

DECHINTA – CANADA’S BUSH UNIVERSITY

I. SUMMARY

Launched in 2009, the Dechinta Bush University Centre for Research and Learning has grown to become Canada’s **only** university which offers all its courses for Indigenous students out on the land. Based in the Northwest Territories, Dechinta offers a unique interdisciplinary program of study. Core streams include governance, sustainable community, health, communications, law, arts, language and environmental science and land management. Dechinta is accredited by McGill, UBC and the University of Alberta.

Dechinta is Canada’s bush university; designed by indigenous people, open to all students. We have a 0% drop-out rate, which is unprecedented for northern Indigenous post-secondary programs. 100% of Dechinta’s graduates have either pursued higher education or entered the labour force (49% pursued further post-secondary and 57% are employed, 97% of these in the NWT labour force).

A registered charity, Dechinta is now poised to take its programs to the next level and become a fully accredited university under the Education Act of the Northwest Territories.

Unlike most Canadian universities which receive on-going government funding through annual operating grants, the majority of Dechinta’s funding has come from private sources. These include the J.W McConnell Family Foundation, The Counselling Foundation of Canada, The Gordon Foundation, The Indigenous Leadership Initiative and RSF Social Finance.

As a next step towards stable operating support, we are seeking a federal grant of \$15M over the next 3 years (\$5M/yr). Federal support at this stage would enable Dechinta to complete the university accreditation process and begin implementation of our long term sustainability strategy, all while expanding delivery of quality post-secondary programming. Given the NWT’s unique situation in the early stages of implementing devolution, three year bridge financing from the federal government would ensure institutional stability as we work with the GNWT to design an effective model for on-going territorial support.

Dechinta directly fulfills many of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s education recommendations, including closing the education gap, developing culturally appropriate and community developed curricula, enabling parenting and community responsibility and control and respecting and honouring Treaty relationships. By supporting Dechinta, the federal government would be contributing to the TRC call to action to close the education gap within a generation.

One of Dechinta’s core programs is the Indigenous Boreal Guardians (IBG). It is inspired in part by Australia’s Working on Country Program (WoC), where 10% of Australia’s land base is now being actively managed by a network of over 800

Indigenous Rangers. With a 3:1 investment return ratio, the WoC shows how **national Indigenous social infrastructure investments can transform community realities**. The vision for Canada's Indigenous Boreal Guardians is to support communities to re-establish their traditional roles in a modern context as the eyes and ears on the ground – providing vital information to help deliver on a wide range of priorities such as environmental assessments, climate change adaptation, species management and environmental monitoring of development projects. Dechinta's unique programs are designed in direct response to community needs and tied to available employment.

II. BACKGROUND

a) A Unique Northern Approach to Education

- Dechinta is flexible, innovative and responsive. Embedded evaluation and performance metrics have ensured responsive programming and are reflected in our success and **demonstrated return on investment**.
- Families are a core part of Dechinta and students are supported to bring their children. Dechinta offers early childhood education through high school on-site so children of students can keep up with their own studies. The culturally rich, language focused outdoor education program ensures whole family education support.
- **Dechinta was purpose-built through research** and intensively engages students in its governance and program evaluation, resulting in cost-effective, results -based programming that is highly rated by participants and faculty on an on-going basis.
- **Dechinta designs unique curriculum on critical northern issues** identified by communities and research using innovative land-based approaches to teaching and learning. Dechinta teaches an interdisciplinary program which spans governance, law, health, research, policy, sustainability , economic development, writing and communications. Students build real capacity and usable skills to be competitive in the labour market in the NWT and beyond.
- In partnership with The Government of the Northwest Territories, Department of Education, Culture and Employment and the University of Alberta, Dechinta designed and offered an On-the-Land Masters level course in Summer 2015 for Northern educators. Dechinta will continue to expand it's Masters level programming.
- Dechinta is accredited by the University of Alberta, McGill University and UBC. This ensures quality control and helps facilitate north/south student mobility.

b) Challenges

The demand for a Northern University is not being met.

Dechinta is receiving 3x as many applications as we have funding for and can't meet the growing demand from students. This year, 104 potential students applied for 30 places.

Canada is the only circumpolar country without a circumpolar university. Dechinta is recognized as the leading evidence-based best practice in land-based Indigenous education. **Dechinta is accredited by the Universities of Alberta, McGill and UBC but does it receive on-going operating funding.**

This underfunding hinders student potential. Students should not have to leave the north to pursue a degree relevant to their future unless it is their choice.

Education level attainment is the single biggest co-determinant in income earning, health outcomes and poverty alleviation.

Since its inception in 2009 Dechinta Centre for Research and Learning has successfully provided land-based post-secondary education in the NWT.

UBC recently co-appointed Yellowknifes Dene First Nation UBC Professor Glen Coulthard to Dechinta, a significant permanent financial contribution from a leading university.

The Dechinta model offers a proven opportunity for sustainable regional economic development through the expansion of land-based programming, creating jobs in education, culture, language and governance.

Stable Dechinta Funding (5M/yr) would create 158 new jobs (153 outside of Yellowknife). In four years, the number of Indigenous degree holders would increase by 5%. This model is scalable.

Dechinta is building an active NWT Knowledge Economy while educating northerners using community expertise and preparing students to tackle the challenges and opportunities our territory faces.

c) Opportunities

- Dechinta has been operating in the NWT since 2009 (offering programming since 2010). There have been 306 (program) course completions and **0 drop outs** in that time. (including 12-week full university semesters and short programs).

- Dechinta offers a full minor in Indigenous Studies and is expanding to offer a full degree.
- Dechinta courses are designed in the North and accredited by the University of Alberta, McGill and UBC.
- In 2015-16 Dechinta's funding from ECE was 250k.
- Dechinta has become a viable and desired education option for Northerners. Dechinta received 104 applicants for 30 places in 2014-15.

d) Economic Indicators

University Degrees are directly tied to GDP growth, poverty alleviation and rise in real income:

- Between May 2008-2014, more than twice as many new jobs were created for University graduates than for college and trades graduates combined¹.
- The NWT needs to fill Northern Jobs with Northerners. Over 50% of the currently un-occupied GNWT jobs require a degree, and only 4.9% of Aboriginal Northerners hold a degree².
- 2015-2030 80% of all NWT jobs will require post-secondary³. The NWT is not ready to fill these jobs. Funding Dechinta will ensure northerners are trained to maximize these opportunities.
- Aboriginal Unemployment for degree holders is 1.9% compared to 14% for those without a degree
- Over their careers, university graduates typically earn 50% more than other full-time workers without a university degree.
- When Indigenous women hold degrees, unemployment decreases to 5% from 20%
- Northerners want the choice to earn a relevant, land –based degree without going south.

e) Other Facts

- In total 104 people have applied for 30 spots offered in the last 3 semesters

¹ AUCC, 2014

² Careers Website, GNWT

³ The Conference Board of Canada/ GNWT Skills for Success S4S, Current Labor Supply vs. Currently Available Labour Supply

- 97% of the students attending Dechinta are Indigenous, 72% Indigenous are women.
- Dechinta offers integrated k-12 KidsU school to support families in education success on-site.
- Dechinta created 27 seasonal and diverse jobs in culture, education, language, history and governance in 2015, hiring people from 4 NWT regions covering many different demographics.
- With funding, in four years, Dechinta can graduate the largest cohort of Aboriginal Northern University Graduates (40) in history. This will increase the number of Indigenous degree holders in the territory by 5% and provide a steady flow of Northern degree holders for the foreseeable future. By 2030, Dechinta will graduate 440 new Indigenous university graduates. This is a legacy impact.
- Dechinta is a dry program.
- Dechinta's original curriculum is designed in the north.
- Each Dechinta semester consists of 7 – 8 weeks of programming onsite at Blachford Lake Lodge followed by 5 weeks of programming in the student's home communities in job placements and community research projects.
- Dechinta expand to the Sahtu in summer of 2015 with the Indigenous Boreal Guardian Program, and will continue to expand with funding offering multiple yearly regional programs, including a Deh Cho Water Semester, Summer 2016.
- Dechinta does not require new infrastructure. Dechinta uses existing land-based infrastructure (lodges, cabins, camps) maximizing efficiencies and re-purposing under-used facilities to minimize investment and maximize outcomes.
- Dechinta has four major funders:
 - ✓ ECE
 - ✓ J.W McConnell Family Foundation
 - ✓ Counselling Foundation of Canada
 - ✓ TIDES Foundation (an anonymous donor)
- Dechinta has received both national and international recognition:
 - ✓ **TIDES Top 10 Award** (one of the top 10 charitable projects in Canada)
 - ✓ **ASHOKA Changemakers Award 2012** – award for best practices in First Nations, Inuit and Métis education
 - ✓ **Leading Together**: Indigenous Youth and Community Partnership

- Dechinta has been a national finalist in major research grants.
- Dechinta is currently a major partner in two multi-million dollar SSHRC research grants, *The Initiative for Indigenous Futures* and *Sustainable Water Governance and Indigenous Law*.
- Dechinta operates as a charity with a cost-effective social enterprise model maximizing public-private-government partnerships.
- Since 2008, Dechinta has brought over 5M in education funding to the NWT.
- Dechinta generates over 250K/yr in revenue from professional development programs and tuition.
- The on-the-land Masters course offers a teaching and learning experience that allows teachers to connect to the land in order to better understand Indigenous identity and life ways. This course gives educators the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will help them to deliver Northern Studies much more effectively.
- Dechinta's Indigenous Boreal Guardian Program, piloted this semester in the Sahtu Region, launched yet another valuable degree stream in environmental science, ecology and land management.
- Dechinta maximizes the benefits of on-the-land education, healing, wellness and capacity building while forwarding a sustainable rural economic development model. The result is cost-effective, results driven, high impact, high return evidence-based education programming.