



ASSOCIATION OF ATLANTIC UNIVERSITIES
ASSOCIATION DES UNIVERSITÉS DE L'ATLANTIQUE

Award for Excellence in Teaching
2026

Anne Marie MacKinnon Educational Leadership Award

DR. HEATHER SCHMIDT

Dr. Heather Schmidt has distinguished herself as a transformative educational leader through her unwavering commitment to inclusion, allyship, and the ongoing work of decolonizing higher education. As an Associate Professor of Psychology at Cape Breton University, she has spent more than fifteen years advancing teaching and learning practices that foster belonging, challenge entrenched assumptions, and create opportunities for students and educators to learn from diverse ways of knowing.

At the heart of Dr. Schmidt's leadership is a deeply collaborative philosophy. She describes her role as being a "gentle thorn" in the side of academia, encouraging colleagues to engage in critical reflection, question routine practices, and pursue more inclusive approaches to teaching. Rather than positioning herself as an expert with ready-made solutions, she creates supportive spaces where educators can learn together and collectively explore new possibilities for educational practice.

Dr. Schmidt's impact is evident across Cape Breton University and beyond. As a former Psychology Department Chair, Centre for Teaching and Learning Teaching Chair in Allyship and Decolonizing Educational Practice, and long-time leader in equity, diversity, inclusion, and indigenization initiatives, she has helped shape institutional culture and advance meaningful change. She has developed innovative curriculum, including one of Canada's first Indigenous People's Psychology courses, and played a significant role in initiatives aimed at embedding Indigenous perspectives and culturally responsive approaches within academic programs and policies.

Her educational leadership extends well beyond institutional boundaries. Through invited keynote addresses, workshops, scholarly publications, and national presentations, Dr. Schmidt has become a respected voice on decolonizing the teaching of psychology as well as higher education more broadly. Her influential scholarship and professional development work have supported educators across Canada in engaging with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action and in exploring practical pathways toward more inclusive teaching.

Among her most impactful recent initiatives is the creation of the "Decolonizing Our Teaching" community of practice, which brings together faculty from diverse disciplines to engage in dialogue, resource sharing, and collective learning. Through this and many other collaborations with Mi'kmaw Elders, Knowledge Keepers, community partners, and colleagues, Dr. Schmidt has strengthened educators' confidence and capacity to create learning environments where all students feel valued and empowered.

Dr. Heather Schmidt exemplifies the vision of educational leadership embodied by the Anne Marie MacKinnon Educational Leadership Award. Through her scholarship, mentorship, allyship, and collaborative leadership, she has made a profound contribution to teaching and learning at institutional, disciplinary, and national levels. It is with great respect and admiration that we recognize Dr. Heather Schmidt as the 2026 recipient of this prestigious honour.