Relationships between Six Nations and McMaster University began to develop in the late 1980s when the President's Committee on Native Issues was constituted, following strong efforts by Dawn Martin Hill and Professor Harvey Feit in the Department of Anthropology among others. The Committee marked a breakthrough at the University because it enjoyed substantial representation from the Six Nations and the Mississaugas of the New Credit communities. I became involved in these developments shortly afterward. When Arthur Heidebrecht became the Provost and Vice-President Academic in 1990, he indicated immediately that he was very open to the idea of an indigenous studies program at McMaster and to setting up a Native University Access Program at the then newly created Grand River Polytechnical Institute (later renamed Six Nations Polytechnic). In 1990, Dr. Heidebrecht asked me to be his Associate Provost Academic and he gave me the responsibility for the indigenous studies file.

It was an exciting time to learn about indigenous peoples and education in Ontario. The newly elected New Democratic party government at the time soon came up with a forward-looking Aboriginal Education and Training Strategy (AETS) that was set up to be run with significant input, if not guiding control, from the aboriginal peoples of the province. In response to this new policy, I worked with various aboriginal organizations to restructure the President's Committee on Native Issues to include representatives from the Native Women's Association of Ontario, the Anishnabe peoples, the Métis Association, the urban friendship centres, the Chiefs of Ontario as well as the Six Nations and the Mississaugas of the New Credit. It was renamed the President's Committee on Indigenous Issues in 1992. In the process, I came to know more elders and leaders in the aboriginal communities in Ontario. The most notable of these was Harvey Longboat, a Cayuga chief in the Six Nations Confederacy. Mr. Longboat held the designation of Deskaheh, a hereditary title in memory of Deskaheh, the Hodinohso:ni/Rotinonhshonni chief who fought for self-government for his people in the early part of the twentieth century. The committee's structure thus involved recognition of the Confederacy Council as speaking for Six Nations and had as members other chiefs including Arnold General, an Onondaga chief, who continues to be a member to the present day. I became the University's co-chair working with several co-chairs from aboriginal communities. I remained in that position until 1998, long after my work for Dr. Heidebrecht was finished. It was a distinct privilege to have worked with him; his commitment to aboriginal peoples is evident and deep rooted.

The President's Committee on Indigenous Issues set up an Academic Sub-committee and as a member I had exciting opportunities to work on such important matters as setting up of the Native University Access Program at what is now Six Nations Polytechnic, the establishment of the Indigenous Studies Program at McMaster, the hiring of its first administrative coordinator, the hiring and setting up of the office of the Aboriginal Students' counsellor at McMaster, and finally the discussion and formulation of a draft proposal for a possible university level program in Hodinohso:ni/Rotinonhshonni studies in the community. Mr. Longboat, Mr. General, Sarah Smith, Sadie Buck and other elders provided important input for the development of the Indigenous Studies Program and the structure and orientation of Six Nations Polytechnic. Their vision was to have this program offered in the community and to build it on the basis of the extensive knowledge available in their community that rested with elders, speakers, clan mothers and other leaders. The time was not ripe, however, in the late 1990s.
Most recently, McMaster University and Six Nations Polytechnic have begun cooperation on a new initiative, the setting up of a Collaborative Center on Indigenous Knowledges and Ways of Living. Basing their thinking on Harvey Longboat's vision, the Center, the University and Six Nations Polytechnic will work again toward the development of a possible university level program in Hodinohso:ni/Rotinonhshonni studies in the community.

William Coleman