Indigenous Student Achievement Pathways at USASK | connecting students through peer mentorship in our community for learning

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Access, Entrance, and Enrichment

Established in 2012, University of Saskatchewan (USASK) Indigenous Student Achievement Pathways (ISAP; formerly ASAP) programming welcomes First Nations, Inuit and Métis students to post-secondary spaces with academically-grounded programming that builds confidence, knowledge, and skills, while connecting students to one another and to the academic community.[1]

ISAP First-year Learning Communities bring students with common academic goals together in 100-level courses, many of which are pre-requisites for degree and certificate programs that emphasize Indigenous perspectives (e.g. the wîcêhtowin Theatre Program, Indigenous Justice and Criminology (IJC, formerly ABJAC), Certificate in Indigenous Governance and Politics, Certificate in the Study of Indigenous Storytelling, and Bachelor of Indigenous Studies), and/or inter-college pathways that align with the aspirations of Indigenous students and communities (e.g. Nursing and Engineering Pathways).

Students in ISAP's 1st Year Learning Communities opt-in to a different kind of first-year experience that includes:
- Small class sizes, 3 classes per learning community
- Culturally-responsive instructors
- Community-engaged learning opportunities
- Dedicated academic advising team at the Trish Monture Centre for Student Success
- Preparatory STEM courses and developmental mathematics programming

At the Heart of ISAP's co-curricula programming is the **ISAP Peer Mentor Program**. ISAP peer mentors are upper year (year 2+) students, often alumni of ISAP's first-year learning communities, who share back to incoming ISAP students through weekly gatherings, contribute to College-wide community initiatives, and provide both formal and informal guidance on wayfinding in the University environment.

ISAP Peer Mentorship is recognized by the USASK Learning Charter and contributes to the development of ISAP Peer Mentor's Co-curricular record, a document validating and celebrating extra-curricular contributions. Peer Mentor Programming is intentionally designed not only to benefit first-year ISAP students, but to foster the development of leadership skills, professionalism, and confidence in participating peer mentors.

In this presentation, Myself (ISAP Peer Mentor 2017-present) and Dr. Sandy Bonny (ISAP Team Lead) will reflect on the ISAP Peer Mentor Program and it's benefits to our Community for Learning in the College of Arts & Science. It is often the little perks in ISAP that make a big difference for students.

Why do students opt-into ISAP LCs?

- Access to academic programs: addressing systemic barriers
- A community for learning
- Bookstore Bursaries and financial advocacy
- ISAP is committed to the success of each student
- Each term, ISAP works with 90-120 undergraduate students

> *The ISAP feeling of community within the university's huge environment really helped me feel like I belonged!*
> *- 1st year ISAP student*

- ISAP students are twice as likely to continue on to 2nd year than their peers
- 95% of ISAP students would recommend ISAP to a sibling or friend
- ISAP courses build foundational skills and open new degree and career pathways
- Academic confidence and sense of belonging were the top two outcomes that students reported gaining by participating in ISAP.[1]

The "LC" Hour & ISAP Community Events

A Learning Community (LC) Hour is a weekly meeting time among students in an ISAP learning community and two upper year peer mentors. LC Hour programming aligns with the disciplinary focus of the LC (STEM, Social Science / Humanities, or Fine Arts) and provides a space to develop study skills, participate in cultural activities, explore career options, discuss 'big ideas' and common interests, learn from the peer mentors' experience and perspectives, and make lifelong friendships!

ISAP LC hours are coordinated to fall on the same day and time between ISAP cohorts (usually 3 to 4 each term) — this allows the whole ISAP community to come together to host special events like end of term celebrations, faculty and Elder visits, and to host special guests and speakers.

ISAP LC Programming is planned collaboratively between the ISAP Staff and the Peer Mentor Team and addresses the needs of our student community through a holistic lens (Fig. 1)

Figure 1. A Holistic framework for academic advising guides interactions between staff and students at the Trish Monture Centre for Student Success, and informs ISAP LC development.[2]

ISAP LC Programming Aims to:

1. **Respond to Students' academic needs**
   a. e.g. Workshop on tips for Exam preparation, Approaches to Notetaking, Communicating with your Professors and Teaching Assistants
   b. Advocacy of an Indigenous Student Advising team through the Trish Monture Centre for Student Success

2. **Respond to Students' emotional, social and spiritual needs**
   a. Connection to Peers through ice-breakers and games
   b. Connection to Indigenous Role Models and Alumni
   c. Connection to Elders, Cultural Knowledge keepers
   d. Safe space for Discussion of Student concerns and achievements

3. **Respond to Student's physical needs**
   a. Textbook bursary to support purchase of learning materials
   b. Annual gatherings and meals
   c. Laptop loan program
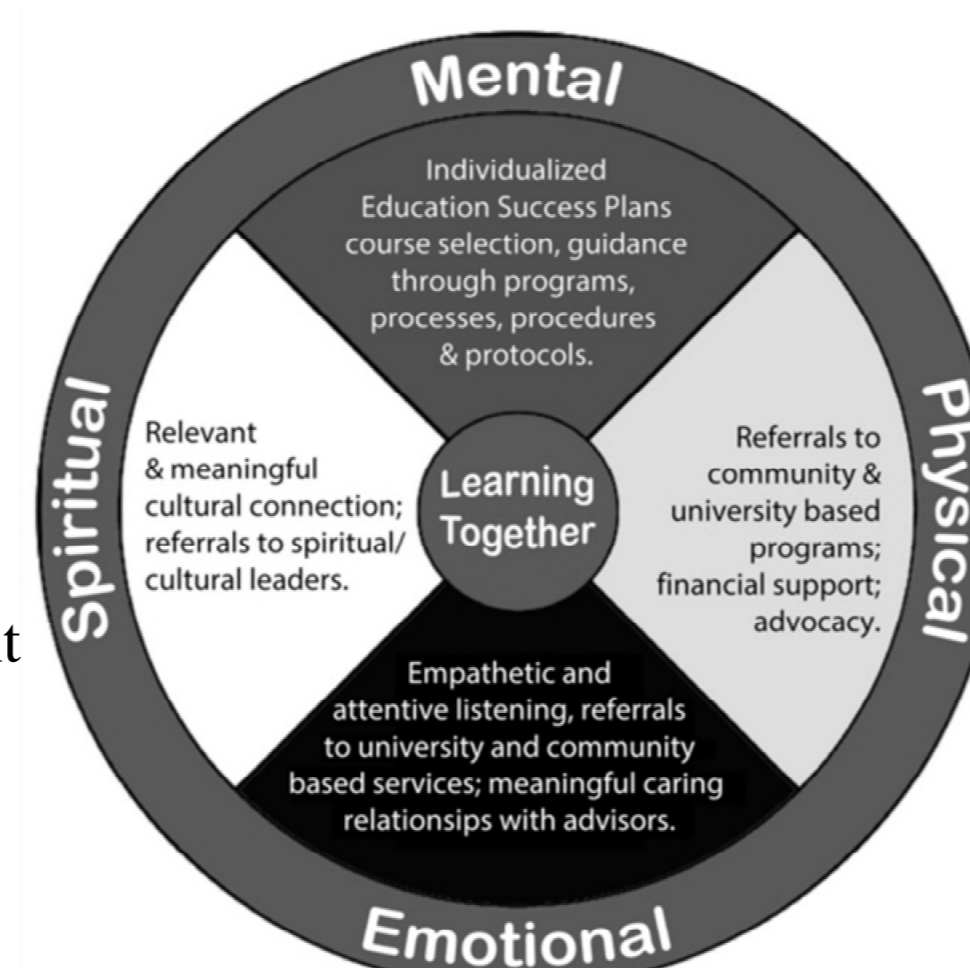
Mentee to Mentor, my ISAP Experience
— Tiffany Benn

ISAP was originally called ASAP (Aboriginal Student Achievement Program), with later changes to "Indigenous" to recognize the sovereignty of self-identification, and a further change from "Programs" to "Pathways", because one of the main ideologies of ISAP is to create pathways for Indigenous student success. When I enrolled with ISAP in my first year of university I was seeking shared experiences and connections with other Indigenous students like myself.

I applied to be an ISAP peer mentor after my first term with the motivation to help other ISAP students feel comfortable, and feel like they are not alone—but also, to keep my own sense of connection to an Indigenous community of learners as I moved toward second year. As a Peer Mentor, my role is to make students feel like they belong and to encourage their success, but my interactions with ISAP students have fostered the same in me. It is extremely rewarding to see a student I mentored recognize me and continue to keep a connection after their LC has finished.

Peer mentorship gave me the confidence and reassurance that as an Indigenous woman I deserve to be in post-secondary studies, and I can do it! I don't know if I would have graduated from my Bachelor of Sociology Program, or applied to my current program in the School of Social Work without ISAP. I am happy they extended ISAP for 2nd year students with common course offerings because I do remember a difficult transition into mainstream programming. Beyond co-curricular connection and friendships, I believe peer mentorship helps students engage and want to succeed in their courses more so than some academic approaches because it has a positive regard for success and is more interactive, engaging and encouraging. For example, it is through ISAP that I have prepared my first Poster Presentation for a Canada Wide Gathering to share my experiences with a Pathway that I walked and which has helped me get to where I am now.

In my 5 years of experience with ISAP, I have witnessed how ISAP LC hours and staff support help students feel valued and like they belong in our dominantly colonial campus settings—especially when there were Indigenous social issues happening that left a lot of Indigenous students feeling unvalued, or even unsafe. Poignant examples are the impact of Colton Boushie's Murder and the Gerald Stanley Trial in 2016 and 2018 on students here in Treaty 6. Our LC discussion circles, and ISAP Elder visits, created a safe place for students to be able to unload fears, concerns and anger when they needed. Sometimes, as Peer Mentors, we can be the bridges for support to help students connect with services on campus to keep healthy and to keep challenges in perspective, whether they are social, academic, or personal to their experience.

ISAP has also created awesome opportunities to connect with Indigenous role models. I've had the pleasure to chat with Harold Johnson, to laugh with Richard Van Camp (Fig. 2), and to bead with the "Bead Queen" Ruth Cuthand, as well as learn from numerous ISAP alumni—they come and share their experience and give students insight on what the future of success can bring.

Each year we welcome new students with a Summer Start Program that is designed to be inclusive, with youth camp programming so that student parents, and staff parents, can participate. I brought my son last year, and we planned activities for youth to engage with Elders and university students, helping them feel, already, that there is a place where they will belong at University one day. We have end of the term celebrations to connect with students and wish them the very best, which never ends with "good bye" but a "see 'ya later" as the connection is always there.

Figure 2. ISAP Peer Mentors Michael Thackery, Tiffany Benn and Milo Cameron with guest speaker, Dene Author and Filmmaker Richard Van Camp (Fall 2019)

Figure 3. Métis artist April Doepker co-created a mural with ISAP students, faculty and staff centering the Nehiyaw word Kaskihowin in celebration of our collective activities toward achievement in teaching, learning and creative work in spring, 2018.[3]

Building a Community to Champion Learning
— Sandy Bonny

In 2018 the Office of the Associate Dean Indigenous, College of Arts & Science, interviewed seven Elders and Language keepers around the province of Saskatchewan, representing eight language groups and communities with diverse cultural perspectives and traditional pedagogies. They were asked to share words related to the idea of "Student Achievement" and ultimately contributed to a list of over 60 words. During Indigenous Student Achievement Week in February 2018, Métis artist April Doepker facilitated a community collaboration, the Living Language Wall, to share the words and their teachings and so inspire students to bring culture forward as an asset in their academic journeys (Fig. 3).

ISAP's peer mentorship program connects students across diverse areas of experience, interest in, and excitement for the opportunities available within and beyond post-secondary education. Mentors and mentees share and invest in one another's growth, creating a reciprocal space for learning that extends to faculty and staff. Echoing the ISAP program's focus on building skills for achievement, April selected the Nehiyaw word Kaskihowin "ability to succeed" to centre in her art piece – and invited members of the campus community to select words to surround it from the Language keeper's list. Here are some of the words and translations shared to the project:

(Nehiyaw; Randy Morin) **imagine** *waniskâ powâta*

oyakihi you can; **you have the ability** to achieve (Dakota/Lakota; Darlene Speidel)

(Dene; Isadore Campbell) **it is accomplished** (by a group of people) *dáhóhtsį*

Ilinniatitsiji teacher; one who **helps them learn** (Inuktitut; Bettina Spreng)

Gii mishkaatonaan chi wiichihitooyaahk **We found each other…**
…to help each other (Michif; Norman Fleury)[4]

These diverse understandings of what enables student success circle one another in April's painting, braiding into art and prayer and poetry. Learning is not a solitary act by individual students, pitched against exams and the professors who draft them. It is a communal activity, one which requires reflection and response among teachers and learners who "find one another" in post-secondary spaces; a daring commitment to imagination and collaboration. ISAP Peer Mentors meet and welcome first year Indigenous students with earned empathy and confidence gained from having created and claimed a space where their dreams belong – they are the heart of ISAP's Community for Learning.

REFERENCES

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