

# Advancing First Nations leadership

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THE EASTERN DOOR  
LOCAL JOURNALISM INITIATIVE REPORTER

A business school for Indigenous leaders has officially been launched in Montreal.

The First Nations Executive Education (FNEE) training program welcomed its first group of participants at the Université de Montréal's HEC business school on December 9 to 11.

Described as a program utilizing innovative approaches, all FNEE certificates are geared to offer short curriculum developed to reflect the needs and values of First Nations while respecting their individual history.

"Regardless of the quality of the program, this is a historic moment for Indigenous leaders in Quebec," said Philippe Tsaronsere Meilleur, executive director at Native Montreal and one of 17 who make up the first cohort. "This recognition of a need for coaching and programs to strengthen the skills of leaders of organizations, band councils and others is huge."

Throughout the three days it took to complete the first of four FNEE units, the group focused on leadership approaches, leading with consciousness, and discussing inner-reflection.

For Meilleur, who had in the past completed a degree in administration at HEC, the contrast between the programs' frameworks was stark.

"It's a very good program that capitalizes a lot on the group and the shared experiences of the participants, which is a very cultural way of teaching," said the Kanehsata'kehrónon. "Inevitably the formula is different, and particularly so because everyone in the room is Indigenous with leadership and management perspectives specific to our challenges and strengths."

Designed by and for First Nations leaders, the school is the result of handiwork by HEC Onkwehón:we graduate Manon Jeannotte and Ken Rock.

"The success of the programs offered by the FNEE depends on several factors, including the quality and contribution of the people who participate in them," reads a statement by pedagogical co-lead and co-initiator of the project Jeannotte. "In this sense, I would like to congratulate each of the 17 participants of the first cohort who have placed their trust in us and who are, in a way, becoming our first ambassadors."



COURTESY FIRST NATIONS EXECUTIVE EDUCATION

Regardless of what Robert Bonspiel could've expected from the program, the Kanehsata'kehrónon was pleasantly surprised by what he has witnessed thus far.

"I suspected that it was going to be like when I went to university and college but this was not the case - it was very interactive," said the president of First Nations Paramedics. "Business and leadership are being looked at in a different light. This is really about sharing approaches and feeding off one another."

Above and beyond what participants intend to gain from the trailblazing courses, Bonspiel is eager to see how these cultural methods may translate in non-Indigenous education programs.

"Our whole approach to decision-making is based on a reflection of how they will impact the seven generations down the road - this has always been part of our thinking, but it's a new mantra to them (HEC educators) and the university," he said.

With the first module completed, participants are already looking forward to the next training component, which will be held in the community of Wendake at the end of January 2022.

Kahnawake's Derek Montour is already impatient to move forward with the next step of the historic program.

"In any leader's role, you reach a certain place where you need to recharge your batteries and assess whether you're still on the right course of doing what's best - this was a reflection I was able to do already during the first module," said the executive director of Kahnawake's Shakotiiia'takehnhas Community Services and president of the First Nations of Quebec and Labrador

Health and Social Services Commission.

"Immediately, there was a sense of bonding that was created with being able to meet with other First Nations leaders because we are all dealing with similar courses."

Montour underlined that the understanding that resonated among participants is an important aspect that needs to be reflected throughout the material and approaches as well.

"There were definitely at-

tempts to bring more cultural perspective but I think what's important is to strike a balance between Western methods of operating and our own Indigenous ways," said the Kahnawake'kehrónon.

In the same way that the school connects First Nations leaders faced with shared obstacles, it also promotes an environment where different experiences can be challenged.

With seven nations represented among the group, adapting

the curriculum to the realities of each participant is a goal that participants highlighted as needing further assessment.

"It's worth mentioning that there were some small missteps at the beginning (for example) when they tried to conclude a talking circle before everyone had had a chance to speak because we had finished with that allotted time," pointed out Meilleur.

"One of my Mohawk colleagues reminded us that our culture is not designed to lend itself to the limitations of other objectives such as a program that may have been overbooked."

However, as far as some unintentional mishaps go, Meilleur was positive about the way things proceeded.

"It was a nice correction to point out that if we don't follow this, we are simply starting to reproduce colonialist teaching methods," he noted. "There's a real issue of making sure that our culture is interpreted in the formula in the right way - and it's fair to say that we're also going to have to learn to integrate our own cultures into the HEC environment."

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