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So We Can All Thrive

The Importance of Indigenous Organizations' Support for Indigenous Post-Secondary Students



About Indspire

Indspire is an Indigenous national registered charity that invests in the education of Indigenous people for the long-term benefit of these individuals, their families and communities, and Canada. With the support of its funding partners, Indspire disburses financial awards, delivers programs, and shares resources with the goal of improving educational outcomes for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis students. Through Indspire's education offerings, we provide resources to students, educators, communities, and other stakeholders who are committed to improving success for Indigenous youth. In 2019-20, Indspire awarded over \$17.8 million through more than 5,124 bursaries and scholarships to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis youth, making it the largest funder of Indigenous post-secondary education outside the federal government.

About Research Knowledge Nest

The Indspire *Research Knowledge Nest* is the first Indigenous research program of its kind in Canada. With data analysis skills rapidly becoming critical to economic success, the *Research Nest* is poised to seize this exciting opportunity to foster Indigenous engagement and leadership in quantitative research and data science roles. The program will be guided by an Advisory Committee of researchers, leaders, and key stakeholders who will provide direction and input on the development of this important initiative.

Founding Supporters

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Introduction

In previous Indspire surveys, *Building Brighter Futures: Bursaries, Scholarships, and Awards* program (BBF) recipients have frequently mentioned that receiving funding from Indspire—an Indigenous national charity aimed at specifically supporting Indigenous students—is different, more meaningful, than receiving funding from other organizations. We wanted to explore these feelings further, to understand what sets Indspire apart from non-Indigenous organizations from the perspective of Indigenous students.

To this end, in our most recent survey, *Following the Path: Insights into Student Experiences of Truth and Reconciliation in Post-Secondary Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic (Following the Path)*, we asked current Indigenous post-secondary students: “In your opinion, why is it important to receive funding from an Indigenous organization like Indspire?” By asking specific questions on this topic, we were able to get more in-depth and accurate results gleaned from respondents’ particular experiences as Indigenous students who are receiving funding from an Indigenous organization like Indspire.

Sixty-eight percent of survey participants responded to this question, resulting in 2,162 thoughtful, detailed, qualitative results¹. From these results, responses were grouped together based on common themes and content. The most frequently occurring themes that emerged from these written responses were that Indigenous post-secondary students:

- Appreciate the level of understanding that Indigenous organizations and staff show towards students and the recognition of students’ lived experiences as Indigenous peoples pursuing post-secondary education;
- Trust that Indigenous organizations share recipients' values and are more likely to apply an ethical approach to funding;
- Feel a sense of belonging to a larger community of Indigenous peoples when receiving funding from an Indigenous organization, and experience pride that Indigenous peoples can help each other succeed.

This report further explores these themes, showcasing the unique relationship that Indigenous funders like Indspire have with Indigenous post-secondary students, and highlighting the importance that receiving an award, scholarship, or bursary from an organization like Indspire holds in recipients’ lives.

¹ We used NVivo software to perform a content and thematic analysis of 1,800 of these free-form survey responses, which were then grouped into common themes based on shared content.

Summary of Key Findings

Understanding the Lived Experiences of Indigenous Students

The first and most prominent theme that emerged from the *Following the Path* survey results is that respondents feel that receiving funding from an Indigenous organization such as Indspire is like being supported directly by their family, relatives, or someone who personally knows and cares about them.

“Receiving funding from Indigenous organizations is more meaningful because it feels as if my community and family are supporting my academic journey. It is not just financial support but the emotional support that my community believes in my goals and is guiding my path to success.”

“It is important because it feels like our community is backing us up. Like our ancestors are proud of what we are doing and our community is there helping us achieve our goals.”

Following the Path survey respondents stated that this sense of familial support comes from Indspire’s organizational structure as an Indigenous national charity with many Indigenous staff responsible for supporting Indigenous students. Respondents felt more comfortable having Indigenous staff aiding applicants and assessing applications, as these staff are perceived to have a deeper understanding of the applicants because they too have experienced what it is like to be an Indigenous student traversing the post-secondary landscape.

“I feel like there is a better understanding of how difficult it really is to be an Indigenous person in post-secondary. I feel like Indspire truly acknowledges the difficulty mentally and spiritually that education can have on each and every student.”

Sharing stories is inherently personal. When applying for BBF funding, students are asked to write about their lived experience and their learning journey. We see storytelling as an important aspect of relational knowledge-sharing that “remind[s] us who we are and of our belonging” (Kovach, 2009, 94) and our responsibilities for holding these stories in a good way (Kovach, 2009, 52). Making space for Indigenous post-secondary students to tell their stories, knowing that they will be understood and treated with respect, creates a closeness and intimacy with Indspire that is felt by Indigenous learners who apply for BBF support.

“It is important and meaningful to receive funding from an Indigenous organization like Indspire because it feels as though we have people in our corner who we are connected to and who understand us in a way that others may not. It is encouraging to know that we have support from people who see us for who we are.”

Reciprocal Relationships: Ethical and Responsible Caring

Many *Following the Path* survey respondents mentioned that they trust Indigenous funders more than non-Indigenous funders. This trust emerged as respondents stated that they perceive Indigenous funders to share their same values and ethics – values and ethics that guide the organization’s approach – whereas other funders’ objectives are seen as nebulous and unclear. The relationships between non-Indigenous institutions and Indigenous students are marred by continuing colonial violence, from residential schools to the discriminatory child welfare apprehensions of Indigenous children to the disproportionate number of Indigenous peoples who are incarcerated (NCTR, 2015, 3). Trust between Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous institutions will not be built overnight. Indigenous organizations like Indspire thus have unique roles in providing appropriate social programming. As we are impacted by the same issues, we aim to come together so that future generations do not have to experience the same discriminatory treatment.

This sense of responsible caring that Indigenous organizations provide resonates throughout *Following the Path* survey respondents' sentiments: when Indigenous organizations like Indspire provide funding for post-secondary achievement, Indigenous students believe that the organization’s core aim is to supply necessary supports to overcome the injustices Indigenous peoples experience that have impacted their ability to gain a post-secondary education, so that all Indigenous peoples and communities succeed.

“It is important to me because I feel deeply humbled and thankful for my ancestors for everything they survived and fought for. Now I am here as their legacy and when I have the opportunity to receive funding through Indigenous organizations, it feels like everything they did up until now, all the struggled they fought, it was all worth it.”

Respondents have a sense of distrust of non-Indigenous organizations that provide funding and expressed that they feel guilty when applying to these organizations because they are unsure of the organizational intention for providing this funding. Respondents reported that when they applied for financial support from non-Indigenous organizations, they felt misunderstood, looked down on, or that these organizations’ tools for allocating funding were inappropriate for Indigenous recipients.

“I feel it is more important because the organization is like minded, you know what we are going through, or what we are feeling. You understand the struggles we face. It seems more genuine coming from our people rather than others that may hold a completely different mindset. We all too often hear how people talk about giving money to Indigenous people and the racial comments behind that. It becomes almost shameful to ask. The effects of colonization have lasting holds on us, the voices stay in our heads about how we are paid for. It just makes us more comfortable accepting from an Indigenous organization, I guess it's less judgement and we know that the other organizations have willingly offered their money to you to give to our cause.”

Being funded by an Indigenous organization is perceived as being more ethical, that Indigenous people are investing in each other for the benefit of our shared success. In the case of non-Indigenous organizational supports, there is a sense of having entered into a relationship of being “helped”, which reinforces power dynamics where the funder is positioned as superior to the recipient (Hinsdale, 51). Indigenous communities investing in each other to enable everyone to succeed is seen as a significant role that Indspire plays. Respondents stated that simply knowing that an Indigenous organization is in a position where it has the ability to fund others – and that Indigenous peoples are succeeding – is empowering knowledge.

“It’s important because it reinforces the importance of Indigenous peoples reclaiming their power and providing their people with opportunities.”

“I believe that as Indigenous people we need to support each other in all ways possible, like in a traditional way of taking care of everyone so nobody goes without.”

Sense of Belonging to a Larger Indigenous Community

Respondents find that it is empowering to have the support of an organization whose goals are to fund Indigenous people and recognize Indigenous achievement, with a structure specifically designed to support Indigenous students, and which is led by many Indigenous staff. Knowing that there are organizations out there whose main objective is to help Indigenous students succeed demonstrates to BBF applicants that Indigenous peoples matter, and there is pride in being connected to an organization created by and meant for Indigenous peoples.

“I think it is more meaningful because we're getting funded based on our identity. Almost every Indigenous person has been discriminated against so it's reassuring to know that we as students are being supported. There's a sense of accomplishment and appreciation when we get funded from an Indigenous organization. We prove that we can be resilient through it all and we're grateful that we've been acknowledged, especially when it's by an organization that understands and accepts us as students.”

Indspire has a positive reputation with and holds a special place of distinction for BBF recipients. *Following the Path* survey respondents stated that when they were awarded a BBF bursary, scholarship, or award, they felt a particular sense of accomplishment in comparison to receiving other types of funding. Recipients felt that the BBF funding reflects the hard work they have done throughout their lives and the efforts they have put in to achieve their education – work and efforts which are now being recognized by a larger community of Indigenous peoples.

“It feels nice to be recognized and supported by people in your community. Getting funding from an Indigenous organization just lets me know my efforts are being honoured by my community and peoples.”

Respondents also mentioned a particular sense of belonging produced by their identity as BBF recipients, as this type of funding makes them feel recognized by and part of a larger community of Indigenous peoples. Because of Indspire’s welcoming and inclusive approach, respondents stated that when they receive a BBF bursary, scholarship, or award, they feel valued and accepted as Indigenous peoples, which in turn makes them feel proud of their identity and communities. Having a strong sense of belonging and culturally distinct resources that support them on their journey are known to be contributors to Indigenous students’ success and engagement in their education (Bastien and Gallop, 2016 210). Receiving support from an Indigenous organization provides a sense of cultural integrity, and therefore, this type of funding in and of itself can be seen as a contributing factor to Indigenous students’ academic achievement.

“I feel extremely validated in my indigenous identity and belonging— that I am “seen” and deemed worthy enough AS an indigenous person to be awarded funding from an Indigenous organization, like Indspire.”

Conclusion

Indigenous organizations like Indspire represent something beyond simply providing financial support for Indigenous students; they have responsibilities to care for and holistically support Indigenous post-secondary learners. Students feel that Indigenous funders are better positioned to understand recipients' lived experiences and appreciate having space for storytelling as a form of cultural reflection. As a result, Indspire's support feels more familial and personal, creating a relationship and sense of togetherness between the funder and recipient. This builds a sense of united values and intentional investment in students for the benefit of all Indigenous peoples. Indigenous learners find it empowering to have Indigenous funders in a position where those funders are able to provide financial support to other Indigenous communities, being part of and witnessing Indigenous peoples' achievements.

Hosting evaluations such as Indspire's *Following the Path* survey is just one example of how Indspire demonstrates to Indigenous students that the organization cares about their success – and, by giving students a platform to voice their experiences, wants to make changes in their lives so they can achieve their highest potential. It is impossible to see the full picture of Indigenous peoples' successes and challenges in traversing the post-secondary landscape without hearing current students' voices. Indspire's main goal is to ensure Indigenous students' continuing success; it is our responsibility to listen, respond to and implement respondents' recommended changes for the benefit of current and future Indigenous post-secondary students.

We want to express our deepest thanks to all the *Following the Path* respondents who were willing to share their stories with us. We will hold your experiences and work towards ensuring that your voices will be heard.

"It is very important. These scholarships are for the Indigenous people Canada wide. I feel when I am being asked surveys about being Indigenous, I really feel the people who make them are actually listening. You actually care and are rooting for everyone who applies. I feel like there are so many scholarships offered out there just because it looks good for them, or if they had extra money in their budget and want to look generous to the public. I feel at Indspire, whoever is reading what I say, actually listens and hopes I do well 😊"

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