

# NEWS RELEASE

Wilfrid Laurier  
University



## **Laurier launches unique master's degree in indigenous social work** *Program will meld contemporary theory and practice with elders, circle and ceremony*

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WATERLOO – The faculty of social work at Wilfrid Laurier University is launching the first social work program in Canada that integrates an aboriginal world view and contemporary social work practice. The master of social work (MSW) in aboriginal studies will accept its first 20 students, who will be aboriginal and non-aboriginal candidates, in the fall of this year.

The new program will be fully rooted within the traditions of indigenous people. Its goal is to develop social work practitioners who can seek empowerment from aboriginals by demonstrating an understanding of and respect for their history, traditions and culture.

“The traditional indigenous perspective is foundational to the program,” said Malcolm Saulis, a trained circle keeper brought to Laurier to launch the program. “Our graduates will be facilitators – tradition-based holistic healers – who bring together the best of contemporary social work practice and of the much older native perspectives to help indigenous clients.”

Students accepted in the 10-month program this fall must already hold a bachelor's degree in social work. They will be required to complete a new curriculum of study and selected required courses in Laurier's existing MSW, such as the field placement. But the material they cover and the approach will include the use of aboriginal elders, a traditional circle process and native ceremonies.

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Traditionally, in indigenous cultures elders are the source of wisdom and the access to the historical heritage. They also mediate disputes and help resolve issues, and pass along the process involved in the harvesting and use of medicines. The new program is unique in that it will employ elders as primary instructors, alongside existing faculty members in social work.

Elders will help assess the personal suitability of program candidates. Students will attend a culture camp, where they will learn traditional teachings and practices under the instruction of elders and aboriginal faculty. The elders and faculty members will assess the students' comfort levels and capacities with traditional processes, as well as their intellectual capacity.

The program will also make use of the circle process, which Saulis explains as “a very powerful indigenous process. It’s a methodology from tradition, a means of engaging in an orderly manner an issue, problem or conflict.”

The four-part process used in the classroom begins by having members of the circle discuss the body of knowledge they bring to the process as well as new knowledge provided to them. During the second step, they explore what the knowledge means, before discussing how the knowledge applies to the matter at hand. In the third step, they contextualize the knowledge and engage in a holistic analysis. In the fourth step, they express thanks for what they received from the process.

The faculty of social work’s new home, which will open in a renovated high-school building in downtown Kitchener this fall, will include a circle room. It will serve as classroom, ceremony room and model for how a circle can be used.

“We are very excited about how these two important developments have come together,” said Luke Fusco, dean of the faculty. “We will move into our new facilities, which were designed with this program in mind, just as we launch the actual program. There really is nothing else like this in Canada.”

Students will learn about indigenous ceremonies, including smudging. This traditional cleansing ceremony involves the burning of herbs to create a cleansing smoke bath to purify people, ceremonial and ritual spaces, tools and objects. The traditional herbs employed are sage, sweet grass, tobacco and cedar, with each representing a different concept.

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Students will also learn the importance of the eagle feather. The eagle is a symbol of truth, power and freedom. It carries the prayers of man between the world of earth and the world of spirit, where the Creator and the grandfathers reside. When someone holds the eagle feather, he or she must speak the truth in as positive a way as possible, for the ear of the Creator is that much closer to the eagle.

Saulis is a Malecite Indian from the Tobique First Nation. He came to Laurier with 20 year's experience as a professor and researcher in many areas of aboriginal interest. He is a recognized circle keeper and has received teachings from many elders. He has worked with churches and governments around issues of restorative justice and residential school survivors, and in other social movements. He has also worked with communities in regards to child welfare, health transfer and health planning, suicide, conflict resolution and many healing strategies based on traditional processes.