

Supporting First Nations communities

SIIT pivots to online learning to help First Nations learners define and achieve their goals

SIIT has always focused on supporting First Nations people in their own communities. Each year, SIIT helps hundreds of students develop skills and set career goals through its JobSeries programs. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, delivering these programs in First Nations communities was no longer possible. SIIT worked with D2L to build an accessible, user-friendly, and equitable online learning platform that helps students thrive.



AT A GLANCE

Client: Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies (SIIT)

Learners: 1,800

Industry: Higher Education

Website: www.siiit.ca

Platform/Features:

- Brightspace Core
- Administrator Support
- Bongo integration for virtual classrooms and video assignments

Interviewees:

- **Ally Rinas**, Career Services Coordinator
- **Derrick Sych**, Facilitator

Highlights:

- Switched to a fully online learning model to support communities during the COVID-19 crisis
- Launched two new competency-based online learning programs in a matter of months
- Delivered 20 online courses to over 200 students within the first year

Challenge

Creating equity in employment opportunities

Established by First Nations leaders in 1976, SIIT provides academic and vocational education and employment support for adult learners and job seekers in First Nations communities throughout Saskatchewan, Canada.

SIIT partners closely with the communities it serves by prioritizing and delivering over 75% of its programs and employment workshops at community centers or via mobile training units. This is the approach of the JobSeries Unit in SIIT's Career Services Department. In many cases, its facilitators visit with local communities for weeks or months at a time to provide in-person training and support for groups of students.

Ally Rinas, Career Services Coordinator at SIIT, explains: "Often students come to us believing that they don't have opportunities for employment because they don't live in an urban center. Our JobSeries programs encourage them to recognize the value of the skills they have and inspire them to move into education, training, or employment—goals that they might not have believed were attainable in the past."

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit Saskatchewan, SIIT realized that its traditional method of delivering the JobSeries programs in the community had to change.

"Our number-one priority is the safety of our First Nations students and our staff," says Ally Rinas. "So we had to figure out how to adapt our JobSeries programming. How do we continue to reach people during a pandemic? When the province closed, we developed a safer way to deliver our programming, which resulted in speeding up the process and creating effective and engaging online programming."

Like other educational institutions, SIIT realized the answer was to move online, but demographics made this particularly challenging. Students living in remote communities often lack reliable internet connections or access to laptops or mobiles, and there were also computer literacy challenges to overcome.

"We had access to an online platform, but the JobSeries programs were not available on it," says Ally Rinas. "We wanted a competency-based learning approach that was accessible, flexible, and user-friendly, and enhanced student experience."



Solution

Putting accessibility first

SIIT began looking for a solution that would help it put accessibility first, not only by providing a technology platform that was easy and convenient for students and facilitators, but also by supporting a more flexible educational model.

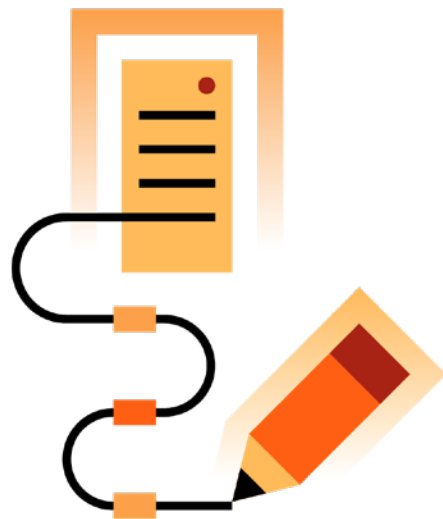
“D2L and the Brightspace platform were very **strong** on a competency-based **approach**, and we knew that other institutions **across** Saskatchewan were already working with **D2L**, so it just made sense.”

Ally Rinas
Career Services Coordinator

SIIT also appreciated how D2L Brightspace is built around accessibility and equity for students—for example, the responsive design of the Pulse mobile app means that mobile users have full access to all the features of the platform, making life easier for students who don’t have regular access to a computer at home. Equally, the focus on supporting guided-study complemented the flexibility needed by SIIT’s student population, as many need to balance work and family responsibilities with finding time for online learning.

“With great support from the D2L team, we were able to get two of our JobSeries programs up and running quickly,” says Ally Rinas. “I credit a lot of the implementation process to staff at D2L, who were so supportive and validated the work that we were putting in.”

She adds: “Because we’re a small team in JobSeries, we are agile and flexible in trying new things, which has been successful for our program outcomes. SIIT as an institute decided to adopt the Brightspace platform, which gives us access to even more features.”





Through integration between D2L Brightspace and Bongo, SIIT now enables JobSeries students to log in to a virtual classroom, meet with facilitators and fellow students, and work through group activities. These sessions are recorded so that students who can't attend on the day of the lesson can catch up later. The virtual classrooms typically take place in the morning and at the end of each day, while the afternoons are devoted to guided-pace study as well as one-to-one virtual meetings between facilitators and students.

“The facilitator reaches out to everybody individually to support and motivate them daily, answer any questions, and check in with them to ensure that they’re progressing,” says Ally Rinas. “Those regular one-to-ones are such an important aspect of what we do because they build relationships and give our students confidence.”

For example, Bella Morin, a student on SIIT’s JobQuest program, comments: “These programs and experiences have really helped me

focus on my goals, my hopes, and my dreams, and to become healthier in mind, body, and spirit. I will keep pushing myself to make steps toward my goals and be on the lookout for more SIIT programs.”

SIIT has also created an online community for its facilitators so they can share their knowledge and support each other. The JobSeries team is using badges in D2L Brightspace as an engagement tool to help students track their progress and recognize their achievements.

Result

Leveling the playing field

Less than a year after going live with D2L Brightspace, SIIT already has 20 programs running with students across the province. Six of those programs have already been completed, and SIIT has been amazed by the results.

SIIT has also received highly positive feedback from both students and facilitators in post-program surveys. Even though JobSeries was the first online program that many students had experienced, many reported that they preferred learning virtually to in-person classes, and the majority said they would recommend SIIT's online programs to their friends.

Derrick Sych, a facilitator at SIIT, explains: "What I like most about D2L Brightspace is that it allows learners and facilitators to fully engage in each other's learning experience. Brightspace allows participants who would normally struggle with being able to attend in-person learning due to personal barriers such as transportation and child care to fully engage and progress successfully with their learning goals."

Ally Rinas concludes: "D2L Brightspace provided the learning environment for delivery of our unique content to foster the empowerment and growth of our First Nations students across Saskatchewan."

"Prior to COVID-19, the completion rate for our JobSeries programs was around 70%. For the six programs we've delivered with D2L Brightspace, it's up to 88%. That's due to the support that we provide our clients and our facilitators, and the format of how we deliver programs daily."

Ally Rinas
Career Services Coordinator