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Laurier creates Aboriginal programming council and appoints senior advisor

WATERLOO – Wilfrid Laurier University has appointed Aboriginal elder Jean Becker as interim Senior Advisor: Aboriginal Initiatives to enhance post-secondary educational opportunities for Aboriginal students.

Becker, an elder-in-residence for the Aboriginal Field of Study in Laurier's Master of Social Work (MSW) program, will begin her term July 1. Reporting to Laurier President Max Blouw and Vice-President: Academic and Provost Deborah MacLatchy, Becker will oversee activities related to Aboriginal initiatives at the university, and will help develop future programming.

"I am delighted to have the opportunity to spend the year working on a vision for Indigenous student services and education at Laurier," said Becker. "This is an opportunity for Indigenous people to enrich the life of Laurier and for Laurier to provide critical leadership in providing education for the growing numbers of Indigenous people entering post-secondary institutions. We welcome Laurier's commitment to developing a positive relationship with Indigenous people locally and nationally."

A member of the Métis Nation of Labrador, Becker has been very involved with the diverse Aboriginal community of Waterloo Region for 30 years.

Becker has served on the board of Anishnabeg Outreach, a Kitchener Aboriginal employment agency, and she has volunteered with Native Sons at the Guelph Correctional Centre, the Native Social Worker program at Guelph Family and Children's Service Agency, and the Native Sisterhood at the Grand Valley Institute for Women. She is the former chair of SUNDANCe (Shared Universities Native Development and Navigation Committee), and has received numerous awards for her community service. Becker has an MA in sociology and anthropology from the University of Guelph.

"Jean Becker's combination of community, academic and life experiences make her an ideal candidate to fill this position in its inaugural year," said MacLatchy.

In addition to the new senior advisor role, Laurier has established an Aboriginal Education Council. Co-chaired by Blouw and Brenda Davis of the Grand River Post-Secondary Education Office, the council will provide leadership for the implementation of initiatives that will further engage aboriginal communities in support of post-secondary objectives.

The council – comprised of Aboriginal community members, students, staff and faculty, as well as individuals in Laurier's senior management team – will meet throughout the year at Laurier's Brantford, Kitchener and Waterloo campuses.

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“Aboriginal youth are under-represented in post-secondary education, and there is a recognized need for universities to provide the necessary support so that Aboriginal students can reach their goals as individuals and as members of the larger Canadian society,” said Blouw.

“As Laurier’s new academic plan states, our university recognizes the unique heritage of Aboriginal peoples and supports the incorporation of Indigenous knowledge and the many distinctive Aboriginal cultures and histories in our academic programming and co-curricular activities.”

Laurier’s current Aboriginal academic programming includes an undergraduate option in Indigenous Studies at Laurier’s Brantford campus, and the MSW: Aboriginal Field of Study at the Kitchener campus, including part-time studies in partnership with the community-based First Nations Technical Institute in Tyendinaga and the Seven Generations Education Institute at Fort Frances.

Support systems for students include a Native Student Services coordinator and an Aboriginal Resource Centre in Brantford and elders-in-residence in Kitchener. There are plans to hire a Native Student Advisor and establish a Native Student Centre in Waterloo. Three Aboriginal student award programs also exist, including one specifically designed to support Aboriginal students studying at the master’s or doctoral levels at Laurier’s Faculty of Social Work.

The Ministry of Training, Colleges & Universities (MTCU) provides funding for the Aboriginal Post-Secondary Education and Training bursary, as well as the First Generation Project, an initiative designed to increase awareness of post-secondary options among parents, secondary students and other influencers in aboriginal communities.

“One of the results of these projects has been a continued increase in the number of applicants from Aboriginal communities,” said Tom Buckley, Assistant Vice-President: Academic Services. “The number of self-identified applicants has grown from about 30 three years ago to close to 200 this year.”

Laurier has also received just under \$150,000 a year for the next two years from MTCU to help support a number of initiatives focused on enhancing the recruitment and retention of Aboriginal students, including recruitment initiatives, extending the part-time MSW: Aboriginal Field of Study program, and undergraduate student support services.