

Growing Our Futures: Community Training in Native Plant Landscaping

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Abstract

The ***Growing Our Futures: Community Training in Native Plant Landscaping*** program provides community-based, culturally sensitive, hands-on training to adult Indigenous students interested in the use of native plants for ecological restoration, landscaping and food production. The program incorporates cultural activities with additional student support provided by a life coach and community Elders and is delivered on site to reduce barriers to attendance and ensure relevance to community interests and opportunities. On completion of the program, students receive a Royal Roads University (RRU) certificate in Native Plant Horticulture.

With funding from the **Vancouver Foundation**, *Growing Our Futures* was delivered in fall, 2016 in collaboration with the Scia'new First Nations on their traditional territory west of Victoria, BC. The training program enabled community members to participate in a landscaping and restoration training program geared for future employment in the Spirit Bay residential development taking shape on Scia'new traditional lands. Spirit Bay is a 10-year, 500-unit development in which the Scia'new Nation is a majority partner. Participants learned how to apply their new-found knowledge and skills to design and undertake projects within the development, creating an on-going legacy for the community.

Program Description

Working with a team of expert instructors, we delivered an 8 week training program on practical landscaping skills and restoration utilizing native plants. We focused on the Spirit Bay residential development site as our classroom for learning activities such as:

- Removal of invasive species
- Planning for restoration of a disturbed site following invasive species removal
- Basic native plant propagation
- Native plant (e.g., camas bulb) salvage from development sites for replanting
- Installation of hardscaping (rock walls and crevice gardens)
- Installing softscaping (e.g., garden bed design, new lawns)
- Understanding the 'right plant for the right site'
- Installation of native plants on multiple landscaping sites, and restoration of previously disturbed/degraded slopes with ecosystem appropriate, native species.

The objectives of the training program were to:

- train members of the Scia'new Nation in the skills required to participate in native plant landscaping and restoration, especially those relevant to the needs of the community (e.g.

- the Spirit Bay development site) to create meaningful, long-term employment opportunities for community members;
- create positive learning experiences and outcomes for students;
 - support students to achieve their goals, including employment placements and/or transitioning into further education; and
 - demonstrate a replicable model for communities to engage with economic development by creating a trained cohort of community members.

We started the program with 11 participants; 10 completed the program (91% completion rate). This is a very high completion rate for this type of programming, a fact that was recognized by community leadership and other educators working in Indigenous education.

Based on both written course-end evaluations, and one-on-one de-briefs with students following course completion, we succeeded in providing positive learning experiences and outcomes for students. Working with our community partner, we are also actively developing plans with students to meet their individual goals. Three of the students are working towards establishing their own landscaping or related enterprises over the next six months. We will be working with them on their business planning and also accessing further training and capital to support the development of their business. These three ventures intend to provide self-employment and employment for a total of six students from the program. Five of the 10 students completing the program have also expressed an interest in further education – ranging from technical training to upgrading to post-secondary education.

Adjudication Criteria

1. Value/Service: What value and/or service does the program provide to the student clientele, institutional or community collaborators or partners, as well as the home institution? What are the indications of its value?

The level of engagement among the students was a strong indicator of success. The comments we had from community leaders indicated that having 10 of 11 participants complete the class was almost unprecedented for this community, as well as in comparison with programs they were familiar with in other communities. Comments provided by program participants were also important indicators of success, and both written evaluations and one-to-one de-briefs were completed by and with participants. Among the comments:

- *"For such a short course there was so much beneficial learning"*
- *"The course opened a lot of doors for me"*
- *"I will always keep this in my life"*
- *"I got what I wanted out of this"*
- *"Great program"*
- *"Will look into work like we did in the course, or go to school more"*

For the instructional team, the greatest indicator of success will be our ability to continue to support students in reaching their goals, whether they are in employment, further education, or starting their own business. Following the completion of the program, we had follow-up/planning meetings with all the students to map out their next steps. In that sense, the training program was just a starting point for on-going engagement with students.

We envision the project will continue to have a positive impact on the participants that completed the program. Because of the relationship we built with the Scia'new community through this course – as well as through the efforts of our Indigenous Education & Student Services Department – a cohort of Bachelor of Business Administration students will conduct their Business Field School this March-April on business planning within the Scia'new community. Some of our *Growing Our Futures* students will receive support in creating business plans to assist them to take the next steps in meeting their goals.

2. Complexity: What is the degree of complexity in program development; for example, negotiations with partner institutions, agencies or target groups, financing or delivery challenges, diversity of students, marketing strategies, and evaluation?

A commitment to delivering programs in-community never comes without a certain degree of complexity and challenge. We were first approached to deliver this program in the spring of 2015. Because we recognized that individual students, and the Nation, would not have access to the funds required to support program delivery, we looked for potential funding sources over the next 18 months. Our first proposal for funding (to the National Indian Brotherhood Trust Fund) did not succeed in a highly competitive and over-subscribed call for proposals. Our second attempt – to the Vancouver Foundation – to obtain funding for the fall, 2016 delivery was successful. As with many funding opportunities, we were required to find matching in-kind and financial support for delivery. This required the University to commit to supporting delivery for a lower than normal cost, and for the delivery lead to work with partners to secure not only needed financial support for the program but also in-kind support.

The partnerships created for and through this program contributed significantly to its success, with success defined as a transformative experience for our students. The plan for this project was developed as a collaborative effort between a staff member from the community and a staff member from Royal Roads University. The importance of having a 'champion' for the project within the community was demonstrated time and again during the program. The Scia'new staff member's knowledge of the community as well as of many of the students, and his background as a trained Social Worker, were invaluable for the delivery of a supportive program responsive to student needs. A number of our students face challenges related to learning, past traumas, and other issues that could impact their – as well as other students – educational experience. The strong partnership that developed early on in the project enabled us to identify and address issues before they created significant challenges within the program.

The other partnerships developed through the program enabled us to deliver additional learning opportunities for students. *Growing Our Futures* is especially relevant for the Scia'new Nation because of their partnership with the Trust for Sustainable Development in the Spirit Bay development located on the Scia'new Reserve. The development site – with a planned 500+ housing units over 10 years – was always intended as the 'classroom' for the hands-on experiential learning that was a key feature of the program. The development supported the delivery of the program especially through staff time from the development's Landscape Architect who worked closely with the instructional team on identifying projects for students to work on, and also acted as a liaison with the development in securing the supplies we needed to support a variety of on the ground learning activities. The development partner is committed to working with the Nation to ensure economic opportunities created by Spirit Bay, including in native plant landscaping and site restoration, accrue to community members. The training program was congruent with Scia'new cultural values and local economic opportunities and brings individualized skills training and community supports to those who may not otherwise have access to this type of training.

3. Ingenuity and Innovation: Is the program innovative, imaginative or unique in terms of its overall concept, or in terms of specific curriculum? The focus of this criterion is on the ingenuity of the content, process, and delivery.

The *Growing Our Futures* program has a number of innovative aspects, some of which have been highlighted in detail elsewhere in this submission. We delivered a hands-on, highly experiential program in landscaping using native plants with direct application to opportunities within the Scia'new community. The development of a strong collaborative relationship with the Scia'new Nation and the Spirit Bay Development partner during the 15 months before program delivery also significantly shaped the design and delivery of the program and led to strong partner support for the program.

We included a total of ten instructors at different stages of the program who delivered from 1 to 11 days of teaching/support for the program, each of whom brought their particular expertise to the training. Although the range of instructors added a certain degree of complexity to project design, delivery, and management, the inclusion of strong facilitators who are also passionate practitioners of restoration, landscaping, garden design, turf management, plant pruning, and much more, was found to greatly enhance the experience for the students. Community representatives, Instructors, Elders, and other program partners were significantly involved in the design, implementation and evaluation of the program. The relevant and supportive teaching and learning approach enabled the interests and passions of students to be reflected in their learning experience, and provided opportunities for them to share their knowledge in a supportive environment. The program is not about rote learning but engagement and empowerment through practical skills and cultural learning. Elders and other community members were involved in program design, implementation, and evaluation. We also held pre- and post-program surveys with all participants and trainers/mentors to gain their feedback on what worked well and what didn't work in the program, and to help us assess how knowledge and attitudes were transformed through the training.

Our goal was for a transformative experience for all participants in the program, including representatives of the Spirit Bay development. We believe the training program acted as another platform to increase engagement among and between community members and the development, partly through the commitment of the developer to provide the resources needed for a restoration/landscaping project on the site. This project will not only be a highly visible legacy for students and the community, but also demonstrate the ability of the community to genuinely participate in this development partnership.

4. Innovation in Delivery: Has the program developed innovative ways to deliver content or to support students to take the program? The focus of this criteria is on how the program is delivered to meet the needs of non-traditional students.

Indigenous learners face many potential social, educational and/or economic barriers to participation in post-secondary education – including previous negative experiences in school, lack of funds, social responsibilities such as caring for Elders and children, lack of supports when moving to attend school, and other systemic barriers. The 2015 Aboriginal Economic Progress Report, from the National Aboriginal Economic Development Board strongly recommends “that continued and sustained efforts be made in ensuring Aboriginal people have access to and receive high quality education in every corner of the country.” The report also recommends that “investments in Aboriginal skills development and training by government and industry be designed and tailored to meet the unique needs of Aboriginal people that align with concrete employment opportunities”.

Community-based programming has been recognized by government as a factor in the success of Indigenous learners. The *Growing Our Futures* program addresses the barriers and challenges faced by Indigenous people by providing community-based education with locally and culturally relevant content and cultural supports for learners from a range of educational backgrounds. *Growing Our Futures* has the goal of increasing access to practical and applied training that will help build self-esteem and personal skills for Indigenous students. Unlike many other programs, *Growing Our Futures*:

- is community-based;
- focuses on native plants with cultural relevance for Indigenous students;
- integrates native plant landscaping training with culturally specific content and student supports; and
- is accessible, with no financial or educational barriers to participants.

Growing Our Futures is built around an Aboriginal learning model with hands-on activities, cultural sessions with Elder mentors, and the flexibility to adapt to student needs and interests. Respect, relevance, and responsibility are the key pillars of this teaching and learning approach. Our learning environment is collaborative, emphasizing teamwork and recognizing the varied skills and knowledge that participants bring to the program. A completion ceremony and feast provides participants with the opportunity to share their work with the larger community and celebrate their learning. We were fortunate to have the Esquimalt Nation Drum and Dance group perform at the celebration and escort

the graduates as they were presented to friends, family, instructors, and Scia'new leaders. This training program also related directly to an immediate and significant employment opportunity for community members in the Spirit Bay Development on the Scia'new Reserve.

5. Profile of Continuing Education: How does the program enhance the profile of continuing education within its home university and the community in terms of research, practice or service?

Professional and Continuing Studies (PCS) offers customized programs for private and public business, governments (including First Nations), communities, and organizations. PCS offers professional and applied skills certificates designed to broaden knowledge, build on competencies, and enhance employability. We are committed to progressive program development that focuses on long term relationships and partnerships with Indigenous communities, governments, and educational institutions. These programs build collaboration and enhance engagement in the development of leadership and community capacity. The *Growing Our Futures* program designed for community-based delivery of applied and practical skills is one example of RRU's responsive approach to meeting the needs of Indigenous communities. This training has demonstrated positive impacts in the five communities where it has been delivered to date, with graduates finding employment and going on to further education as a result of the program and the student supports provided.

Growing Our Futures and similar programs have significantly enhanced the profile of continuing education within RRU and within the Indigenous communities we serve. Our institution has at times found it challenging to address the needs of our local Indigenous communities for applied training that is accessible to students lacking a strong academic background. These non-credit courses open to all community members with an enthusiasm and commitment to learning, create an opportunity for Indigenous students to engage with an academic institution in the pursuit of new skills. These courses also represent important learning opportunities for the university by enabling RRU to pursue new and innovative delivery models outside of our normal for-credit offerings.