

SCALING RECONCILIATION THROUGH THE INDIGENOUS INTERN LEADERSHIP PROGRAM (IILP)



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The Indigenous Intern Leadership Program (IILP) stands as one of British Columbia's most effective and inspiring models for advancing reconciliation through pathways to economic mobility.

Launched in 2018, the program connects Indigenous post-secondary graduates with two-year paid internships that offer meaningful employment, mentorship, and leadership development. It not only creates opportunities for Indigenous youth to thrive in the workplace, but it also equips them with the skills, confidence, and networks to become community and sector leaders.

In partnership with the **British Columbia Collaborative for Social Infrastructure.** This collaborative is designed to strengthen social infrastructure across the province and advance Reconciliation by uplifting Indigenous communities.



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Dr. Nilson, currently President Emeritus in Residence at Fulbright Canada and former President of Vancouver Island University, played a key leadership role in advancing the BC Collaborative for Social Infrastructure—an initiative funded by the McConnell Foundation and involving four BC-based universities. His leadership helped drive transformative initiatives like the Provincial Tuition Waiver Program, which contributed to major policy changes that ensure tuition-free access to post-secondary education for former youth in care across the province.

INTRODUCTION

The Indigenous Intern Leadership Program (IILP) stands as one of British Columbia's most effective and inspiring models for advancing reconciliation through pathways to economic mobility. Launched in 2018, the program connects Indigenous post-secondary graduates with two-year paid internships that offer meaningful employment, mentorship, and leadership development. It not only creates opportunities for Indigenous youth to thrive in the workplace, but it also equips them with the skills, confidence, and networks to become community and sector leaders.

What sets the IILP apart is the power of its partnerships. The program was born out of the Champions Table, an initiative of the Business Council of British Columbia (BCBC) that brings together 11 First Nations Chiefs and 11 senior corporate leaders in a shared commitment to eliminate socio-economic gaps and advance reconciliation. Through this unique leadership forum—and with foundational contributions from the BC Assembly of First Nations (BCAFN), Vancouver Island University (VIU), and the Government of British Columbia—the IILP was established as a shared response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).

Since its inception, the IILP has grown from a promising pilot into a proven success. In 2021, the program entered its second phase with critical new support from the Government of Canada and a major philanthropic investment of \$1.4 million from the McConnell Foundation. These national contributions reflect growing recognition of the IILP as a blueprint for systemic change and a model that other jurisdictions can learn from and scale.

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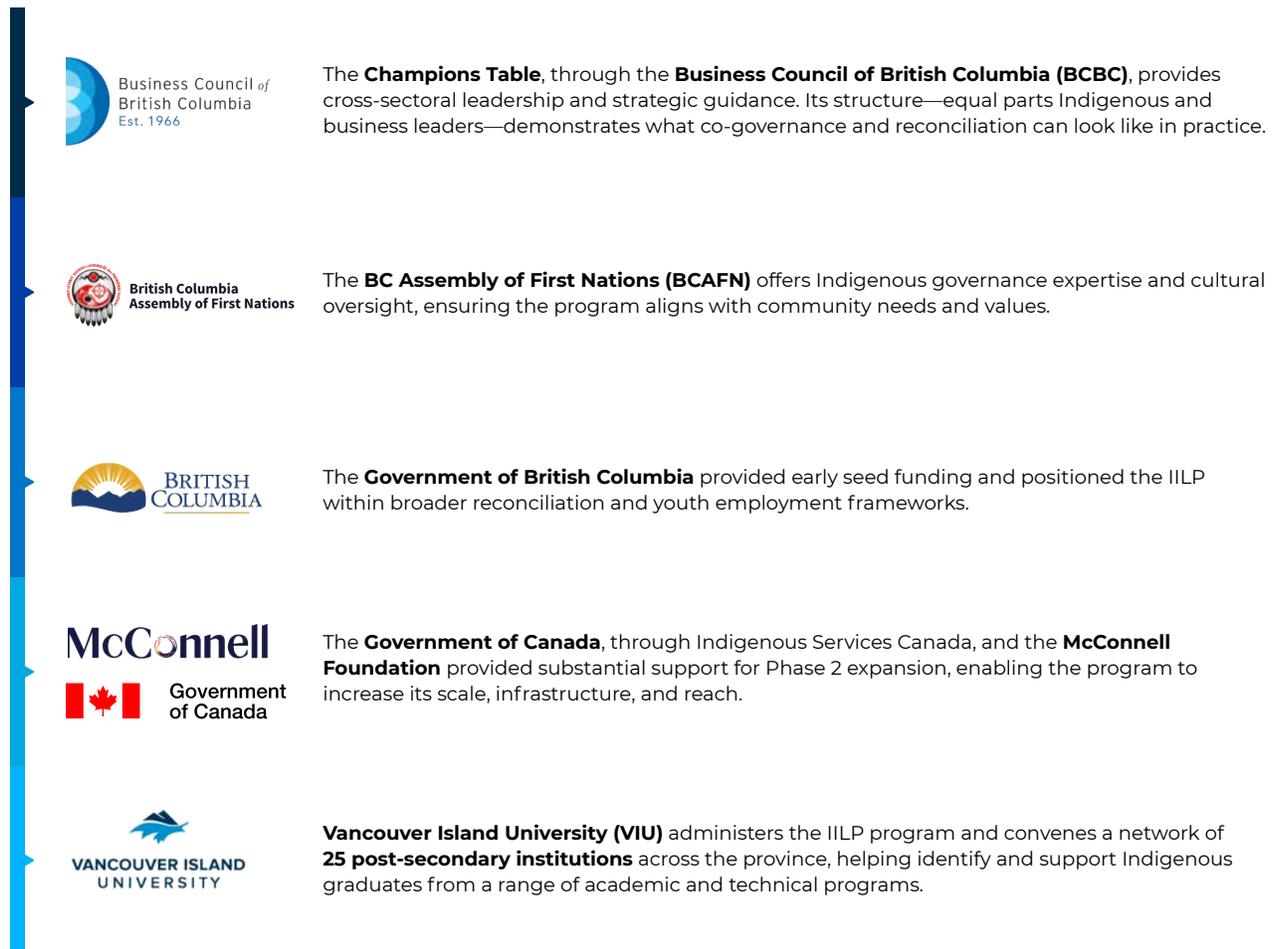


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A COLLABORATIVE MODEL FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE

At its core, the IILP is built on a powerful and comprehensive partnership model that bridges Indigenous leadership, post-secondary institutions, industry, and government.

Each partner plays a vital role:



Together, these actors form a **community of practice** that is transforming institutions, fostering Indigenous leadership, and embedding reconciliation within economic development strategies.

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PHASE ONE OUTCOMES

Building a Foundation for Change (2018-2021)

From 2018 to 2021, the IILP placed **56 Indigenous interns** in two-year roles across a wide range of sectors:

 Private Sector	 Public Sector	 Indigenous Communities	 Post-Secondary Institutions
Interns worked at companies like Mosaic Forest Management, Teck Resources, FortisBC, and Deloitte, contributing to fields such as project management, finance, HR, engineering, and Indigenous relations.	Interns were hosted by B.C. ministries and later by federal departments, gaining insights into governance, policy, and service delivery.	Interns supported First Nations band offices, Indigenous nonprofits, and economic development organizations—building internal governance and service delivery capacity.	Interns took on roles in academic support, student engagement, and research, reinforcing institutional learning and leadership.

A cornerstone of the program is its **mentorship model**. Each intern was paired with a culturally informed mentor—often an Indigenous professional—who offered guidance, support, and coaching. Annual gatherings with the Champions Table facilitated peer learning, leadership development, and cultural exchange.

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PHASE TWO EXPANSION

From Pilot to Platform (2021–2025)

With a solid foundation in place, Phase 2 of the IILP introduced ambitious goals:



Placing **35 interns annually**, aiming for **140 placements over four years**.



Creating **Indigenous Employment Navigators** in the **Lower Mainland** and **Northern B.C.** to provide regionally grounded, culturally informed support.



Enhancing **mentorship**, **professional development**, and **alumni tracking**.



Aligning with **post-pandemic workforce recovery** efforts, and assisting Indigenous youth who faced job loss.

These advancements are enabling the IILP to evolve into a scalable and sustainable model for economic participation and reconciliation in practice.

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INDIGENOUS-LED DEVELOPMENT AND INDIGENOUS-INFORMED PARTNERSHIPS

The IILP is not simply about internships—it is a platform for Indigenous-led development. It was co-created by Indigenous leaders and institutions with a clear recognition that reconciliation must include economic opportunity, leadership development, and co-governance.

The program operates on the principles of:



Respect and reciprocity in relationships.



Cultural safety in mentorship and organizational practices.



Indigenous governance shaping all strategic decisions.

Intern placements are often hosted by First Nations governments, Indigenous businesses, and organizations addressing community needs. This ensures alignment with self-determination and economic development goals. Interns bring their skills back to their communities, or lead in spaces where Indigenous voices have not been prominently featured.

Importantly, the program is also a learning vehicle for employers. Businesses are gaining cultural awareness and becoming more adaptive workplaces. This is not just about hiring—it is about transformation.

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STRATEGIC IMPACT AND BROADER SOCIETAL VALUE

The Indigenous Intern Leadership Program (IILP) is a catalyst for comprehensive growth and systemic transformation.

Its societal value extends far beyond the interns it places:



Closing the Employment Gap

Creates clear, supported pathways into career-track roles, reducing Indigenous youth unemployment and enabling long-term economic mobility and opportunity.



Fostering Indigenous Leadership

Interns emerge as confident, culturally grounded change-makers who are strengthening governance, driving innovation, and leading within communities and sectors.



Operationalizing Reconciliation

Brings the TRC Calls to Action and UNDRIP to life by embedding Indigenous voices in workplace structures and creating mechanisms for fairness and repair.



Transforming Institutions and Workplaces

Engages organizations in self-reflection, comprehensive practice, and learning from Indigenous knowledge and lived experience.



Replicable Governance and Partnership Models

Demonstrates the effectiveness of co-leadership structures like the Champions Table, providing a roadmap for other reconciliation-based collaborations.



Public Narrative Shift and National Inspiration

Uplifts stories of Indigenous excellence, shifts perceptions, and offers a tangible example of what success looks like when Indigenous youth are empowered and respected.

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POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Support National Replication of the IILP Model

Promote and fund similar Indigenous-led internship and leadership initiatives across Canada, ensuring they are community-rooted and co-governed.

Secure Long-Term, Multi-Partner Funding

Develop sustainable, multi-year funding strategies that combine public, private, and philanthropic contributions to support long-term program continuity.

Invest in Indigenous-Led Delivery, Mentorship, and Navigation

Expand regional supports, empower Indigenous Employment Navigators, and strengthen mentorship programs rooted in Indigenous ways of knowing.

Integrate Reconciliation Metrics into Policy and Workforce Strategies

Use indicators like Indigenous employment outcomes, leadership representation, and cultural safety benchmarks to track and report progress.

Promote Co-Governance Structures Like the Champions Table

Adopt and adapt this model in other domains to guide collaboration and ensure Indigenous leadership is embedded in institutional and policy decision-making.

Elevate the Role of Post-Secondary Institutions in Social Innovation

Support initiatives like the BC Collaborative for Social Infrastructure (VIU, SFU, UNBC, BCIT) to expand Indigenous entrepreneurship, social procurement, and innovation.

Complement the IILP with an Indigenous Entrepreneurship Initiative

Establish a complementary program—such as the Fulbright Canada Indigenous Entrepreneurship Initiative—to support Indigenous-led innovation, wealth creation, and self-determined livelihoods.

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Image Credit: BC Assembly of First Nations

CONCLUSION

The Indigenous Intern Leadership Program is more than an internship initiative. It is a transformative system rooted in Indigenous governance, cultural integrity, and shared responsibility. It demonstrates how multi-stakeholder partnerships, when guided by Indigenous leadership, can generate meaningful, scalable change.

By empowering Indigenous youth and supporting employers on their reconciliation journey, the IILP advances comprehensive economic growth, strengthens community capacity, and redefines what collaborative innovation can look like in Canada.

As governments, industries, and academic institutions seek ways to implement UNDRIP and respond to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the IILP offers a living blueprint: a structure that is strategic, relational, and rooted in reciprocity. One that delivers measurable impact on lives, institutions, and the broader society.

Scaling this model, and sustaining the principles behind it, is not only a smart investment—it's a moral imperative. It's a step toward an economy and a future where all voices are valued, all youth are supported, and all communities thrive.

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