

Responding to ohpahotân | oohpaahotaan:

The College of Law's Journey in Reconciliation, Student Success and Relationship Building

On August 20, 2021, the University of Saskatchewan was formally gifted with ohpahotân | oohpaahotaan ("let's fly up together"), the institution's Indigenous strategy. This marked a historic moment for both the University of Saskatchewan and post-secondary education across Canada, as it represented the first Indigenous strategy at a Canadian U15 research university created solely by Indigenous peoples. More than a strategic document, ohpahotân | oohpaahotaan serves as a call to action and a shared commitment to reconciliation, ethical space, relational accountability, and institutional transformation across all areas of the university, including the College of Law.

This report shares the ongoing story of the College's journey in legal education and engagement. Through reflections on programs, policies, relationships, and student experiences, it highlights how the College continues to respond to the spirit and intent of ohpahotân | oohpaahotaan. These contributions reflect not only institutional change, but also the lived experiences of students, faculty, staff, Elders, Knowledge Keepers, alumni, and community partners who are part of this work.

We begin by acknowledging the challenges and opportunities that continue to shape the College of Law. It then highlights key initiatives, student and community successes, and emerging practices that demonstrate growth in legal education and cultural inclusion. Future directions and planned initiatives are also explored as part of the College's ongoing commitment to relationship building, student success, and meaningful reconciliation.

Guided by the seven commitments of ohpahotân | oohpaahotaan, this report reflects a process of learning, listening, and accountability. It concludes by considering both the progress made and the work that continues as the College moves forward together in a good way.

Historical Barriers and Response in Indigenous Legal Education

The story of Indigenous legal education in Canada is shaped by longstanding systemic barriers that limited Indigenous participation in the legal profession and post-secondary institutions. For generations, Indigenous peoples faced exclusion from legal education through the ongoing impacts of settler colonialism, including discriminatory policies under the *Indian Act*. Enfranchisement provisions and restrictions on citizenship created significant barriers to entering the legal profession, while the role of Canadian law in

advancing colonial systems contributed to deep mistrust and alienation from legal institutions more broadly.

Within this national context, the College of Law recognized early on the need to respond to Indigenous underrepresentation in the legal profession. At the time, Indigenous students remained significantly underrepresented in Canadian law schools, and few Indigenous lawyers were being called to the bar across the country. These realities reflected not only barriers to admission, but also broader gaps in culturally supportive programming, mentorship, and pathways into legal education and the profession.

There was also growing recognition that legal research and scholarship often failed to respond to the lived realities, priorities, and legal needs of Indigenous peoples and communities. This highlighted the need for approaches to legal education that were more inclusive of Indigenous perspectives, legal traditions, and ways of knowing.

These challenges demonstrated the importance of broader institutional commitments to Indigenous inclusion, cultural safety, and reconciliation. In response, the Indigenous Law Centre (ILC) emerged as an important source of advocacy, support, and innovation within the university community. Initially operating outside of the College of Law and largely independent in structure, the ILC created space for Indigenous-focused legal education, research, and student support during a time when such initiatives were limited within Canadian legal institutions.

Over time, the relationship between the ILC and the College of Law grew stronger and more integrated. The ILC increasingly became part of the College's programming, student supports, and day-to-day operations, helping build a sense of community and belonging for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students alike. Alongside its research and academic work, the ILC became an important relational and cultural space grounded in Indigenous perspectives and community connection.

At the same time, the work has not been without challenges. Over the past decade, the ILC has experienced shifts in staff and leadership, as well as a period of reduced activity during the COVID-19 pandemic. These moments have highlighted the importance of sustained leadership, institutional commitment, and ongoing investment in Indigenous legal education and student support.

Despite these challenges, the continued rebuilding and strengthening of the ILC shows an ongoing commitment to creating meaningful pathways for Indigenous students within legal education.

Reimagining Legal Education Through Truth and Reconciliation

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) Final Report was released in 2015. This was a turning point for legal education in Canada. Through its Calls to Action, the TRC asked legal institutions to examine the role of Canadian law and the legal profession in settler colonialism and in harm experienced by Indigenous peoples. For law schools, this required changes to how law is taught and how students are prepared for practice.

Call to Action #28 asked all Canadian law schools to include mandatory education on:

- Indigenous law
- Residential schools
- Treaties
- The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
- Intercultural competency
- Anti-racism

In response, the College of Law began changes to its curriculum to include more Indigenous content and address gaps in legal education. One major change was the creation of Kwayeskastasowin, a mandatory first-year course on Indigenous peoples and the law. The College also required students to take at least one upper-year elective focused on Indigenous legal issues. These changes were meant to make Indigenous content part of the core law program.

Experience in the implementation of these courses made it clear how challenging the TRC's prescriptions for legal education can be, including:

- Facilitating understanding of settler colonial history in Canada
- Engaging with Indigenous legal traditions
- Expanding understanding of how Canadian law affects Indigenous peoples in various other areas of law
- Teaching skills such as intercultural communication, anti-racism, human rights, and conflict resolution

While Kwayeskastasowin addressed some of these areas, it could not meet the full scope of the TRC Calls to Action on its own. Requiring students to complete one upper year course focused on Indigenous legal issues helped expand their understanding of how Canadian law affects Indigenous peoples, but it did not allow for a consistent baseline for all graduates beyond Kwayeskastasowin. The range of knowledge and skills required could not be fully covered in one course.

These limits showed the need for broader change at the institutional level. Over time, this led to further work on Indigenous strategies, more programming, and efforts to include

Indigenous knowledge, perspectives, and legal traditions across the curriculum and learning environment.

Learning, Growth, and Institutional Development in Practice

As the College of Law strengthened its commitment to Indigenous legal education and reconciliation, it also encountered moments of tension and resistance that reflected broader societal conversations about equity, inclusion, and institutional change. These experiences demonstrated that reconciliation within legal education requires ongoing reflection, accountability, and a willingness to engage in difficult conversations.

The introduction of a mandatory course on Indigenous peoples and the law marked an important step in integrating Indigenous perspectives into legal education. However, the course also generated resistance from some students, with Indigenous faculty members often carrying the burden of navigating challenging classroom dynamics. Dr. Jaime Lavallee's published reflection, "How To Be Biased in the Classroom: Kwayeskastasowin - Setting Things Right?" (2022), highlighted the realities of teaching Indigenous legal content within environments where reconciliation efforts were sometimes questioned or misunderstood.

At times, debates surrounding Indigenous content and accommodations created tension within the student body and reflected broader political discussions regarding equity initiatives in post-secondary education. Long standing accommodation policies intended to support substantive equality for Indigenous students also faced public criticism, contributing to difficult and emotionally taxing experiences for some Indigenous students and faculty members.

Throughout these challenges, the Indigenous Law Centre (ILC) continued to serve as an important source of support, cultural connection, and community. Access to the College's cultural advisors, ceremonies, workshops, and student-focused programming helped create culturally grounded spaces that supported student wellbeing and belonging.

The College also continued efforts to integrate Indigenous perspectives into both curriculum and learning environments. One visible example is *Every Dot a Prayer for the Saskatchewan Rivers* (2022), a commissioned work by Métis artist Christi Belcourt displayed in the Law Library. The piece reflects Métis law and symbolizes the College's commitment to respectful engagement with Indigenous legal traditions.

The College's leadership in Indigenous legal education also extended nationally through the Nunavut Law Program in Iqaluit from 2017 to 2021, which contributed to a significant increase in Inuit lawyers.

While meaningful progress has been made, the College recognizes that this work remains ongoing. Moving beyond isolated initiatives toward sustained, institution-wide change

continues to be an important priority as the College works to deepen the integration of Indigenous knowledge, law, and culturally safe practices throughout legal education.

Building Legal Education Through Systems Change and Student Experience

The following initiatives reflect a response with system-level changes within the College of Law that affect curriculum, student requirements, institutional supports, and community-based learning. Together, they show how Indigenous perspectives, responsibilities, and relationships are being built into the structure of legal education at the College of Law rather than treated as separate or optional components.

- Indigenous legal issues, histories, and perspectives are now part of the core curriculum for all students. All first-year students complete a required course on Indigenous peoples and the law, as well as mandatory training in anti-racism and human rights. Students learn about Treaties, Indigenous legal traditions, residential schools, settler colonialism, Indigenous–Crown relations, and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.
- Indigenous content and competencies have been created across upper-year studies. All students must complete at least one upper-year course in Aboriginal law, with a standardized requirement being introduced in Fall 2026 to align with national legal education standards. Students can also take additional courses focused on Indigenous governance, economic development, child protection, and criminal justice.
- The College has expanded experiential and community-based learning opportunities that connect legal education with Indigenous communities and ways of knowing. This includes a new land-based learning course and the Indigenous Child Protection Practicum, which supports partnerships with communities and applied learning in Indigenous child welfare practice through the terms of an MOU with the FSIN. Students may also participate in the Kawaskimhon National Aboriginal Moot to develop skills in culturally responsive advocacy and consensus-based negotiation
- Institutional supports for Indigenous teaching, learning, and community connection have also been strengthened. The College has had one long-standing Cultural Advisor/Elder position and recently added a second position with dedicated spaces for ceremony, gathering, and Indigenous ways of knowing, including an Elder’s room, ceremony room, medicine garden, and tipi grounds. Elders, Indigenous leaders, and legal professionals are also directly involved in student learning and support.

These changes are supported through ongoing institutional leadership and accountability. The Indigenous Engagement Committee provides oversight and coordination to help ensure these reforms are sustained and continue to shape the direction of the College.

We would also like to highlight success stories involving our students and staff:

- Amy Constant, an upper-year Indigenous law student (James Smith Cree Nation), served as President of the College of Law's Indigenous Law Students Association (ILSA) and as a volunteer through Pro Bono Students Canada, among other contributions to our College of Law community. In recognition, she received a 2025 USask Indigenous Achievement Award for leadership.
- Jaylynn Stonechild, another upper-year Indigenous law student (Muscowpetung Saulteaux Nation), served on LSA's executive and contributed to the ILC and the College of Law community in other ways, earning her recognition through a 2026 USask Indigenous Achievement Award for leadership.
- Most graduates of the Nunavut Law Program have completed their articles and are now practicing law in Nunavut. Several others play important roles in the Government of Nunavut or Inuit organizations.
- The ILC's Elders/Cultural Advisors (Joseph Naytowhow and Julie Pitzel) have ensured ceremony, protocol, and cultural safety are integrated into the College of Law's programming. Moreover, they have strengthened the ILC's role as a community hub on campus through work they have done in collaborations across campus, such as through the kihci-okāwimāw askiy (Great Mother Earth) Knowledge Centre housed in the College of Agriculture and Bioresources.

Pathways Forward: Land, Governance, and Applied Indigenous Legal Education

We are developing new learning opportunities focused on Indigenous land, governance, and economic development. These initiatives respond to the need for legal education that prepares students to work across federal, provincial, and Indigenous legal systems and support community priorities and decision making.

The work includes a proposed degree concentration in Indigenous Land and Economic Development and a practicum on Additions to Reserve (ATR) linked to University of Saskatchewan lands in Saskatoon. These initiatives would give students structured and applied learning in areas such as Indigenous governance, land and environmental management, jurisdiction, taxation, and resource development, along with practical experience in land governance and planning processes.

Degree Concentration on Indigenous Lands and Economic Development

The Indigenous Law Centre (ILC), in collaboration with the Associate Dean Academic, is working toward establishing a formal degree concentration in Indigenous Land and Economic Development.

This concentration would recognize students who choose to develop focused knowledge in areas such as:

- Indigenous governance and business structures
- Trusts, taxation, and jurisdiction
- Land and environmental management
- Resource development and related legal frameworks

The goal is to prepare students to support Indigenous communities and governments in land governance and economic development, with attention to legal pluralism and community priorities.

Addition to Reserve Practicum

The ILC is also working with the Office of the Vice-Provost Indigenous Engagement (OVPIE) to explore the development of an Additions to Reserve learning opportunity linked to University of Saskatchewan lands in Saskatoon.

This initiative would include:

- A practicum focused on Additions to Reserve processes
- Student learning grounded in real-world land governance issues
- Collaboration across multiple colleges, including the Edwards School of Business and the College of Agriculture and Bioresources
- Applied work in areas such as community engagement, land planning, and governance processes

This practicum is intended to create an interdisciplinary learning space where students can work together on practical questions related to land, jurisdiction, and community-led development processes.

Kinship, Reciprocity, and Responsibility

Over the past year, the Indigenous Law Centre (ILC) implemented a renewed accountability structure focused on student success, cultural wellness, and renewed relationships with community partners and the broader university community. The framework clarified roles among students, Cultural Advisors/Elders, Knowledge Keepers, alumni, and legal professionals, while embedding Indigenous ways of knowing into program design, including relational learning, lived experience, and community connection.

Student participation in cultural programming and informal gatherings increased over the year and provided ongoing feedback that directly informed program development. Cultural wellness, including smudging, sharing circles, ceremonies, and peer learning, were core elements of student support and cultural identity within the College. Students also accessed one-on-one guidance from Cultural Advisors/Elders strengthening ongoing cultural and academic support.

Biweekly lunch and learn sessions functioned as a structured forum for engagement beyond the classroom. These sessions brought together Elders, Knowledge Keepers, community leaders, Indigenous legal professionals, and alumni to support mentorship, knowledge exchange, and relationship-building within the legal community. They also refreshed and strengthened the College's connections with Indigenous legal networks.

The ILC held regular student gatherings throughout the academic year, including a welcome feast and an end-of-year gathering. These events helped students connect with the College community and reinforced Indigenous approaches to learning based on relationship, listening, and shared experience. The gatherings were co-sponsored by oyateki USask.

One of the College's Cultural Advisor/Elder emphasized that law is grounded in actions and responsibilities, and that legal education benefits from bringing Indigenous and non-Indigenous students into shared learning spaces. They noted that talking circles are one method of teaching and learning within Indigenous traditions, which are primarily rooted in relationships rather than rules alone. They further identified ongoing limitations within legal education in making consistent space for Indigenous language, ceremony, and legal orders within formal structures.

The Way of Story: Indigenous Laws in Living Practice was introduced as a new way to advance the recognition of Indigenous legal orders through storytelling and oral teachings. The program strengthens the inclusion of Indigenous law within legal education and supports the sharing of knowledge across generations.

Overall, the accountability structure impacted student engagement, improved relationships with community partners, and advanced a system level approach to student success and wellbeing. This work demonstrates continued implementation of the Indigenous Law Centre's mandate and its over 50-year role in supporting access to legal education for Indigenous peoples and advancing the recognition of Indigenous peoples and the law within Canadian legal education.

Uplifting Ohpahotân | Oohpaahotaan ("Let's Fly Up Together")

The College is putting the commitments of ohpahotân | oohpaahotaan into practice by continuing to embed Indigenous ways of learning into its programs and structures. This

includes learning through relationships, respect for Indigenous knowledge systems, and a holistic focus on student wellbeing. Through required courses, access to Cultural Advisors/Elders and ceremony, land-based learning, and partnerships with Indigenous organizations, the College is connecting classroom learning with lived experience while embodying the seven commitments.

Safety is supported through anti-racism education, cultural protocols, and learning environments grounded in respect and accountability.

Wellness is supported through Cultural Advisors/Elders, ceremony, peer networks, and holistic student support. A Wellness Coordinator adds another layer of support within the College.

Stewardship is reflected in responsibility to Indigenous legal traditions, knowledge systems, and land-based learning.

Representation is reflected through Cultural Advisors, Indigenous spaces, and Indigenous presence in curriculum and governance.

Right Relations is supported through partnerships with Indigenous organizations, Nations, and community-based learning.

Creation is supported through curriculum development, research and new approaches to Indigenous legal education.

Renewal: is reflected in pathways for Indigenous youth and student entering legal education.

Moving Forward Together

The College of Law's implementation of ohpahotân | oohpaahotaan reflects a shift from isolated initiatives toward integrated institutional systems.

Programs connected to experiential learning, community engagement, and Indigenous-led teaching contribute to a learning environment that centres accountability, respect, and reciprocal relationships. The Indigenous Law Centre, cultural spaces, and community partnerships continue to play an important role in supporting these efforts.

Many Indigenous education and reconciliation frameworks emphasize that institutional change requires sustained action, ongoing evaluation, and accountability to Indigenous communities. The College continues to integrate Indigenous perspectives and experiences into its programs, services, and learning environments, while also recognizing that further work remains.

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The College's established strengths, including the Indigenous Law Centre, community partnerships, and existing Indigenous programming, provide a strong foundation for continued development. Moving forward, the College will continue to reflect on learning, relational accountability, and institutional change. We know this is important to ensure the commitments of ohpahotân | oohpaahotaan remain strong in everyday practice.