

Indigeneity and Allyship 2016 Report

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OVERVIEW

From March 14–24, 2016, SSMU Indigenous Affairs hosted ***Indigeneity and Allyship 2016***, an event series examining the experiences of Indigenous peoples at McGill and beyond. Drawing from numerous panel events, workshops, and speakers, this report discusses the negative impacts that the McGill environment has on Indigenous students. Issues include harmful interactions with other students, staff and faculty; perpetuation of a pan-Indigenous identity (the assumption that all Indigenous nations are the same); daily stereotyping; and more.

These impacts are experienced in social and academic life at the University, and are caused by several factors:

- ▶ Under-representation
- ▶ Tokenism
- ▶ Poor allyship
- ▶ A lack of support
- ▶ A lack of true reconciliation and decolonization

UNDER-REPRESENTATION

“McGill is known as a racist school,” stated one student on a panel during the SSMU *Indigeneity and Allyship 2016* event series; they went on to describe how students from the Kahnawake community usually choose Concordia for school instead. Indigenous students on campus are often shocked by the lack of knowledge of Canada’s history and the current context in which Indigenous peoples live, a deficiency that is common across the University including students, staff, and faculty members of all backgrounds. This contributes to systemic racism at McGill, often experienced in the form of everyday interactions. Questions based in harmful stereotypes, such as “Do you pay taxes?” “What's it like not to have to pay for school?” and “You only got into McGill because you're native, right?” are not uncommon in the lives of Indigenous students here. These encounters make them feel misunderstood, unwelcome, and unsafe in our community. However, they are not inevitable.

Racism and stereotyping can be countered in part by addressing the underrepresentation of Indigenous peoples on campus. Of the entire student body, there are currently only around 230 Indigenous students, or under 0.6% of the population. In comparison, Indigenous people were found to be 4.3% of the Canadian population in 2011, and one of the fastest growing demographics. Furthermore, as stated by an Indigenous instructor during the *Resurgence, Reconciliation, and Revitalization* conference, “We are fighting for last place nationally in terms of Indigenous faculty numbers.” We have only one full-time, openly Indigenous tenure-track professor at McGill. This kind of underrepresentation contributes to many of the assumptions of community members, who often do not even realize that Indigenous people are present on campus. Furthermore, it makes debunking stereotypes and harmful misconceptions difficult, as McGill does not have the teaching resources to offer mandatory or expanded Indigenous studies classes. Options such as cluster hires could do significant work to change this.

McGill can support Indigenous visibility on campus through a combined increase in human, physical, and academic representation. An increase in designated faculty and staff is crucial for Indigenous students to feel that they have a place at this school. Many Indigenous students have expressed that being in a class with Professor Allan Downey was the first time they had seen another Indigenous person in such a role within academia. For many it was also the first time they had seen their own identities reflected in the content they were learning and whom they were learning it from. However, this visibility is limited as Professor Downey teaches only in the Faculty of Arts, and there are many Indigenous students in other faculties who do not have the opportunity to take his classes (usually due to a lack of flexibility in their degree requirements). Indigenous professors need to be hired to teach in other faculties as well to ensure there is representation across the University.

At McGill, there are many physical acknowledgements of the Western history of the University, but very little to acknowledge its colonial history or place on Indigenous traditional territory. This contributes to an erasure of the past and continued presence of Indigenous peoples on the land that McGill occupies. Furthermore, not only is there a lack of recognition, but increased recognition has been actively denied. The Hochelaga Rock located on lower campus is the only formal acknowledgement of Indigenous territory at McGill, yet it is placed where most people will never see it. Repeated community requests to move the rock have been rejected. As the University allows the rock to remain in a position of invisibility, they are contributing to a similar fate for Indigenous students and their history on campus. It is important to note, however, that moving the Hochelaga Rock would be one step towards better recognizing the history and presence of Indigenous peoples at McGill, rather than an end goal.

Academic representation can take the form of an increase in Indigenous course content within all Faculties. There is no academic program in which students would not benefit from learning more about Indigenous histories, environments, and knowledge. When “Indigenous Studies” is limited only to the Faculty of Arts, a large portion of McGill students graduate without exposure to new ideas that may change any stereotypical beliefs they arrive with. At the same time, Indigenous students have inadequate connection to content or role models in the academy with which they can relate. As it stands, instructors are missing out on even the bare minimum opportunity to introduce Indigenous academics and traditional knowledge-holders as guest speakers on important topics.

Indigenous course content can easily be specific to the course in question, whether it is consultation strategies around environmental impact assessments or intercultural communication skills for working with Indigenous clients. Furthermore, this consideration needs to occur at all levels and in all programs, from introductory to upper-level classes. Increasing the number of Indigenous writers and academics included in course readings is a key way to address the divide between respect shown for “Western” versus “traditional” forms of knowledge, while also exploring the distinctions made between both. This is a necessary step to break the feedback loop of reading and writing about only white, male, European thinkers and experts.

TOKENISM

Indigenous students, staff, and faculty members are often faced with an added expectation of representation, knowledge, and/or consultation on campus. This is often due to the limited total population of Indigenous peoples at McGill, but also speaks to a lack of effort in engaging with wider communities in the Montreal area. One example of tokenism raised is the reliance on individual, visibly Indigenous students to be experts on all things Indigenous. This might involve a professor or teaching

assistant(s) calling on that student to answer questions on Indigenous topics during discussions or to debunk stereotypes held by other students.

This is problematic as it ignores the variety of Indigenous peoples' perspectives and histories. Due to the legacies of colonial violence and systemic racism, Indigenous students usually have varying levels of knowledge about their own nation's and community's history, let alone that of other groups across the country. The expectation for an Indigenous student or staff member to provide this knowledge both perpetuates the idea of homogenous pan-Indigeneity and adds the burden of educating others about their own identity, rather than people seeking out this available knowledge on their own.

Tokenism can also take the form of promoting the existence of a small Indigenous community at McGill in order to support the University's public image as an institution moving towards "reconciliation." In this case, Indigenous peoples become a checkbox for McGill events, communications, and promotions, rather than individuals with their own thoughts and needs.

POOR ALLYSHIP

Equity and allyship cannot simply be optional or sporadic endeavours. Concrete and consistent efforts must be made to support these goals. At McGill, Indigenous students often face problematic attempts at allyship and reconciliation. Issues reported include non-Indigenous people speaking for Indigenous students without consultation; selective acknowledgement of Indigenous voices to suit a particular cause; and cultural appropriation rather than appreciation. These inappropriate gestures do more harm than good.

Indigenous students feel that their input and opinions are often asked for in order to meet a requirement, but are not taken seriously. This is particularly evident when at events where Indigenous topics are discussed, the upper administration chooses not to attend, or does so only in order to defend their views rather than listen to the lived experiences of attendees. If administrators hope to be allies to Indigenous peoples, it is necessary that they stand behind them and support their voices rather than deciding themselves what is right. McGill's senior leadership is perceived as making decisions based on what will make the University look good, rather than what Indigenous peoples on campus have identified as most needed. Therefore, it must be a priority to make space for diverse Indigenous voices and to take feedback and suggestions seriously. Actions are needed in addition to words.

McGill administrators and student groups need to begin, on a regular basis, to consult with Indigenous students and communities in order to build successful partnerships. "Allyship" is an active

process, not a static condition that any person or organization can lay claim to. Therefore, two-way communication and engagement must be ongoing in order to ensure that support for Indigenous students, staff, faculty members and communities is substantial and effective in meeting their needs. At the same time, there must not be an expectation that any single Indigenous person speaks for all. To avoid “double-burdening,” it is necessary to engage with equally diverse voices among Indigenous peoples as are found within non-Indigenous communities.

SUPPORT FOR INDIGENOUS STUDENTS AND STAFF

“McGill is a lonely place for Indigenous people,” explained a previous student at a panel exploring Indigenous experiences in the academy. This stems from the difficulty of finding other students, staff, and faculty with whom one can relate to as peers or interact with as role models. As previously described, students often find that they are not even represented in the academic curriculum at McGill, and that choosing to study dedicated Indigenous topics requires them to compromise on their own programs.

However, many students have found safe havens of support at McGill. These primarily include the First Peoples’ House, the Social Equity and Diversity Education (SEDE) Office, and peer groups such as the Indigenous Student Alliance (ISA) and the American Indian Science and Engineering Society (AISES). Many Indigenous students regularly express feelings of gratitude for the existence of the First Peoples’ House, remarking that without this service they may never have graduated. These supports have also provided access to organizations such as the Ivy Native Council conferences, which have helped to build relationships between Indigenous students at McGill and American schools. The value of these experiences cannot be understated, as they have allowed students to recognize that their peers share similar experiences, challenges, and resilience strategies on their own campuses.

Despite these opportunities, however, such resources are generally limited at McGill. Indigenous students would benefit from further academic and social supports in order to alleviate or cope with many of the problems caused by underrepresentation, tokenism, and institutional racism. The reluctance of the administration to take action on moving the Hochelaga Rock, for example, is disappointing and disheartening for Indigenous students who do not even see small steps towards progress. Furthermore, due to complex historical legacies and the challenges of actively identifying as Indigenous on campus, not all Indigenous students are guaranteed to engage with the First Peoples’ House. It is crucial that there is representation of and sensitivity to Indigenous needs in other student services across campus, and that

any dedicated services have more than one entry point. This also means encouraging the McGill community as a whole to think of Indigenous identity in diverse ways, and to ensure that the perception of students coming forward as Indigenous in order to receive “benefits” is discouraged.

Effective support mechanisms are crucial in order to increase Indigenous student presence on campus. While administrators speak of a desire to improve recruitment efforts and enrolment compositions, this cannot be done without expanding caring environments to ensure that Indigenous students are welcomed and successful at McGill. This issue is amplified when students do not feel comfortable raising issues due to a lack of support or explicit racism. Therefore, to improve the public image of the University among Indigenous communities without a corresponding internal commitment is to ask for failure. Seeing oneself reflected in the surrounding environment and connecting with those who can relate to one's personal experiences is crucial to building effective support networks. For Indigenous students, this includes faculty members but also their peers, student services staff, and top administrators.

RECONCILIATION

Reconciliation means addressing historical injustices in order to create a path on which our nations may move forward together. It is crucial to understand that this is a pan-Canadian issue in which McGill as an institution can and must play a role. In developing this position, it is the University's responsibility to ensure that past harms are not perpetuated and people are not forced to tell their stories over and over before real change is made.

For McGill, this means confronting the historical and ongoing colonizing role of educational institutions through administrative practices and curricula. Academic programs currently prioritize primarily Western, white, and male thinking and writing. Change must begin by bringing more Indigenous voices into reading lists and classrooms in order to ensure that these perspectives are represented and passed on. Otherwise, we will continue to perpetuate the harmful legacies of colonial ignorance.

Throughout this process, the administration must understand that Indigenous activism has been occurring in the McGill community for many years; they are now entering at a late stage. Rather than engaging with saviour-based ideas, it is necessary to allow for community leadership and to focus on needs and solutions that have already been identified. This includes allowing for wide community participation in decisions such as how to incorporate more Indigenous content into our academic programs. Here, thoughtful consultation can eliminate the likelihood that this will occur in ways that perpetuate further harm, such as by expecting that Indigenous faculty and students bear the brunt of

dispelling widespread stereotypes. In addition to including more Indigenous voices at events and in special programs, it is important to recognize the need to provide more permanent and regular channels for individuals to engage with University teaching and research.

There is no shortage of ways in which McGill can work towards addressing the colonial and racist history of its campus and begin moving towards reconciliation. However, there must be concrete efforts to engage with decolonization, rather than superficial efforts to bolster the University's reputation. This can include exploring bilateral agreements with Indigenous communities, where authority is truly shared, rather than relying on top-down consultation. Reconciliation is not a process with a set end date, but rather an ongoing movement towards a future where Indigenous peoples are not continually marginalized and re-colonized in their daily lives. It is imperative that McGill University carefully consider its role in reconciliation efforts, and take sincere, concrete steps towards solutions.