Adapting to changing systems: Moving between Theory and Practice at JAED

Mary Beth Doucette
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Penelope (Penny) Sanz, managing editor of the *Journal of Aboriginal Economic Development,* spoke with Mary Beth Doucette regarding her insights from editing and curating the journal's special issue on Two-Eyed Seeing. Mary Beth has Mi'kmaw and settler Canadian heritage. She currently holds the position of the Purdy Crawford Chair in Aboriginal Business Studies within the Shannon School of Business (SSOB) at Cape Breton University (CBU) in Sydney, Nova Scotia. Originally an industrial engineer, she later earned a Master of Business Administration in Community Economic Development and a Ph.D. in Management from St. Mary's University in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Penny: Thank you, Mary Beth, for taking some time to talk and reflect on guest editing JAED's Spring 2025 special issue on Two-Eyed Seeing and economic development. Can you tell us more about yourself? Background?

Mary Beth: Unama'ki, Cape Breton, is my home. I have lived here for most of my life. I only left for a bit to study industrial engineering at St. Francis Xavier University then [at] Dalhousie University. I worked in Toronto for a couple of years as [a] project manager at Canadian Tire Corporation. That's when I decided to do my MBA in Community Economic Development here at CBU, which allowed me to focus on Economic Development in First Nations communities, like Membertou. Then, I worked at Membertou for a few years before I was asked to work at CBU with the Purdy Crawford Chair, which eventually led to my Ph.D. and my current role as a faculty member at CBU.

Penny: What made you return to Cape Breton and enter the academe when you could have stayed in the corporate world?

Mary Beth: I missed the ocean. I remember having a conversation with a co-worker in the Toronto office after I went back to attend a wedding in Newfoundland. I was talking about having gone sea kayaking. He replied that you can go kayaking in Northern Ontario. I said, "yeah, but you have to drive two hours in traffic just to get out of the city." It's not the same as living on an island in the Atlantic Ocean.

Penny: I hear you. I used to live along the coastline back in the Philippines. Saskatoon is in the prairies and landlocked. I think I lasted this long here because I live near the river. Did you complete your MBA at CBU?

Mary Beth: All of my closest friends in Toronto were from the Maritimes. They all said, "I would move home if only I could get a job there." It was the same story I grew up hearing, there's not enough good jobs in the Maritimes. But the problem with that logic is that if there's no jobs, and everyone keeps leaving, you have brain drain, right? I thought, "Well, you're an engineer. You can get a job anywhere you want."

I decided to pursue an MBA because I am curious about the nature of community economic development. I am also a band member of Membertou. They supported me in my undergraduate education and also in my MBA. I knew that Membertou was making significant progress in economic development in Sydney, despite the common belief that there are no opportunities in Cape Breton. So, how do you reconcile the fact that the most "historically" impoverished part of the community is doing all of these amazing things, and nobody else in the region seems to think that it's possible? So, I ended up spending a lot of time doing research in Membertou and then studying and working there. That's how I landed back here at CBU.

Penny: Would you mind telling us what the Purdy Crawford Chair is all about?

Mary Beth: The office is named in honour of the late Purdy Crawford, who held a Master of Laws degree from Harvard Law School and was conferred with an Honorary Doctorate of Laws from Cape Breton University. He was a very involved member of the Shannon School of Business Advisory Board, along with Chief Terry Paul. I've been told that it's their conversations that sparked the idea of establishing a Research Chair to focus on Indigenous business. The goals are to foster entrepreneurship and investment in corporate skills training to Indigenous students so they have the tools to shape their futures. The research we do focuses on Indigenous business models, best practices in Indigenous economic development, case studies profiling Indigenous businesses, and national and international comparative analysis.

Penny: That's wonderful. I did my dissertation on the impacts of Canadian mining on an Indigenous community back home. One of the gaps I saw was that Indigenous communities desire economic development, and that is why they allow mining on their land. But when they receive their mining royalties in [the] millions, they have inadequate financial management, investment skills, and know-how to sustain their

economic gains while mining continues. This is just one aspect, as I am aware that they have their own business practices; however, we are constrained by a very colonial educational system and traditional methods of conducting business. To have something like the Purdy Crawford Chair back home would be beneficial to us, too. So, how did you become the chair and executive director?

Mary Beth: I'd been working in Membertou for a couple of years already when Dr. Keith Brown, my MBA supervisor for the Applied Research Project, asked me if I would be interested in coming back to CBU and working with him. CBU has worked with Indigenous leaders to develop the Purdy Crawford Chair in Aboriginal Business Studies. Chief Terry Paul, who has been chief of Membertou First Nation for 40 years, is supportive of it. They wanted to get it started. But Keith won't do it unless he had a co-chair from the community. He thought it would be inappropriate since he is of white settler heritage, but he is genuinely interested in community development in the Mi'kmaw community. He would rather not be the Purdy Crawford Chair without support from the community. So, in conversations with Chief Terry, Keith, and the rest of the School of Business Advisory Board, said that Mary Beth will be part of the Crawford Chair.

Penny: So, what was that like?

Mary Beth: At first, I was just working 20% of my time here, and 80% of my time was at Membertou. Then we got a big grant contribution from the federal government. It was not from SSHRC [Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council] or CIHR [Canadian Institute for Health Research]. The Federal Government promised to provide us with $1 million annually for five years to run the In.Business Mentorship Program across the country. But they, INAC (Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada), were unclear about the conditions of the award and it was unclear to CBU what the administrative process would be. INAC had placed a matching condition to it; it was like you had to raise $100 to get $100. So, about three years into the Crawford Chair project, Chief Terry said, "Mary Beth, Keith wants to second you to work at CBU and help them figure out how to get the money."

Penny: That must be disappointing. Did you get the grant eventually?

Mary Beth: After five years, we were able to access about 70% of the promised $5,000,000. We were able to match by sourcing out the funds on our own, which either went into the endowment or [were] used to fund "ineligible" expenses. But there was a lot of back-and-forth process. Not only did we have to raise a dollar before we could access a dollar, we also had to maintain a budget of $1,000,000. If we didn't spend $1,000,000 within the fiscal year, we had to send it back.

One of the SSOB advisory members said it was the most ridiculous administrative process he'd ever encountered after a lifetime in business. But these are the strategies the government use[s].

Penny: At that time, what project were you already doing for Membertou?

Mary Beth: The project that I was working on for my applied research project was part of my MBA. It's like the capstone project. The focus was on Membertou Heritage Park, a project that had not yet undergone development. It was in the project planning stage. So, it was unique, at least as a local project, because they have established an Elders Advisory Group to advise the development of the project in terms of what it would look like and what the building would be. It was a very engaged group.

The Elders Advisory Group visited a variety "heritage spaces" to consider what they wanted theirs to look like — a museum, a heritage park, or a community centre. They got Membertou to fund them to go to Ottawa and look at some of the national and local museums and heritage centres. Here they went to the Fortress of Louisburg, and the Bell Museum.

At the time, the Elders had expressed concerns that Membertou [was] doing too much development but without community involvement. My research aimed to understand how they balanced the socio-cultural expectations for the Heritage Park with the economic expectations of the heritage product. So, how do you balance the two worlds?

Penny: Right, you've mentioned earlier that Membertou has already been doing outstanding things. What were those wonderful things?

Mary Beth: They built the Trade and Convention Centre. They had built, at the time, a gas station, bingo hall, and commercial enterprises. The critique from the community was that they were doing all of these things without considering the value that it adds back to the community. Consequently, the Elders became actively involved. The land that had been donated was just next to the Trade and Convention Centre.

They said what they wanted to be in it, how they wanted it to look, and what they wanted [it] to look like. The main thing that the Elders said was they didn't want it to cost Membertou anything. They wanted culture. They wanted it to be a community space. They wanted it to be a place where we talk about Membertou's history and to be like a gathering space. But they didn't want it to end up costing a lot of money. They wanted to break even at the very least. And so that was the first project that I was involved in.

When I started working at Membertou full time, I was first working at the Trade and Convention Centre, which was one of these situations where we were losing money. It wasn't really making money. As a result, there was significant turnover among the administration staff. The chief and council were often there criticizing the management. I came in to help clean the house a little bit and get things back on track. Thereafter, I started working as the director of quality assurance for Membertou. They have an ISO quality assurance program that the majority of the departments use. I was part of a team with two other people, working to ensure that we maintained the ISO certification for the quality assurance program.

Penny: It is so fascinating to hear about the community engagement you are involved in at Membertou and CBU, as well as with the wider community. I think what is most challenging and meaningful is how you balance the two worlds. We are focusing on Two-Eyed Seeing in this special issue. I know that this edition is a spin-off of a conference that you organized in 2023. Can you tell me more about Two-Eyed Seeing and its application in business and the Indigenous economy?

Mary Beth: Two-Eyed Seeing is the foundational concept of what this journal's special issue is building on. Etuaptmumk/Two-Eyed Seeing was developed in the early 2000s, even the late 1990s, as part of the collaborative co-learning program, the integrative sciences program at CBU. The integrative science [program] does not exist anymore. However, upon its establishment, it was a brand-new program.

It was Elder Murdena Marshall, who was working here at CBU as a Mi'kmaq language teacher, and Dr. Cheryl Bartlett, who was a biology professor, who developed the concept. They had been talking, and Cheryl pointed out that we have a substantial Mi'kmaq population here at CBU relative to other distinctive groups. We always have around 500 Mi'kmaq students a year graduating from CBU, which ends up being a tenth of our population. It's a consistent amount. We have been doing a lot as an institution in terms of relationship-building with the Mi'kmaq community for decades. So, we have a number of students that are here going through the Mi'kmaq studies program, learning about politics, policy, and language, Indigenous Mi'kmaq culture and history, and whatnot. A lot of people were graduating to go into education or they were going into legal studies. They weren't really going into science or business, either. So, it was kind of a general arts degree leading into other careers that were primarily arts-based, like law, education, and public policy.

Cheryl Bartlett had asked Murdena over a coffee in the cafeteria, "What can we do to encourage more Mi'kmaq students to think about going into other science-based programs like biology?" That prompted a bigger conversation around teaching science in a particular way and how it dismisses all of the things that we already know about, such as Mi'kmaq perspectives of science and biology. Therefore, creating this absolute dichotomy invalidates Indigenous understandings of science and the environment.

We weren't feeling welcome in that space. Their conversations led to the development of the integrative sciences program. It had Indigenous perspectives of science as a core part of land-based learningThe Western scientific lens was also part of the core programming. So, it was trying to see science from both worldviews.

In the process of that program developing, evolving, and becoming, Elder Albert Marshall became involved as a guest speaker. He was working at Eskasoni Fish and Wildlife at that time with another Elder, Charlie Joe Dennis, who has since passed away. Murdena has also passed away since. But they were looking at these things and saying, "How do we explain this?" The words that they were using, and continue to use, are collaborative co-learning. We need to spend time together in space, discussing and conversing about what we observe from both Mi'kmaq and mainstream perspectives, while learning from each other and appreciating the diversity of viewpoints.

At some point they use many different visuals. They use various visuals, including images of trees holding hands (their roots in the ground), teachings, and diagrams. They did a lot. Cheryl ended up applying for and receiving Tier 2 research program funding and then a Tier 1 research program from CIHR. They developed a lot of programming assets, and, eventually, Elder Albert called it Two-Eyed Seeing. So, the icon that we see a lot consists of two puzzle pieces with eyes on them. One is blue. One is green, and then when you put them together, you have a more complete picture. The idea is that covering one eye limits your view and depth. It's the same when you cover the other eye. You also don't get as much stuff. It is when you can look through two eyes or two lenses that you appreciate more. It adds understanding and makes you see better. Teaching Two-Eyed Seeing would enable one to move back and forth between spaces and see things from different lenses.

It was because of Cheryl's Canada Research Chair, which focused on two-eyed seeing. They did a lot of presentations for the Canadian Institute of Health Research. It blew up as a concept nationally and internationally. So, in the world of health sciences, two-eyed seeing is very familiar. In Unama'ki in Cape Breton, we have been discussing and learning about Two-Eyed Seeing and Etuaptmumk for approximately 35 years. This concept and series of teachings are well developed and integral to my understanding of what CBU represents.

When we started the Crawford Chair, we weren't calling it Two-Eyed Seeing. It was the same principle, right? You've got the Business Studies Advisory Board, Chief Terry, and Purdy Crawford were sitting together at school and talking about business studies. Purdy asked Terry how the School of Business could better support Mi'kmaq students and better support Chief Terry's economic development plans. Chief Terry basically said, "Well, I need people to graduate with a business degree and already know about Indigenous business, [and the] issues and the challenges that we face. The way the taxes are different when you're doing business on the reserve and with Indigenous People." At the time, it was like 2004; there was nothing in the business studies curriculum.

Students could graduate from school, generally across the country, and what happens? All the business people hired at Membertou, worked for a multimillion-dollar enterprise, and they didn't know how all the different federal and provincial rules applied. Consequently, Membertou funded extra technical and cultural awareness training for its staff to ensure they were equipped to perform their jobs effectively.

So, that's where the concept evolves for the Purdy Crawford Chair in Aboriginal Business Studies. They were recognizing that when students graduate with a business degree, they should be ready to work in, with, and for Indigenous communities without having to be taught by the Indigenous communities. That's what launched the Crawford Chair concept.

Penny: What a wonderful story that keeps on going. Let us fast forward to 2023. I understand that you organized a conference on Two-Eyed Seeing. Can you tell us about its context and vision?

Mary Beth: Yes, the conference theme was Two-Eyed Seeing: From Vision to Action. [It] was organized and hosted in 2023 by the Bras d'Or Lakes Collaborative Environmental Planning Initiative (CEPI) and the Unama'ki Institute of Natural Resources (UINR), which is a science research institute based in Eskasoni. I am the current co-chair of the Bras d'Or Lakes Collaborative environmental planning initiative. I was appointed as the co-chair in the spring of 2023. That was one of the first things that I was doing. This conference wasn't necessarily my idea. But I was very involved in the evolution of it.

CEPI was established 20 years ago in 2004. Its guiding principle is Two-Eyed Seeing. When the organization was established, the deliberate intention was to foster conversation between all the governments that have some level of jurisdictional authority over the body of water in the middle of Cape Breton Island. It is salt water, which means that the Department of Fisheries and Oceans Canada considers it ocean water and their jurisdictional control. It's also inland. So, there's water around it. There are also tributaries that are freshwater, which means that the Province of Nova Scotia's Department of Lands and Forests is involved in some jurisdictional aspects of the coastline.

There are four of the five First Nations in Unamaki Cape Breton located around the Bras D'Or Lake, and the lake also serves as the dividing line at the centre of Cape Breton Island between four municipalities. So, there are a lot of governments that have their finger in the pot of what happens around the Bras D'Or Lake. It is good that it draws attention to the watershed ecosystem, but bad when they don't get along. When goverments don't talk to one another,it creates a lot of confusion.

Elder Charlie Joe Dennis, the original chair, established CEPI to regularly bring together government departments. This is because their departments create policies that influence the health and wellness of this watershed ecosystem. When they are not talking to one another [then] they get away with creating problems. So, he wanted to see them talking, and he also wanted to know what research was happening, how that was impacting the lake.

There's a whole longer story that I will not get into about how the CEPI came to be. (*CEPI's Journey to Collaboration* was included earlier in the special issue). In essence, it has a 20-year history. The conference on Two-Eyed Seeing was intended to deliberately celebrate Elder Albert Marshall, who is our Elder advisor at UINR and CEPI. The Two-Eyed Seeing is something that we have been practicing for a while. Many times, during our meetings, Elder Albert would say, "I'm tired of talking about the concept of Two-Eyed Seeing as a vision. I want to talk about how you're enacting it. I want people to show us what is changing. Could you please share how that is impacting your job? How is it changing the way you work? How is it changing your relationships?"

This is also because everybody is going to Elder Albert Marshall. I go visit him any given day, and he's got 10 people visiting to ask him about Two-Eyed Seeing. He is the guy, right? And so, at this point, he is saying, I want people to talk about and share with one another what they're doing on the ground and not just share with me. So that was the concept of the conference. It was a call to our network, for instance, people in education, health, government services, who are using this concept. He wants to know

what lessons were learned. How is it working? Is it not working? What are the goods, the bads, and the uglies of all this? How has your relationship changed and evolved over the last five, ten, or 25 years?

Penny: What's the conference turnout then?

Mary Beth: It was awesome. We had over 450 people show up to the conference. It was something they had hoped they would organize in 2020. This was intended as a creative reference to 2020 Vision while also celebrating the International Year of Indigenous Knowledges in 2020. But we're all familiar that 2020 was not a year for organizing in-person conferences. So, we finally held it in 2023.

We had one Mi'kmaw person who attended and said that they had been going to events, but they stopped going. This is because they're so difficult. He said that this CEPI conference was the best one he had ever attended. It's because it's our knowledge. Our people were out front talking, and people were engaged. It was good.

Penny: When our former editor-in-chief Wanda Wuttunee asked you to edit and curate our Spring 2025 special issue, what was your experience like? I have two questions. This is my first question. Based on the article submissions we have received, how, in a variety of ways, is Two-Eyed Seeing being implemented on the ground?

Mary Beth: When we decided to have this special issue, it was partly because of Wanda. I had been working on another project—the A SHARED Future project— with Heather Castleton and Dee Lewis. That project focused on environmental issues and Indigenous-led renewable energy initiatives. Wanda approached them a couple of years ago and asked them if they'd like to be special editors of the journal. We, as a group, had declined. That's because I was the only "economist" and familiar with JAED. The other members of the group are environmental scientists, experts on environmental policy, and feminist geographers. So, it wasn't a tight fit for them, and they didn't have the time to do it. Then, I knew that Wanda had approached them and that she wanted to start having special issues in JAED. So, when the CEPI conference came up, this would be something I could get behind. I hoped that people who participated in the conference would also publish some of their work in the journal.

That was the impetus. That's why I talked to Wanda and said, "Let's do the special issue on this," and she loved it. We basically put in JAED's call for papers based on the CEPI conference's call for papers. The call for papers requested both practical lessons from experience and academic insights. There were a lot of people who I had hoped were going to submit, and they didn't. They had the intention, but they were unable to follow through.

Penny: Off the top of your head, what articles stood out?

Mary Beth: I'm really excited about what we have in the upcoming special issue. We have two articles on lessons from experience. One is [by] Dr. Shelly Denny and her team, who are working together for a healthy and resilient ocean. Shelly Denny did her PhD thesis on this. She's from Eskasoni, and she works at UINR. She finished her PhD two years ahead of me. She wrote about Two-Eyed Seeing and collaborative governance models and what they look like when you're doing government engagement planning around environmental issues and environmental policies.

There is another paper discussing Indigenous social enterprise in the Northwest Territories. It describes the experiences of Indigenous social enterprises in applying Two-Eyed Seeing within economic development contexts. We also have a couple of articles that used the term Two-Eyed Seeing, but they do not necessarily think of it the same way as I do. So, I really love what they wrote.

I would really love to have a conversation with Elder Albert to discuss people's thoughts on Two-Eyed Seeing and how they apply it. People are starting to debate what Two-Eyed Seeing is. There are just a lot of questions around what you can qualify as collaborative co-learning.

Elder Albert is very resistant to putting a box around what Etuaptmumk/Two-Eyed Seeing is. People say they are doing Two-Eyed Seeing; he thinks we should be talking to them about it. I think I'm putting words in his mouth. But he's interested in anybody who's interested in it because it's an opportunity to engage in learning, teaching, and collaborative learning.

Penny: I have read the abstracts on our open journal system. I get the concept of Two-Eyed Seeing, but listening to you talk about it made me see that Two-Eyed Seeing to you as a Mi'kmaq scholar, is like Bras d'Or Lakes in the heart of Cape Breton. I hope I'll be able to come and see you in action in Cape Breton. So, here is my second question. It is more on the operational sense with you as an editor and working towards this issue's publication. How was the dialogue and the back-and-forth between the peer reviewers (and the lack thereof), authors, and you as editor?

Mary Beth: I drew on many people that I know who have been doing research in different disciplines. Some of the reviews we are receiving highlight a topic that I am unsure whether JAED's editorial board has discussed yet, but I expect we will address it soon. What came up during the review process were more questions such as what does it mean to be doing Indigenous-led economic development? Is that what JAED is promoting? Or is it Indigenous economic development? Is there room for Two-Eyed Seeing in economic development that is not led by communities? At what point does this approach qualify as Indigenous economic development?

Penny: Those are excellent questions that point out the unresolved tensions that the previous editors most likely encountered but didn't have the time and space to discuss. We also have to consider that JAED is evolving. Case in point is that you and I are also relatively new to the board. In any case, what are your initial thoughts on how to navigate these conceptual boundaries between Indigenous-led economic development

(grounded in community sovereignty/self-determination) and broader Indigenous economic development frameworks that may include non-Indigenous collaborators? In addition, in terms of practice, such conceptual boundaries are being blurred since in the process of finding solutions to real-life issues. Your thoughts?

Mary Beth: I will draw on a framework I developed for my Ph.D. thesis to answer that question. I referred to Two-Eyed Critical Sensemaking, which builds on and critiques an existing framework from Management and Organizational Studies called Critical Sensemaking (CSM). CSM is primarily concerned with how people in organizations understand and respond to organizational change initiatives. They don't always behave as expected, but they usually do. According to CSM, individuals are impacted by more than just an administrative mandate to change; they also consider official and informal regulations, language employed (e.g., two-eyed seeing or Etuaptmumk/Two-Eyed Seeing), and formative environment. Those who research and write about management and administration, on the other hand, tend to presume that the organization is "Canadian" or "American" or has been schooled to view the world through a Eurocentric lens.

When working for Indigenous-led organizations, such as Cando, the tensions and differences between mainstream and Indigenous community norms and administrative practices become more apparent. We collaborate with communities that have a shared desire for sovereignty and justice. Even if we don't always agree on the strategy we use to get there, we have a shared sense of direction because we understand the past and the link between Canadian governments and their regulations, as well as Indigenous groups and their norms. Because JAED is ultimately a component of Cando, it may have been reasonable to presume that the core audience, Native Development Officers, could tell the difference between what was Indigenous-led and what was not, and understand the articles and case studies were part of a bigger discourse from the previous 25 years.

The tensions raised by this special issue are essentially related to Reconciliation and the TRC. Most Indigenous peoples, particularly those who work in mainstream settings, are well aware of Canada's colonial history and the difficulties with current governing institutions. They know a lot more than most Canadians. So, before they can effect significant change, Canadians must first understand the relationship between past and present colonial structures and laws, as well as local Indigenous histories and current contexts.

Indigenous Economic Development Officers, as well as JAED's editors and authors, are accustomed to weaving and braiding two systems. As Warren describes in the book review's opening, Aboriginal Economic Development navigates two systems in order to effect change. David Newhouse spoke about this history at the conference in 2024. He also mentioned some of the work they conducted at Trent University, where they've changed policies to reflect the differences in expectations between working in the mainstream academic system and working in Indigenous knowledge systems. There is also a middle ground where reconciliation exists, when two-eyed seers are actively striving toward reconciliation. That requires a distinct skill set again.

But, the JAED Board is comprised of a diverse group of individuals representing academics, industry, and grassroots Indigenous-led economic developers. We navigate the tensions that Indigenous Development Officers, Economic Development Officers, and Chiefs face across industries by negotiating and holding spaces for community lessons from experience, so the academic questions are placed alongside the lived experiences of our communities. Economic Development lessons from experience are not consistently showing up in other places, thus I think it is critical that JAED maintains that space. But we can't do it all, and I think we want to do something well. What is that something? What has it been in the past? And where can JAED add the most value in the future? These are the questions and tensions that I think we will be dealing with to in the coming years as people like Wanda Wuttunee, David Newhouse, Warren Weir, and Robert Oppenheimer retire, What is the next iteration of JAED going to look like? How can we best serve Cando and its network?