

Episode 10: The Indigenous Strategic Plan

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[00:00:02] You're listening to CiTR 101.9 broadcasting from UBC's Point Grey Campus, located on the Traditional Unceded Coast Salish Territory of the Halkamania speaking Musqueam people.

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[00:00:29] Santa: Broadcasting from the University of British Columbia where waves crash onto the shores of wreck beach. This is Blue and Gold Cast.

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I'm Santa Ono, the President and Vice-Chancellor of UBC. Our campuses, both here in Vancouver and in the Okanagan are on the traditional ancestral and unseeded territories of the Musqueam people and the Syilx peoples. We, as a university, are striving to build meaningful, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial partnerships with the Musqueam and Syilx people, on whose land we work, learn and live.

Today we're talking about our newly-released Indigenous Strategic Plan. My guest today is Dr. Sheryl Lightfoot, my advisor on Indigenous Affairs. In addition to her role as an advisor, she's also a Canada Research Chair in Global Indigenous Rights and Politics. A citizen of the Lake Superior Band of Ojibwe, enrolled at the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community in Baraga, Michigan. Hello, Sheryl.

[00:01:51] Sheryl: Hello, Santa.

[00:01:51] Santa: Thanks for joining us today.

[00:01:53] Sheryl: My pleasure.

[00:01:55] Santa: There's a lot in this plan. I didn't know you've worked tremendously hard as has the entire community. Let's talk about some of the big picture takeaways from this new plan.

[00:02:06] Sheryl: Thanks, Santa. Yes, it is a big plan. This 2020 Indigenous Strategic Plan or what we're calling the ISP for short, sets out the vision, the mission and the goals as a guiding framework for indigenous engagement throughout the entire university. This plan will make up UBC's response to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of indigenous peoples. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's calls to action, and the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls' inquiries Calls for Justice.

It's an action plan that we intend to meaningfully advance the human rights of indigenous people and peoples connected to the university. It commits us to 8 larger goals and 43 specific action steps. One of the things that I want to highlight is that we are the first university in North America to make the UN Declaration, the foundation of an indigenous strategic framework. We're also the first university in North America to use all three human rights documents. The TRC, the UN Declaration and the Calls for Justice as the starting point for developing our plan.

This plan will help UBC meet the objectives of each and every one of these documents.

[00:03:31] Santa: Now, a lot of consultation went into this. I know because I saw you hard at work over some period of time. A question we keep hearing from students is, what will this plan actually change? It comes especially from the indigenous students. Can you take us through that?

[00:03:48] Sheryl: Yes, I'm happy to. The ISP was made with the engagement of both UBC community and outside partners. In total, we had 2,500 people from both the Okanagan and the Vancouver campuses. Both indigenous and non-indigenous students, faculty, staff, and community partners involved. They provided us whopping 15,000 different ideas, opinions and comments, from which we ended up structuring the action plan in its current form.

What we heard from all of these students, faculty and staff during our engagements, was that the environment and the culture at UBC still have quite a long way to go if we want indigenous students, faculty and staff to feel truly at home here and to feel that they can not only survive here but also that they can thrive here. A human rights approach can help take us to that next level.

[00:04:48] Santa: We're looking forward to all the work ahead and I know that many people are very passionate about this. As you know, UBC has been looking at its own colonial history for some time now. I think the first ISP began in 2008, or development of the first ISP began in 2008. We need to define our own path of reconciliation for more than a decade. What is different now from the first plan?

[00:05:19] Sheryl: Thanks. That's a great question. Since the first Aboriginal Strategic Plan, we've seen tremendous national and global shifts in indigenous human rights, discourse and practice. This new plan will aim to advance our collective goal, to move beyond just implementation of program-specific initiatives, but to also lay a foundation for long term relationships that actively advance the human rights of indigenous people on campus, in Canada, and around the world.

This plan places relationships at its center and sets a path for UBC to build good and productive and positive and most importantly, mutually reciprocal relationships with indigenous peoples. The process, also of developing this plan has been unique and in alignment with the UN Declaration. We had a leadership team who relied on engagement at all levels of the university and out into the community.

[00:06:18] Santa: As you said, partnerships is going to be critical. How were those partnerships leveraged in the development of this plan? Was there a deep engagement with First Nation's communities?

[00:06:28] Sheryl: We had engagement, both with the Musqueam First Nation and also with the Okanagan Nation Education Committee. Which is the agency of the Okanagan Nation Alliance that deals directly with UBC.

[00:06:45] Santa: Now, I know this is not directly part of the dialogue, but I know personally that you actually traveled the globe to learn about best practices elsewhere, even on the other side of the planet. Is that correct?

[00:06:57] Sheryl: That's right, Santa. As part of this process, I traveled to both Australia and New Zealand and spoke to experts there on their indigenous strategic frameworks. Or in the case of New Zealand, Maori strategic frameworks, and we took a look at their best practices and tried to emulate the best and even take us a step beyond.

[00:07:19] Santa: Did we have a lot to learn from what's going on in Australia and New Zealand?

[00:07:24] Sheryl: Absolutely. The frameworks and partnerships that have been developed there are now a decade and a half to two decades old. There is a lot that we can take away from some of the most advanced universities, particularly in Australia.

[00:07:40] Santa: We're grateful that you traveled all the way over there. Now, part of the report and this is mentioned in the news almost every other day, is the phrase 'truth and reconciliation', but in the reports referred to as, 'truth before reconciliation'. Could you unpack that for us, for individuals who are not thinking about truth and reconciliation? What does that mean, truth before reconciliation? What does it mean to you personally?

[00:08:06] Sheryl: Thank you for that question. I'm happy to share a bit. There is a personal connection here for me. It comes from my own family's history. When I started this process, I knew that my family was two generations of residential school survivors. The process of Truth and Reconciliation, particularly the truth part, and sharing the truth of what happened, and how long this happened, and what the legacy and the impacts of that are extremely important for a Canadian society.

In the middle of this process, I found out that I was not only two generations, but three. I discovered through some ancestral work that my great grandmother had also attended a residential school. That takes us all the way back to the 1890s. It was something I discovered along the way like I said, and it became even more meaningful and drove my motivation and commitment even further to take us to that next level.

[00:09:07] Santa: Now, I know storytelling is very, very important, and it's very accurate in preserving history, especially in the First Nations. I just want to draw up on my personal-lived experience. I come from ethnicity, my parents came from Japan. They didn't talk a lot about traumas that they had experienced when they were children and adolescents. Did you know a lot about your multiple generations of residential school history within your family? Were you told about what had happened?

[00:09:45] Sheryl: That's a really important question, Santa. It is a difficult one to talk about. I knew that both the two generations had gone to residential school. I know which school they had gone to. I was aware of some of the friends that they still had from their time there that were students with them, but no one ever spoke about their actual experiences. When asked, it was quite clear that they didn't want to speak about it. Yet, others have been wanting to share their stories very much as a healing journey. I'd like to honor both of those desires in my work here.

[00:10:25] Santa: We all have to because it's a deeply personal situation and it affects individuals differently and for some, it's very painful. Thank you for sharing that. It also I think underscores the fact that those of us who have not had those experiences try to understand them and to ensure that we're part of telling those very important stories. Now, what do you want other faculty and students not only here at UBC but elsewhere, what do you want them to know about the work that we will undertake as a community moving forward?

[00:11:04] Sheryl: Another very good question. What we heard loud and clear from our engagements in the past year has been that many indigenous students, as well as faculty and staff, feel that colonialism is still a very daily reality at UBC. One need not look very far to see and recognize the value that we as a university and most universities for that matter, have placed on exclusively Eurocentric approaches to teaching and to research.

It's important to understand why so many indigenous peoples don't see themselves reflected in classrooms or workplaces. I think what we can see and what we hope to move towards is that when indigenous worldviews as expressed in their own legal traditions, their own governance institutions and social structures are excluded from our life on campus. We deprive all of us of the beauty and the understanding of what it can mean to be a scholar or an advocate or a healer or an entrepreneur or any other area of expertise.

[00:12:15] Santa: You know, I was just speaking with a student and a faculty member, a staff member, and a community liaison in the faculty of land and food systems the other day. The faculty member is really one of the most kind and gentle individuals I've ever met. A very young professor of teaching. He didn't know that the questions he was asking or the way he was teaching in a class exhibited a privileged perspective that ingrained in his formation was a colonialist view.

It took a community liaison and the student to point out what he didn't realize. It wasn't really his fault but once he realized how he was making indigenous students feel in the class, it was like a light went on. What's beautiful is that he's dedicated years of his life to addressing that situation. I suppose that's kind of what you'd like to see happen and spread across the entire university and to other universities around the world

[00:13:27] Sheryl: That's entirely correct. I've seen that happen in the classroom where all of a sudden, a light comes on and it's a life-changing experience for a student. I would like to see that replicated across faculty and across the administration because we all have our part to play in implementing this plan.

[00:13:46] Santa: Even me or especially me. Let me say this. I won't actually name names or point fingers but I got to tell you honestly that you and I have been working with hundreds, thousands of people during this process. The question I have for you is-- I have to admit, sometimes I feel as if what's being said in terms of a commitment isn't genuine and that it is difficult for someone in a position of privilege to give that up. The question for you is how do we make sure that when people say that they're committed to what we're trying to do that it's not lip service.

[00:14:32] Sheryl: A very good question and it's important question. I think to ensure that this plan remains a focal point of the entire university's work, we will be establishing special implementation committees and some other structures that will begin working with all of the faculties and operational units throughout the university. We hope to develop performance measurement frameworks which will include both qualitative and quantitative measures to help guide faculties and units.

We plan to report publicly on the achievements and challenges that have come from taking these actions. We would like to collect some baseline data to track our progress and incorporate the actions into existing and upcoming strategic plans. Ultimately, it's going to be your job Santa to ensure that all the units are incorporating this plan into their regular work and are making progress towards implementing the plans' actions.

[00:15:32] Santa: I agree 100%. I'll just tell you the way we're going to do that. First of all, I know I'm going to be held accountable because not only is the board of governors as a group fully invested in this commitment but I know since I've been working with you, that you will make sure that I remain committed. I actually just to be frank, this is something that's a passion of mine.

It's something that I do with a lot of satisfaction and there'll be ups and downs and don't get me wrong, but it's something that I really look forward to. All of us need to be held accountable. I know that you will hold me accountable and the community and the board of governors will and that's absolutely appropriate. Dr. Lightfoot this has not been fair. I've been asking you all the questions. You must have questions for me.

[00:16:25] Sheryl: Thanks, Santa. I do have one big question for you. You just said it here but I've also heard you say it many times. You've said that indigenous engagement here at UBC is one of your top priorities. I respect that but I'd like to ask you why it is so important to you both as a leader of this institution but also as a human being.

[00:16:48] Santa: There are a couple of different reasons. One is that I've been able to meet indigenous students and faculty members who have been here for a long time. Students who've just arrived, and I've talked to them about their experiences. How they have felt. I've talked to Liana Sparrow who was here when there were very few indigenous students. She talks about the pain of feeling lonely and not feeling supported.

She talks with excitement about the progress that we have made, but she also sometimes talks about her frustration with the pace of change. I think that as the president of UBC, I have a responsibility to build upon what we've accomplished but to accelerate that process. Part of it has to do with my interaction with first nations youth and adults and survivors of residential schools. The pain is palpable.

My responsibility is to look after those who don't feel included. That's one of my biggest responsibilities, I think because as an institution you're only as good as people feeling that they're empowered to make a difference. To really soar and to fly and to reach the limits of their potential. That's not the case right now because of the colonialist past of this institution and of most institutions in Western civilization.

That's part of it is what I see in other people. Part of it is personal as well in that I've alluded to in our conversation the fact that as a Japanese-Canadian. I'd first say it is a different situation, but it's related. I've spoken to Larry Grant and he says it's kind of similar what happened with Japanese-Canadians with their internment, with their belongings being taken from them. With being separated from family members and put on trains to very, very rudimentary places, losing everything and having to work to rebuild everything.

Having education that was almost insights with our own UBC students and not being able to realize that education. I understand from a personal perspective from having friends and family who've lost everything. The crime that we have committed as a Western civilization in colonialization and we have to fix it and it has to start with truth, and truth has to happen before reconciliation. The first is a feeling of responsibility.

The second is as I said, we need to fix the wrongs that we've been part of. We've been complicit as a university, as privileged individuals but the benefits of empowering Indigenous youth to really reach their full potential and to amplify that is enormous.

[00:20:11] Sheryl: Thank you for sharing that. Also, I just wanted to mention and remind us, take us back about a year and a half to the apology that you delivered at the opening of the residential school history and dialogue center in April of 2018. I know that was a very meaningful day for many people. I heard for months how important that apology was to people who were present to receive it. I'm wondering how you see this plan is connected to that apology.

[00:20:47] Santa: Well, an apology is only genuine if you act upon it. I think the fact that it was meaningful is just the first step. I think it's incumbent upon all of us in the university to read that apology. It's powerful. It's on behalf of the university. It's not my apology, it's our apology. The mountain is so steep, so high that we have to climb. That there needs to be a reference point. For me, that apology is meaningful because it's that reference point. It's the commitment and it's part of truth. Saying you're sorry is really in many ways, the very first step at acknowledging what you've done, but also committing yourself to doing more.

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Well, Sheryl, Dr. Lightfoot, thank you so much for everything you've done and I'm looking forward to working with you on implementing the ISP.

[00:22:04] Sheryl: Thank you, Santa. It's been a pleasure to join you today, and I look forward to working with you in the next few years and beyond.

[00:22:12] Santa: Absolutely.

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Dr. Sheryl Lightfoot is my senior advisor on the indigenous affairs. She's also an associate professor in first nations and indigenous studies in the department of

political science here at UBC. You can read more about our indigenous strategic plan at indigenous.ubc.ca.

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