

Summary and key learnings of 'su'luqw'a' Community Cousins

Summary:

Community Cousins began in 2011 with funding provided by The Counselling Foundation of Canada. Funding for the development was for three years and the first training was held from September to October 2011 with six students receiving their official hoodies, t-shirts and honorarium for participation. The original training was based on a similar program called "outreach mentorship" that was offered out of the Adult Basic Education Program. We have had 110 aboriginal students participate in 'su'luqw'a' since its inception in 2011.

Changes were made to reflect more aboriginal content including having an Elder attached to the program and changing the name to be reflective of the territory that we are living on. Acknowledgement of territory and protocol is an integral part of the training and of the program.

Work continues the development of a three-tiered approach to the program:

- squle'eq (younger brother/sister)
- 'su'luqw'a' (community cousin)
- shush u'yulh (older brother/sister)

The philosophy around this is that the connection continues after graduation and mentoring is a continuous journey.

'su'luqw'a' has received funding from the Royal Bank of Canada for six years to sustain and grow the program. This has allowed for opportunities for students to attend and present at conferences, participate in training such as True Colors, Public Speaking and co-facilitating workshops. We have participated in land based activities with the Elder in Residence including collecting cedar for aboriginal graduation; canoeing to shuyatchun for our orientation and hiking on traditional lands of Snuneymuxw to listen to our elder share his experience and teachings.

In 2016 we submitted a proposal to 100,000 Strong in Americas and were successful in the grant and the funds provided an opportunity for 'su'luqw'a' to participate in an exchange with Pitzer College in Claremont, California. Pitzer College had an Indigenous Youth Summer Camp that was successful and an mentorship program that we wanted to expand upon at Vancouver Island University. We were able to do an exchange and traveled to Pitzer College to exchange ideas and teachings with five of our 'su'luqw'a' and our Elder. In exchange Pitzer College participated in Tribal Journey 2017 paddling from Nanaimo to Campbell River bringing seven students and three faculty from Pitzer College to participate with our Munu canoe family.

In 2017 The Peter Cundill Foundation provided funding for an Indigenous Youth Camp and involved 'su'luqw'a'. Current 'su'luqw'a' are hired each summer as summer camp coordinators to offer camps to Indigenous Youth in Grades 8 to 12 throughout Vancouver Island. The camp is called Thuy'she'num Tu Smun'eem (Lifting up our Youth) and held at Cowichan Campus, Nanaimo Campus, Powell River and a new camp was offered in 2019 that 'su'luqw'a' participated in – Haahuupa Camp. To date we have had

In 2018, Toro Consulting was hired to review of 'su'luqw'a' and Thuy she num' Tum smeneem (Indigenous Youth Camp). This work looked at developing a 2-hour workshop for mentors; consulting with summer camp stakeholders for input in recruiting students and families; and to conduct research as

grounding to develop a sustainable model for 'su'luqw'a'. Information from the stakeholders included providing dates of events that 'su'luqw'a' could get involved in including further outreach into community.

Based on the report from Toro Consulting, restructuring of 'suluqw'a' was completed to reflect the changing reality of community cousins. Students now have an opportunity to move from mentorship to leadership with financial support offered to those that volunteer 30 hrs of their time. 'su'luqw'a' continues to evolve and have the check in circles to thuy thuts (fixing up). In fall of 2019 we added women's and men's circle to support indigenous students on campus and have adapted our thuy thut's during COVID19 to zoom gatherings.

Key Learning:

'su'luqw'a' are keen to participate in learning circles and share their truth as Indigenous students with faculty and staff and are encouraged to speak their truth and use their voice.

Encouragement is given to speak their traditional indigenous language and recognize their family through protocol at every event. This gives the students opportunity to recognize their cultural uniqueness and promote their indigenous identity in a post-secondary setting.

Gratitude is practiced and goes beyond our circle and I have witnessed students doing that in circles that they facilitated with staff and faculty.

Having an elder present in our training and circles have provided 'su'luqw'a' with an opportunity to have those teachings embedded in post-secondary and an encouragement for them to succeed and do good work.

Food is an important component of 'su'luqw'a' and this is provided to share food and teachings together.

'su'luqw'a' is a family of indigenous students that also has younger brothers and sisters that they can mentor and older brother and sisters that they can rely on to help throughout their post-secondary experience.

The program is always enhancing and looking at ways to incorporate indigenous knowledge within 'su'luqw'a' and has included land based activities. When encouraged and supported students thrive and recognize their potential in a place that has not been supportive for indigenous students. We continue to work to create opportunities so that they can see themselves in leadership and mentorship positions.

'su'luqw'a' Community Cousins continues to look forward in building a stronger student leadership program that is reflective of the student population at Vancouver Island University. We are working and expanding the program at the Cowichan Campus as the program continues to grow we need to be inclusive of the other VIU campuses.

Student Testimonials:

“The ‘su’luqw’a’ Community Cousins has given me a second family on campus I’ve learnt to rely on and eventually trust. With this program I’ve learnt many important life skills such as public speaking, being a more confident leader and helped me grown personally in many other ways. I look forward to always being a part of this new family I’ve made at VIU and can’t wait to see how the program grows in years to come. Also a special thank you to all the people and organizations that have supported this amazing program.”

“Was an honor and privilege to be part of the community cousins program. In more ways than one the community cousins helped me feel supported and part of a community which helped because I was so far away from home. I will return back to university at some point in the future I'm sure but for now I am happily being a shush u’ yulh.

“I have had many wonderful and life changing moments here at VIU. One moment was becoming a Community Cousin, it was the first time I had truly felt part of a bigger community here. It is my family and home away from home. Within that program I have been to California to work on a Project for Aboriginal youth, connecting them to the land and this place we all call home, as well as doing a summer internship to run out the first Aboriginal Youth Summer Program here at VIU.”