
NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release
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Sept. 10, 2015

Office of the Premier
Ministry of Advanced Education

Premier announces awards for Aboriginal masters and doctoral students

VANCOUVER – Premier Christy Clark today announced \$2 million to encourage more Aboriginal students to pursue masters and doctoral level degrees at public universities in British Columbia.

“Aboriginal people are a vital part of British Columbia’s future and contribute to our diverse, growing and strong economy,” said Premier Clark, who made the announcement during closing remarks at the B.C. Cabinet-First Nations Leaders Gathering in Vancouver. “These awards of up to \$5,000 each per year will help open doors for more Aboriginal masters and doctoral students.”

Aboriginal Masters and Doctoral Student Awards are available to Aboriginal students studying at public universities in British Columbia. The awards are granted through the Irving K. Barber B.C. Scholarship Society.

“Increasing the number of Aboriginal students enrolled in masters and doctoral programs is one of the goals of our Aboriginal Post-Secondary Education and Training Policy Framework and Action Plan,” said Advanced Education Minister Andrew Wilkinson. “These awards provide an incentive to Aboriginal students to take their education to next level, which will ultimately help to build stronger communities and new opportunities for Aboriginal people.”

The provincial government established the B.C. Aboriginal Student Award in 2008 to improve educational access and achievement for Aboriginal people. The award supports Aboriginal students pursuing all levels of post-secondary education by reducing financial barriers. In 2012, government provided additional funding specifically for Aboriginal students pursuing masters or doctoral degrees. Since then, 107 students have benefited from this special funding initiative aimed at assisting students to complete their masters and doctoral degrees. This year, the government is providing an additional \$2 million to the Aboriginal Masters/Doctoral program.

“These awards help talented Aboriginal students pursue academic excellence in their chosen fields and the continuing success of these students is something that enriches us all,” said Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation Minister John Rustad. “Opportunities for Aboriginal people in B.C. are growing as we continue to work on reconciliation and improve support for Aboriginal people to achieve their goals.”

The Irving K. Barber B.C. Scholarship Society works with the Victoria Foundation to provide scholarships and awards to B.C. students throughout the province and internationally. To date, the society has awarded more than \$8.9 million from five separate scholarship and award programs, including more than \$3 million to Aboriginal students in British Columbia.

“Providing scholarships for graduate studies to Aboriginal students gives the students an increased opportunity to contribute to their Aboriginal community and to the British Columbia

economy,” said Irving K. Barber British Columbia Scholarship Society chair Hugh Gordon.

Graduate studies at universities in British Columbia are in high demand and attract the best and brightest students from B.C., Canada and the world. B.C. universities offer many programs that provide financial aid to graduate students including scholarships, bursaries, teaching assistantships, research stipends, fellowships, awards and loans. Last year there were approximately 16,000 full-time equivalent student spaces in graduate programs at the four public research-intensive universities in B.C. – an almost 60% increase since 2002-03.

“This announcement will benefit Aboriginal students pursuing masters or doctoral programs at universities such as UNBC,” said Senior Advisor to the President on Aboriginal Relations at the University of Northern British Columbia Rheanna Robinson. “Statistics show a gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students at a graduate degree level. Anything we can do to close that gap is welcome news.”

B.C. Aboriginal students received 3,240 post-secondary credentials in 2013-14. While this has grown by 23%, or 607 from 2009-10, only 5% of these were graduate credentials. A 2011 Statistics Canada national household survey indicated that 1.46% of Aboriginal persons, aged 25 to 64 years, received a masters degree, compared with 5.1% among the non-indigenous population.

Learn more about Aboriginal student awards:

More information about this award: www.ikbbc.ca/web/aboriginal

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BACKGROUND 1

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PhD candidate wins Aboriginal Student Award to pursue pollination research

PhD candidate Kyle Bobiwash is one of 25 Aboriginal students who received the 2015 Irving K. Barber Aboriginal Student Graduate Award. With the \$5,000 renewable award Bobiwash, 31, is free to undertake his doctoral research in pollination at Simon Fraser University without having to worry about working on the side.

“It’s a full-time job,” says Bobiwash, “I’m working at it from 8am to 6pm – they’re full days. It would be difficult to manage my workload and have to work as well.”

Pursuing a PhD in Biology, the focus of Bobiwash’s research is pollination ecology – looking at which native pollinators are important for crop pollination and how pollinator diversity impacts crop yield. By planting wildflowers next to blueberry fields, for example, he examines whether increased floral resources leads to greater native bee pollination and fruit yield as compared to a field with only honeybees.

By understanding the relationships between pollinators and crops, Bobiwash, of the Mississauga First Nation, intends to develop farm systems that are productive and profitable to create opportunities for First Nation communities.

He’s had a love of bees and nature from a young age. “I’ve always been interested in the natural world,” says Bobiwash. “I remember learning about bees on Reading Rainbow when I was really young and being so fascinated.”

Growing up with traditional farming practices, like wildfire burning, taught Bobiwash about the relationship between land and food, and how to manage land in an ecologically sustainable way. Complemented by his interest in beekeeping and his studies, Bobiwash developed a thorough understanding of how biodiversity supports healthy ecosystems and thriving communities.

“Many communities have lost their traditional agriculture practices,” says Bobiwash, “I soon saw the direct benefits that understanding ecology could provide to native species, farmers and communities.”

While a lifelong passion for this work helps him to persevere, Bobiwash admits that it’s not always easy and limited funding available for doctoral studies makes it particularly challenging. “There are definitely times where you start to wonder, is it really worth it?” says Bobiwash.

However, he now shows no sign of letting up.

Once he completes his research, Bobiwash wants to help create sustainable farms on reserves using everything he’s learned. By creating productive and profitable farms, Bobiwash wants to

demonstrate the opportunity that First Nations communities have in sustainable agriculture. He wants to incorporate research and academia, jobs, economics, scientists, and accountants to show that agriculture can truly sustain a community.

“It doesn’t matter how hard school is for you,” says Bobiwash, “If you have something that you really love, just keep knocking on those doors – just keep on going. Chip away, chip away, chip away.”

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BACKGROUND 2

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UBC Okanagan student wins Aboriginal Student Award for Master's Studies

The 2015 school year was made a little more manageable for health sciences student Nathan Sletten who was awarded a \$5,000 renewable Irving K. Barber Aboriginal Student Award. Undertaking a master's degree in Interdisciplinary Studies at University of British Columbia Okanagan in the fall, Sletten's focus will be exercise physiology and health-related conditions in children and youth.

After graduating high school, Sletten started his post-secondary studies in business management. But he soon switched gears after an elective course in exercise physiology hit home for him. He saw an opportunity to bring knowledge and awareness to Aboriginal communities about the connection between physical activity and lowering instances of disease.

"Maintaining health is so important in Aboriginal communities," says Sletten, "Metabolic diseases, like Type 2 Diabetes, are much more common in the Aboriginal individual and there is a lot we can do to reduce these negative impacts."

After receiving his degree in human kinetics in 2015 from UBC Okanagan, Sletten continued to work in the area of metabolism and metabolic disease including research work in the Exercise Metabolism and Inflammatory Laboratory at UBC.

His research helped him to develop an acute understanding of the impact that exercise has on cardiorespiratory function, health, and body composition. His research and concern for the growing health issues in many Aboriginal communities led Sletten to focus specifically on children and youth; he sees his work in that area having the greatest impact.

"If we can find strategies to improve the health of children and youth before they develop sedentary habits and health issues, we can increase the number of healthy years of living and the overall health of our communities," says Sletten.

Sletten works at UBC, has a personal training business, volunteers his time to local community organizations, visits his family regularly in Richmond, and manages to keep healthy and active himself.

As someone who studies efficiency in processes of the body, it's no surprise that he leads his life efficiently as well. In order to accomplish everything he wants to in a week, Sletten sets up a 6am – 6pm calendar at the beginning of each week and allocates time for everything important to him. Over the years, time management became a very important skill and he uses it to help him live his life as fully as possible.

Education and research continue to be central in Sletten's approach. After he finishes his Master's Degree, Sletten wants to continue working to improve the health and lives of as many

people as possible and, eventually, pursue work as a university professor and a strength and conditioning coach for collegiate sports.

“I am not exactly sure what the future holds—I have so many different possibilities in my head for a future career,” he says. “But uncertainty is okay, because if I stay on my path I know I will end up being successful at a career that I enjoy that enriches my life and the lives of others.”

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