

The Gaelic College

New Mabou campus offers opportunities for post-secondary students

The Gaelic College (Colaisde na Gàidhlig) has been a crucial cultural institution in Cape Breton for 85 years. Until recently, however, the “college” part of its title has been “a bit of a misnomer, in a way,” says staff member Kenneth Mackenzie.

Put simply, the Gaelic College is mostly known for its experiential learning opportunities through its summer and March Break programs. Students can take classes in just about anything to do with Gaelic culture, including Cape Breton fiddle, bagpiping, and - of course - Scottish Gaelic language. While there is no shortage of reasons to visit the Gaelic College, there are also a handful of online courses available for those unable to travel.

What’s more, the institution is continuing to expand its reach, including some longer-term immersion programs in partnership with Cape Breton University (CBU). These courses offer second and third-year credits for university students. Additionally, the Gaelic College has collaborated with Alberta’s Olds College of Agriculture and Technology on courses for the Olds College Master Weaver Certificate.

“It’s not just something that exists on a shelf or on a stage,” Mackenzie says of Gaelic culture. “It is alive.”

Mackenzie is the vice president of Beinn Mhàbu: the Mabou-based post-secondary campus which first opened its doors in September 2023.

The campus site was originally a convent and girls’ boarding school which then evolved to become a spiritual retreat centre. “When the Sisters decided it was time to move on themselves, it was a fairly competitive process” to obtain the property, notes Mackenzie. “We are thankful that the Sisters saw something in our vision.”

Again in partnership with Cape Breton University, the Gaelic College’s Mabou campus offers students the opportunity to



immerse themselves in Gaelic culture while earning post-secondary credits.

“There are numerous Celtic studies programs at universities, but we are trying to do something a little bit different here,” explains Mackenzie. “Students here get their Arts education within the Gaelic cultural worldview. So, rather than focussing on Celtic studies in a historical context, it’s a broader spectrum interdisciplinary program.”

The Beinn Mhàbu Gaelic Foundations program, which meets first year Arts program requirements for post-secondary students, offers four consecutive courses: History, Music & Dance, Folklore, and Literature of The Gael. Each takes place over six weeks.

Meanwhile, students also take part in a year-long course in Scottish Gaelic language.

As of September 2024, Beinn Mhàbu is offering second-year courses as well. These classes are crafted to fit into CBU’s Bachelor of Arts in Community Studies, through which students can major in Gaelic Language and Cultural Sustainability.

“It’s really hands-on,” shares Mackenzie, adding that this year’s students have organized activities from kids’ dances to beach clean-ups as part of their first semester. “Those are designed to build community and build life skills for these students.”

In addition to the long-standing Community Studies courses, Beinn Mhàbu’s second year includes Advanced Gaelic, Global

Language Revitalization, and Experiencing Music.

The hope is that Beinn Mhàbu will eventually have a full degree offering.

In the meantime, Mackenzie says the campus has attracted “a nice assortment of people” from Cape Breton, other parts of Atlantic Canada and further afield. This year’s batch of students even includes representation from New England and Scotland.

“It’s a nice melting pot. Some have stronger connections to the language or culture than others, or more experience with it - but it is great to see them coming together here onsite.”

Mackenzie notes that there has been an increased interest in Gaelic culture over the last five years, in part due to the popularity of the Outlander series. He also points to the recent inclusion of Scottish Gaelic on the Duolingo language app. Perhaps the biggest draw, however, is the community that Gaelic study offers as so many aspects of Gaelic culture (such as ceilidhs and milling frolics) are communal.

While online courses have certainly made the Gaelic College more accessible, “you can’t beat the in-person experience,” says Mackenzie. However, he adds, “I have seen some nice communities grow just in online settings.”

Gaelic, then, isn’t simply about keeping an ancient language alive. It’s about the people.

“More than just preserving something, I think it gives folks an opportunity to connect to something. To find themselves grounded in a place or a people - whether it is their family line or just something they feel drawn to - these days people are really missing that.”

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