



# Conversations with Calgary's Indigenous Community

A summary report of Calgary Learns' community consultation with  
Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and service providers about  
adult foundational learning

Over the winter of 2023-24, Calgary Learns engaged in a consultation process with representatives from Calgary's Indigenous community. Calgary Learns staff members had one on one conversations with Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and service providers. This report is a summary of input received in these conversations.

Elder Wanda First Rider led a validation ceremony for this report with consultation participants and witnesses on May 15, 2024.



# Conversations with Calgary's Indigenous Community

Calgary Learns reconciliation journey has been intentional, purposeful, and emergent.

Calgary Learns receives a Community Adult Learning Program (CALP) grant from Alberta Advanced Education to support local, part-time learning programs for adults with foundational learning needs (i.e. up to Grade 9 level) through grants, professional development, and advocacy. We work intentionally with the Indigenous community so the foundational learning needs of Indigenous adults can be better addressed. Our journey started well over a decade ago with our participation on the education funders table of the former Calgary Urban Aboriginal Initiative (CUAI). Over the years we have listened to and learned from the Indigenous community while engaging in a number of projects that support Indigenous adults to build their foundational skills and confidence.

In 2013, we received an additional grant specifically for Indigenous programming which then became an ongoing grant stream. As a result, we hired our first Indigenous Grant Liaison and consulted with the Indigenous community to shape our Indigenous granting stream ([consultation report](#)). Over the years, we have implemented the recommendations which included parallel processes (oral processes at both application and final reporting), Elder involvement, grants selection informed by Indigenous community leaders, and a focus on professional development to support practitioners with an understanding of history, reconciliation, and practices to support Indigenous adults on their learning journey. We strive to ensure that our granting process supports the basic tenet of “nothing about us, without us” as we work alongside Indigenous communities. Our Indigenous-specific grant-funded programs recommended by the Indigenous leaders have included: cultural programming, Indigenous language development, skills for learning, foundational upgrading, and employment readiness programs.

We acknowledge a responsibility to take steps toward understanding the impact of the Truth and Reconciliation findings. Calgary Learns staff and Board have been on a learning journey that has been supported through work with both Elders (Doreen Spence, Reg Crowshoe, Patrick Diagneault, Kerrie Moore, Florence Kelly, Sky Blue Morin), Community Leaders (Christy Morgan, Sharon Goulet, Michelle Scott, Buddie Dixon, Tim Fox), and our Indigenous Grant Liaisons (Monique Fry and Lisa L'Hirondelle). We were honoured when Elder Kerrie Moore recently referred to Calgary Learns as a relational ally - a term she coined to identify allies who take meaningful action.

As we continue our own work as an organization, and as funders of learning programs within this community, we are on a path of growth in our understanding of the complexity of the issues. This, in turn, shapes our work and our sense of our role within and responsibility to the community.

Our [2023-2025 Strategic Plan](#) reflects our desire to work towards addressing these complex needs. By setting intentional Indigenous strategic priorities in each pillar of our work, we remain focused on our commitment to better serve Indigenous adults with foundational learning needs. We strive to steward and strengthen a granting process that is responsive to the needs in our community and supports strong learning options that are available for Indigenous adults. We also believe it is critical for non-Indigenous facilitators and program designers to understand Indigenous history and worldviews, and to ground this

knowledge into safe and culturally appropriate learning spaces. This is our vision for our path to reconciliACTION.

Our work in this area has also been enabled by the generous support of the Calgary Foundation through a multi-year grant which concluded in 2023. As we approached the end of this grant and recognized the strains that our post-pandemic world has put on the foundational education field in general, it was time to intentionally re-engage with the Indigenous community to better understand the current adult foundational learning needs and where Calgary Learns can continue our role as a relational ally to best serve the foundational learning needs of Indigenous adults.

## Setting our Intentions

Our goals for the Indigenous Consultation were to:

- Ensure the Indigenous community has a strong voice in setting our priority foundational learning program areas for our grants for Indigenous adults
- Identify the foundational learning programming gaps that may be supported by grants for developing new Indigenous programming
- Create stronger learning pathways for Indigenous learners by sharing knowledge of existing foundational learning programs and “next step” programming with the community

What follows reflects what we heard during a consultation this winter with Indigenous and Metis Elders, Knowledge Holders, Community Leaders, and foundational learning providers. One-on-one conversations allowed us to settle deeper into listening and receive a breadth and depth of input from community leaders. We are grateful for the generosity of wisdom, knowledge, time, and energy that was shared with us.

This consultation, as noted, builds on a number of actions and commitments. Setting our current context is the Urban Society of Aboriginal Youth, 20/21 Indigenous Initiative grant that resulted in a (COVID-impacted) grounded-research project and the publication of the [Indigenous Literacy Assessment](#).

***“When aiming to understand topics such as literacy, it is paramount to understand that education was weaponized against Indigenous people for more than 100 years, and that many of those practices have evolved, not disappeared. The ongoing systemic challenges facing Indigenous people in Canada needs to be recognized, discussed and considered when evaluating data, understanding findings and viewing the information provided within this document.”*** Urban Society for Aboriginal Youth (USAY) – Indigenous Literacy Assessment

We recognize there are systemic barriers, as emphasized in the USAY report, for Indigenous adults returning to learning. Throughout this consultation process those systemic barriers and challenges were echoed and many shared personal stories to illustrate the impact. We also acknowledge the many significant and relevant factors that disproportionately impact/impede Indigenous adults' learning journeys. These factors result in inequitable access to income supports, housing, food security, employment opportunities, childcare, mental health services, etc.

# What We Heard

## Context

Although our focus for this consultation was to learn more about the foundational learning needs of Indigenous adults, all interviewees highlighted the interconnected needs that directly impact an adults' ability to pursue further learning. As was noted, many Indigenous adults who have foundational level skills are living in poverty and in order to have the privilege to prioritize building their skills, they need to have their basic needs addressed first. This need has been disproportionately exacerbated in our current economic climate. Indigenous adults are often facing rising living costs (childcare, transportation, rent, food etc.) that prevent them from investing the time in learning. These economic pressures have also contributed to an increase in other issues including addictions and mental health concerns.

Calgary Learns' grants support non-formal foundational learning programs, however there is a broader education context that impacts adults with low academic skills. It was expressed that the K-12 system does not have the necessary supports or best delivery style to help many Indigenous children succeed.

***"The system often doesn't work for our kids. They don't feel comfortable at school. They don't like to sit all day. They don't feel like the teachers care. Some are pushed through the system and don't realize that they are missing prerequisites. Their family may not have gone to school so couldn't support them. As they get older, they need money so they drop out to try to get a job."***

This results in many Indigenous teens leaving the system without the skills needed to move forward to set and achieve their goals. There was frustration expressed that the needs have not changed yet there has been little done to address these issues in schools where Indigenous students slip through the cracks.

When these individuals later want to pursue learning as adults, they must confront systems that place increased barriers for low skilled people. Applications for upgrading programs are often online and complicated therefore requiring support. Funding support through Foundational Learning also has an online application that requires not only digital access and skills, but is written at a 10.1 Grade level. Most applicants who need to use the application form have literacy levels far below that level. In addition, Indigenous adults often do not have the required ID and the process to get them is time consuming and difficult.

An additional significant barrier that was identified is that Foundational Learning grants were limited in 2023-24 which resulted in many having to wait another year before starting their upgrading journey. It is challenging to keep people engaged when they can't start for ten months. Placement testing is another challenge for many Indigenous learners who may have graduated Grade 12 but may test at a Grade 8 level when assessed. This is demoralizing for learners who realize that they have a much longer learning journey in front of them than expected.

## The Cost of Learning

At Calgary Learns, we often talk about the ‘opportunity cost’ connected to learning. That even when a program is ‘free’ or subsidized in some way, the cost of choosing between work and learning or childcare and learning, or transportation and learning, or internet/hardware and learning can be simply too high. It is also true that the person in the family who will have the most immediate benefit from returning to learning is often the primary wage-earner.

A common theme in this consultation was the urgency of addressing the basic economic needs that prevent Indigenous adults from completing schooling or employment training. Foundational Learning Assistance funding, when a program is eligible for it and the funds are available, is essential. Band funding can be a second option for some Indigenous adults.

Part-time, non-formal, community-based foundational learning programs are often the only on ramp to success in next-steps learning for Indigenous adults with low academic skills. Calgary Learns grants support program delivery costs, which allows programs to be offered for free and programs often include food and sometimes transportation and/or childcare support. However, assessing what needs to be in place from an economic perspective, to support learning is essential. Programs that have worked to find adequate additional funding to support Indigenous adults to stay in programs have demonstrated remarkable and unsurprising success. Having responsive funding to support learning *and* living makes all the difference.

## Priority Foundational Learning Programming

Community Leaders stressed priority areas for program design rather than program content during our consultation. Safe, clear, and affordable Indigenous pathways need to be prioritized. The importance of program design that is wholistic and addresses the four quadrants of the medicine wheel as well as incorporates Indigenous Principles of Learning (see side bar) was reflected in their input.

Many of those interviewed spoke to the legacy of trauma and its impact on education and learning. This has led to a bundle of interconnected truths, some of which are:

- a lack of trust in colonial learning systems
- a lack of community and home supports for engaging in education/learning
- difficulty seeing oneself as a learner and being able to bring one’s skills and knowledge to a learning setting
- a lack of trust for being personally and culturally safe in a learning setting.

### Indigenous Principles of Learning

- Learning ultimately supports the well-being of the self, the family, the community, the land, the spirits, and the ancestors.
- Learning is holistic, reflexive, reflective, experiential, and relational (focused on connectedness, on reciprocal relationships, and a sense of place).
- Learning involves recognizing the consequences of one’s actions.
- Learning involves generational roles and responsibilities.
- Learning recognizes the role of Indigenous knowledge.
- Learning is embedded in memory, history, and story.
- Learning involves patience and time.
- Learning requires exploration of one’s identity.
- Learning involves recognizing that some knowledge is sacred and only shared with permission and/or in certain situations.

## Successful Programs Start with Relationship

Creating a safe space to learn starts with relationships. As one Elder summarized, “You need to listen to a person’s story, determine how you can build on that story with supports, and hear the person’s dreams”.

Relationship and connection allow practitioners to better understand how to create a successful learning environment for their learners. Relationship creates an opportunity to offer more of the kinds of supports that are already in place and find out more about what resources and services are needed.

Relationships and connections also make assessing learning needs and establishing meaningful learning goals a safe and respectful process. There needs to be an understanding that a traditional/colonial model of ‘school’ is not a good fit with cultural norms of Indigenous peoples. Many Indigenous learners do not thrive in a success/fail model.

Several people spoke about standardized tests and assessments triggering anxiety and lack of confidence in self. Some programs approach assessment differently. For example, some programs have created a bridging/prep course that creates space for a ‘learning together’ assessment. These ‘readying-to-learn’ opportunities offer a mix of learning skills and life skills to build knowledge bridges between what the adult knows and what they will need to know when they take their next step into a more formal program. These programs are an opportunity to address gaps that will get in the way of learning, and to develop a more holistic/wrap around experience. Mentors and peer learning are valuable in bridging programs. Mentors were mentioned by many community leaders as an important part of Indigenous communities in the past that needs to be revitalized.

All staff that work with Indigenous learners need to have a cultural awareness of the unique and pervasive systemic barriers that Indigenous peoples face. Staff needs to be trained to be trauma-aware and trauma-informed in the teaching and learning space.

Staff need to recognize that their primary role is to provide a safe and welcoming learning experience – one with an open door to building relationships, confidence, and belonging.

## Medicine Wheel - the Foundation of Programs

It was emphasized that needs are all connected and we are four dimensional. Programs therefore need to **address all four quadrants of the medicine wheel.**

Indigenous people come from a historical journey of trauma. It was explained during the consultation that trauma disrupts the development of the brain and prevents the individual from moving into the pre-frontal cortex which is the center for cognitive functioning. This creates challenges and barriers for Indigenous learners including literacy and problem solving. When a person experiences trauma, they are operating in their survival brain (flight, fight, freeze) and do not have the capacity to learn. For programs to be successful, they first need to start sessions with bringing people down into spirit so people can shift from their survival brain into their pre-frontal cortex. To



achieve this shift, creating **safe relational space** is critical. There needs to be a cultural bridge for learners so they find where they belong. Elders, smudging, drumming, and engaging all of the senses support this process.

Once people are ready to learn, they need to have new **repetitive positive experiences** in which they are successful. Therefore, programs need **to start where the adults are at and engage them in ways they are successful**. From there they can take baby steps forward. It was stressed that programs need to engage Indigenous adults through **a variety of senses** throughout the learning process. The importance of **story** and **hands on learning** was reinforced throughout this consultation. Additional one on one support is required to help adults learning at the foundational level to succeed and maintain their motivation. (preceding two paragraphs are reflective of teachings by Elder Kerrie Moore)

As trauma impacts adults served by foundational level programs, it was stressed that all programs should have **mental health supports** in place to support learners. The importance of self-care for the staff of programs who are working with learners was also mentioned.

## Programming Ideas

Rather than focusing specifically on foundational learning non-formal program gaps, the community shared suggestions for potential programs and program components to enhance the system.

- Cultural Programs have purpose. A culturally based program such as Making Ribbon Skirts or Cooking with Kokum could address skill building while also helping learners to find a sense of belonging and validation for those disconnected from their culture.
- Literacy was identified as an issue for many and there are few Indigenous literacy programs to support adults. Community Leaders mentioned:
  - Family literacy programs could support parents to learn early literacy skills alongside their children
  - Resources such as the Truth and Reconciliation book (possibly simplified and in larger print), the 7 Sacred Teachings posters, Indigenous authored books, or the AA Book could be used as tools to support adults within literacy programming
  - Literacy is complex. There may be a need to bring literacy specialists into Indigenous organizations. It would be ideal to have an Indigenous facilitator but sometimes there is a lack of capacity. An Elder or Indigenous Knowledge Keeper could attend once per week to incorporate the cultural component into the learning program.  
***“We may need to first incorporate the Indigenous components into a literacy program until we have the capacity to offer a fully Indigenous delivered program.”***
- Free classes do not always encourage commitment. Adults at the foundational level who are returning to their learning journey may not understand what is needed for their success. It was suggested that maybe using the first 2-3 classes of a program to help students to understand the learning process and the commitment needed. A program might register 20 to start and after 2-3 classes expect to have 10-15 learners committed and ready to invest in their learning journey.
- Hands-on learning should be part of programming. Expressive arts would engage learners and skill building could be meaningfully put into this context. Some examples shared included creating a play, or writing/talking about our own stories.



- Someone who has not been in education for a while and needs to get their grade 12 may be required to make a 180 shift in their life to re-engage in education. Guidance and pre-training could support learners' success in upgrading programs. A combination of learning skills and life skills that acknowledge that new skills might be needed, new ways of problem-solving, new ways of thinking about oneself as a learner. It was mentioned several times that Indigenous adults often carry a belief that they '*will never be successful in academics*'. As was said "***it is important to experience success at learning in order to believe that setting learning goals is possible***". Again, bridging programs that build connections and confidence can make a huge difference on both retention and success.
- Needs are interconnected and programs need to provide holistic supports. Calgary Learns grants are focused on the learning portion of the program. Strategic partnering with other funders could allow programs to provide the holistic supports needed.
- Programs need to be designed and delivered by practitioners who are committed to understanding true Indigenous and settler history and the impact that it has on returning to learning. One of the people we interviewed said that when a practitioner understands the often-negative learning stories that Indigenous adults carry with them into programs then it is more possible to find a meaningful path forward. Another interviewee said:

***“Non-Indigenous practitioners need to be prepared and supported to become more knowledgeable about Indigenous Learning Principles and settler and Indigenous history and to truly hear the stories that Indigenous learners come to programs with. Organizations that want to create safe and welcoming spaces for Indigenous adult learners need to know how to provide trauma-informed support and training for Indigenous and non-Indigenous practitioners who are working this way.”***

## Creating Strong Learning Pathways

The pandemic disrupted connections within and across communities and sectors. This was also true in the foundational learning field overall. One of the unanticipated benefits of these consultation conversations was the opportunity to learn about and share the services, resources, and tools we each have in our toolboxes. Follow up emails had links and often contact names (*you will want to talk to...*) that strengthened the work each of us is undertaking. Gatherings like the Native Information Exchange were mentioned more than once. The Elders, Community Leaders, and service providers identified common organizations where they make referrals which included:

- Upgrading Programs - SCcyber, Riel Institute, Bow Valley College, SAIT
- Financial Programs - Momentum
- Employment - Aboriginal Futures, Trade Winds
- Youth and Family Programs - Miskanawah, Trellis, USAY,
- Supports - Friendship Centre, Native Counselling, Awo Taan

Responsive learning pathways are so important. Indigenous learners need clear on-ramps and off-ramps to learning programs that can meet emerging and emergent learning plans and goals. In conversation with Indigenous foundational learning providers it was important for us to listen carefully to where the learners in their programs came from, how their stories shaped their journey, and where they referred out to for next steps.

People in foundational learning programs often require additional supports. Elders stressed that program leaders need to be champions and support participants in planning and navigation to the next steps in their educational journey.

### Ideas to Further Strengthen Pathways

Clear information sharing about adult learning programs enables the community to better support adults who desire to return to learning. To support this, it was encouraged that adult foundational program information be shared broadly with the above organizations, as well as Elbow River Healing Lodge (Sheldon Chumir), individuals coming out of incarceration, probation officers, food banks, and band offices.

The creation of posters to show the visual roadmap to achieve goals and the programs available to support the steps along the paths was encouraged. These posters could be hung in strategic locations such as the Friendship Centre, Miskanawah, 4<sup>th</sup> floor at the Calgary Public Library, band offices, and possibly on bus shelters/C-train stations. These posters could be part of a broader advertising strategy which could also include radio ads and social media. It was emphasized that word of mouth is a strong promoter of programs.

Navigating systems in a large city is hard. The idea of having a central person at an Indigenous organization to build relationships with Indigenous adults looking to return to foundational level learning and help them find the programs to meet their goals was also discussed as a strategy to support pathways. This person could also help these adults find resources to address some of their other needs that are barriers to learning.

### Evaluation of Programs

Programs are encouraged to start from where a learner is at and create repetitive successful steps. The more repetition and success experienced, the easier it becomes for learners. With this in mind it was suggested that program evaluation should reflect this process. As previously mentioned, formal assessment creates anxiety for many adults who have not had successful educational experiences. An alternative method suggested that program evaluation starts with the learner at the beginning of the program after they are comfortable in the learning setting. Learners could simply draw a picture of where they are in their lives and define where they want to get to with the support of this program. At the conclusion of the program, these initial pictures could be given back to learners and they could then draw another picture of where they are now, where they started and what they thought they needed and what helped them most. The stories the learners tell in explaining the picture could be recorded (with permission and without any names attached) and shared with funders. Stories are a wonderful way to evaluate outcomes.

Calgary Learns was encouraged to continue to be reflective about their processes and evaluate their outcomes. Statistics regarding the number of learners moving forward with their goals could tell a more fulsome story. Understanding pathways (referrals in and out) provides some insight on the strength of the system. When key ingredients for learner success are missing in programming and these fall outside Calgary Learns funding capabilities, it was encouraged that we explore funding partnerships.

**Our gratitude to all of those who participated in this consultation:**

Elder Louise Crane	Elder Patrick Daigneault	Elder Kerrie Moore	Elder Wanda First Rider
April Bellegarde	Buddie Dixon	Leanne Froese	Adrian Goulet
Sharon Goulet	Karol Kamieniecki	Catherine Koch	Steve Kootenay-Jobin
Wendy Lindberg	Melissa Lupton	Charlotte Macleod	Tori McMillan
Christy Morgan	Michelle Scott	Mariija Small Legs	Natalie Wynn Dempsey

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# Foundational Level Indigenous Programs:

2023-24 Calgary Learns Supported Indigenous Programs (part-time, non-formal community-based programs):

## **Indigenous Financial Literacy (Tipi Life)– Momentum**

Are you interested in learning about financial wellness? We will use Indigenous cultural values to learn about western financial concepts through stories and knowledge sharing. Join us so that you can feel more confident on your financial wellness journey. One-on-one individual financial coaching is also available.

For more information, please visit [Momentum](#)

Email: [welcome@momentum.org](mailto:welcome@momentum.org)

Phone: (403) 272-9323

## **Indigenous Foundations: Adult Literacy (COMM 006) – SAIT**

Do you want to go to college or university but need upgrading in English first? If you need to strengthen your reading and writing to apply for upgrading, this pre-upgrading course covers grades 6 – 9 English to help you get ready.

For more information, please visit [SAIT](#)

Email: [Chinook.Lodge@sait.ca](mailto:Chinook.Lodge@sait.ca)

Phone: (403) 210-4028

## **Indigenous Foundations: Numeracy (MATH 007) – SAIT**

Do you want to go to college or university but need upgrading in Math first? If you need to strengthen your math skills to apply for upgrading, this pre-upgrading course covers grades 5 -8 math to help you get ready.

For more information, please visit [SAIT](#)

Email: [Chinook.Lodge@sait.ca](mailto:Chinook.Lodge@sait.ca)

Phone: (403) 210-4028

## **Indigenous Workplace Wellness Circle – Aboriginal Futures**

Have you been out of work or school for more than a year? Build skills and a plan to return to work, school, or training. Join us to gain experience, earn certificates, and explore employment opportunities. Indigenous culture and ways of learning are honoured with support from community Elders.

For more information, please visit [Aboriginal Futures](#)

Email: [info@aboriginalfutures.com](mailto:info@aboriginalfutures.com)

Phone: (403) 253-5311

## **Knowledge to Move Our Lives Forward – Closer to Home**

Do you want to learn from Indigenous Elders/Knowledge Keepers? Join us! This is an opportunity to build life skills through traditional cultural teachings. Come and be part of the circle and learn to drum and sing. Families are welcome.

For more information, please visit [Closer to Home](#)

Email: [familyresourcenetwork@closerhome.com](mailto:familyresourcenetwork@closerhome.com)

Phone: (403) 543-0555

### **Sage: Emotional Wellness Program – Elizabeth Fry**

Are you an Indigenous woman? Have you had criminal justice involvement? Join us. Using Indigenous cultural connections and supports, we will come together to gain confidence and strengthen communication skills. You will build essential skills and prepare for employment.

For more information, please visit [Elizabeth Fry](#)

Email: [sage@elizabethfrycalgary.ca](mailto:sage@elizabethfrycalgary.ca)

Phone: (403) 294-0737 ext. 246

### Other Indigenous Foundational Upgrading Opportunities

**SCcyber** - Alberta-accredited high school diploma (not GED) online for students of all ages. Their e-learning system is designed to be sensitive to the needs of Indigenous learners. Courses are delivered online by certified Alberta teachers. In most cases, students work from a classroom environment in their home community that is led by an in-person mentor who encourages students in their studies, addresses technical concerns, and ensures student participation. This space may be a stand-alone learning partner program, or may be hosted by an organization through which the student may also access other programs (Aboriginal Futures, SAAMIS Employment, Kavaklik Adult Education Centre (Inuvik), and many First Nation partner schools) Where joining a partner program is not possible due to geography or other factors, SCcyber registers the student directly and they are mentored online by a member of the school administration team.

**RIEL Institute for Education & Learning** - delivers education and training programs in a supportive atmosphere to Indigenous students. The Indigenous Youth Connections program is a bridging program to further learning or employment. This program was created for Indigenous youth between the ages of 18 to 30 years old who are unemployed and lack the job skills needed to enter the work force. SCcyber also delivers programming at Riel Institute.

#### **Bow Valley College:**

- The Indigenous Foundational Learning Program builds foundational literacy, numeracy, and essential skills to prepare for high school programming or employment. Indigenous learners engage in holistic learning that fosters well-being and connection to the community. Transcripts for the high school courses that have been completed are required.
- Indigenous Pathways to Employment is a 12-month foundational learning assistance program to start the journey to further education and employment. The program is offered in a supportive learning environment that weaves Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing into the educational setting. Upon completing the program, you can transition directly into further studies in the School of Foundational Learning or enter the workforce. Other than a functional basic level of literacy (verified by testing), there are no formal academic prerequisites for this program.

**Lack of Internet Access is often a barrier to learning!**

**Did you know that the City of Calgary now has a low-cost internet plan as part of their fair entry program?**