGPS Strategic Plan to emphasize commitments to Indigenization, Decolonization and Reconciliation and EDI. The relationship built with Dr. Ottman led to CGPS benefiting from the Oyateki Partnership, funded by the Mastercard Foundation and creating a lead position within the college. I believe that regularizing the position as a permanent CGPS-funded position is one of the most significant aspects of the efforts to support Indigenous graduate students.

I am very grateful to the team at CGPS for walking this journey together. There is so much more to do and change.

Dr. Debby Burshtyn
Dean, College of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies

SAFETY

Creating and realizing inviting, welcoming and safe spaces for Indigenous peoples, free from racism and oppression.

An early step to indicate the importance of improving our relationship with Indigenous graduate students, in Spring 2022 we released an update to the CGPS Plan 2025 to incorporate explicit commitments woven into the existing goals.

These included:

- **Increase Indigenous Recruitment and Retention** to reach parity with provincial demographics and broaden interest in a range of disciplines. (p. 10)
- **Increase efforts to decolonize graduate education** through anti-racism training for staff and faculty and structural changes that enable and validate Indigenous ways of knowing as scholarly output (p. 7).
- **Revise the CGPS Governance Structure for Indigenization and decolonization.** Guided by ohpahotân | oohpaahotaan and supported by OVPIE, we developed our college Indigenous strategy to provide access, mentorship, changes to structures and training for faculty and staff (p. 9).

Our implementation of ohpahotân | oohpaahotaan for CGPS to create a safe and welcoming space for Indigenous students had three stages of development to arrive at the way of communicating the Cousins brand and the suite of engagement activities: **Research, Community Connection & Listening, and Placemaking.**

Research

In work began by Kim Fraser-Saddleback (Indigenous Initiatives Coordinator, 2022-23), we reviewed what supports are provided to students and what barriers these programs are facing by looking at programming for Indigenous graduate students across post-secondary institutions.

Through this work, the SAGE program from UBC and Simon Fraser University became a model in which to build out our own graduate supports. We found that while the SAGE program has many advantages, it thrives when it receives designated coordination and financial support from the institution.

Community Connection & Listening

Ian Worme, Indigenous Initiatives Coordinator (2023 – 2024) connected CGPS with important players across campus, Saskatoon, and Indigenous communities and institutions. This work situated us in a network of support.

The next goal was to connect ourselves with students, listen to their concerns, and determine how we could be more adaptable and considerate. Ian gifted us with a nehiyawewin word to guide this work with students:

kiskêyimisowin [self-knowledge Cree]:

cultivating the knowledge of yourself, building identity, and elevating who you are,

Indigenous Graduate Leadership Circle (IGLC)

First formed in 2025, the IGLC amplifies and centers our Indigenous students' voices, centering the tenet of 'Nothing for us, without us'. This group meets quarterly with the current Indigenous Initiatives Coordinator, Aurora Wolfe. The meetings consist of deciding programming for the coming months, identifying challenges and oversights, and learning from an Elder. Students who complete three meetings receive a letter of commendation for their service from the Dean of CGPS.



Placemaking

Cousins Brand

To begin this stage of development, we started developing a brand. Creating a common ground for students to gather regardless of their background and academic focus.

Taken from a student group chat that was created in the Community Connection section (The Cousins Network), we created an identity for our Indigenous graduate students to gather under. Cousins reflects on the relationships that Indigenous peoples share, even though our students may undertake vastly different pathways - they share similar experiences and challenges while navigating graduate studies.

Cousins is not only an opportunity for CGPS to show up for our Indigenous graduate students but a **pathway** for them to show up for each other.



Our Cousins banner is designed to reflect the values of lifelong learning while drawing from Indigenous cultural principles of **kinship, interconnectedness, and shared growth**. Often, cousins are more than just extended family; they represent a support system rooted in collective responsibility, respect, and reciprocity.

The name Cousins honours this relational approach, recognizing that every Indigenous graduate student is part of a larger network of support, knowledge exchange, and mentorship. Through Cousins, we aim to create spaces where Indigenous students can foster academic and personal growth while connecting with peers equally committed to community and self-discovery.

Monthly Newsletter

The newsletter distributed to self-identified Indigenous graduate students centers Indigenous events on campus and reaffirms that graduate students are welcome there.

It was brought to CGPS' attention that Indigenous graduate students weren't sure if they were allowed to participate in Indigenous events on campus as they are usually marketed towards undergrads. This newsletter helps students stay connected with the many offerings on campus and integrates them deeper within the USask community.



Cousins Workshops

During outreach sessions, students mentioned that they want to make friends and build community with fellow graduate students but didn't enjoy the pressure of direct networking. Instead, we have brought in a 'busy hands' model that encourages students to make connections through cultural and artistic activities such as ribbon skirt making, basket weaving, beading, and tufting.

This approach exposes students to diverse cultural teachings they may have not previously had access to, while taking some of the pressure off social interaction. This format has resulted in a steadily growing group of students that regularly show up for these workshops and each other.



Outreach

Through the Cousins Outreach Events, we connect with young people by blending creativity, mentorship, and meaningful dialogue to spark academic curiosity and build community.

At the Indigenous Summer Institute's graduate studies workshop, high school students explored research through hands-on collage journaling, envisioning themselves as future scholars. Earlier in the season, Indigenous graduate students shared their personal journeys with undergraduates in the SURE Summer Scholars Program, fostering mentorship and inspiring confidence in the next generation of researchers. Each January, our students present their research to Indigenous Student Achievement Pathways (ISAP), highlighting the variety and breadth of ways students can approach graduate studies.

Workshops, info sessions & meet-ups

Cousins Workshops:

Stitching Stories: Quilting Sessions
Surprinting Workshop in the College of Law
Medicine Garden with Elder Roland Duquette
Ribbon Skirt Workshop with Marilyn Black
Red Willow Basket Weaving with Lyndon J. Linklater
Virtual Bead Hive: Beading Sessions

Cousins Info Sessions:

Indspire Funding Session
CGPS Funding Session
AES Info session

Cousins Meet-Ups:

Welcome Lunch: On-Campus
Welcome Lunch: Virtual
Visiting with Cousins: Mentorship with ISAP and SURE
COUSINS Virtual Meet Up
Family Movie Night
Shawn Wilson Research and Graduate Experience Panel
Holiday Hampers
Turkey Bingo
ISAP Mentorship Graduate Presentations



Marker: A deep understanding of the challenging realities experienced by many Indigenous peoples as a result of discriminatory laws and policies by non-Indigenous peoples on campus.



All graduate students are required to take a non-credit course in Academic Integrity and Ethics (GPS 960), followed by courses in Animal Research Ethics or Human Research Ethics if their research involves animals or human subjects. To date, the foundational course did not include any content on research with (or previously on) Indigenous peoples.

To be launched in Fall 2026, a revised version of GPS 960 includes consideration of ethics in research with Indigenous people with the goal that all students will appreciate the history of unethical research on Indigenous people and the responsibilities in doing research with Indigenous people.

As a first step to reflect on the internal policies that create systemic discrimination, CGPS took steps to increase Indigenous voices in policy making bodies and to provide training to those involved in reviewing and revising graduate policies that apply across the institution.

In 2022, the college bylaws were updated with significant changes to the constitution of faculty council and standing committees. Changes included expanding voting membership to include the GSA Vice President Indigenous Engagement and granting voting status to the Vice-Provost Indigenous Engagement, as well as revising committee terms of reference to require Indigenous and EDI expertise in policy development and decision-making.

The Dean and Associate Dean participate in nearly all committees, supporting efforts to address bias, advance decolonization, and ensure alignment with institutional priorities.

Onboarding and training for committee members—particularly within Awards and Scholarships and Graduate Academic Affairs—were initially introduced with support from Human Resources. As faculty have since received broader EDI-related training through granting agencies and collective agreement requirements, this approach has evolved to include a standing agenda item at the first meeting each year, where committee chairs reinforce the importance of addressing bias and strengthening policies within their specific contexts. Ongoing leadership attention remains essential to maintaining awareness, supporting chairs, and fostering safe, inclusive decision-making environments that address historical inequities.

Marker: Increase the number of educational/training resources and opportunities focused on racism and oppression.



To support the development of reconciliation knowledge among CGPS staff, a cohort participated in the Four Seasons of Reconciliation course, facilitated by Kim Fraser-Saddleback (2022–23). While the program was well received, its cohort-based, discussion-focused format limits its suitability for ongoing training of smaller numbers of new staff; in the interim, new employees are directed to the core video materials available through the University Library.

Further, in 2022–23, HR leads Cara Banks and Jarett Danyluk provided antiR-antiO training for staff. All staff were required to take part in these 2.5 hour workshops. Again, the workshops were well-received and created baseline knowledge for the staff as a whole. Finding ways to have individual new staff (1–2 per year) access such training at the institutional level when they join would be appreciated.

CGPS staff also participated in educational activities throughout the 2025–26 year. For Orange Shirt Day, we engaged with ‘150 Acts of Reconciliation for Canada’s 150th’ by Crystal Fraser and Sara Komarnisky to learn how we can personally instigate change and take responsibility for our role in reconciliation. For Red Dress Day, we partnered with OVPIE to bring ‘Voices in the Wind’, an interactive installation, to campus where all community members were invited to paint a bell in remembrance of MMIWLG2S+. This initiative had over 250 participants and the final product was installed for a month outside of Gordon Oakes Red Bear Student Centre.

Future Goals:

Learning and Support

- Expand ongoing learning opportunities for CGPS staff
- Increase focus on graduate administrators and graduate chairs in colleges and schools
- Explore training for new faculty, with an emphasis on inclusive excellence in mentorship
- Maintain faculty-wide development within academic units

Marker: Increase in the number of policies and practices that are congruent with Universities Canada and the University of Saskatchewan’s Equity, Diversity and Inclusion principles.



While CGPS’ efforts to implement the gift are distinct from more general EDI work, the college’s major EDI policy work occurred in a parallel time frame and with special attention to the needs of Indigenous graduate students.

In 2021, CGPS undertook a project to review and revise all the academic policies and procedures of the college with an EDI lens under the leadership of the Associate Dean. This work involved a working group that led a series of focus groups to gain student perspectives, including two Indigenous student groupings. Student input drove drafting of the declaration of the [CGPS commitments to EDI](#) that was subsequently endorsed by CGPS Faculty Council.

The Associate Dean prioritized updates to key policies that were identified by students as problematic. Graduate academic policies were revised to remove stayed and ominous language that perpetuated a culture of fear for students, to move towards a student-centered approach to policies and procedures. Updated policies included program leaves, program extensions and, more recently, the introduction of parental leave funding with CGPS scholarships. Additionally, CGPS introduced **holistic admissions** to be overt about how life experiences may be factored into admissions, shifting away from admission on probation, as well as terminology such as qualifying exams in doctoral work that students perceive as particularly pejorative.

While these changes were advanced within an EDI framework, particular attention was given to benefits for Indigenous students. This reflects guidance shared by Elders, who emphasized that the principle of *ohpahotân* is intended to benefit all—recognizing that **what supports Indigenous students also strengthens outcomes for other equity-deserving groups**.

In May 2026, **updates to thesis and dissertation formatting guidelines** clarified acceptance of diverse forms of knowledge representation beyond traditional formats, including the appropriate use of languages other than English.

WELLNESS

Integrating wholistic healing supports for the University's Indigenous community, including students, staff, faculty and leaders



Marker: Improvement in the experiences and efficacy of new Indigenous students, staff, faculty and leaders - experiences that foster a strong sense of belonging.



With rising costs of groceries, food insecurity has been identified as a major stressor for Indigenous graduate students. Through our Holiday Hampers program, we have fed over 60 students and their families over the past two years. This has included our remote students, some as far away as Baffin Island.

Through conversations with the wider campus, Gordon Martel from the College of Education told us that Indigenous graduate students are often "One event away from dropping out of their studies". This is due to the lack of support systems and increased challenges that Indigenous students face. Our Cousins meet-ups and workshops aim to position CGPS as an additional resource in increasing student success but also have an underlying goal of establishing a deeper sense of community among students. This in turn develops additional safety nets for students facing hardships by establishing social and professional networks.

Students are often drawn to workshops because they are interested in cultural learning (i.e. basket weaving, ribbon skirt making, picking medicines), which is another way we holistically support their development, but strengthening community underlines this work.

CGPS and USask Indigenous graduate students had the opportunity to participate in research led by Indigenous scholars Dr. Margaret Kovach, Dr. Monty Montgomery, Dr. Shawn Wilson, and PhD Candidate Lindsay DuPré from UBC. Their study, Indigenous Graduate Student Support Experiences (Western Canada), explores how Indigenous-specific graduate student supports in Saskatchewan and Alberta contribute to student success, degree completion, and aspirations toward academic careers. The research included surveys and focus groups with current and former Indigenous graduate students from universities across Western Canada.

As part of their visit, there was the panel discussion, Coming to Know Indigenous Research in the University, featuring Drs. Kovach, Montgomery, and Wilson. The discussion highlighted the growing impact of Indigenous research methodologies and explored how universities can better support Indigenous scholars and create environments where Indigenous research can thrive. Indigenous graduate students were able to participate in focus groups and the survey and we are looking forward to the research team's return visit to share their findings.



STEWARDSHIP Preserving and amplifying Indigenous cultures, language and protocol learnings

In addition to grounding all formal meetings with a land acknowledgement, each year we invite an Elder or Knowledge Keeper to start off the governance cycle at Graduate Faculty Council in a good way. Each time, different important messages are shared that ground the work of the Council for the year. Similarly, other major events are started in a similar way.

Marker: Increase in the number of public presentations, performances and experiential cultural and language learning opportunities promoting Indigenous histories, traditions and knowledges - Indigenous ways of being, doing and knowing.



In an attempt to make Indigenous experience come alive for the graduate administrative support community, CGPS hosted a Grad HUB Living Library event in May 2024. The event featured six living books - Elder Roland Duquette, Derek Rope, Gordon Martell (PhD), Kayla Benoit (MSc), Karla Jessen Williamson (PhD), and Valerie Arnault-Peltier. The living books hosted individual stations where they could share their stories, experiences, and perspectives with 'readers' from the USask community.

While the event served as an excellent learning opportunity, engagement was disappointing. We had little participant turn-out, with most participants coming from within CGPS as well as a few graduate administrators.

Marker: Growth in the number of Indigenous and non-Indigenous student graduates across all programs with an appreciation for, and understanding of, Indigenous histories and current Indigenous realities in Canada.



Four Seasons of Reconciliation - A facilitated course for graduate students

CGPS provides funding to Gwenna Moss Centre for Teaching and Learning (GMCTL) through an MOA that includes the commitment for GMCTL to offer the Four Seasons of Reconciliation course. First offered in 2021, it is a Canvas-based course designed to introduce learners to Indigenous histories, contemporary realities and pathways toward reconciliation, aligned with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action. The content uses the Four Seasons of Reconciliation resource subscribed to in collaboration with the University Library. Cohorts of students participate with asynchronous engagement with material and synchronous online discussion. Initially, the course was offered all three terms and with more than 200 students on the waiting list at one time, suggesting strong interest. Over the years registrations waned, and the offering has been reduced to once per year. Through an oversight, it was missed in 2025-26 and will return Fall 2026-27.

Several factors may have limited interest after the initial demand, including the advent of similar offerings through at least one college, changes in students' interest in online offerings post-pandemic and less effective promotion of the course.

The Future of Four Seasons

GMCTL will be running two sessions for graduate students in Fall 2026. These cohorts will be promoted through our Grad HUB, and various orientations across campus. We are hoping to fill between 60-80 spots this year.

This course provides an important opportunity for non-Indigenous students to engage significantly with the histories; but it is limited in the number of students that can be reached being ~5%/year. Alternate means to ensure all graduate students are offered baseline exposure and education need to be developed and to go deeper into anti-racism/anti-oppression education.

In Spring 2026, the GSA Vice President Indigenous (2025–26) and the GSA President raised concerns about how best to orient new international students to Canada's colonial history, including the experiences of Indigenous peoples, reconciliation, and the meaning of land acknowledgements. While programs like Building Bridges offer valuable opportunities for intercultural learning, participation is voluntary and does not ensure all incoming international graduate students receive this foundational context.

To begin to address this gap, CGPS will review the various onboarding materials provided to all new graduate students to determine where they can provide or point to resources that offer explanation.



We have already identified a gap in the CGPS web-based onboarding platform, the Grad HUB, to be worked on this summer. There is a great opportunity to incorporate an introduction to land acknowledgements, Indigenization and reconciliation at USask in the Arrival section and point to ohpahotân/ooohpaahotaan and other campus websites for more information, including potentially incorporating it into the Canvas modules housed within the Grad HUB Lab.

This project will be led by the CGPS Indigenous Engagement Coordinator.

REPRESENTATION Uplifting Indigenous peoples in University spaces and places

Calls to Action

- Promoting Indigenous storytelling
- Celebrating the success of Indigenous peoples through respectful dedications, remembrances and events across the University

Celebrating Indigenous Scholars Series

Three times a year, CGPS calls for nominations from supervisors and departments to feature an Indigenous graduate student and the incredible work they are doing. Through this initiative, we have celebrated 10 of our students and continue to select a new student to feature quarterly. This highlights the achievements and resilience of our students while also showcasing the many pathways to and through graduate studies.

Celebrating Indigenous Scholars: Laila Valila



As a graduate student at the Johnson Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy and the VP Indigenous Engagement for the Graduate Students Association, Laila Valila is already making her mark.

Her connection to community runs deep, and it's shaped both her academic path and her leadership journey. [Learn more.](#)

Marker: Increase in the number of physical spaces that recognize Indigenous peoples, cultures and practices, demonstrating an interconnected and respectful community.



In 2022, CGPS introduced Indigenous art into the main reception area and the dean's office. Then, in 2025, the Indigenous Initiatives Coordinator, led Stitching Stories, a participatory culturally grounded activity to create a lasting visual display representing the Indigenous graduate students at USask (see Creation section for more details).

Additionally, one of the display cases outside CGPS' main office is regularly updated with displays to highlight key dates and seasons, including Orange Shirt Day, Red Dress Day, Pride Month, and more.

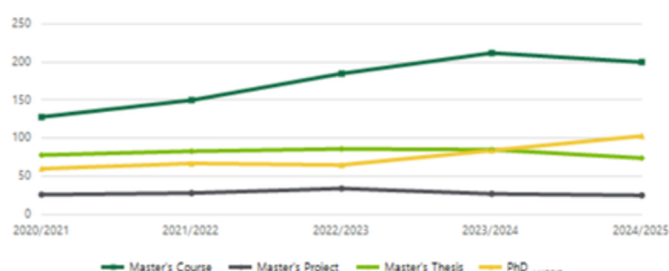
Marker: Success in attracting and retaining Indigenous students.



There has been a steady increase in self-declared Indigenous student enrolment particularly in course-based masters programs and more recently in PhD. The increases in enrolment is spread among various programs/colleges and we do not see the expected decrease due to the known impact of the pandemic felt especially by Indigenous students from remote communities and working with communities where access was difficult.

New and expanding health professional programs will bring in additional Indigenous students (MPAS, OT, SLP).

Indigenous Enrolment by Degree Type



Fostering relationships that create pathways to graduate school

The oýateki [from oyate (leaving no one behind) Dakota] Partnership is a collaboration of educational institutes with goals to change the lives of Indigenous youth for the better. The oýateki Partnership connects USask, the Gabriel Dumont Institute and SIIT. Funded by the Mastercard Foundation, this collaboration has allowed cross institutional collaborations that serve Indigenous youth from high school to employment.

External funding provides valuable support for Indigenous programming, but reliance on short-term (grant-based) funding creates challenges for sustainability. Positions tied to grants must end when funding expires, limiting recruitment, increasing turnover, and undermining the perceived importance of roles that often require Indigenous expertise. This was evident in the initial Indigenous Initiatives Specialist position under the oýateki project and informed the Dean's decision to establish a permanent role within CGPS's operating budget. This commitment was recognized by Indigenous graduate students as a meaningful and symbolic investment in Indigenization and student support.

The Indigenous Initiatives Coordinator in CGPS has developed a close relationship with Indigenous Student Achievement Pathways (ISAP) and Society for Undergraduate Research Experience (SURE), connecting them with mentorship opportunities with Indigenous Graduate Students and highlighting different possibilities and pathways for graduate studies.

RIGHT RELATIONS Supporting active and respectful partnerships and engagement with Indigenous peoples - ethical and relational spaces

Calls to Action

- Adapting institutional protocols and foundational documents to recognize and reward work, service

Marker: Increase confidence in sharing of Indigenous information (e.g. self-identification) with University groups that support Indigenous peoples.



Access to lists is a significant issue in communicating with Indigenous students. Clearly, the landscape has changed since the formation of ohpahotân/oohpaahotaan and sensitivity for only verifiable Indigenous people to hold spaces and resources intended for Indigenous people is paramount. That said, there is a need for internal collaboration and the ability to share appropriately is critical to responding to the needs of students.

There is a challenge to reconcile in that applicants to CGPS as well as current students are able to self-identify as Indigenous and this is the data used to report on Indigenous enrolment. There is no reporting available to CGPS for “verified” Indigenous students.

Marker: Ensuring proper protocol training is a part of all research involving Indigenous peoples; respecting that traditional ceremony may be a part of the Indigenous research process.



While CGPS did not establish standards that go beyond the established guidelines, we are endeavoring to ensure all graduate students are exposed to and gain some understanding of the standards and guidelines irrespective of whether they engage in research with Indigenous people.

To this end, in 2026 a revision to a required course for all graduate students, GPS 960 – Academic Integrity and Ethics, includes information to build the awareness of the frameworks and intended that with the awareness, students will appreciate the history of research done on instead with Indigenous peoples and be in a position to question past research they encounter through their studies.

Calls to Action

- Instituting mechanisms that will provide an open, transparent and welcoming bridge for Indigenous peoples into the Universities ecosystem

Alternative Application Avenues

In 2024, CGPS introduced holistic admission into our application procedures to accept students not exclusively on their academic background and performance, but also taking into consideration 'Relevant life experience, including educational, learning, and cultural background, indicators of leadership ability/preparation, extracurricular and/or community involvement.' (CGPS Policy 2.1).

Increasing Awards and Financial Supports for Indigenous Graduate Students

We hear often of the financial pressures faced by Indigenous students and the more limited financial band support for First Nations Students for graduate studies. To address this profound need, CGPS identified financial support for Indigenous students as its sole priority in the comprehensive campaign, Be What the World Needs. We are grateful for the one award we received centrally and we are aware several new awards that are based within colleges placed Indigenous students as a priority.

For 2024-25, we requested and received an additional \$100,000/year in institutional graduate support to set up a new Indigenous Recruitment Award. Ten (10) annual entrance awards of \$10,000 each are awarded. Departments can nominate both master's and PhD students entering a new program of study in a thesis-based USask program.

Indigenous Graduate Leadership Scholarship

The Indigenous Graduate Leadership Scholarship (IGLS) is aimed towards Indigenous students who have taken an active role of leadership within their community. Master's and PhD students are eligible to receive \$20,000 (for up to 2 years) and \$25,000 (for up to 4 years) respectively. Based on student input, the application for this award has been changed from requiring a video entry to allowing students to submit a video entry in place of a written statement. This was to reduce the extra work we were requiring of only Indigenous students and to make the adjudication of the award more equitable.

New Entrance Scholarship: William R. Dixon Indigenous Graduate Scholarship

Two (2) annual entrance awards of approximately \$10,000 each are awarded. Open to Indigenous graduate students entering a graduate program at USask.

Open to both master's and doctoral students with an entrance average of 80% or more.



Focus on Positioning Indigenous Graduate Students for Tri-Agency Awards

Tri-Agency is the umbrella term used to describe the three Canadian government scholarship funding agencies – CIHR, NSERC, and SSHRC.

Federal agencies have introduced a fast-track process for Indigenous doctoral scholarship applicants, allowing institutions to submit applications from meritorious Indigenous applicants beyond their quotas and CGPS and adjudicators are committed to ensuring applicants receive support in making sure applicants submit the best quality applications.

Beginning in 2026, we are creating a cohort for students interested in Tri-Agency funding. This group will meet bi-weekly to work on applications, follow a timeline, and receive mentorship on how to craft the best possible package.

Challenges:

While guaranteed minimum funding for PhD students and new recruitment scholarships establish an important baseline, significant gaps remain at the master's level. Funding is particularly limited for course-based and professional entry-to-practice programs—where many Indigenous students are enrolled—highlighting a shared responsibility with colleges and schools to improve access and support.

CREATION Acknowledging, resourcing and investing in wise practices and activities - conjuring the creative spirit that inspires innovation.

Stitching Stories

Stitching Stories revolves around the creation of a paper piece patchwork quilt. Each hexagon represents an Indigenous graduate student made from fabric which reflects their college and/or department. Instead of a square or rectangle, this quilt is a hexagon, inspired by the holistic nature of the project and the Indigenous communities of this region.

Through collaborative making, participants had the opportunity to connect with community and learn a new skill. Quilting hives were held weekly between November 2024 - March 2025 with the final quilt being unveiled and displayed for Indigenous Achievement Week. The quilting hives were an opportunity to take a breath, make new friends, and learn from each other during the colder months. Held in Gordon Oakes Redbear Student Centre and primarily advertised to Indigenous graduate students, all were welcome to attend.

The final quilt was framed and mounted outside the CGPS offices in a busy thoroughfare. This highlights the ever-growing Indigenous graduate student body and our commitment to showing them that they belong.



What worked?

The consistent, drop-in nature of the project made it easy for people to participate within their own capacities. Grad students, undergrads, faculty, staff, and community members took part in project and were excited about it. It created a space for kinship, and challenged gender roles as young men participated - eager to learn how to sew and gain a new skill. Students were always happy to be fed and this was central to creating a collaborative environment.

One example of the impact of the project was represented by a future grad student who had deferred for a year because she just had a baby, joined us and brought in her 4-month-old. While she ate, participants gladly held and entertained her child for her. There was a tangible positive shift due to the presence of a child

Marker: Increase in the number of Indigenous storytelling about activities and accomplishments across varied platforms.



Honouring, celebrating and elevating Indigenous Ways of Knowing

The following stories illustrate how CGPS has made efforts to increase flexibility for graduate students to demonstrate their thesis research, regularize Indigenous ways of knowing, and elevate the achievements of Indigenous scholars at USask in recent years.

2025 marked a stellar accomplishment for [Jaris Swidrovich who won the Governor General Gold Medal](#) for USask and the [CAGS-ProQuest National Dissertation award](#) – the first ever national dissertation award for USask.



An urban Elder's journey: The role of tradition, community, and education

Young is paskwaw-nehiyaw/Plains Cree from Onion Lake Cree Nation, Treaty 6 Territory. While growing up, Young absorbed traditional knowledge the way many Indigenous children do: by watching.

While developing her PhD and research plan, Young knew that the conventional approach to a dissertation defence wouldn't suit her approach to the project.

"I wanted it to be a Conversation, not a defence, because in Cree language, defence is a position you take to fight back, and I didn't want that. I felt everybody in the Circle had something to share. The Sharing Circle format made it easier for me to process the questions and the sharing that each person did. I wanted to be in community. I wanted the artwork to be in the community, so I took it out of the institution, and anyone could come."

Young and Pushor proposed a plan to CGPS to ensure that the college and her committee could accommodate Young's unique approach to her dissertation.

[Learn more.](#)

"We contacted (Dean) Debby Burshtyn, and (former Associate Dean) Ryan Walker and asked if we could meet with them and propose this process for Linda," said Pushor, "[Linda and I] don't think we would have been able to do it without them. They made all the difference to us in terms of understanding the intention and what Indigenizing actually meant, what it looked like. They were integral."

Young's PhD dissertation included 10 videos, four bookworks, a glossary of terms, and a gallery show. The videos explored concepts such as the changing role of Elders, cultural trauma, reparations, and lived reconciliation in schools. Each Conversation was connected to and inspired by an original art piece Young created, using a variety of artistic mediums to tell a story.



In 2022, Chris Scribe (PhD) defended his dissertation, [kihtheyhayak pihkswestamawnan: Wisdom Keepers Will Speak for Us](#). His dissertation is premised around Indigenous leadership and learning. He worked with the University of Saskatchewan Human Ethics board to redesign what constitutes relational ethics and sources of knowledge for what traditionally has constituted a "literature review." His work is premised on the knowledge of traditional Elders and how that knowledge is "owned", "(re)-presented" and granted source credit.

Chris' dissertation is framed through a creative Indigenous cosmology that privileges orality, experiential learning, and artistic expression. Rather than offering a written work that privileges the language of the colonizer, his work is based in an oral and video docu-story that incorporates cultural expression and symbology. In this journey, Chris articulates through dance, artistic expression, and kinship the ways in which ancestral knowledge of leadership and learning is enacted, along with how he positions himself in his responsibilities to the ancestors, to the land, and to this knowledge. His work maintains academic standards of rigour but is organized in a non-traditional format.

Linda Young and Chris Scribe's dissertations were featured in stories to share with the graduate community.

THE ROAD AHEAD

To date, the focus of CGPS has been on direct support to students and changes to the policies and practices of the college to create a more inclusive environment. The area that has not been given much attention is to work with academic units in a systematic way to Indigenize programs and the research environments. USask has clear leaders in this work at the graduate level in Education, Health and Sustainability, and there is much that can be shared across graduate programs. There is an opportunity to tap into the leaders of those programs to facilitate and encourage programs that may not yet see the ways in which their curriculum could incorporate Indigenous knowledges and histories – from physics to philosophy. This will require focused effort from everyone and needs guidance from Indigenous scholars. The more the institution provides grounding for faculty and staff, so will grow the readiness to take this on.

We have students joining us from across the world in graduate studies. Many of these students are coming to USask with little to no Indigenous context. A required learning credit would not only help graduate students directly by giving them insight into Indigenous histories, cultures, and traditions, but would also help our Indigenous undergraduate students as graduate students are often given the opportunity to teach undergraduate classes.



Ideas to Contemplate

- **Elder Access:** Providing opportunities for graduate students to connect with elders as spiritual, emotional, and academic support.
- **Language Access:** Providing students with a language learning stipend to pursue classes in their chosen Indigenous Language.
- **Blanketing PhD Graduates:** Gifting Indigenous PhD graduates starblankets as recognition for their dedication and hard work. Implementing this at convocation where our elders are given the opportunity to take part in the ceremony.
- **Increased Cultural Awareness Staff Training:** Moving forward, we are committing to yearly staff Indigenous learning. While we keep decolonization in mind during all stages of planning, setting aside time to reflect and learn will benefit our staff and our students.
- **Increased Focus on Reflection:** Giving our Indigenous student body the option to comment on how we are serving them through short surveys and sharing circles
- **Develop Specialized Professional Development Offerings:** to respond to request from Indigenous Graduate Student Leadership Circle in areas such as leadership.

FINAL THOUGHTS

ohpahotan I oohpaahotaan gave us a framework on how to listen to our students, how to forefront their needs, and how to deconstruct and rethink structures that weren't serving us. We are challenging our notions of research and committing to supporting our programs to create safe and accountable environments for Indigenous learners and also educate the graduate community.

This change has allowed us to reevaluate how we formalize the synthesis of knowledge, creating a space where students are allowed to think beyond a classic written thesis format. This in turn makes our programs more robust as it increases the types of knowledge that we champion and develop. It also increases access to the work that is being produced as students have the opportunity to create work that can be engaged outside of academia, bringing ideas to communities beyond the university. Not only Indigenous students benefit from this change, but all students.

We look forward to the results of Indigenous Graduate Student Support Experiences study to use as a reflective tool, and for future programming and planning considerations. Additionally, we are in the process of creating a cross-institutional committee with participating Universities (University of Saskatchewan, University of Regina, University of Alberta, and University of Calgary, UBC, and Simon Fraser University) to connect individuals working specifically to support Indigenous Graduate Students in a community of practice. We continue to take personal interest and responsibility in the success of our Indigenous graduate students. We commit to continuing the process of learning and unlearning that is required for reconciliation as a college and as individuals.

BE WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS



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