LE,NO_NET RESEARCH PROJECT
Supporting Aboriginal Student Success

Executive Summary

University of Victoria
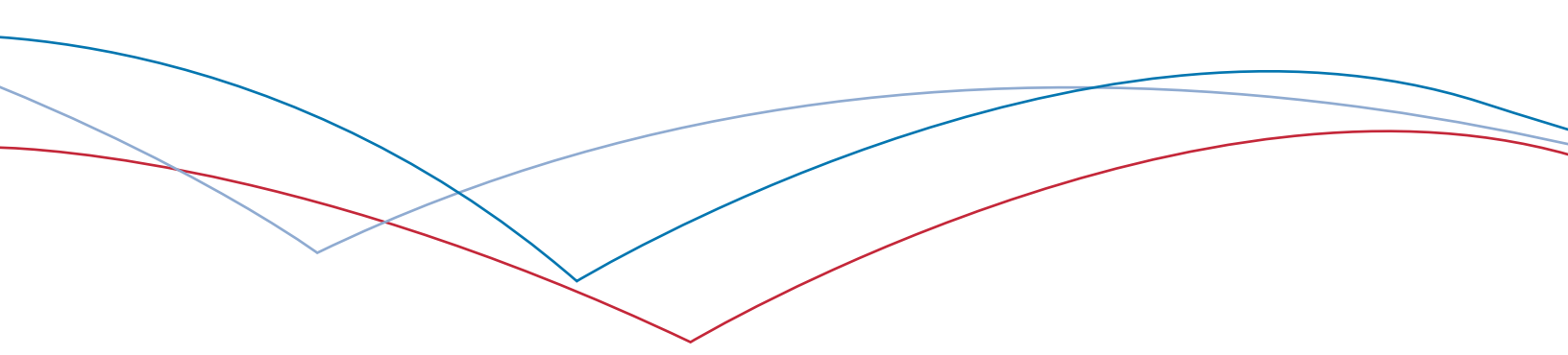
LE,NONET Research Project

Executive Summary

*What impact did the LE,NONET Project have on the success of student
participants, in terms of their retention and graduation rates,
academic performance and personally defined measures of success?*

LE,NONET: "Success after enduring many hardships"

LE,NONET (pronounced le-non-git) is a word in SENĆOŦEN (sen-chaw-then), the language of the local
Straits Salish people, meaning "paddling a canoe in a storm and making it through to the other side,"
and was also documented in an orthography by the late Dave Elliott Sr. as meaning "success after
enduring many hardships." The name LE,NONET was suggested by elder and traditional knowledge
keeper Earl Claxton (YELḰÁTŦE) as well as by John Elliott of the Tsartlip First Nation.

Artist Charles Elliott of the Tsartlip First Nation contributed the LE,NONET Project logo, which uses
a classic spindle whorl design depicting a human surrounded by a pair of wolves and speaks to the
capacity of students to use the best of both worlds, in this case the traditions of their Indigenous
communities and the traditions of Euro-Western academia.

SUPPORTING ABORIGINAL STUDENT SUCCESS

The LE,NONET Project was developed by the University of Victoria in partnership with the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, which was established with funding from the Government of Canada, to determine best practices and to evaluate program models in supporting the success and retention of Aboriginal students in post-secondary education. The project developed a suite of student-focused programs and one program for faculty and staff at the university, which were piloted between 2005 and 2009.

The LE,NONET Project emerged out of both national interest in increasing post-secondary graduation rates for Aboriginal people and the University of Victoria's long-standing commitment to Aboriginal education. Supported by leadership at the University of Victoria and the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, the LE,NONET Project was an opportunity to investigate program models for supporting Aboriginal students to succeed in post-secondary studies within a culturally grounded, supportive environment.

Project Goals

The two main goals of the LE,NONET Project were:

1) To change the experience of Aboriginal students attending the University of Victoria to a more visibly positive one; and

2) To improve Aboriginal students' access to the university through an effective and readily available program of support services that will enhance student success.

Program Descriptions

Over the four-year pilot, the LE,NONET Project developed and implemented six complementary student-focused programs and one program designed for staff and faculty at the university.

| Student-focused LE,NONET programs	
Bursary Program	The Bursary Program provided direct financial aid to Aboriginal undergraduate students. Students received between $1,000 and $5,000 per year. Students were required to be in their first year of study at UVic the first time they applied for a bursary.
Emergency Relief Fund	During the first year of the project, it became apparent that some students experienced short-term financial crises that required financial support in order for them to stay in school. The Emergency Relief Fund was established in the second year to meet this need.*
Peer Mentor Program	The Peer Mentor Program provided new students with one-on-one mentoring by experienced Aboriginal students. Additionally, group events were held to bring together Aboriginal students as well as their families and friends.
Preparation Seminar	The Preparation Seminar was a course focusing on local Aboriginal history and culture, Aboriginal research methods, and skills for working in community settings. It was a prerequisite for the Community Internship and Research Apprenticeship Programs.
Community Internship Program	In the Community Internship Program, students completed 200 hours of work with an Aboriginal community or organization in Canada.
Research Apprenticeship Program	In the Research Apprenticeship Program, students completed 200 hours of research work with a professor or research institute at the University of Victoria.
Program for university staff and faculty	
Staff and Faculty Aboriginal Cultural Training (SFACT)	The SFACT Program had two components: a series of online modules and five face-to-face workshops. Initial SFACT modules were delivered online and were only available for faculty who were supervising students as part of the Research Apprenticeship Program. The workshop modules were developed and piloted in the final year of the project. A needs assessment was conducted in order to inform the creation of the workshops and future offerings of the online modules.

STUDENT PARTICIPANTS

A total of 200 students enrolled in LE,NONET programs between 2005 and 2009. Many more students were impacted through informal participation in drop-in events, but there were no formal data collection mechanisms in place to record information from these students. To qualify for participation in the LE,NONET programs, students were required to demonstrate evidence of Aboriginal ancestry and Canadian citizenship or permanent resident status, and were required to be registered in an undergraduate degree program at the university. Additionally, students were required to be in good academic standing in order to qualify for the Bursary Program.

The majority of students participated in more than one LE,NONET program over the four-year project. The Bursary Program had the highest number of participants: of the 200 LE,NONET students, 140 received one or more bursaries. The Preparation Seminar had the second highest rate of participation, with 90 students over the four years (see Figure 1 for the program participation rates for all LE,NONET programs).

Figure 1: Number of Students in Each Program
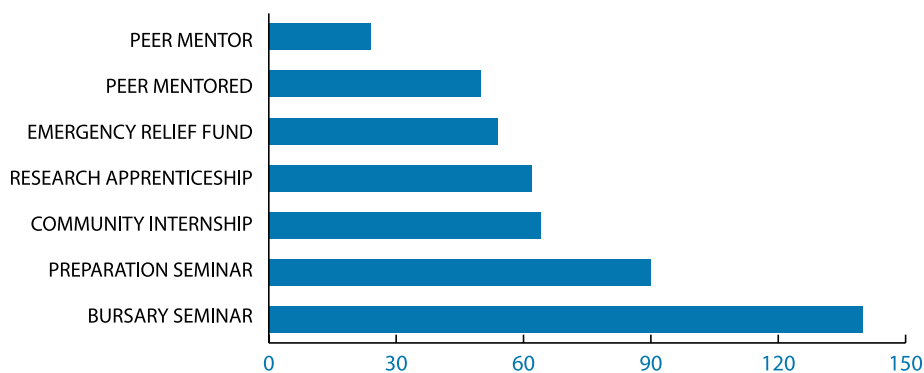
The average age of LE,NONET participants was 28.7 years. LE,NONET participants were, on average, nearly five years older than the general undergraduate population.

The majority (71%) of LE,NONET participants were female, which reflects the overall gender distribution for the Aboriginal student population at the university.

PROGRAM EVALUATION

Both qualitative and quantitative research methods were used to evaluate the LE,NONET Programs and to measure their impact on student participants.

Quantitative Research

Quantitative data was analyzed for three comparison groups: an historical cohort (pre-LE,NONET comparison group), LE,NONET participants, and non-participants (current Aboriginal students who elected not to take part in LE,NONET programs).

Using information contained in LE,NONET program files, in university administrative records, and in files held by the BC Ministry of Education, a total of 997 students were identified in the historical cohort, 200 in the LE,NONET participant group, and 819 in the non-participant group. The groups were comparable on most demographic and academic performance variables. This comparability was prerequisite to the planned survival analyses of student retention and graduation data.

Qualitative Research

Of the 200 LE,NONET students, 144 (72%) participated in the qualitative research, providing feedback on their experiences through interviews, surveys and focus groups. Response rates ranged from 54% to 78% among the individual LE,NONET programs. Students were asked a number of questions that were unique to each of the six programs in order to focus on specific aspects of the programs, as well as a set of common questions that explored student experiences across the programs.

A number of other stakeholders (faculty, staff, administrators) were invited to participate in the qualitative research to provide input into the program models and the overall impact of the LE,NONET Project.

Interviews were conducted with advisors who worked with LE,NONET students in the Community Internship and Research Apprenticeship Programs in order to gain their feedback on the programs. A total of 20 advisors were interviewed for the Community Internship Program and 23 were interviewed for the Research Apprenticeship Program.

Qualitative interviews were conducted with six staff members of the LE,NONET Project during the final months of the programs, in summer and fall 2009.

In order to gather information about the impact of the LE,NONET Project on the university as a whole, interviews with 16 key stakeholders were conducted in fall 2009. Respondents included senior administration, university employees, a representative from an Aboriginal student group, and several deans.

Finally, participants in the Staff and Faculty Aboriginal Cultural Training (SFACT) Program provided feedback on their experiences with SFACT through online and paper surveys, as well as through interviews.

IMPACT ON STUDENT SUCCESS

The LE,NONET programs were found to have a significant impact on the retention, graduation and withdrawal rates of Indigenous students.

Among LE,NONET participants, withdrawals (13%) were lower than expected, while the number of students continuing (55%) and graduating (32%) was higher than expected. Concentrating on LE,NONET participants and non-participants only, a clear pattern emerges: retention and graduation rates were higher than expected for LE,NONET participants, while withdrawal rates were lower.

The observation window for current students was shorter than that for the historical cohort (7 terms vs. 12 terms), but the percentage of students who earned a degree after LE,NONET began was actually higher than in the historical cohort (27.7 vs. 23.1%). Also, the percentage of students in the LE,NONET participant group who graduated (32.0%) was higher than that of the non-participant group (26.6%). The number of students who could be considered "withdrawn" from university (i.e., had not graduated and were not registered at the end of the study window) was reliably lower among LE,NONET participants than among non-participants. Term-to-term retention was also significantly higher for LE,NONET participants.

In summary, LE,NONET students experienced:

- 100% increase in term-to-term continuation
- 20% increase in graduation rates
- 67% reduction in withdrawal rates
- One extra year of persistence

Figure 2: Withdrawal, continuation and graduation rates for three comparison groups (percentage by group)

Registration status	Group		
	Historical cohort, Sept 2005 (%)	Participants, Sept 2009 (%)	Non-participants, Sept 2009 (%)
Continuing	486 (48.7)	110 (55.0)	202 (24.7)
Graduated	230 (23.1)	64 (32.0)	218 (26.6)
Withdrawn	281 (28.2)	26 (13.0)	397 (48.5)
Total	997 (100)	200 (100)	819 (100)

THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Several key themes from the qualitative research are explored in this section. The individual LE,NONET programs are evaluated in great depth in the full final report.

Exploring the meaning of "Success"

One of the key questions in the interviews, surveys, and focus groups explored the meaning of "success" for Aboriginal students. The vast majority of students (92%) agreed that the LE,NONET programs contributed to their success, but the definition of that success was shaped by individual, cultural, and community factors. A small number of students talked about success in purely academic terms, saying that, like non-Aboriginal students, success is about doing well in their academic program and long-term career goals. However, the majority of students saw success as much more than that, and they defined their own personal success as inextricably linked to broader community change. In this way, students said their education was meaningless if it did not allow them to use their skills as tools for meeting the needs of their families and communities. Students also said that success included bringing their whole selves to their educational experience, with a priority on strengthening and exploring Indigenous cultural teachings and values.

Impact of Financial Support on Student Success

More than $1,600,000 went directly to students in the form of bursaries, emergency relief funds and stipends. Students said the financial support offered through LE,NONET had a profound impact on their ability to do well in their studies and relieved the stress they suffered as a result of financial hardship. Students said they felt supported by the university and by the LE,NONET programs because of both the financial aid programs and the stipends they received through other LE,NONET programs.

Building Community

Student respondents were asked a number of questions about how the LE,NONET programs contributed to their sense of community connectedness. Overwhelmingly, students said that the programs increased their sense of connection to Aboriginal communities—both on and off campus—as well as to the broader university community. The issue of community connectedness was strongly linked to both a feeling of being part of a broader group of Aboriginal people and the development of individual relationships with staff, faculty, elders, community members, and other students.

Overwhelmingly, students said that the LE,NONET programs helped them to feel connected to the Aboriginal community on campus (see Figure 3 below). The Preparation Seminar and Peer Mentor Program received the most positive responses from students, as these programs were designed to bring Aboriginal students from various backgrounds together in a shared space. Students said these programs provided a structured space for Aboriginal students to learn from one another, develop friendships, and share with one another across differences.

Did the LE,NONET program contribute to your success?

92% of students said YES

It's really connected me with the university because, just as a student, you're usually sitting in the classroom, and then I get home and study, but this actually got me involved with some of the people that are doing good things at the university and I saw a different side of the university, something that I'd never seen before.

LE,NONET student

Figure 3 "The LE,NONET program helped me to feel part of the Aboriginal community on campus" (all programs)
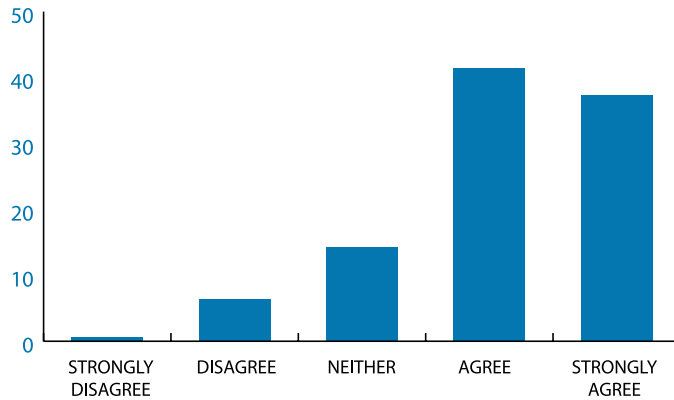
Although support was lower on the question of connectedness to the university community than on the question of connectedness to the Aboriginal community on campus, the majority of student respondents said the LE,NONET programs helped them to feel part of the university community (see Figure 4 below). The Research Apprenticeship Program had the most positive responses (51.1% agreed and 22.2% strongly agreed), largely due to the relationships that students developed with specific professors, departments, or research centres during the course of their placements.

Figure 4: "The LE,NONET program helped me to feel part of the general UVic community" (all programs)
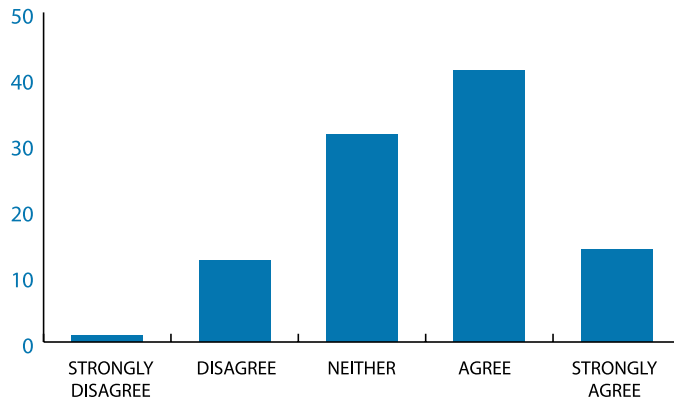
DEVELOPING INDIGENOUS IDENTITY

The success of Aboriginal students was seen as integrally linked to the strengthening of students' identities and making education relevant to their cultural and community contexts (see Figure 5 below). Student participants came to LE,NONET from diverse cultural backgrounds, with varying degrees of cultural knowledge and community experience. Some students had never lived on reserve or had grown up away from their Aboriginal family members, while other students grew up in remote First Nations communities with little exposure to mainstream society. The LE,NONET programs were challenged to support the diversity of individual Aboriginal student identities but were highly successful despite these intersecting factors. One key element was providing centralized programming designed specifically for Aboriginal students in a safe space where Aboriginal students could find and use their voices. Specific cultural components were also significant contributors to students' Indigenous identities.

Figure 5: "The LE,NONET program helped me to develop a sense of who I am as an Aboriginal person" (all programs)

Program	Strongly disagree %	Disagree %	Neither %	Agree %	Strongly agree %
Peer Mentor Program	7.5	18.9	22.6	34.0	17.0
Emergency Relief Fund	6.7	20.0	20.0	26.7	26.7
Bursary Program	2.4	13.4	25.6	46.3	12.2
Research Apprenticeship	2.2	4.4	17.8	28.9	46.7
Community Internship	0.0	6.0	6.0	28.0	60.0
Preparation Seminar	0.0	4.6	7.7	41.5	46.2
Total	**2.6**	**10.3**	**16.8**	**36.8**	**33.5**

STAFF AND FACULTY
ABORIGINAL CULTURAL TRAINING

The Staff and Faculty Aboriginal Cultural Training (SFACT) was created in order to contribute to the overall project goal of making the university a more welcoming environment for Aboriginal learners. The program was seen as an important tool in making faculty and staff aware of the unique needs of Aboriginal students, the diversity of backgrounds and experiences Aboriginal students bring to the campus, and the ways in which faculty and staff could support Aboriginal students to succeed.

The SFACT component of the LE,NONET Project comprised three major initiatives:

1. Needs assessment: A needs assessment was conducted to inform the development of the SFACT workshop modules as well as future awareness-raising initiatives for staff and faculty at the university. A total of 267 people participated in the assessment, including Aboriginal students (both undergraduate and graduate), professionals in Aboriginal education, and university staff and faculty. The needs assessment final report was released in 2009 and is available on the LE,NONET website (www.uvic.ca/lenonet).

2. Online curriculum: Eight online units were created by specialist consultants who were hired to write the curriculum, and included text and multimedia content on a range of issues. Content areas included First Nations, Métis and Inuit culture and history, as well as modules on racism, Indigenous worldview, and Indigenous research. Completion of the units was a requirement of faculty advisors as part of the Research Apprenticeship Program.

Overall, faculty respondents said that the online curriculum contained a wealth of important information and was a useful resource for faculty and staff working with Indigenous students. However, the requirement that the online curriculum be completed by Research Apprenticeship advisors was seen as an unnecessary barrier by many faculty respondents. The majority of research respondents recommended that the material be used as a resource rather than a requirement in future program implementation.

3. Workshops: Five half-day workshops were created by curriculum development consultants who worked with the SFACT Advisory Committee and LE,NONET staff on determining the workshop content and format. The Elders' Voices group on campus was involved in the delivery of the workshops and brought cultural teachings and knowledge that helped to ground the workshops in the local territory. The guiding threads through the workshops were building respectful relationships and an Indigenous Knowledge framework of responsibility, reciprocity, relationship, respect reverence and balance.

Participants provided overwhelmingly positive feedback on the SFACT workshops. The involvement of elders and the experiential nature of the workshops were both personally and professionally meaningful for a majority of participants.

The elders put wisdom, kindness, and even humour into the "information" thus making it "shared knowledge." They are the critical difference from all the workshops/ seminars/ courses that I have taken over the years. Their humility and grace exemplifies what our common humanity should be — but at the same time does not diminish our own pain or responsibility.

LE,NONET student
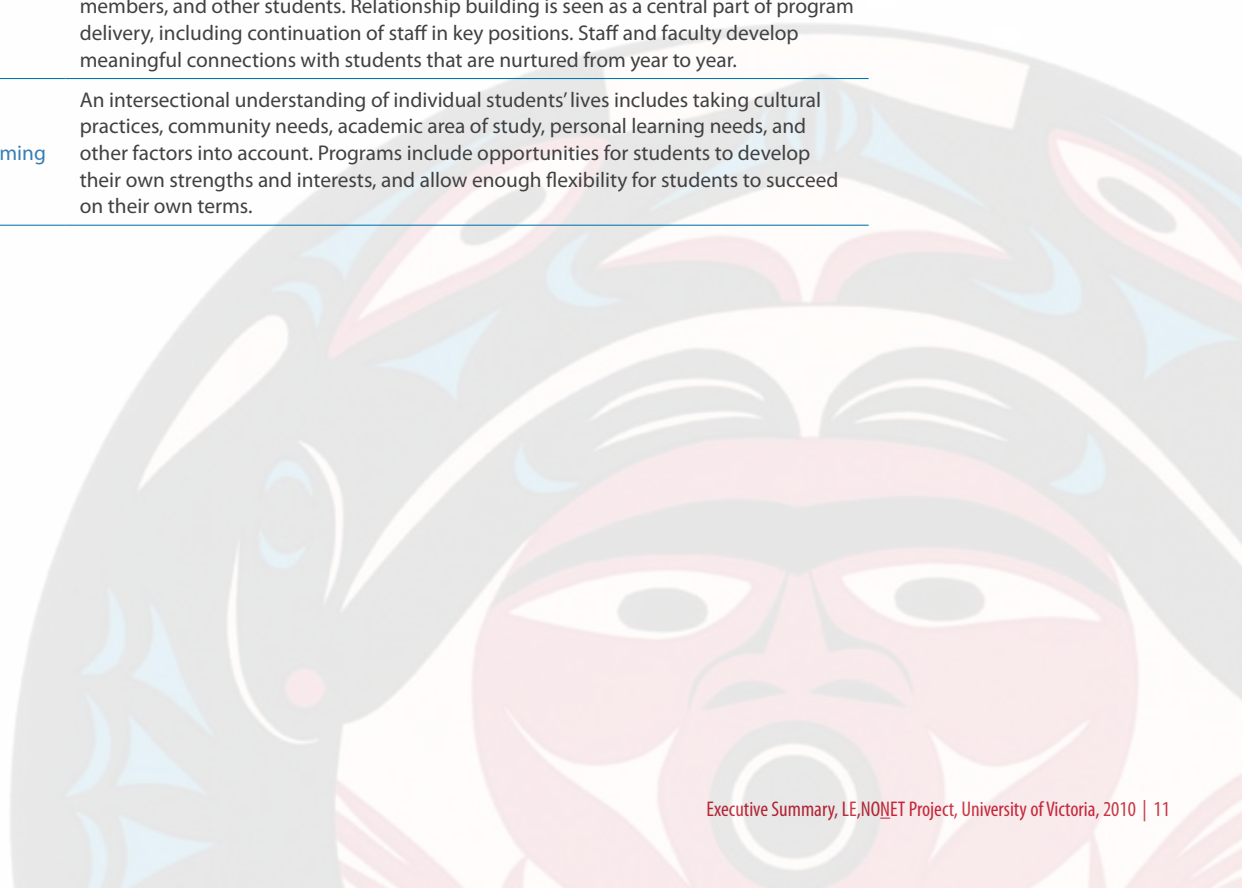
BEST PRACTICE PRINCIPLES

The LE,NONET Project demonstrated that post-secondary institutions can create culturally relevant programming to support the success of Indigenous post-secondary students.

Through analysis of the responses from the qualitative research, several key principles emerged as common threads running through the various programs. We hope that the University of Victoria and other post-secondary institutions will use these research findings and key principles as a jumping-off point for enhancing existing programs and for creating new programs to support the success of Aboriginal students.
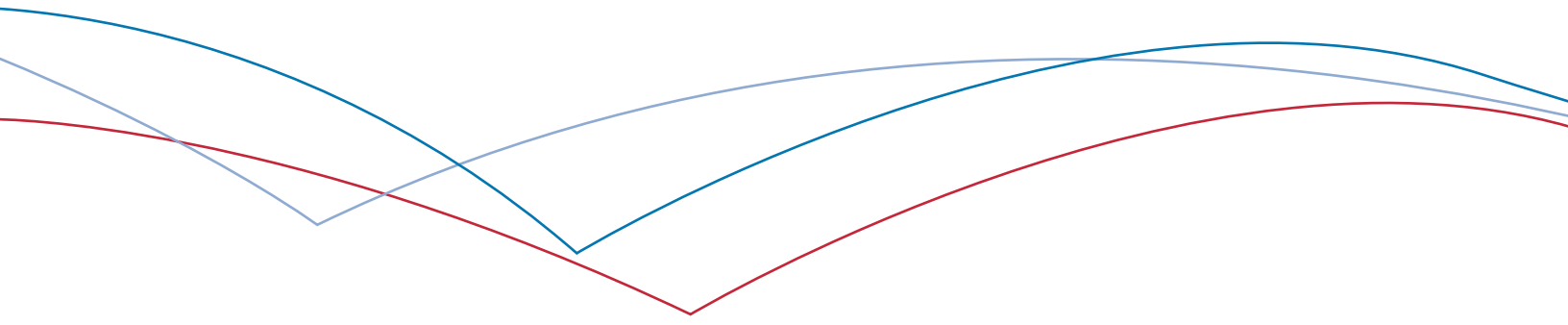
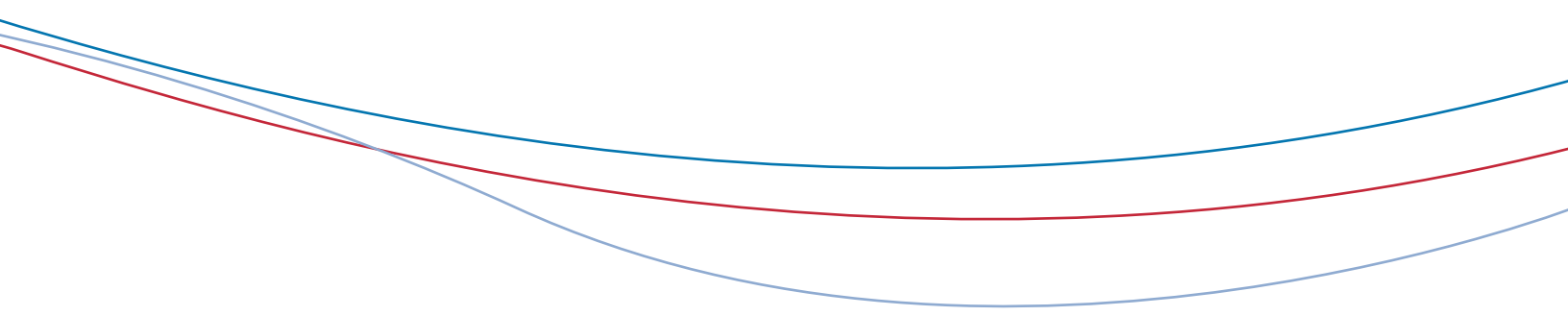| Principle	Description
Reciprocal learning	Students have opportunities to share their strengths, knowledge, and experiences, as well as to learn from the skills and knowledge of professors, staff, mentors, and other students. Students have as much to offer as they have to gain and know that their perspective is valued.
Supporting Indigenous identity development	Students feel seen and respected as Indigenous people. Students from diverse backgrounds and identity perspectives (rural, urban, culturally grounded, displaced, Métis, First Nations, Inuit, and other) are valued and supported. Indigenous identity is multifaceted and complex, and this diversity is given room to grow.
Culturally relevant programming	Cultural activities and knowledge are integrated into programs for students. This includes the use of local traditional practices, involvement of local elders, and the incorporation of students' own cultural teachings into the program activities.
Community building	Indigenous students are provided with a space in which a sense of community is facilitated, encouraged, and supported. Students have opportunities to build ongoing connections with Indigenous faculty, staff, and other students on campus, as well as with the broader Indigenous communities off campus. Community is developed out of a sense of being cared for, nurtured, valued, and embraced as a whole person; extended family is also welcome, including children and partners.
Relationship building	Students develop lasting relationships with Indigenous faculty, UVic staff, community members, and other students. Relationship building is seen as a central part of program delivery, including continuation of staff in key positions. Staff and faculty develop meaningful connections with students that are nurtured from year to year.
Individualized programming	An intersectional understanding of individual students' lives includes taking cultural practices, community needs, academic area of study, personal learning needs, and other factors into account. Programs include opportunities for students to develop their own strengths and interests, and allow enough flexibility for students to succeed on their own terms.

I'm really going to miss it, actually. It was safe, it was warm, it was comfortable, it was like a little piece of home in some ways…. we're reminded what are some of our teachings, and one of them is respect, respect all people, and to be reminded of that was really great.
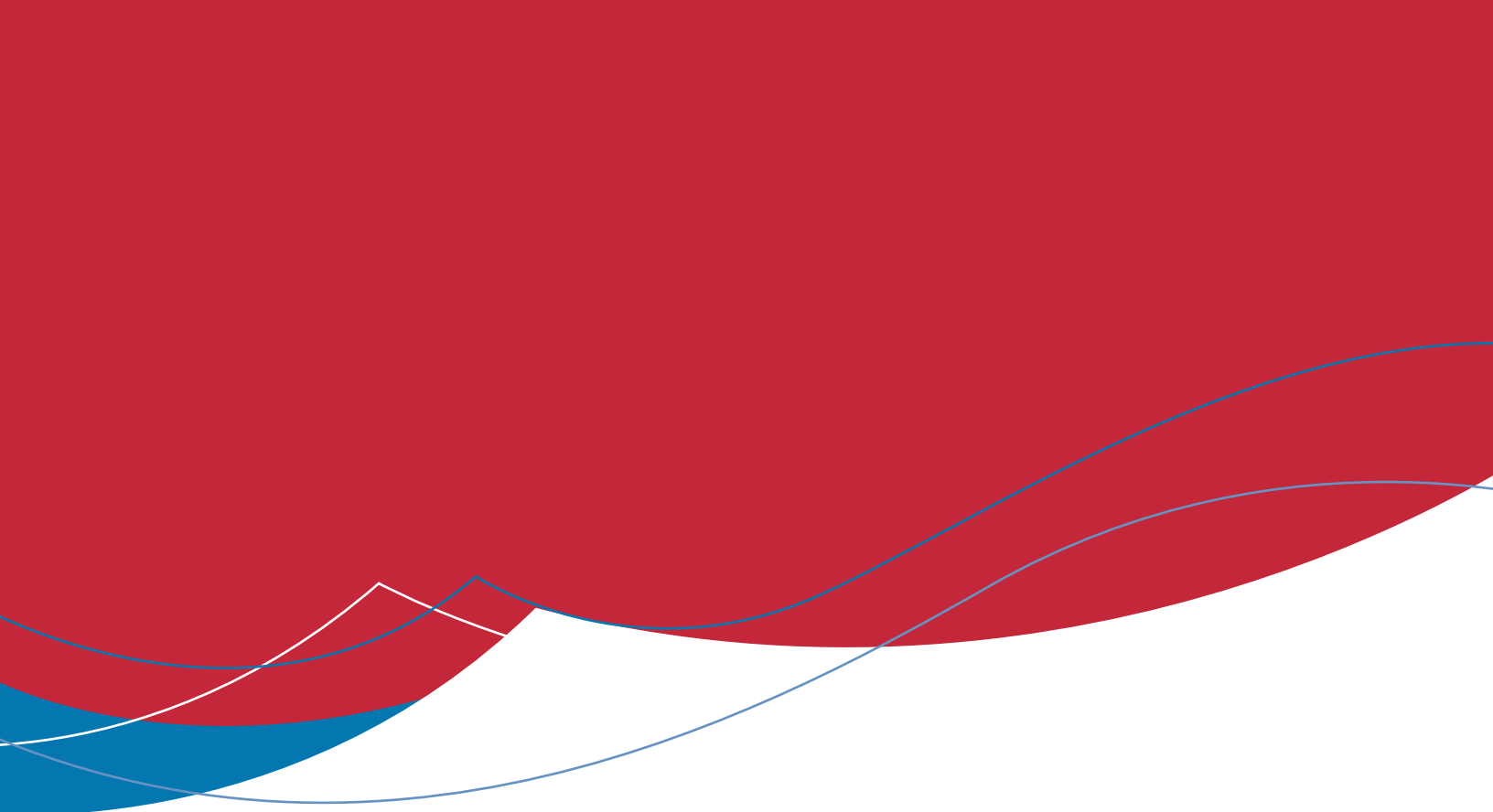
LE,NONET student