

## Raising Indigenous Librarians: a Canadian Internship Story

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### Abstract:

*The University of Alberta Libraries (UAL) in Edmonton, Canada, has established an Indigenous Internship for First Nations, Métis, or Inuit (FNMI) students in the University of Alberta's School of Library and Information Studies (SLIS). This presentation will describe the strategies and challenges in planning and implementing the internship, as well as the experiences of three Interns in the program. The internship provides an opportunity for an Indigenous person to make a contribution to UAL through employment as a student, while pursuing a Master's degree in Library and Information Studies at SLIS. The aim is to support new Indigenous students in the local SLIS program and increase the number of Indigenous staff members in the library. The internship lasts for up to two years and provides for paid tuition and paid part-time work at the library. As well as benefitting the interns, the program has enabled other UAL staff members to learn more about Indigenous cultures from their colleagues. Other FNMI students are able to find role models at the library Service Desk and helpful advice from students who have recently taken the same courses. Challenges have included: identifying students (in the early days of planning the program), ongoing work to operationalize the program and give students diverse experiences, and finding ways to engage the Interns to allow their fellow FNMI students to have a positive and comfortable experience in the library.*

**Keywords:** Indigenous initiatives, libraries, internship, professional development, First Nations and Métis

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## **Introduction**

The University of Alberta Libraries' (UAL) Indigenous Internship story began in 2014, when several alignments allowed the internship to become a reality. First, we would like to give credit to librarians at the University of Saskatchewan Library. They had begun working on an internship, which inspired us to create our own (with some similarities and differences). We were also encouraged by a climate at the University of Alberta which increasingly aimed to support First Nations, Métis and Inuit (FNMI) students and to increase FNMI staff.

A key aspiration set out in the University's *Aboriginal Strategy* document (2011) was for the University to be a place where Indigenous people experience success. This would attract Indigenous students, faculty, and staff by finding inclusive, supportive environments that foster growth and achievement. The University's stated aim was to reduce barriers to entry for Indigenous learners, as well as barriers to success. One aspect of reducing barriers is the establishment of role models, which has the potential to attract greater numbers of researchers and staff from FNMI communities. The University's current strategic plan *For the Public Good* (2016) continues the commitment to respectful relations with First Nations, Métis and Inuit people.

Finally, the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was coming to its conclusion, with the expectation that all of us on Turtle Island would be called to action for the work of Reconciliation (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). The TRC involved a multi-year process to listen to Survivors, communities and others affected by the Residential School system. Residential Schools were used for many decades as a tool of assimilation by the Canadian government and churches, and resulted in students suffering abuse and loss of culture, which in turn cause negative effects that continue today.

## **Literature Review**

We were able to draw on little in the literature relating to library internships for Indigenous students. We identified a study evaluating internships in museum studies, and later, in 2016, a study in a health library.

Bloomfield (2012) discusses barriers to the engagement of Indigenous people in the museum field. He reveals that Indigenous conservators may feel resentment from non-Indigenous colleagues due to the perception that the Indigenous person received privileged treatment and opportunities. Bloomfield reported that few museum internships resulted in an increase in the number of Indigenous conservators, although they did appear to lead to employment in museums. He also noted that internship programs had difficulty attracting Indigenous applicants and that personal connections were important in identifying potential candidates.

Keselman et al. (2016) describe an internship at the University of Arizona Health Sciences Library for Latino and Native American MLIS students and recent graduates. Its aim was to attract students to careers in health sciences librarianship. Benefits identified included increased skills, experience, and confidence. The interns also reported good relations with staff and increased professional connections. Among the interns' recommendations for improvements included more formal mentorship opportunities and fewer clerical or administrative assignments.

## Beginning the University of Alberta Libraries Indigenous Internship

We set out to create our internship according to our own values. We had several hopes and wishes:

- To support our own library school; interns are required to be enrolled in the UA School of Library and Information Studies.
- To enable students to earn enough to support themselves if necessary. The internship, then, funds up to 20 hours of paid employment during term-time and up to full time during the summer.
- For the interns to have practical and meaningful work in an academic library.
- To offer the interns mentorship and cultural opportunities.
- For the interns' presence to enable UAL staff to become more familiar with Indigenous issues and culture to bring an Indigenous voice to UAL initiatives.
- That the interns would provide a role model for other Indigenous students and would enable welcoming and culturally appropriate help with research.

We hoped to begin immediately in 2014; however, our chosen candidate could not accept the internship due to other commitments. In 2015, we were able to accept two Indigenous interns. One was a member of the Siksika First Nation in the south of the province. She completed one semester of the MLIS before taking a medical leave. Her internship has been paused and will be available should she return. The other intern was Tanya Ball, who is Métis, from the Métis heartland in Manitoba. As we had two interns, Tanya was assigned to the University of Alberta Press. For the second year of the internship, we also accepted two interns: Lorisia MacLeod, a member of the James Smith Cree Nation, and Kayla Lar-Son, who is Métis, from a community southeast of Edmonton.



Lorisia MacLeod, Kayla Lar-Son and Tanya Ball

### Tanya's Story

My family settled in Saint Ambroise, a small village located at the base of Lake Manitoba. Our ancestral lineage has never been a secret, but it was never openly discussed either. An explanation for this could be found in our history, which is filled with stories of trauma. There is only a passing mention providing a glimpse into the pain and suffering that occurred with our family. Rather, the topic is often skirted or dismissed with a sense of humour. This silence is often paired with hiding one's identity, which is something that some of us are afforded because of the light tone of our skin. In fact, my mom raised my sister and me to fit within a stereotypical 'white' community. She saw this as a survival tactic, so that we would never suffer the turmoil and racism

that she experienced in her lifetime. Unfortunately, because of this, many of us in the later generations are left without knowledge of our history or culture -- myself included.

This “disconnect” with my heritage followed me for most of my life. It wasn’t until my first year in the MLIS program that I openly declared myself as Métis. This was a cautious decision, since I was almost convinced to do so. I say convinced with a light heart here. I received an email from the University of Alberta Libraries that endeavoured to persuade me to apply for the Indigenous Internship. I figured that if they needed to contact me, that I would likely be accepted into the program, so I went for it! I was eventually accepted as their first participant (or “guinea pig” as I like to say).

The first year of the internship was extremely revealing. Being immersed in a cultural program where I am faced with Indigenous topics forced me to confront my lack of identity and to start asking questions. This opened a dialogue with my mom that I never had before, and what I learned was shocking. In the second year, I was introduced to Kayla and Lorisia. An effort was made to open a dialogue between the three of us. Given my background, I have never really had an opportunity to discuss my identity crisis(es) with anyone who may be suffering from something similar. I was able to confide in them the many things that I have witnessed in the program: the good and the bad. With this in mind, these last two years have been an intensive learning experience, one found at the professional and personal level.

Regarding professional development, my internship placement was at the University of Alberta Press (UAP), the publishing house on campus. Initially, I assisted with the development of their Open Access Collection. At that particular time, Canadian Circumpolar Institute (CCI) Press was dissolved and UAP inherited their collection. Over the course of 6 months, I updated the UAP database and edited the CCI books. They were all uploaded as a PDF format, which rendered them unsearchable. With the end user in mind, UAP decided to insert bookmarks for all major pages and chapters to improve usability and searchability.

The larger project that I was assigned to was to be a steering committee member for the *Writing Stick Conference: Sharing Indigenous Stories*. This was a 3-day conference held at the University of Alberta. The intent was to foster conversations on editing and publishing Indigenous stories and writers. People from all walks of life were encouraged to attend the event. Those who were able to attend would be exposed to an intensive learning experience that ranged from keynote speakers to film presentations. The topics that were addressed were: editing Indigenous works, cultural protocol, cultural appropriation, appropriate use of terminology, stereotyping, and more. There were 27 sessional presenters and 4 keynote speakers.

The most crucial components of the conference were the spiritual elements. The conference was grounded in ceremony early in the morning with a sunrise pipe ceremony. Those participants who attended the ceremony were prepped in advance of the necessary protocol. For example, women were told that they could not participate in the ceremony if they were on their moontime. These aspects were reinforced by the volunteers at the event. The ceremony itself took place in two separate tipis: one for men and one for women. Each tipi had an Elder and an Elder helper to perform the ceremony and pass on traditional stories. Afterwards, the Elders hosted a talking circle within each tipi. Concluding the talking circle, participants were invited to share in a traditional feast of bannock, stew, and berries.

Since graduating from the MLIS program and the Indigenous Internship program, I have been hired by the University of Alberta Libraries to take part in their Librarian Resident Program to assist with a variety of decolonization projects on campus.

## **Lorisia's Story**

I am a member of the James Smith Cree Nation of Saskatchewan; however, I was born and raised in Edmonton, Alberta. My family is connected to the history of residential schools and one of the effects of intergenerational trauma for me has been the cultural disconnect that my family has experienced. I was raised around libraries as both my grandmother and father are in the library field, so growing up I did not know about the lack of representation of Indigenous people in librarianship. It also meant that I have always felt comfortable in libraries which is a benefit that not all Indigenous people have. As I moved into post-secondary studies, I found ways to connect with my culture and learned about the variation of experiences that Indigenous students have on campus. It was disappointing when I learned that Indigenous people are generally underrepresented in librarianship and leadership positions in almost every career. This led me to choose to focus on developing my leadership and management skills through my MLIS at the University of Alberta.

Given the cultural disconnect that I experienced in my youth, I also felt it was important to find a career that gave back to my people, and I felt that information-based institutions such as libraries have an important role as information (or story) keepers. I feel that I can contribute to the decolonization and indigenization of these information-based institutions by being a mentor for future generations. My hope is to show future generations by being a successful and proud Indigenous woman in the field that there is a space - alongside allies - in a diverse workforce at information-based institutions like archives, libraries, and governments. After all, that is what my father showed me growing up and it made me feel comfortable in those institutions. It educated me and it empowered me. This familial support along with the support I have received from the University of Alberta School of Library and Information Studies has allowed me to push myself to achieve beyond my expectations. I have had the honour of being selected as both an Association of Research Libraries Diversity Scholar and an American Library Association Spectrum Scholar. The other amazing scholars that I have met through these programs have opened my eyes to the challenges facing diversity programs across North America and highlighted the importance of programs like this internship to promote long term success.

My journey to empowerment with the field began with the Indigenous Internship. During my Bachelor's degree I did partially reclaim my identity but there was still a fracture. When I attended my lectures I was a scholar, when I attended a round dance I was Indigenous. It wasn't until I became an Indigenous Intern that I found a way to bring both of these elements of my identity together. With the Internship, I was given a voice - not just as an Indigenous individual or as a scholar but as both. One of the biggest perks and responsibility of the internship is the bridge building that happens with staff. I have found that much of the learning is reciprocal so staff learn from the interns, particularly on topics such as reconciliation, while the staff teach their skills in librarianship. My experience with the Indigenous Internship has been mostly based in Rutherford Library which is the University of Alberta's Humanities and Social Sciences library. My responsibilities have varied from record management to reference desk hours, from online chat to attending a range of staff meetings and training. In addition, because my colleagues knew about my areas of expertise and interest they were able to direct special topic reference questions to me allowing me grow as a subject matter expert. The staff don't limit my voice to when they are seeking cultural consultation, instead they seek to include me as a full staff member. I've found this to be extremely empowering because it is an acceptance of my entire identity - as a student, as a staff member, as an Indigenous woman. I believe this open and active engagement helps prevent the feeling of tokenism that can be a common flaw in diversity programs.

A particular element of my experience in this internship that I would like to highlight and encourage has been the mentorship aspect. The first type of relationship is the formal mentorship program offered to new employees of the UAL system. As both Kayla and I are considered library staff, we were both given mentors in the form of library staff with experience in the profession. This relationship gives us a current successful professional to help guide us from such an early point in our career. A second form of mentorship is the informal mentoring given by all staff. As Kayla and I work shifts alongside the other library staff members, there is ample opportunity for knowledge sharing. And most importantly, this knowledge sharing can go both ways.

In fact, I feel this internship is boots on the ground style approach. Changing processes and the underlying beliefs behind them can take time but an internship can immediately inject underrepresented individuals into the field. While you can't change a history of oppression overnight, you can have an internship immediately bring those traditionally unheard voices to the table. This can be where the long term changes start. By giving staff and students a chance to engage regularly with underrepresented groups as co-workers and professionals, the diversity of staff voices can be improved and students are introduced to how they could create a space for themselves within the institution without compromising their culture and values.

### **Kayla's Story**

tansi, twansi, Bonjour, edl'anat'e, aba washded (hello in Cree, Michif, French, Dene and Nakoda) my name is Kayla. I was born in Rocky Mountain House, Alberta. When I was a child I spent the first few months of my life in the care of child protective services, but I was eventually adopted and moved to the farming communities of Tofield, AB., where I spent most of my childhood. I am a Michif (Métis) and Ukrainian woman and a proud member of the Métis Nation Region 4, which is located in Edmonton. Growing up in a small farming community, I found that most of the individuals who lived there were of settler origins. There were only one or two other Indigenous families who lived there. Being Indigenous was not something that was openly talked about, and in my own family the mention of our heritage was a taboo topic. I've always been a bit of a wanderer; when I was 15 my father passed away and I decided to move to Vancouver, only to return when my mother died.

After I moved from Tofield to Edmonton, I went to trades school and later applied to University. While at the University of Alberta I entered the Faculty of Native Studies where I completed an Honours Degree, with a minor in Anthropology. While in the Faculty of Native Studies, I had the opportunity to meet other Aboriginal students and share my experiences with them. I was accepted by the community for who I am, and I will forever be grateful to them.

In my second year of Native Studies I took a research methods class where I would meet my academic mentor, Dr. Frank Tough. Dr. Tough offered me a position doing archival research with his project The Métis Archival Project. I worked for the project for 4 years doing community based research and rights based litigation research. I worked as a teaching assistant for Dr. Tough and began to mentor students with respect to their own library or archival research projects. It was Dr. Tough who encouraged me to pursue a degree in LIS education, which I began at the University of Alberta in 2016.

Over the past few years I have made a strong connection with my Aboriginal heritage. As well, I have made long lasting relationships with various Indigenous communities from the surrounding Edmonton area and from different nations. This relationship building has inspired me to develop my career into one that is focussed on community based practice, and decolonizing methods of engaging with communities. Through the internship I have been able to work closely with Indigenous students in a University context, and use my knowledge of Indigenous research methods and pedagogies. This means I can aid in different research projects Indigenous students may have, and most importantly be a familiar face that understands their needs. As well the internship has allowed me to be an acting member of the Decolonizing Description working group at the University of Alberta, which is assessing how problematic subject headings concerning Indigenous peoples in Canada can be changed to reflect the ways in Indigenous peoples in Canada classify themselves.

More recently, I have been focusing on how I can give back to the broader community outside of the University of Alberta. I recently was involved in a land based learning class with the community of Susa Creek, Alberta. The purpose of the course was to be actively involved in the traditional process of moose hide tanning, and learn how this practice can be used as a form of Cree Indigenous law, through the passing down of Indigenous knowledges. Although this was not formally part of the internship, I was fully supported by my colleagues to take the course, and they shared in my excitement in what I had learned. While in Susa Creek I presented community members with a collection of archival documents that I had collected about the community while visiting Library and Archives Canada. It was at this point that I realized how important it was as an Indigenous person myself to aid in community based archival research projects and how much it truly meant to the community. This has inspired me to use the internship as a platform to engage with more communities in Alberta, that may need assistance in their community based research, but may not have the means to conduct their own archival searches or library research sessions.

### **Anne's Story**

I am the coordinator of the program. I am not Indigenous. I am of Scottish and English ancestry and came to Canada as an adult, to marry a man I met in France. I came to be involved with Indigenous initiatives in the library because a few years ago I was asked to work on an initiative with six First Nations college libraries in Alberta. Building on those relationships I took on other initiatives with the Indigenous community within the University. My story begins before that though, when I was eight years old and my teacher read us a book called *Susannah of the Mounties*. At the time I probably didn't even know where Canada was. In the story was a little boy who ran away from school and was brought back against his will. I remember being terribly sad for him; and years later, living in Canada, I realized that this had been a Residential School.

I have been very fortunate that Indigenous friends and colleagues have welcomed me and have introduced me to Indigenous culture and ceremony. These experiences have been precious and powerful for me and I feel blessed to have been welcomed in. As an urban dweller for my adult life I've also experienced a reconnection with the relationship to the land I had as a child in the countryside. It's a good thing to be mindful of our original cultures and the cultures we've entered. Although we don't require the interns to showcase their culture, there's no escaping that it's an invitation to them to explore and examine their Indigenous culture, and so far the experiences have been generally good. The internship has made me realize all the more what a journey culture is even for Indigenous people as they learn and reconnect with their culture and family stories. I am intensely proud of these

amazing young women as they enter into the profession of librarianship and continue their cultural journeys.

### **Challenges**

All stories have rocky sections as well as smooth, and ours is no exception. Our first challenge was identifying a candidate for the internship. When the proposal was accepted in 2014 there was only one Indigenous student accepted into the MLIS program, who was unable to accept the internship due to other work commitments. In 2015-16 we identified two qualified candidates. The following year we were able to use personal connections as well as announcements, and we have found that this has been a successful approach in encouraging students to apply. Relationships are very important in this context.

Another challenge has been giving the interns a variety of experiences while also ensuring they are of value to the library units they have been placed in. The interns were very welcome in the units for the service they provided, and once the units had trained them well, they wanted to keep them. Two of the interns have so far had experiences in other units, and we hope to extend this next year.

### **Continuing the Story**

Recently, the interns and Anne met to plan for the next stage of the internship. We identified several areas where we could improve. These improvements can be divided into two main areas: community support and future internships. While there are cultural support services available to FNMI students at the University, cultural support needs to be intrinsic to the internship. In the coming year we are hoping to bring in Elders and cultural advisors and to enable more cultural experiences. As we've seen, the internship has proved to be a catalyst in the cultural journeys of all involved and a cultural component is important.

With respect to hiring and future internships, the increase of Indigenous staff in libraries is simply a matter of hiring more FNMI staff into professional and nonprofessional positions. We would also like to see more internships established, in libraries of all kinds and for students in library technician programs as well as master's programs. A library technician program would be a good fit for an Indigenous person wanting to provide knowledgeable library service within their community.

### **Conclusion**

The UAL Indigenous Internship program has now seen its first librarian graduate with an MLIS degree, and she will be continuing at the library in our Academic Librarian Resident program. Two more students are entering their second and final year of the SLIS program, and we have a brand new intern who is starting work at the library in the summer of 2017 in preparation for her first term of library school. The interns' stories suggest that the program has succeeded in providing fulfilling work experiences and financial support for the students. It has also brought an increased Indigenous voice to our work and has enabled non-Indigenous staff members to connect with Indigenous culture. During the internship the participants have also deepened their own cultural understanding and connections. The program has enabled the interns to blend professional, scholarly and personal cultural interests, including further developing their work in the areas of Indigenous research methodologies and pedagogies, and Indigenous approaches to leadership.



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**Note:** for more information on the Indigenous history and current issues consider taking the University of Alberta Faculty of Native Studies free MOOC:

University of Alberta, Faculty of Native Studies (Producer). (2017). *Indigenous Canada*. [MOOC]. Retrieved from <https://www.ualberta.ca/courses/indigenous-canada>.