SFU has committed money from its university priorities fund to bankroll pre-university Aboriginal Bridge programs for the next three years. “In view of the difficulty in obtaining consistent external funding for these programs, the university felt it was important to provide stability for a number of years,” says VP-academic Jon Driver. Meanwhile, adds Driver, “we will continue to search for external support from public and private sources.” “This is awesome news, and it ties in nicely with our new Aboriginal undergraduate admissions policy,” says Office for Aboriginal Peoples director, William Lindsay. (See related story p.2). “It makes SFU a Canadian leader in Aboriginal education in this regard.”

The funding “means we can plan ahead and properly recruit for the programs instead of having to wait for last-minute funding from various sources, as has been the case in the past,” says Lindsay. “Our students and community partners can also plan ahead because now they know the programs are going to run every year starting next year, so it’s better all around.”

“Prospective students who apply under the new Aboriginal admissions policy who may not be quite ready for university study will be directed to the bridging programs, which will now be running for sum.”

A few other Canadian universities have similar bridging programs,” says Lindsay, but they all rely on temporary grant support. “The coordinators of all those programs spend a lot of their time trying to drum up financing, just like ours had to do, and it’s really tough to do.” (See related story, p.3).

Merck funds Aboriginal mentoring program

Merck & Co., one of the world’s largest pharmaceutical companies, has awarded $15,000 to finance a program to help mentor Aboriginal students in pre-health programs at SFU. The Training Aboriginal Youth in Biomedical Labs (TAYBL) program is designed to provide entry-level jobs and mentorship for Aboriginal students who are interested in health careers.

The program, which is being administered through the biological sciences department, targets students who have completed the Aboriginal Pre-Health Program at the Surrey campus and then entered programs in biomedical science at the Burnaby campus. “We hope to support two to three students in part-time jobs and training for the spring semester, and then a similar number for full-time jobs in the summer,” says biologist and department chair Felix Breden, who applied for the grant.

Three SFU labs have expressed interest in the program so far.

Andrew Petter

President a champion of Aboriginal rights, education

You would be hard pressed to find a Canadian university leader with a better track record on Aboriginal rights and education than SFU’s new president Andrew Petter. As Minister of Aboriginal Affairs from 1991-93 with Mike Harcourt’s NDP government, Petter led development of the mandate for the Nisga’a treaty negotiations that culminated in British Columbia’s first modern-day treaty. He also led the province’s efforts to create the B.C. Treaty Commission and to negotiate a treaty-cost-sharing agreement with the federal government.

As University of Victoria law school dean from 2001-08 he collaborated with northern partners to establish the Akitsa Law School, which offered UVic law degrees to Inuit students studying in Iqaluit, Nunavut. Petter also helped establish two new Aboriginal research chairs at UVic Law and a Law and Society graduate program.
ABORIGINAL ART AND CULTURE

Art course recalls ancient skills

Students taking First Nations 383, a popular sustainable Indigenous technologies course, learn how to sew animal skins, weave cattails and cedar bark, sew beaded designs, make drums and carve wood. They also learn about culturally relevant First Nations protocols and spiritual practices related to the materials and their home environment.

The class has given UBC exchange student Pipa Clifton greater appreciation for how First Nations communities work with and sustain the environment. She says the cattail mats students weave are reminiscent of the coverings early First Nations people created for their homes.

But there’s more to the class than crafts, including lectures, weekly readings, critical discourse, storytelling and dancing and singing.

“There’s something powerful about knowing how to make beautiful things,” says assistant professor Annie Ross (her spelling), who notes students must use the lessons to make items reflecting their own culture and personal ideas.

Students also must find their own materials in the appropriate season, an exercise that Ross says illustrates the fragility of First Nations crafts, which rely on a sustainable, healthy ecosystems, and human engagement within it.

She says it also helps students to think about the sacrifice that an animal or plant has made in order for them to have nice things.

Many students who take the course have no Aboriginal background and Ross says it becomes a transformative experience for them. “You can see the respect they gain for people who make things, and the confidence they have in their own hands.”

New policy encourages Aboriginal enrolment

SFU’s Indigenous Student Centre (ISC) and First Nations Student Association (FNSA) signed a tentative agreement during the April 2010 Honouring Feast that promises to alleviate years of uneasiness between the two organizations.

The draft memorandum of understanding (MOU) is subject to review by the FNSA’s newly elected board members. But Angela Semple, a five-year veteran board member, is confident it will lead to a closer working relationship.

The MOU commits the two organizations to enhancing and strengthening Indigenous student services and academic success and acknowledges their “collaborative partnership” while retaining their autonomy.

“We still have our differences,” says Semple, a member of the Ktunaxa (Kootenay) Nation who’s completing the fifth and final year of her BA honours degree in English with a minor in First Nations Studies.

“But basically we all want the same thing, which is to move forward as a whole community on campus rather than being separated.”

In this way, we hope to reach our collective goal of supporting Aboriginal students throughout their university experience—from high-school graduation to entrance into the workforce."

ISC director Jenna LaFrance agrees, and takes it one step further. She would like to see both organizations housed in the same space.

“We have different mandates and different roles to play at the university,” says LaFrance (Cree/French Métis).

“But we’re both doing two essential things connected to student services and retention, one of which is our community area for students and the other is the FNSA’s computer room.

“If we could find a larger space where we could consolidate the two services it would make things far more convenient, particularly for new Aboriginal students.”

Semple adds, SFU’s four main university Indigenous organizations—ISC, FNSA, the Office for Aboriginal Peoples and the First Nations Studies department—have recently started meeting monthly as an “Indigenous inclusion committee to keep us connected. And the MOU was the start of this.”

MOU promotes ‘collective partnership’

Jenna LaFrance (left), director of the university-operated Indigenous Student Centre signs an agreement with Janelle Kasperski of the independent student-run First Nations Student Association. The groups pledged to work together to support SFU’s Indigenous students.
Building a bridge to the future

Ivy Bell isn’t sure how she’ll use her degree after she graduates. “But I’m reaching for the stars,” says the first-year health sciences student who was one of the first graduates of SFU’s Aboriginal Pre-Health Bridge Program.

The two-semester program first offered in September 2009 and the one-semester Aboriginal University Preparation Program (AUPP) operating since 2007 were both incorporated as formal pathways to conditional SFU admission in the new Aboriginal Bridge Program the senate approved in January.

And this month VP-academic Jon Driver announced continuing funding for the new program, which had previously been dependent on a temporary grant funding (see related story p.3).

Continuing Studies developed the two popular tuition-free programs in partnership with First Nations peoples and communities to provide greater access to SFU post-secondary opportunities as mandated in First Nations Strategic Plan, says program coordinator Natalie Wood-Wiens.

“They’re both hugely popular,” she says, “so it was a logical step to recognize them formally as ‘bridging programs’ to provide improved access and acknowledge coursework completed by the students.”

Both programs include foundation courses in university level reading and writing, mathematics, science and Indigenous knowledge in the modern world, as well as study skills, managing stress, motivation, wellness and careers in a global environment.

The pre-health program Bell was in also explores various health career options while building the necessary prerequisites for health-sciences programs such nursing, midwifery and dental hygienist training.

Wood-Wiens says possible future bridging streams will also be based on the AUPP core model and will be similarly recognized as part of the Aboriginal Bridge Program.

“The work is quite tough,” Bell says of her pre-health program training, “but I really enjoyed it and the instructors were very helpful—and still are. I feel like I’m ready now to train for a career that will be great for the future.”

Honouring feast reinforces Aboriginal heritage

For as long as First Nations students have been graduating from SFU the university’s Aboriginal community has been holding its own traditional ceremonies in tandem with the university to celebrate their achievement.

Over the years the informal ceremonies have drawn increasing numbers of people until three years ago when the First Nations Honouring Feast became a regular event during spring and fall convocation.

The much-anticipated feast draws proud families from across the country to celebrate their children’s achievements in a culturally appropriate way that also reinforces their Aboriginal heritage.

SFU is on traditional Squamish Nation lands so the university’s First Nations community “asked us to help ‘set the table’”, says Squamish Nation education department head, Deborah Jacobs.

“We provide the fish for the feast” and the ceremony is conducted using Squamish protocols that involve applying a very particular set of cultural values to the ceremony, explains Jacobs.

“We blanket a speaker, who speaks for the host family—the university, the First Nations Student Association, the Indigenous Student Centre and the First Nations Studies department.”

The Squamish Nahane Dancers delighted guests last June at the First Nations Honouring Feast, which became a regular SFU convocation event three years ago.

Unique collection speaks with ‘Indigenous voice’

Indigenous scholars worldwide will soon have open Internet access to a unique SFU collection of digitized graduate theses, research papers and other materials all written by Indigenous authors from an Indigenous rather than an Euro-centric perspective.

Dubbed the Indigenous Academic Resources (IAR) project, the collection is the result of a partnership between SFU’s Indigenous Student Centre (ISC), the institutional repository and the Bennett Library, using a $5000 grant from the library’s Scholarly Digitization Fund.

“A dozen years later, students can pursue a bachelor of arts degree in First Nations Studies in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. Creating a stand-alone major for First Nations members, with three jointly appointed in FNST faculty, staff and instruction.”

A dozen years later, students can pursue a bachelor of arts degree in First Nations Studies in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. Creating a stand-alone major for First Nations members, with three jointly appointed in FNST faculty, staff and instruction.

SFU introduced First Nations Studies (FNST) as a minor program offered on the Burnaby campus in 1998. Initially, the program offered a limited number of courses but it has grown incrementally since.

A dozen years later, students can pursue a bachelor of arts degree in First Nations Studies in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. Creating a stand-alone major for First Nations members, with three jointly appointed in FNST faculty, staff and instruction.

Although the department of archaeology has been the institutional host from the outset and continues to act in that role today, establishing a physical presence for the academic program was an important recommendation of the strategic plan.

When Saywell Hall was built it included space to house FNST faculty, staff and instruction. In the seminar room adjacent to the atrium, faculty members offer courses that examine unique Indigenous literature, visual arts, heritage, traditional knowledge and politics.

While FNST might be a fledgeling venture that has taken a significant step forward, there are still future initiatives to consider, such as seeking departmental status.
‘Indigenous’ name change reflects global realities

The SFU’s Indigenous Student Centre (ISC) recently changed its name from its previous designation, First Nations Student Centre, to better convey the inclusive nature of the centre for both local and international Indigenous peoples.

The term Indigenous “is recognized throughout the world by other Indigenous peoples as well as international organizations such as the United Nations,” says ISC director Jennie LaFrance.

“But the term ‘First Nations’ is only used in Canada and the term ‘Aboriginal’ is used only in Canada and Australia. ‘Indigenous’ is a more widely recognized term and because we are thinking of the world, as our logo says, I wanted to expand on that. Plus, the other terminologies are more colonial in their origins and not as inclusive, says Blankinship.

“Also, we’re recruiting for students from places in the U.S. and Latin America where the words ‘Aboriginal’ or ‘First Nations’ are practically unknown.

She adds, “A lot of the faculties are also looking at changing their terminology to ‘Indigenous’ because we have knowledge from Indigenous peoples all over the world. We don’t want to categorize them in different boxes.”

PETTER from page 1.

that has attracted an unprecedented number of Aboriginal students. Aboriginal enrolment rose to almost 10 per cent of the law student body on his watch.

“Canadians have a huge responsibility to Aboriginal Peoples, who have been poorly served historically,” says Petter.

“Education can help overcome past wrongs by empowering Aboriginal people to address social and economic challenges and giving them the skills to work with businesses and influence governments.

“And when an institution has a significant proportion of Aboriginal faculty and students it enriches the academic environment for everyone.

“Non-Indigenous students not only gain a better understanding of Indigenous history and culture in Canada, they’re invited to view their own history and culture through a different lens.

“They’re also encouraged to consider how things might need to be changed to better accommodate Indigenous values and experience.”

Northern boy makes good

Vancouver Metis filmmaker Kelvin Redvers has come a long way from his birthplace in Hay River, NWT—and it’s been a wild ride.

His last five years polishing his craft in SFU’s Contemporary Arts film program were punctuated by a string of awards and a celebration of his roots while working to increase the profile of Aboriginal culture on campus.

A fixture at the First Nations Student Association, he organized two annual Aboriginal spring feasts, several coffee houses and an Aboriginal storytelling workshop, all the while maintaining a near straight-A average. At spring graduation this year, his extraordinary record earned him SFU’s most prestigious undergraduate honour, the Gordon M. Shrum gold medal.

Then barely two months later he scored a plum job as a producer with CTV’s Aboriginal current affairs show First Story.

Still, you can take the man out of the north but you can’t take the north out of the man, and the concerns of Indigenous communities bordering the 60th parallel have never been far from his mind.

“So when a friend told me how Treaty 8 lands near Fort St. John were being contaminated from about 1,400 old oil and gas sites and eight-year-old oil spills were poisoning the caribou, I jumped at the story,” says Redvers.

The result was Black Blood: Tainted Land, Dying Caribou, his inaugural First Story report, which first aired Nov. 14 and can be viewed at the program’s website www.ctvbc.ctv.ca/firststory.

The story attracted national media attention and prompted promises from Victoria and Ottawa lawmakers to look into the problem.

Redvers’ grad film Kid’s Court opened at the Vancouver International Film Festival Hollywood the same weekend, while his first short film, Black Blood, earned him a string of awards and drew international media interest.

“Since then it’s been a wild ride,” says Redvers.

The Ahp-cii-uk program helped the Vancouver Island community of Ahouseat revitalise its deteriorating Wild Side heritage trail, which has been re-born as an eco-tourism destination.

“’That’s where we came in,’ says Mark Selman, director of the SFU Business Learning Strategies Group, which was contracted in 2007 to advance the project and enlist corporate support.

Selman recruited business undergrad Bryan Gallagher to work with renowned facilitators and SFU adjunct professors Barry Stuart and Glenn Sigunin to help the three nations choose community-led projects.

He also enlisted a multi-sector team to participate in Ahp-cii-uk, each donating $10,000 and supplying employees to help.

Ahouseat chose to revitalise its deteriorating Wild Side Trail, which has been reborn as an eco-tourism destination, complete with a welcome fence. Tseshaht developed an artists’ market and road safety program, while Ehattesaht has focused on skills development for youth.

The other Ahp-cii-uk partners provided financial support and know-how on marketing and tourism development.

“The whole thing has been a life-changing experience for me,” says Gallagher, who plans to continue working with Aboriginal communities after completing his PhD.

“We’re now in discussion with other communities about extending the approach,” says Selman, adding, “the plan is to have Ahp-cii-uk rolled out nationally.”

Kelvin Redvers

International Student Film Festival Hollywood the same weekend, where it picked up an award, and the next weekend it was screened at Australia’s Yauh International Jugend Medien Festival.

When asked the secret of his success so far, the young TV producer doesn’t miss a beat: “SFU has been a huge part of it,” he says.

“It was my home for five years and the best part of my life and the First Nations Student Association was like a second home. SFU was pivotal to me becoming a filmmaker and learning how to bring attention to the Aboriginal peoples and culture I love so much.

“Now I’m able to do it on a much larger scale.”