Two Aboriginal tourism programs aim to keep it real

With a significant increase in government funding of Aboriginal tourism, now is the ideal time to explore a career in this sector, says the dean of academics at Native Education College (NEC) — which offers two Aboriginal tourism programs.

“Tourism in general in B.C. is one of the industries that continues to thrive and with funding such as the Provincial/Territorial Aboriginal Tourism Association Funding program, there is a lot of opportunities in Aboriginal tourism because it is fostering growth in the industry,” says Jason LaRochelle.

NEC facilitates an Aboriginal tourism operations certificate program as well an Aboriginal tourism management diploma program. The first, says LaRochelle, focuses on offering students broad knowledge of the entire spectrum of the tourism industry, which will allow them to obtain entry-level positions. It covers topics such as ecotourism, heritage interpretation and cross-cultural tourism. The second, meanwhile, builds on foundational knowledge and adds topics such as marketing, human resource management and business law.

Both programs, says LaRochelle, do share some commonalities. “While a lot of other tourism programs may have a course involving Aboriginal tourism, the majority of our courses have an Aboriginal focus,” he says. “We hone in on Aboriginal tourism and teach students to provide an authentic cultural experience. It can be tricky to be authentic without selling your culture, which is why it is important for Aboriginal people to be involved in this sector — to ensure it is done appropriately.”

Students of both programs, says LaRochelle, also benefit from interaction with industry through a four-week practicum placement with a tourism company based in Metro Vancouver. This, he says, is essential to not only gaining real world experience but also networking with potential employers.

“We have built relationships with companies involved in Aboriginal tourism as well as non-Aboriginal focused tourism,” he says. “This way, students can choose where they want to launch their careers.

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