

1. Question submitted by Senator Wiener (April 22, 2010)

On April 6, the Queen's Native Students Association (QNSA) released a statement raising concerns about serious and ongoing problems at the Four Directions Aboriginal Student Centre (FDASC). These problems have included the lack of a Director or Acting Director in the Centre, a complement of only two staff members, and a unilateral hiring and firing process coming out of the office of Student Affairs. This has led to a large decline in the use of the Centre by Aboriginal students. In addition, Aboriginal students have expressed feelings of alienation from an Aboriginal Council dominated by non-Aboriginal university staff.

1) Would the Dean of Student Affairs please explain why the position of Director has been left vacant for almost two years, and why FDASC was run out of Student Affairs rather than a Director being appointed on an interim basis?

Response from Senator Laker, Associate Vice-Principal and Dean of Student Affairs

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to this question. Due to a travel obligation scheduled a year ago, I regret that I am unable to be present today to answer in person. I feel it is incumbent upon me to first state an unequivocal rejection of the notion that any staffing decisions were made unilaterally. It is widely known that personnel matters are inherently confidential, and unfortunately in this case it has allowed speculation – usually negative – about the motives or processes relating to such issues; and it precludes detailed discussion to support this assertion. Suffice it to say that each decision made utilized all available and appropriate consultative resources. One can debate whether there are enough resources or processes, but nonetheless those currently in place have been made use of thoroughly and ethically.

In any case, I deeply regret that the Four Directions Aboriginal Centre has had several leaders over the past decade. It was my hope and intention when I arrived in 2006 that this pattern would not continue. In fact, one of my first actions in this regard was to change the title of the incumbent from “Manager,” to “Director,” to recognize the important status of this role in shepherding the support for recruitment, support, and success of Aboriginal students at Queen's. What I can share is that the former Director went on leave during the late Spring of 2008, and it was unclear for quite some time whether she would be returning. During that time, I was precluded from appointing an acting Director. Since the staff in the Centre required assistance in managing budgets and other activities, I had no alternative but to ask my Human Resource and Finance Manager and my Executive Assistant, neither of whom are Aboriginal, to provide support to them in areas of resource utilization, especially ensuring that Ministry funds were used appropriately. (It should be noted that the Aboriginal Council vets and approves those budgets and reports openly, supported by the Finance Managers in Education and Student Affairs.) However, they did not supervise programs, and staff were trusted to decide how to design and implement them.

I shared in the staff's and students' concerns about the consequence of not having clarity and stability in the Centre's leadership, and the frustration of not being able to immediately correct that. In an effort to express support, facilitate healing and professional development,

I personally accompanied the staff and a QNSA representative to the National Institute on Native Leadership in Higher Education in the summer of 2008 in Albuquerque, New Mexico. That was a beneficial experience in many ways, including building all of our capacities to work effectively and together. Nonetheless, from summer, 2008, until summer, 2009, we were unable to hire a Director. This took a toll on the momentum we hoped to foster. I happen to agree with the QNSA that there should always be Aboriginal leadership of the Centre, and again I remain perplexed and frustrated about the constraints which have interfered with that agenda. So, in the Spring of 2009, I hired an Aboriginal educator and consultant to provide additional leadership support to the Centre. This was very helpful, but again did not solve the broader problem of needing permanent, stable leadership. Finally, during this past summer, it was determined that the Director position would indeed become vacant. It was at this time that I asked my Assistant Dean for Diversity Programs and Community Development to become more actively involved in supporting the Centre.

It is arguable that the Director position could or should have been posted during the Fall term of this Academic Year. However, it should again be noted that the Centre has been unable to secure and retain a Director for any substantial period of time, dating back a number of years. I expressed this concern to the Aboriginal Council and indicated my view that it would be unwise to simply repeat the pattern of posting and hiring a Director without critically reflecting on, and improving the structures and other factors currently in place. The Council was understandably ambivalent, in that there was recognition of this dilemma yet also a strong desire to secure new leadership.

Related, there was ongoing discussion at the Council about the potential for an Aboriginal Studies program of some kind, and Bob Lovelace secured funding from the VP (Academic) to pursue a study on the feasibility of such a program for Queen's. I raised the question about whether it would be beneficial to consider re-thinking the Director position in favour of an Aboriginal leader/scholar role, such as the model we find in other area studies (Jewish Studies for instance). There was some interest in this, and the Council Chairs and Mr. Lovelace also thought it may be a good approach, with the added value of being a pilot of the early stages of a potential academic program.

So, during the Fall term two things happened. First, the Aboriginal consultant was tasked with conducting an appreciative inquiry into the assets of the Centre and Aboriginal community on and off-campus, with the intention of informing any efforts to develop the leadership and broader capacity of the Centre. Second, the Assistant Dean and I began to work with two of the Faculty Deans' offices and the Office of the VP (Academic) on the policy and procedural implications of this idea. While there was general positive feedback, it was ultimately determined earlier this term that the complexities (e.g. collective agreement, staffing policies, feasibility of an attractive academic appointment, to name a few) made it too onerous to proceed in any timely way. At this point, the consultant had submitted her report to the Council, and we decided that we need to proceed with hiring a Director. We have posted the position widely, and the Search Committee, which is predominately Aboriginal in composition, is working on their review of all applications. My earlier trepidation remains, but I am committed to supporting the new Director and efforts to consider new models such as those proposed by the QNSA at the recent Council meeting.

I recognize that the explanation and account offered here is not likely to erase the negative or hurt feelings of students who have desired, needed, and deserved more support from the Four Directions Aboriginal Student Centre than has been available. But, I do hope that the Senate will understand more about the complexities which have led to them. Even now, I still believe we can and will achieve the goal of a Centre with a full staff and great vitality for the Queen's community, and for Aboriginal members in particular.

2) Will the University be exploring structural changes to the format of Aboriginal Council and to governing bodies regarding Aboriginal representation?

Response submitted jointly by Senator P. Deane, Vice-Principal (Academic) and R. Silverman, Acting Vice-Principal (Academic)

The QNSA and others have raised a number of significant concerns about the present composition and function of Aboriginal Council, as well as about the governance of FDASC, in which Aboriginal Council participates. The University recognizes the need to resolve these problems, and plans to initiate a review to identify or confirm the changes required. In this process, there will be full consultation with students and the broader community.