



## *Commentary*

### *Easing the culture shock of being in a space dominated by the educated*

Laura Forsythe  
*University of Winnipeg*

*aboriginal policy studies* Vol. 10, no. 1, 2022, pp. 90-96

This article can be found at:

<http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/aps/article/view/28241>

ISSN: 1923-3299

Article DOI: 10.5663/aps.v10i1.29405

---

*aboriginal policy studies* is an online, peer-reviewed and multidisciplinary journal that publishes original, scholarly, and policy-relevant research on issues relevant to Métis, non-status Indians and urban Aboriginal people in Canada. For more information, please contact us at [apsjournal@ualberta.ca](mailto:apsjournal@ualberta.ca) or visit our website at [www.nativestudies.ualberta.ca/research/aboriginal-policy-studies-aps](http://www.nativestudies.ualberta.ca/research/aboriginal-policy-studies-aps).

# Easing the Culture Shock of Being in a Space Dominated by the Educated

Laura Forsythe  
*University of Winnipeg*

I want to share my unique perspective on being the first (and thus far only) Métis Inclusion Coordinator in a post-secondary institution, even though Métis make up 40%–55% of Indigenous students on campuses across the Métis homeland, which ranges from Ontario through to British Columbia. I begin with a land acknowledgment in Michif to ground this work and demonstrate the significance of the Métis Inclusion Coordinator's role in understanding who we are at the University of Manitoba. Daañ lii Michif leu teer-aeñ d'niikinaahk eekwaa Daañ lii Anishinaabeg, lii Krii, lii Oji-Krii, lii Syoo pi lii Dene nishtam leu peeyii, lii kampoos d'yuniversitii di Manitoba pi lii kampoos d'yuniversitii di Winnipeg ashteewa. University of Manitoba campuses are located on the original lands of Anishinaabeg, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota, and Dene Peoples and on the homeland of the Métis Nation; this is where I live, work, and study.

Laura Forsythe d-ishinikaashon. My name is Laura Forsythe. Ma famii kawyeshe Roostertown d-oshciwak. My family a long time ago was from Rooster Town. Anosh ma famii Winnipeg wikiwak. Today, my family lives in Winnipeg. Ma Parenti, or my ancestors, are Huppe, Ward, Berard, Morin, and Cyr. My ancestors worked for the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company. En Michif La Rivyeer Roozh kaa-oschiyaan niya. I am a Michif who is from the Red River. Niya la primere la ko-ordinatrees kaa-akimaahk lii Michif. I am the first Métis Inclusion Coordinator employed at a post-secondary institution. My lineage includes Joseph Huppe, who fought in the Victory of Frog Plain, and my maternal great-grandmother Nora Berard was born in Rooster Town on land known as Lot 31 and owned by my ancestor Jean-Baptiste Berard. I am descended from voyageurs and buffalo hunters. I am descended from farmers, ranchers, teamsters, seamstresses, and tradespeople; I come from the working class that built Manitoba and the Métis nation. I am not descended from doctors, lawyers, or engineers. I tell you this as a demonstration of the total anomaly that I, Laura Forsythe, am writing this at all. I share this to establish my experience in the academy as foreign, with no familial support and no one within my kinship ties, to ease the culture shock of being in a space dominated by the educated (Forsythe 2021).

Many Métis scholars share my experience in the academy; colonial actors enforced a historical disconnect from the academy affecting those with deep roots in the homeland. Despite this disconnect, a momentum has been creating waves of first-generation Métis scholars who have been entering the academy in the 2000s. According to Statistics Canada, in 2006, only 8.9% of self-identifying Métis aged 25–64 reported having a bachelor's degree

or higher, a figure that rose to 13.2% in 2016. Of the Métis population, 44.5% had no post-secondary education, 25.6% had college education, and 6.9% had started an apprenticeship. These figures demonstrate how rare it has been and still is for Métis to have kinship ties with those with experience in the academy (Statistics Canada 2016).

Despite historic underfunding and persistent efforts to exclude Métis from post-secondary education (Fisher et al. 2006; Racette 2007), Métis students continue to persevere and are seeking education at that level in greater numbers. In 2020, the University of Manitoba (U of M) enrolled 1,389 self-identifying Métis students, who comprised 54% of the self-declared Indigenous student body (U of M 2021). In an era of reconciliation, the Métis National Council and the Government of Canada signed the Canada-Métis Nation Accord in 2017 to ensure a stable nation-to-nation governance relationship. The signing of the Canada-Métis Nation Post-Secondary Education Sub-Accord in 2019 aimed to close the attainment gap between Canadians and Métis learners by supporting 7,000 Métis students. Most recently, the Manitoba Métis Federation (MMF) announced an agreement with the federal government that provides \$45 million over five years to fund Métis citizens' post-secondary education. The MMF's Post-Secondary Education Support System received 1,391 applications for post-secondary funding in the 2020–2021 intake year (MMF 2021). Additionally, through the Louis Riel Institute Bursary, a \$2 million endowment, hundreds of MMF citizens in financial need received support in 2020 to attend one of Manitoba's twelve post-secondary institutions. As the number of Métis students continues to rise, the need to accommodate and support their educational journeys becomes increasingly important.

In 2016, Indigenous Student Centre Director (and now Associate Vice-President Indigenous) Christine Cyr, a Métis woman driven by the programming she witnessed (and did not witness) during her two decades of service at the U of M, saw a need for Métis inclusion. Despite the large number of Métis students at the institution, Métis-specific programming and funding remained under 5% of Indigenous programming. Determined to change this situation, Cyr applied for and was awarded an Indigenous Initiatives Fund grant of \$25,000 to employ a part-time Métis Inclusion Coordinator and develop programming for the 2017–2018 fiscal year.

Having interviewed in April 2017, I started the next month on a term basis. I had ten hours a week to dedicate to developing this new portfolio at the U of M. The mandate was daunting: supporting Métis students, staff, and faculty at the U of M culturally, linguistically, academically, and politically while educating the broader campus about the Métis. Ten hours may not seem like much, unless one realizes the significance of having time dedicated to achieving a shared goal. At institutions across the homeland, Métis scholars, support staff, and administration with the best intentions attempt under the "Indigenous" umbrella to support Métis students, creating projects and opportunities from the sides of their desks when they can steal the time. Gabel (2019) warns of the workload placed on Indigenous students, faculty, and staff in campus reconciliation efforts, which speaks to the larger issue of the lack of dedicated time. In that context, ten hours seemed like a gift. After years of

creating student programming under the “Indigenous education” umbrella for all learners from all nations, I was able to focus on my own people.

Within a year, we had established the Manitoba Métis Federation Bison Local with the aim of building a relationship and creating a presence on campus that would assert a level of educational sovereignty at the U of M. We hosted a series of Southern Michif language lessons and culturally relevant workshops, including beading and pemmican making, all with the aim of establishing a broader sense of awareness that Métis needed and deserved space on campus. Unfortunately, the year was almost over, and the Indigenous Engagement Office chose not to continue funding this effort. Over my decade in Indigenous programming, I have witnessed two institutions in different provinces practice a model of short-term funding for Indigenous initiatives that prevents long-lasting change. Like many Indigenous initiatives taken up by institutions, the one-year Métis Inclusion Coordinator pilot would be discontinued while providing material for the glowing account of the U of M’s commitment to the Indigenous pillars found in its strategic plan (U of M 2020). This is precisely what would have happened if not for a chance encounter with Glorian Chartrand, wife of MMF President David Chartrand.

Part of the Métis Inclusion Coordinator’s role is to attend events, conferences, and consultations run by the MMF to build relationships; encourage student engagement; and gain an awareness of opportunities for students, staff, and faculty. At one such event, I began speaking with Glorian about the progress we were making at the U of M and the community we had started to create. Excited, Glorian inquired about the plans for the following year, and I reported that we would be ending this line of Metis-specific programming, lacking funding and a commitment from the institution. At this point, Glorian said I needed to meet her husband, who was, unbeknownst to me, David Chartrand. Not for the first time, the power and influence of a Métis woman would help keep a door open that seemed certain to close.

The U of M and MMF began a partnership with both parties having fiscal responsibility for and input on the way forward for Métis inclusion planning and implementation. Now, the coordinator reports to both the U of M and MMF, has a seat on the Louis Riel Institute (LRI) board to ensure two-way communication, and a position on high-level U of M administrative committees to provide the perspective of Manitoba’s Métis community. An essential aspect of this journey is understanding how we used a collaborative approach to reach the point at which the Métis Inclusion Coordinator is now a jointly funded permanent position with full-time benefits, vacation, pension, and union membership. However, that leaves out the role’s tangible impact on the community and its ability to change how the U of M values the Métis among its ranks.

The U of M position is the only one across the Métis homeland, which leaves a question in many minds: What does Métis inclusion mean? Of course, every institution has Indigenous programming that strives to offer opportunities to Metis, Inuit, and First Nations. However, an honest appraisal of these efforts shows that Métis and Inuit are often afterthoughts and that inclusion is a form of Indigenous affirmative action rather than a

norm. This type of programming results in the bare minimum of inclusion and leads the community to show disdain rather than to be seen as builders. For example, Métis-specific programming at the U of M amounted to four events in the 2015–2016 academic year; 2020–2021 saw 78 events, despite the pandemic.

The initial mandate to support students culturally, linguistically, academically, and politically by providing programming and opportunities to connect with their community and the MMF continued with the establishment of a permanent Métis Inclusion Coordinator position. These mandates were achieved through a series of consultations involving student stakeholders like the Métis University Students Association, the MMF Provincial Youth Advisory Committee, and the MMF Bison Local youth citizens enrolled at the U of M, who identified the types of events, workshops, and connections they believed would enhance their academic experience while building lifelong connections.

Alongside consultations with students, conducting meetings with MMF stakeholders such as cabinet and associate ministers in various portfolios looking to connect with students, promote the MMF's work, and seek relationships with researchers is an integral component of the coordinator role. Programming in partnership with MMF affiliates such as the Infinity Women's Secretariat and LRI also solidifies the U of M–MMF relationship by providing a wide range of ways for students, staff, faculty, and the community to engage in programming while getting to know the Red River Métis and their governance. These consultations played an important role in actualizing self-determination and educational sovereignty through student programming at the U of M.

Supporting the education of both Métis and non-Métis at the U of M culturally, linguistically, academically, and politically began with consultations with various stakeholders and resulted in a series of opportunities that brought the Métis and university community together. Cultural implementation of Métis inclusion programming has occurred based on a wide range of suggestions from students and the community, including hands-on workshops run by LRI such as beading circles and a special online session with Métis artist Jennine Krauchi during the pandemic with over 200 participants in partnership with the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, aimed at solidifying our reconnection to our ways of living. Other workshops included the creation of capotes, the traditional fur trade wear created from Hudson's Bay blankets with Elder Nancy Gouliquer, and a voyageur history lesson, which included making pemmican with elders. In partnership with Waterways, a summer canoeing program allowed Indigenous youth, students, staff, and faculty to ply the waters of their ancestors by paddling down the Red and Assiniboine Rivers, with financial support from the MMF. Given the profound disconnect caused by the hiding in plain sight that many families have done to cope, learning to make bannock and Métis boulettes in Michif with Elder Verna Demontigny was a significant moment in the lives of our students. These types of cultural workshops offer a glimpse into the past and can provide Métis students with a sense of self-connecting to their ancestors.

Linguistic implementation of Michif programming at the institution began in 2018. The U of M already taught Cree, Anishinabemowin, and other French languages spoken by our

Métis ancestors, but a gap could be filled for those from the Red River by reclaiming Michif. The Department of Native Studies was keen to add Michif to its repertoire but lacked the connection to the community required to identify a teacher. Therefore, the relationships built with LRI and the late Lawrie Barkwell by the Office of Métis Inclusion proved crucial. Grasping the great amount of time that creating a new Michif program would take was one of my first undertakings. Heather Souter, language advocate and co-founder of the Prairies to Woodlands Indigenous Language Revitalization Circle, was recommended; we shared a bond and passion for Michif revitalization. Over two years, we hosted free community Michif lessons to demonstrate the public interest in that language and prove to the Faculty of Arts that it was a viable endeavour. After hundreds of people attended our weekend sessions, we were granted a summer pilot to offer NATV 1300, a special topics course in Michif. It has since blossomed into sections of Michif running three terms a year at the U of M, with free community offerings continuing monthly.

Academic implementation has evolved over the past four years, from bringing attention to the need to highlight Métis scholars and those researching the Métis at the U of M to the student body through a series of lectures offered in the circle room of Migizii Agamik (the Indigenous Student Centre) to offering the Métis Awareness Monday programming viewed weekly by thousands online. By spotlighting Métis scholars, we can learn from their research in multiple disciplines while sharing the possibilities for students and acknowledging that not all students wish to participate in academic lectures and events with community members and outside organizations. Over the years, the programming's popularity and good-natured badgering from my office increased Métis inclusion in other speaker series offered at the U of M, including the Indigenous Scholars Speaker Series, Fireside Chats, and the Indigenous Studies Colloquium.

Political implementation, perhaps the rarest form of programming for an institution to tackle, has surprisingly been met with open arms from the U of M and the community. Youth are historically disconnected from politics and are often voiceless within their Métis locals. Establishing the MMF Bison Local created a bridge between the institution and the Métis government that proved highly effective in connecting students with both parties. Opportunities to apply for MMF citizenship through citizenship drives prior to COVID-19 enabled hundreds of students to reclaim their birthright and provided them the opportunity to access the funding discussed above. Allowing students, staff, and faculty to easily renew or apply for harvester cards on campus increased people's engagement with multiple entities of the Métis government. Over the past four years, Minister of Housing & Property Management Will Goodon has attended events both virtually and in person to clarify for our community the direction of the MMF, such as the implementation of the First Time Home Buyers' Program, the assertion of the Métis Homeland Map, and the 2021 departure from the Métis National Council. We provided Red River Métis students, staff, and faculty with access to direct knowledge and an ability to ask questions, which gave the MMF immediate feedback from tomorrow's leaders.

Providing the Métis with a dedicated support staff person who is one of their own, shares their lived experience, and understands the spectrum of their identity journeys while



working alongside their government provides a level of educational sovereignty unmatched in Indigenous student support at Canadian universities. It ensures a Métis voice in the day-to-day programming aimed at Métis students, staff, and faculty, an effort that goes far beyond biannual blueprint meetings or random advisory opportunities gifted by the institution. It provides space for true collaboration in determining what will be presented and who will speak about and for the Métis. In a world where identity fraud appears to be an increasingly urgent issue, the least we can do is confer with the Métis Nation as to who will share our histories and how they will be told.

As scholars and theorists, many of you will have thoughts about Indigenization and inclusion efforts from a theoretical perspective. Many may even argue against the creation of Métis community programming within the academy. Gaudry and Hancock (2019) speak to the need to help Métis students deal with the realities of the post-secondary environment and the broader colonial world around them. From my lived experience witnessing the transformation of students over their academic journeys, Métis inclusion initiatives are key to their sense of belonging and their learning journeys. Watching those who have engaged in programming that assisted them in rekindling their kinship ties, told stories wiped from their families' collective memories by colonization, and given them a sense of belonging in the foreign academy has given me a deep appreciation for the power of Métis inclusion in post-secondary institutions.

## References

- Fisher, D., K. Rubenson, J. Bernatchez, R. Clift, G. Jones, J. Lee, M. Macivor, J. Meredith, T. Shanahan, and C. Trottier. 2006. *Canadian Federal Policy and Postsecondary Education*. Centre for Policy Studies in Higher Education and Training, Faculty of Education, University of British Columbia.
- Forsythe, L. 2021. "Becoming the Métis Inclusion Coordinator." In *Brave Work in Education*, edited by MacDonald and J. Markides, 181–187 : DIO Press.
- Gabel, C. 2019. "Being an Indigenous CRC in the era of the TRC #Notallitscrackeduptobe." *Aboriginal Policy Studies* 7, no. 2: 88–98.
- Gaudry, A., and R. L. Hancock. 2012. "Decolonizing Métis Pedagogies in Postsecondary Settings." *Canadian Journal of Native Education* 35, no. 1: 7–22.
- Manitoba Métis Federation. 2021. *Provincial Education*. Retrieved March 14<sup>th</sup>, 2022 from <https://www.mmf.mb.ca/provincial-education>
- Racette, S. F. 2007. Métis education. *Indigenous Saskatchewan Encyclopedia*. [https://teaching.usask.ca/indigenoussk/import/metis\\_education.php](https://teaching.usask.ca/indigenoussk/import/metis_education.php)
- Statistics Canada. 2017. Table 37-10-0099-01: *Distribution of the population aged 25 to 64 (total and with Aboriginal identity), by highest certificate, diploma or degree and age group*. <https://doi.org/10.25318/3710009901-eng>
- University of Manitoba. 2021. "A profile of Canadian Indigenous Students: University of Manitoba." [https://umanitoba.ca/institutional-analysis/sites/institutional-analysis/files/2021-08/Indigenous\\_Profile\\_20.pdf](https://umanitoba.ca/institutional-analysis/sites/institutional-analysis/files/2021-08/Indigenous_Profile_20.pdf)
- University of Manitoba. 2020. "Taking Our Place: University of Manitoba Strategic Plan 2015-2020". <https://umanitoba.ca/sites/default/files/2020-06/um-strategic-plan-2015-2020.pdf>