

Present: Why Are We here?

The main theme that emerges across the responses is community. Respondents have different ideas about where community exists and what its role is, but it comes up time and again, and cuts across all categories. It is clearly valued by respondents, and it is also something respondents felt is compromised or should be strengthened.

Core purpose, vision, values

There is a quite varied sense of Nipissing's core purpose and values. Many respondents flagged the university's key talking points, and usual post-secondary objectives. For example, core purposes included: serving first generation learners, focusing on students, knowledge creation and dissemination, and free thinking. Students were at the heart of such responses.

Other responses were about values. They emphasized a university that fosters connection to community, people, and land. Helping students develop as human beings was a part of this type of response, which highlighted the necessity for an integrative and affiliative experience at the university. Many respondents thought that this work must happen in the classroom, and that Nipissing should embrace and support that as a core value and vision.

Numerous responses remarked on the need for the university to better serve the North Bay community; respondents also noted that many of our students are not from the north -- and they too are our community. Finding balance is a challenge. It was clearly and repeatedly expressed that we need to focus more on North Bay, and involving students in the community of North Bay was mentioned often.

Supportive-inclusive-responsive environment

Many respondents stated that Nipissing is friendly and supportive and welcoming. A large number, presumably those who have a long history at the university, stated that these qualities are associated with our past—as in, we used to be these things, but no longer are. Sometimes reasons were given for this perceived loss, such as overwork, burnout, too few employees, increasing student needs, and decreasing resources for staff and faculty.

There was a sense that Nipissing is far behind/lacking in cultural diversity and needs to embrace EDI more deeply. There are respondents who simply do not think Nipissing is welcoming. Often, they point to structural inequities and suggest that international students, mature students/families, grad students, BIPOC students get fewer resources here. There is a perception that larger (urban?) universities do a better job of supporting equity seeking groups. The vast majority of comments touching on equity/inclusion were about the culture and processes of the university.

Some comments addressed the lack of representation from equity seeking groups around the university (presumably across faculty and staff and administration); one respondent remarked on the absence of Cree persons in OII.

The importance of small class sizes was linked to the ability to be responsive and supportive to students.

There was one quite different approach to inclusion which looked beyond student life and working conditions at the university and spoke about how the university connects—or doesn't—with the wider community. The respondent noted that it is difficult for local organizations (even organizations where faculty are members) to use university space, such as for a meeting, because of cost and/or the bureaucracy. Nipissing is a public institution and the respondent felt that making space available for local organizations could be widely beneficial and help connect us to the community in a meaningful way.

Academic Excellence

The responses touching on academic excellence were far ranging. The respondents give a clear endorsement that Nipissing should be a leading institution in the north and deliver high-quality academic programs for all students, but what that looks like isn't cohesive. There were three main categories that considered academic delivery.

Professional training: Nipissing should continue to deliver quality professional training. Education and Nursing received many mentions, and these were typically very positive but also quite broad, so it was hard to pinpoint what exactly respondents valued. For example, "tradition" was continually valued alongside Education, and the importance of health care was appended to Nursing. But respondents also had the sense (real or perceived) that education students and nursing students don't live/stay in the north and so their professional training doesn't necessarily serve the north. This is, of course, true of the majority of our students—more in this below.

[**note #1:** I flag the tension between the value these programs hold and student demographic because it is interesting and seems to present an opportunity. For instance, many BEd students are here for 4 years before Education. Increasing community involvement opportunities in those 4 years is possible and could be productive, and would likely involve SMA metrics.

note #2: "tradition" clearly appeals, but might be a bit of a dog-whistle. It elicited one overtly racist comment].

Engineering was mentioned several times as a professional opportunity that would serve the north.

Undergraduate education: respondents commented on the importance of providing rich academic programs that engage students and help them deepen their knowledge and commitments. Our existing undergraduate research opportunities were noted, as was the need to support and expand those opportunities. Place, land, and environment were flagged as key unique components of undergraduate experience Nipissing offers, and there were many recommendations to focus on these elements. Experiential learning, creative opportunities, and connecting students to the community were of considerable importance. One respondent saw an opportunity to distinguish NU from Laurentian and Lakehead by highlighting Nipissing's humanities and social sciences disciplines and the cultural and social issues they focus on. Some feedback suggested Indigenous Studies needs to be at the forefront of our mission, and Indigenous language instruction was mentioned specifically.

Job preparation: this category is a bit nebulous but it does come up. Several respondents commented that NU should learn what skillsets are important and design programs to fulfill the needs of Northern employers. On the other hand, some respondents noted that focusing narrowly on job training has considerable risks.

[**note:** There are numerous venues that identify the skillsets employers find valuable, and they don't vary greatly. An institution as conservative as U of Alberta cites Creativity, Communication, and Critical thinking in the top three in its Professional Development handbook. So I take such responses to mean, in part, that we should do a better job helping our students connect their education to their goals, and realize and articulate their own professional capacities. There seems to be an opportunity here].

It was noted that a dearth of hiring impedes renewal, change, and innovation and this has real consequences for the academic experience of students.

Research and scholarly culture

There was not extensive feedback about research in and of itself, and many of the comments tied research activity to other categories, such as student experience. Overall, the responses emphasize a research-driven institution that connects serious scholarship to classroom and community (broadly defined). Research is one of the primary ways the university is distinguished from the college.

Respondents addressed the need to grow and promote research on subjects of local or Northern interest. "Local" was varied in its use and usually meant North Bay, the North East, and North; "local" occasionally seemed synonymous with "applied"—ie. research that would be of direct benefit (practical or economic) to a local or regional group. Comments touched on a wide range of academic fields. The feedback said NU should continue to concentrate on and emphasize research that develops knowledge about our immediate cultural context, environment, relationships, practices, and histories. It was noted that graduate programs tend to focus students more directly on local issues.

Respondents also acknowledged that important research doesn't necessarily have an immediate local application. Not a lot was said on this front but it came up a number of times, and the remarks didn't imply such work was perceived negatively. [**note:** the vague nature of these comments suggests that Nipissing could more effectively foreground the connection between faculty research and our mission as a post-secondary institution]

Many respondents expressly valued research focused on the environment and on Indigenous issues and relationships.

Sustainability/growth

This category tends to divide into two types of responses, suggestions for what we could do and lamenting what we aren't doing.

Connections, or lack of:

Many respondents addressed the need to connect more effectively with the city of North Bay as a pathway to stability and growth. Numerous respondents noted that Nipissing is separate from the North Bay community, and some respondents perceive that the university keeps itself separate and does

nothing for the city. The economic impact of the university received minimal acknowledgment. Respondents saw the need to connect with local industry, and also Nipissing First Nation. Establishing more fulsome provincial connections with provincial industry and research institutions was also encouraged.

More broadly, very many respondents commented on the need to increase the service culture of the university. One complained that Nipissing is a bad neighbour to the residents of Cedar Heights. Respondents also noted that Nipissing is rarely represented/visible in town and Canadore does a better job of establishing its presence in the community.

The sense of community *within* the university received comment. Nipissing is a main employer in the city and creating better working conditions would improve employee retention and satisfaction, and feed into Nipissing's local reputation. Burn out and loss of cohesion and trust within the university itself were mentioned, and these are also impediments to the university's sustainability.

Opportunities for programs / expansion (and threats)

Respondents wanted to see a focus on quality education for Indigenous students and investing in Indigenous language instruction (Cree in particular); similarly, NU should be a leader in Indigenous-settler relations in the city and in academic programming. A French language and degree program was raised, and it was noted that much of the region is Francophone.

The threat to universities by college programs was noted several times, and college degree programs received particular attention. One respondent suggested that the Nipissing should consider offering a Nurse practitioner program alongside its BScN.

Geography:

Some respondents focused on geography, and suggested NU grow our presence beyond the North Bay area; others wondered if the university had a reputation outside of the north. There was a lot of attention in general to the fact that many of our students come from the south, and some respondents seemed to want the university to do more to encourage those students to remain in northern Ontario (especially those in Nursing and allied health fields). A few respondents thought Nipissing had a role to play in keeping northern/local students from migrating south.

A different set of respondents felt that Nipissing needs to develop an identity as a small-town university connected to community and environment. Connecting to land and people was often noted as strength and a best way forward. Many respondents thought the university should concentrate on offering a northern experience, land-based and interactive learning; relationality and Indigenous ways of knowing were frequently mentioned as a cornerstone.

Helping our students connect to careers came up in a variety of ways.