

Bachelor of Commerce Indigenous Business major and
University Certificate in Indigenous Community Economic Development and Planning
Athabasca University (AU), Faculty of Business (AUFB)

AUFB's Indigenous Business (INBU) program was conceived in 2019 in partnership with Aboriginal Financial Officers of Alberta. (AFOA Alberta). Using a research-informed approach, the program was designed to reduce barriers to post-secondary education faced by Indigenous learners while addressing business and managerial needs in the Indigenous communities.

Curriculum: Representation matters

The major and the certificate are comprised of the same eight courses created by Indigenous scholars for Indigenous learners. An Indigenous business context and lived experience are deeply embedded into the curriculum and delivery of each course. The course and delivery help to validate traditional knowledge and Indigenous culture as relevant to the practice of management within Indigenous organizations.

Delivery: Meets student where they are

The program and its courses are designed to be flexible. It may be taken in the fully asynchronous self-paced online format used in the majority of AU's current undergraduate programming. However, it is designed and intended to be delivered in a cohort-based hybrid model, whereby students do asynchronous self-paced study in combination with live classes. This format offers a representative learning environment and peer support system. Bringing the courses to community is intended to further reduce barriers to program participation. This level of flexibility is intended to allow student to be able to easily adapt and continue their studies should circumstances see a student fall behind or need to temporarily discontinue their courses or program.

Supports: Addresses unique needs

Besides the tailored curriculum and flexible delivery model, the program incorporates the following elements:

- ✓ An Indigenous in-class mentor whose role is to be aware of and respond to any potentially triggering classroom events. An Indigenous instructor may serve in the dual role of instructor and mentor if necessary. However, if an Indigenous instructor is not available, a non-Indigenous instructor may deliver the course specifically as designed by the Indigenous scholar with the support of the Indigenous mentor, who provides essential Indigenous context and lived experience to the classroom. The mentor also acts as an advocate for the Indigenous learners by helping the institution to understand the multiple barriers that Indigenous learners face in their personal and academic lives.
- ✓ An Indigenous student advisor whose role is to build trust with students by proactively reach out to them and assisting them with any barriers they may be facing with their studies or institutional systems. The advisor also has the power to make some decision that would usually require central approvals based on their unique personal understanding of students' needs.

Scalability: A partnership approach

This format is designed to be customizable to different institutional and community partners. As with Red Crow Community College, in the Kainai Nation, the courses can be combined with other already existing programming. The overall program, course, and face-to-face delivery schedules can be tailored to meet partners' needs. When possible human resources can be sources from the home institution or community, keeping as many dollars as possible within the local economy. Partners may include other educational institutions, corporations, not-for-profits, and more.

Success: Early days

The first hybrid course was held on Enoch Cree Nation in September of 2018 with an initial cohort of 16 students. Current enrollment is approximately 30 students. The INBU major launched in 2021. The certificate launched as a stand-alone credential in September 2022. In September 2022, the courses were integrated into Red Crow Community College's Niitsitapi Business Administration Diploma, allowing students to earn AU's certificate as part of their 2-year diploma program to an initial cohort of 16 students.

An evaluation was done in April 2021 by a third-party evaluator as part of a formative evaluation by AFOA Alberta of the program.

Quantitative completion data and success rates support the efficacy of the approach, with many programs exceeding provincial norms for pass rates. However, the qualitative data collected from students have been powerful and perhaps more insightful. They feel supported, understood, heard, and safe in the learning environments provided. They described the program as life changing. The following are quotes from the studies and are used with permission.

"[The program] really gives me a sense of pride and it gives me a sense of hope. If I can do [the Indigenous Business Program] at my age, with the struggles that I've had to overcome, then I know other people can do it too."

"I've been there, I've struggled...I've dealt with all the issues that come with living and growing up on reserve and I'm not perfect. I've had people come to me and ask me [for] advice on this and that, and it just makes me feel really good. I got a late start, but [the Indigenous Business Program] really has changed my life."

"This program has totally changed my life. I feel more comfortable with my decisions. I can't say enough good things about the program. I was always pretty comfortable with my work life...but this just keeps the cobwebs out of [my] mind. It keeps me going, it keeps me motivated. It helps me to be more creative with my programs and it gives me the confidence to be able to reach out with an idea and say, "Hey, do you think this would work? Let's give it a shot."

