

Guiding Circles Encourages Successful Career Choices

When Nova Scotia's employment opportunities shifted away from resource industries (like fishing and forestry), many maritime residents came to the realization that a post-secondary education was quickly becoming the key to long-term success.

Today, for example, more than 25,000 students attend classes at 13 Nova Scotia Community College campuses, spread out across the province. It's an enrollment rate that reflects a dynamic shift towards skill-based careers that demand a certificate, diploma or degree.

Unfortunately, despite a new appreciation for education, many students will first have to achieve a variety of core competencies before course enrollment can take place. And, for Aboriginal students, the hurdles may be even greater.

"There are 250,000 people with very low literacy levels in Nova Scotia, who need to raise them," says Laurie Edwards, director of career services at Nova Scotia Community College (NSCC). They find themselves out of work, they want to take training but they need a high school diploma."

It's a legacy of the past where little more than muscle was required on a job application. Fortunately, there's help, including the option of completing a true high school diploma (not an equivalency) without ever leaving the community.

To assist potential students with entrance into NSCC, the college has established "schools of access" that focus on four main industry sectors:

- Health and Human Services
- Trades and Technology
- Business
- Applied Arts and New Media

These schools of access help potential students prepare for future careers, meet entrance requirements and expose them to a variety of educational choices.

In four of the 13 provincial college campuses, NSCC also offers First Nations counsellors who have been trained in the use of the *Guiding Circles* career development program - a workshop that combines traditional Aboriginal teachings with contemporary career exercises that awaken an individual's sense of self-esteem.

Through specially-designed *Guiding Circles* storytelling activities, students are able to relate their life experiences to career planning in a method that creates self-confidence, hope and vision.

"It allows them to discuss the theme of their lives...work, spirituality, identity, community," says Edwards. Really, this is a career planning model that we need to use with everyone," she adds.

Using the *Guiding Circles* holistic approach, Edwards says counsellors can help each potential student find their individual strengths and understand how those strengths can relate to a successful career choice.

NSCC counselors use the *Guiding Circles* tools and activities in an oral manner, to help offset any issues with literacy and they focus on revealing and recognizing a participant's talents - even when the participant doesn't believe they have any.

In addition, the whole *Guiding Circles* program is delivered in the community - an aspect that helps make the participant more at ease.

“It’s very important that the first transition into an educational environment occur there,” Edwards says. Because of residential schools of the past, there is still much healing that needs to take place,” she adds.

Guiding Circles was launched in 2003 by the Aboriginal Human Resource Council and *Guiding Circles* authors, to forward this unique approach nationally and internationally. The NSCC has been using *Guiding Circles* it for the past five years and, in the fall of 2009, the college will pilot a modified version that trains parents in the *Guiding Circles* approach.

“Ideally, we would love to see parents, guardians and elders trained in the *Guiding Circles* method so that they can all act as career counsellors,” says Edwards. “Parents and elders have such a positive influence on young people and the choices they make. Ultimately, this method could also be used as a healing model that reflects on the past, present and future,” she says.

To learn more about how you or organization can get involved with *Guiding Circles* visit aboriginalhr.ca or call 1.866.711.5091.