Indspire

Indigenous education, Canada's future. | L'éducation des autochtones. L'avenir du Canada.

An Introspective Look into Barriers and Facilitators to Accessing Post-Secondary Indigenous Support

By Nicholas St. Germaine
Chippewas of Rama First Nation

and Shawna D'Antimo
Wiikwemkoong First Nation

Cover Design
We Swim Together
by Emily Kewageshig

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 2022–2023, Indspire awarded over $27.5 million through 7,533 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 is guided by an Advisory Committee of researchers, leaders, and key stakeholders who provide direction and input on the development of this important initiative.

Cover Design –
We Swim Together by Emily Kewageshig

Emily Kewageshig is an Anishinaabe artist and visual storyteller from Saugeen First Nation No. 29. Her work captures the interconnection of life forms using both traditional and contemporary materials. Her work is centred around themes of birth, death, and rebirth as they are closely intertwined in both her cultural teachings and personal lived experiences.

Emily celebrated her first solo exhibition titled Mooshknemgog Bmaadziwin: Full Circle (2020), which was shown at the Tom Thomson Art Gallery in Owen Sound, Ontario. She continues to create artwork for various organizations to highlight Indigenous knowledge and culture. She graduated from Sheridan College's Visual and Creative Arts Diploma program with Honours in 2017, receiving the Best in Show award at the final graduate exhibition. She attended OCAD University in the BFA Indigenous Visual Culture program (2017–2020).

Founding Supporters

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank all those who participated in this study and shared their stories with us. We hope that you felt acknowledged and validated in the process. We are grateful for the opportunity to hear your stories and hope to honour you by sharing the valuable lessons you have taught us.

Miigwech for gifting us with your knowledge!

Introduction

Background

This study is the follow-up to the earlier report by Indspire, "Barriers and Facilitators for Accessing Indigenous Supports Literature Review" (St. Germaine, 2023). This literature review outlined the historical background (e.g., historical trauma and disconnection from community and culture) determining why Indigenous post-secondary students often require additional support. The literature review also examined why culturally relevant support seem to be more effective than non-culturally relevant ones, as well as identified several barriers to accessing the support. The review recognized that campus mental health services can provide culturally relevant support by hiring Indigenous counsellors or training non-Indigenous counsellors to address Indigenous-specific issues.

The main barriers to accessing culturally relevant mental health support were stigma around mental health and structural accessibility, which was defined as when aspects of the campus environment make it difficult for students to utilize services. It also identified that many post-secondary institutions have an Indigenous student services office, which is tasked with supporting First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students. The review found that two of Indigenous student services' main roles were facilitating access to community and culture and providing academic support. However, they were limited by a lack of Indigenous staff and insufficient support from the institutions. This lack of support was reflected in underfunding and the absence of permanent spaces on campuses for students to gather and hold events.

Purpose

The prior literature review (St. Germaine, 2023) identified the scarcity of literature examining the accessibility of on-campus Indigenous support. This exploratory study sought to assess support most needed by Indigenous students, the factors that impact students' decisions to access Indigenous support, and the barriers that impact Indigenous student services' ability to provide quality support. To do this, we utilized focus groups with Indigenous post-secondary students as well as semi-structured interviews with administrators at Indigenous student services. The purpose of this study is to use the stories of the participating students and administrators to inform areas where support is needed for Indigenous students.

Research Design

Research Question

The goal of this research was to further learn about the barriers and facilitators to accessing post-secondary Indigenous support. For this study, Indigenous supports are those that are developed by, or delivered to, Indigenous people using an Indigenous perspective. The larger question, "How can the quality and accessibility of Indigenous support in higher education be improved?" was developed to lead the conversations with participants.

Methodology

The study was conducted using a qualitative research approach to gain key insights from Indigenous post-secondary students and administrators. Key topics were included to get an exploratory understanding of participants' experiences, thoughts, and suggestions. For students, this included learning about the barriers to accessing support and completing post-secondary, in addition to the support provided to, and used by, Indigenous students. Administrators were asked about the types of support offered to Indigenous students, outreach efforts, and limitations experienced. Participants were also given the opportunity to share anything that was not covered in the questions. This approach led to insightful discussions on how to better support Indigenous student success in post-secondary.

Methods

To explore the rich experiences of participants, qualitative research methods utilized for the study included conducting six focus groups with Indigenous students and five semi-structured interviews with administrators at Indigenous student services. Focus groups and interviews were conducted using a focus group or interview guide. Sessions occurred in early 2023, ranged from 60–90 minutes in length, and were held remotely using Microsoft Teams. They were recorded and transcribed using online transcription software to ensure accuracy.

An initial intake survey was sent to all participants invited to take part in the study. It contained a description of the study, a consent form, demographic information, and an area for participants to provide details on their availability for focus groups and interviews. Students were contacted through Indspire's database of Building Brighter Futures recipients. Administrators were contacted using an internal database of Indigenous student services in Canadian post-secondary institutions. A pool of potential candidates from across Canada was developed based on demographic information and availability.

Participants

Indigenous students and administrators in higher education were invited to share their key insights and knowledge by answering our research questions. In total, 13 students participated in the six focus groups. The student sample was made up of five (38%) bachelor's, six (46%) master's, and two (15%) PhD degree students, with nine (69%) completing more than half of their coursework in person. In total, five administrators participated in the interviews. None of the administrators who participated in these interviews were employed at institutions attended by the students who participated in the focus groups.

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis of transcripts was conducted using NVivo according to Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines for a six-step approach:

Step 1 – Initial reading of the transcripts to generate ideas for codes that might be used in the following steps.

Step 2 – Line-by-line coding of transcripts by labelling each line with its underlying meaning.

Step 3 – Similar codes were then grouped to develop an initial list of overarching themes to aid in analyzing the data.

Step 4 – Each theme was separately analyzed to determine if themes needed to be divided into subthemes or eliminated due to a lack of support, and to develop new themes that better fit the data.

Step 5 – Writing a detailed analysis of the content for each theme, as well as how they relate to each other.

Step 6 – Reporting on the themes by writing about the underlying meaning behind them.

After this process was completed, an early draft of the results of the thematic analysis was emailed to the participants to give them the opportunity to provide feedback and clarify any misunderstandings of the quotes they provided.

Ethical Considerations

To attain informed consent, a consent form was attached to the beginning of the intake survey. The form detailed the purpose of the study, what participation in the study entailed, and how the information participants provided would be used. Participant consent and authorization to record their participation were obtained prior to each focus group and interview session. To protect participant confidentiality, focus group participants were given the options of using aliases and turning their cameras off during the sessions. Additionally, details in the quotes used in the published report that could identify the participants were redacted.

Results

Overview

To answer the research questions, three themes were developed from examining the student focus groups and administrator interview data: Needs for Wholistic Support, Barriers to Delivering Support, and Facilitators to Accessing Support. A list of the sixteen subthemes related to these three themes can be found below. In addition, participant quotes relating to each subtheme are referenced in the Appendix.

Themes and Subthemes That Emerged Through the Data Analysis Process
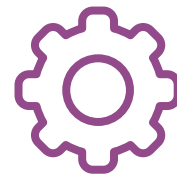
Needs for Wholistic Support

- Community and Culture Access
- Mental Health Services
- Academic Supports
- Financial Aid and Assistance
- Housing Information and Resources
- Additional Support

Barriers to Delivering Support

- Limited Funding Availability
- Lack of Self-Determination
- Constraints on Staff
- Hiring of Indigenous Staff
- Hesitancy of Funders

Facilitators to Accessing Support

- Encourage Student Engagement
- Create External Partnerships
- Increase Accessibility of Support
- Facilitate a Welcoming Community
- Advertise Available Support
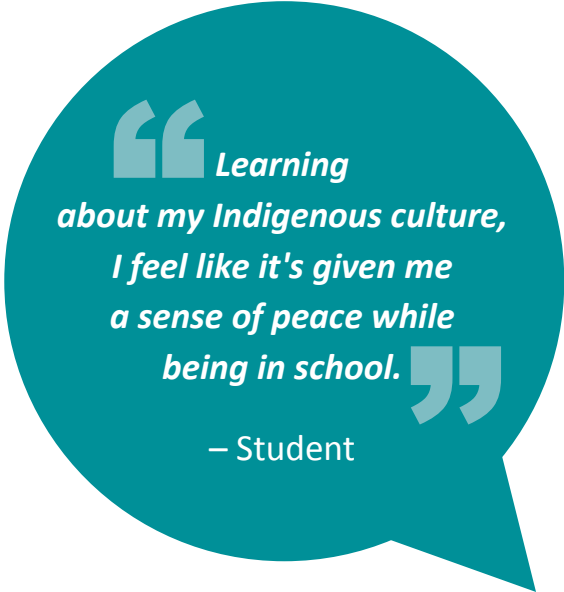
Needs for Wholistic Support

Indigenous students face a variety of barriers to completing their post-secondary education. Thus, wholistic support is required to ensure that all the barriers that Indigenous students face are addressed. As noted by students and administrators, the main supports required include community access and culture, mental health services, academic support, financial aid and assistance, housing information and resources, and additional support. While individual needs may vary, these are the main supports students require.

Community and Culture Access

For many students, the pursuit of higher education necessitates moving away from their home community and their culture. As a result, many often feel isolated, and the lack of cultural connection caused by moving away from their home community makes other issues they face while attending higher education more difficult to deal with. Consequently, providing ways for Indigenous students to meet, gather, and practice their culture has a great and positive impact on their experience in higher education.

There are many ways in which Indigenous student services have provided access to community and culture. The most common is providing student lounges for students to gather in and hold community gatherings and cultural events. In addition, the lounges give Indigenous students a place where they can feel safe on campus. Some Indigenous student services also provide access to community and culture through ceremonies, inviting Elders from local communities to campus, language lessons, and craft workshops.

The sense of community at an institution is also affected by how the administrators interact with their students: Administrators at some Indigenous student services want students to feel like they are a part of the community as well, usually taking up the roles of extended family for the students, rather than seeing themselves purely as administrators. These efforts are made much easier when the Indigenous student services are staffed by Indigenous people.

> "*Learning about my Indigenous culture, I feel like it's given me a sense of peace while being in school.*"
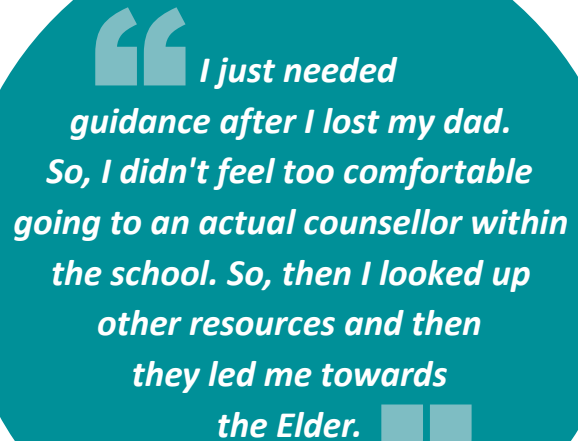>
> – Student

Mental Health Services

For many students, poor mental health is one of the primary barriers to completing their degree. Several said that it is a larger barrier than the difficulty of attaining the degree itself. Poor mental health among the interviewed students was often brought on by factors such as stress caused by financial, housing, or academic pressures, and intergenerational trauma. This can reduce their ability to focus on their studies. While most institutions offer mental health counselling, many students are uncomfortable with sharing their stories with non-Indigenous counsellors. Therefore, some Indigenous student services have provided Indigenous mental health services. This can be as simple as providing Indigenous counsellors. Others have provided mental health support that includes Elders for guidance, sharing circles, and cultural ceremonies such as smudging.

> " *I just needed guidance after I lost my dad. So, I didn't feel too comfortable going to an actual counsellor within the school. So, then I looked up other resources and then they led me towards the Elder.* "
>
> – Student

Academic Support

A variety of academic supports are often provided for students, which can be grouped into two categories: peer support and academic advising. Through peer support, students assist each other in their studies, usually taking the form of student mentors or tutors, and sometimes study groups. While Indigenous student mentors and tutors are usually volunteers, some Indigenous student services also employ students part-time to work in these positions. Academic advising offered by Indigenous student services includes reviewing course options and program requirements, holding writing labs, arranging academic accommodations, and helping students navigate specific policies and procedures such as grade appeals and academic complaints. In some cases, students who have failed multiple courses in a semester are matched with coaches who refer them to more wholistic support to address issues impeding students' academic success. While many of these services are often offered to the wider campus, academic advising is frequently difficult for students to access due to limitations in the services' capacity. Thus, it is sometimes necessary for Indigenous student services to provide these services to Indigenous students.

Financial Aid and Assistance

Financial barriers are one of the largest obstacles many Indigenous students face to completing their post-secondary education. While some students receive band funding, this is often not enough to cover tuition and living expenses, and some students receive no band funding. Additionally, many province-specific bursary providers do not offer funding until well into a semester. Consequently, some students had fears that they would have to discontinue their education due to a lack of financial resources.

There are a variety of ways Indigenous student services provided aid for students' funding. Where resources are available within their budgets, some Indigenous student services have directly provided emergency financial aid through emergency bursaries and loans. Additionally, some administrators have advocated on students' behalf to their bands to attain funding. It is also very common for Indigenous student services to share funding opportunities with students by providing information on scholarships and bursaries.

One commonly seen barrier to receiving financial aid is that the application process for bursaries and scholarships can be very lengthy and unintuitive. Many Indigenous student services help students through the application process, either individually or through organized workshops. Another way Indigenous student services have helped students, particularly at larger institutions, is by arranging part-time employment in administrative or tutoring roles for them in the institutions.

Housing Information and Resources

Another major barrier that Indigenous students face is housing. With the current rental market, housing is becoming increasingly difficult to find and tends to be very expensive, which greatly contributes to the financial stress on students. Consequently, both administrators and students agreed that support should be provided to help students find housing. While many post-secondary schools have dormitory-style housing, it is usually only available for first-year students and is typically not suitable for students with children. The only option for Indigenous student services to support students with housing is through emergency bursaries. However, administrators feel very limited in what they can do to find a long-term solution to this issue.

> " *I want to pursue my PhD, and I am limiting where I'm applying based on where I think I could afford housing.* "
>
> – Student

Additional Support

Another way that Indigenous student services provide support to their students is by providing items such as school supplies or food for free to their students. By doing so, they help reduce the financial burden on students by providing supplies that students may not have the funds to purchase themselves. Many Indigenous student services maintain food banks, provide gift cards to local grocery stores, or serve food at events that they hold. Sometimes, school supplies are provided by Indigenous student services, usually by offering access in their student lounges to items such as printers or computers. Specifically, as students are now required to complete and hand in assignments online, providing access to computers is essential for students who cannot purchase their own.

For students with children, material support may also involve providing childcare. However, many institutions do not offer childcare, and when it is offered, it often does not line up with university course calendars. Additionally, where after-hours childcare is not provided, students with children are limited in the evening courses they can take. When either of these issues occur, the parent must pay out of pocket for childcare, which is very expensive and difficult to find.

Barriers to Delivering Support

The administrators at Indigenous student services face many factors, usually outside of their control, that limit their ability to provide the services necessary to support their students. These barriers include limited available funding, lack of self-determination, constraints on staff, hiring Indigenous staff, and hesitancy of funders.

> *Longer term [funding] would really benefit a lot of institutions to make more effective decisions with their resources.*
>
> — Administrator

Limited Funding Availability

Limited funding availability was the most common constraint faced by administrators interviewed. Availability of funding is an important constraint on the number of staff they can hire and the kinds of events that they can organize for their students. Often, funding to Indigenous student services lags behind the rate of inflation, the growing demand for services required by the rising admissions of Indigenous students, and the increasing student expectations of Indigenous student services due to the recent spotlight on reconciliation. For instance, one administrator noted that their institution's president's office, after reducing funding to the administrator's office, has significantly increased their responsibilities in light of the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation. For Indigenous student services to be able
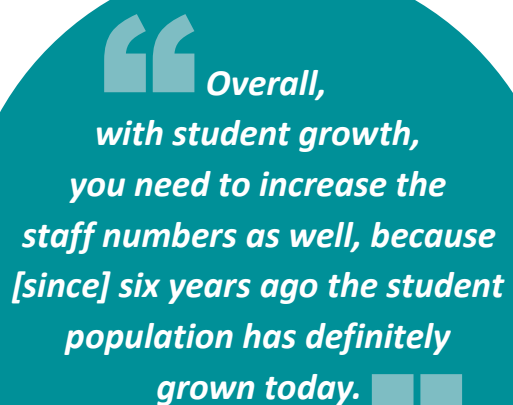
to fulfill these increased responsibilities, they must be provided with additional funding. Also, the lack of funding causes higher turnover rates because institutions are not increasing salaries to keep up with inflation. Some staff are leaving Indigenous student services to find jobs with higher salaries that better fit their needs.

Lack of Self-Determination

The way that funding is provided to Indigenous student services has a significant negative impact on the services they can provide by limiting what they are able to do with their funding. This occurs in two ways. First, funding often comes with stipulations that limit how Indigenous student services are allowed to spend it, which restricts their ability to attend to their students' unforeseen needs. For example, one administrator noted that if they wanted to provide a student with a laptop to complete their studies or other kinds of emergency support, funding could be deemed ineligible. Second, in many institutions, Indigenous student services risk losing support if funding is not exhausted by the end of the budget cycle.

Constraints on Staff

The number of staff greatly impacts the services that Indigenous student services can provide in a variety of ways. For instance, many have so few staff that roles are unable to be filled when an employee is ill or otherwise occupied, meaning that sometimes important services are entirely unavailable to students. Additionally, the duties of Indigenous student services staff differ from those of the wider staff as they are required to spend more time supporting and building relationships with individual students. This means that more staff are required to support the same number of students. Additionally, when Indigenous student services are understaffed, they are unable to spend as much time with their students, which negatively impacts the relationships they can build. Two ways that Indigenous student services dealt with this issue are by employing Indigenous students in part-time positions and by hiring contract workers. It should be noted that student employees must have flexible work hours and, due to the length of time required for training, contract employees require contracts longer than one year.

> *Overall, with student growth, you need to increase the staff numbers as well, because [since] six years ago the student population has definitely grown today.*
>
> – Administrator

Hiring of Indigenous Staff

The hiring practices at some institutions make it very difficult for Indigenous student services to hire only Indigenous staff. This is an issue, as hiring Indigenous staff has many benefits for students it supports. First, Indigenous students want to be supported by Indigenous staff, as it makes them feel more comfortable and like they belong at the institution. Second, Indigenous staff, through their lived experience, have a better understanding of the struggles of Indigenous students and of the support that they require. Third, when only a small part of the Indigenous support staff is Indigenous, students tend to seek out only Indigenous staff for support when other non-Indigenous staff are available. It also inadvertently makes the Indigenous staff responsible for educating the non-Indigenous staff about the support the students need. Both factors result in Indigenous staff having a higher workload than the non-Indigenous staff.

Hesitancy of Funders

When administrators at Indigenous student services request funding, they tend to experience a high degree of reluctance from funding providers for two main reasons. First, Indigenous students tend to make up a relatively small proportion of the total student body at institutions. As a result, it can be difficult to justify increasing funding for support that most of the students will not utilize. Second, some funding providers are uninformed about why Indigenous students need support that most non-Indigenous students do not. This makes it difficult for administrators to apply for funding for projects, as they must repeatedly make the case for why new projects are needed. Some administrators feel that many issues related to funding could be resolved if the funders were better informed about the specific struggles that Indigenous students face.

> " *A lot of the funding issues would be solved by that broader education and understanding.* "
>
> – Administrator

Facilitators to Accessing Support

While some factors that limit the quality and accessibility of support are outside the control of administrators at Indigenous student services, both students and administrators identified things Indigenous student services can do to better support their students. This includes efforts to encourage student engagement, create external partnerships, increase accessibility of support, facilitate a welcoming community, and advertise available support.

Encourage Student Engagement

Administrators and students agree that the best way to ensure that the support provided fulfils the students' needs is by asking them what they want. This is usually done using in-person or online suggestion boxes and surveys, or by listening to the students. Consistently asking for feedback from the students ensures that administrators know what support is needed most by the current student population. One administrator noted that students seem to be more comfortable using platforms that allow them to anonymously provide feedback.

> *We bring in speakers from the local community, we eat together in that program. Each cohort actually determines what their need is, so every year it looks different.*
>
> – Administrator

Another way Indigenous student services have encouraged student engagement is through including them in the planning of events. This is usually achieved by consulting with student unions. However, one administrator described how each year they assemble a group of Indigenous students whose role is to inform administrators of the direction of supporting events that the cohort wants, as well as partaking in the planning of events. Other student groups may also be able to fill small gaps in the services provided by Indigenous student services, such as sharing information about funding or employment opportunities. However, it is important that student groups do not entirely take over the roles of Indigenous student services. For instance, one student recounted that poor support forced students to form a community outside of the school that filled many of the roles that should have been filled by their Indigenous student services.

Create External Partnerships

Creating external partnerships is one way some administrators have reduced the impacts of some of the previously discussed limitations. Some Indigenous student services have partnered with mental health organizations to have counsellors available on campus either full- or part-time. This is particularly useful when the Indigenous student services do not have the funding to hire full-time counsellors. Mental health organizations also have access to a network of counsellors, which may make it easier to meet a student's specific needs. Additionally, many Indigenous student services have found success through partnering
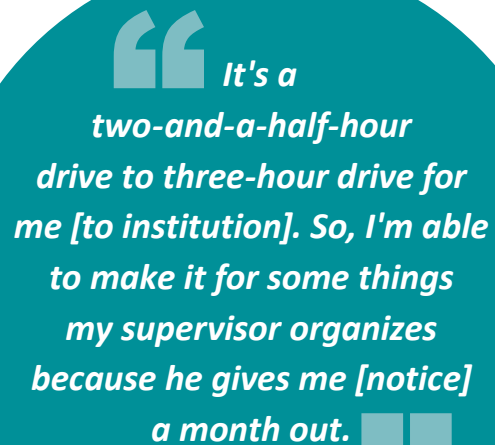
with outside funders, usually to provide financing for specific events that are not covered by the institution itself. Additionally, partnering with student unions and involving students in planning and promoting events also serves to lift some of the workload off the Indigenous student services staff.

Increase Accessibility of Support

In some cases, events provided by Indigenous student services can be readily available, but students are still unable to attend them for a variety of reasons. For example, many students, especially those who remotely attend school, live too far from campus. This is made worse when students do not have access to reliable public transportation from their residence to the school. Students who live far from campus can often only attend events when they are already on campus for other reasons such as attending class.

> *It's a two-and-a-half-hour drive to three-hour drive for me [to institution]. So, I'm able to make it for some things my supervisor organizes because he gives me [notice] a month out.*
>
> – Student

One way that this barrier can be mitigated is by providing virtual support. This can be most easily achieved with counselling or academic support and is also possible with craft workshops if materials are shipped to students. However, events such as cultural ceremonies are often not allowed to be recorded, and it is difficult to provide virtual accommodation for those who cannot attend community gatherings in person. In these cases, it may help to inform students well in advance of the events to aid them in the planning for travel.

Another reason that students may not be able to attend scheduled events is that the events conflict with their work or course schedule. For instance, one student recalled that many students at their school were unable to attend events due to schedule conflicts with their mandatory courses. The main way to combat this barrier was for administrators to be mindful of when students would be unable to attend events and to keep a flexible schedule.

Facilitate a Welcoming Community

Among students who were non-Indigenous passing, disconnected from their community and culture, or struggling with their identity, one of the major barriers to accessing support was students' feelings of lack of belonging with the Indigenous community on campus. Language around identity and connection are very prominent in Indigenous student lounges, exemplified by the routine of asking, upon meeting a newcomer for the first time, where they are from or who they know. While to most, this is more akin to a friendly greeting, for those struggling with their identity or connection, conversations around these topics may feel exclusionary, even when that is not the intention. For some students, the negative feelings caused by these conversations are exacerbated by the rise in prominence of "pretendians" in the public consciousness. While there is no obvious answer to addressing this issue, in a case where Indigenous student services attempted to limit the use of language around identity in a student lounge, it only created more tension among students.

> *That disconnection from community makes me [feel] even more of a like an outcast in the academic community.*
>
> – Student

Advertise Available Support

One of the other barriers that keep students from accessing support is a lack of knowledge of the available support. Proper advertising that ensures students know about the support provided by Indigenous student services is essential. This is usually achieved by emailing students to let them know when events are being held. Typically, students are reached through email lists they sign up for on an individual basis. In some cases, they are added to email lists when they self-identify as Indigenous during the admissions process. However, students are less likely to read emails if they are sent too frequently or are too long. Thus, many students prefer to be reached with advertising of support through social media. Some institutions also inform incoming students of available support during the recruitment and intake process. Word of mouth is also used effectively for advertising. Staff may directly tell students about events, tell staff in other departments about their services so that they can pass the information along to students, or encourage students themselves to spread the word of events and provide some kind of reward for doing so.

Discussion

Insights into Support

The current study examined Indigenous support most utilized by students, as well as factors limiting the accessibility and quality of support. In doing so, the results of this study have provided insight into support that must be provided, factors that limit Indigenous student services' ability to provide support, and some suggestions for how administrators in Indigenous student services can improve the support they provide. The study found that Indigenous student services must provide wholistic support to aid their students mentally, spiritually, emotionally, and physically. They can support students mentally through academic support, spiritually through access to community and culture, emotionally through Indigenous mental health support, and physically through various forms of material support.

Indigenous student services face numerous barriers that impact the support they can provide, many of which can be traced back to the availability of funding and limited self-determination. The amount of funding Indigenous student services receive impacts the number of staff they can employ and the kinds of events they can organize. Self-determination is also limited by funding, as funding agreements often come with stipulations that limit how funding is used, and the need to spend all funding by the end of a budget cycle inhibits long-term planning. In some cases, self-determination is also limited by the hiring practices of the institution which inhibit the Indigenous student services' ability to specifically recruit Indigenous staff. The Indigenous student services should be given the self-determination to decide how they can best support Indigenous students.

While participant stories led to the development of many suggestions for best practices, the most common suggestion from students and administrators alike was to encourage student engagement. All support outlined in this study should be provided in some way by Indigenous student services, however, the needs of each cohort of students vary. Some supports may be required more than others in each cohort, while some cohorts may want support to be provided in a specific way. This means that encouraging student feedback and involving students in the programming of support, when possible, ensures that the support provided can be tailored to the unique needs of each cohort of students.

Recommendations

The following is a list of recommendations developed from the shared experiences of Indigenous post-secondary students and administrators.

1. ### Create Welcoming Indigenous Student Lounges

   Establish safe gathering spaces for cultural practices, community events, and connection.

2. ### Access to Indigenous-Specific Mental Health Support

   Offer counselling with professionals knowledgeable in Indigenous culture or traditional healing practices.

3. ### Offer Academic and Peer Support Programs

   Provide mentorships, tutoring, and study groups led by fellow Indigenous students or staff.

4. ### Increase Financial Aid and Emergency Support

   Support increasing funds specifically for Indigenous students, especially those facing an immediate financial crisis.

5. ### Navigate Affordable and Suitable Housing Options

   Compile housing options near campus and implement inclusive on-campus housing policies.

6. ### Access to On-Campus Childcare Services

   Align childcare services with institution calendars and explore financial subsidies for Indigenous students.

7. ### Increase Staff and Prioritize Indigenous Hiring

   Promote staff recruitment/retention and prioritize hiring and training Indigenous staff.

8. ### Provide More Flexible and Sustainable Funding

   Advocate for increased funding to align with the growing needs and realities of Indigenous post-secondary students.

9. ### Engage in Facilitating Student Feedback

   Implement regular feedback mechanisms to ensure students can share their needs.

10. ### Boost Awareness of Services and Partnerships

    Expand communication efforts across platforms favoured by students and introduce services to incoming students.

Conclusion

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore Indigenous support most used by students, as well as the factors that limit the accessibility and quality of support. Results of the study indicate that wholistic support is required to ensure that Indigenous students succeed in post-secondary education. Additionally, this study has highlighted many structural barriers that impede the ability of administrators at Indigenous student services to provide quality support and has used the stories of administrators and students alike to highlight several best practices that administrators can use to improve the support they provide. By providing an understanding of the barriers that impact the quality and accessibility of on-campus Indigenous support, this report may be useful in informing the future programming of support.

Limitations

While this study provided a detailed look at the Indigenous support available to post-secondary students, some limitations should be noted. First, the study experienced high levels of participant attrition, specifically among the student focus groups, which likely limited the number of perspectives this study was able to capture. Second, due to the nature of the study, which partially examined the limitations that Indigenous student services face in providing support, the sensitivity of the topic may have impacted some administrators' willingness to participate in this study. For those who did participate, it may have limited what they were willing to share for fear of reprisal from their institutions, or that it may reflect poorly on those who are providing these services.

Further Directions

This exploratory study has shed light on some potential areas for further inquiry. First, while the results of this study indicate that housing insecurity is a major barrier that many Indigenous students face to completing their post-secondary education, no long-term solutions have been found to help mitigate students' struggle to find housing. So, future research should explore cost-effective housing support and options for students. Additionally, while the participants in this study have highlighted some of the major barriers they face to accessing or providing Indigenous support, it was unable to draw conclusions on how prominent these barriers are. Thus, future research should explore how critical the barriers outlined in this study are, as well as how much they impact the accessibility and quality of on-campus Indigenous support.

References

Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77-101. *https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa*

St. Germaine, N. (2023). *Barriers and facilitators to accessing Indigenous supports literature review.* Indspire. *https://indspire.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Barriers-and-Facilitators-for-Accessing-Indigenous-Supports-Literature-Review-FINAL.pdf*

Appendix: Participant Quotes

Needs for Wholistic Support

Community and Culture Access

"I feel like the impact [the student lounge] had on me is definitely that of community – seeing familiar faces has made me feel more comfortable and everything within the school within the university setting. Somewhere I can just go get away to think, to do my studies, or to be around my people – just healing, medicine, our laughs, our stories, and everything like that. I really am fortunate and blessed to have that as well. I feel it has had a huge impact on me." – Student

"Learning about my Indigenous culture, I feel like it's given me a sense of peace while being in school. As well as kind of just owning my own identity while I'm there." – Student

Mental Health Services

"Barriers faced were primarily mental health. […] I find a lot of inspiration and kind of drive to completing projects and tasks, so I'm really lucky in that sense. But still, mental health was the largest barrier for sure." – Student

"I just needed guidance after I lost my dad. So, I didn't feel too comfortable going to an actual counsellor within the school. So, then I looked up other resources and then they led me towards the Elder." – Student

Academic Support

"I actually volunteer in the skills lab, all during [my] free time. On Mondays, students will come in and practice our skills because demos for nursing are a big deal. I'll go in and help other students in other years if they need help practicing for demos. So, I feel like we do have a lot of support." – Student

"We have a [academic probation] program for any students that have failed two or more courses in a term, they will be matched with their coach. I'm one of those coaches and mainly we're connecting them to all the free academic supports we have on campus, whether it's the learning center, writing lab, math lab, or peer tutoring." – Administrator

Financial Aid and Assistance

"I just got kind of tossed to the side and I was not supported for my second year of school. That was a really hard thing on me because I had signed up for so much [...]. It's really challenged my learning because I was really riding on that support. That was a huge barrier for me this year that I had to overcome. I'm a new mom as well, I just had a child last year. She's a year and a half, so it was just like a kick in the pants." – Student

"I was having some financial issues at the beginning when I first started at [institution]. I expressed that to one of the counsellors at [institution] and the Indigenous student centre, and they allayed my fears [about finances]. Basically, they said 'Don't worry about it. We're gonna speak with admissions. If you don't hear from your funder by this date, we'll give you the money and we can figure out from there what to do.' They were very much proactive and using their voice within an administrative position to help me." – Student

Housing Information and Resources

"I never did find a market rental. I was fortunate that the Indigenous housing organization at the time I had applied two years prior and completely forgot about it. By sheer luck, my name came up on their priority list and my son and I found housing. Otherwise, I don't think we would have found housing in the city. It's quite challenging, and that's not even taking into account how expensive housing is now. [...] I want to pursue my PhD, and I am limiting where I'm applying based on where I think I could afford housing." – Student

"So [institution] only has housing currently for first-year students. [...] We're at a bit of a loss on how to help students find an apartment or find roommates. It's a really difficult rental market here in the city. That's a big limitation that we see and feel a bit helpless about because there's little that we can do. If students find themselves in an emergency situation, there's some emergency financial support available to them, but it's a very band-aid type of solution." – Administrator

Additional Support

"[Events] always have a lot of food. So, I feed off that food for like three days, which is wonderful. [...] Being able to access the student lounge has provided me with a computer to do my studies. There was always an available computer, which was awesome." – Student

"[Support includes] general student wellbeing and interactions, we offer a nutrition program. Which means we have our community kitchen here and our centres, full of food and snacks for students to eat and make a small meal. We have weekly soup days as well." – Administrator

Barriers to Delivering Support

Limited Funding Availability

"That financial component like this are our budgets were cut, but then we still have the wider university coming to our office asking for things. It's like, well we have funds to support Indigenous students doing this stuff out of this office, and if you want to come join us, you can, but we can't be asked by the president's office to spend more money on Elders and stuff like that. It's like, you guys cut our budgets and now you want us to do more with that." – Administrator

"Another limitation is the fact that Indigenous students make up a very small proportion of the overall student population. So, it's kind of making the business case about why it's important to keep these well funded, even though it's a small number of students [...]. How else do you show that Indigenous student services is a priority for the institution to be properly resourced, even though you are really small numbers in comparison to other student populations?" – Administrator

Lack of Self-Determination

"It puts a pressure, it puts a little bit of limitation on like [our] technology bursary, we're not allowed to use it for [other] bursaries, and they kind of have a broad definition of what that is. So, you have to be mindful of the types of things that we might help students with – financially or things like if we needed to buy laptops for students or different types of emergent supports, those might be deemed ineligible." – Administrator

"It's kind of based on use it or lose it. So, you have the rush at end of fiscal year, which I don't know if you've ever experienced [...] I think it doesn't allow for flexibility and making good decisions if you can't carry it over without fear of getting less funding in the year after [...]. I think the year-to-year funding is very limited. I think it's the constant reporting that goes with [that] kind of year-to-year funding. Longer term [funding] would really benefit a lot of institutions to make more effective decisions with their resources." – Administrator

Constraints on Staff

"Overall, with student growth, you need to increase the staff numbers as well, because [since] six years ago the student population has definitely grown today. Still just me here, you know what I mean? So, there needs to be that correlation or relationship between hey the student numbers are going up, [...] the staff support numbers need to follow as well."
– Administrator

"There's no more survival mode for staff or for students. Like before [hiring more staff], it was just staff didn't have time to think about things like professional development. They didn't have time to think about their wellbeing, it was just help as many students as you can in one day. Just get done whatever you can possibly get done – and the students felt that." – Administrator

Hiring of Indigenous Staff

"I had a friend who was Cree. She worked at [institution] here in [province], and she had to leave because there were two Indigenous professors, and they were basically in charge of all – anything Indigenous was put on them and basically had to decolonize the school with no help, no money. So that causes a burnout that opens the door to these kinds of problems. So, well it's excellent that all of our schools have these groups, it's probably not enough. And more funding so you could have more staff, you could have more supports." – Student

"The hiring practices of HR and like the union puts a lot of obstacles in terms of having Indigenous staff working in the Indigenous office because of the union stuff. So, there's a lot of non-Indigenous folks working with Indigenous students [...]. I think a lot of people just see it really surface and just don't understand or don't have any experience of the deeper pieces. I just don't understand how people who haven't gone to school as an Indigenous person can relate." – Administrator

Hesitancy of Funders

"I had to sit with the head of the registrar, like the lead of our registrar services, and say, 'these are the reasons why our students are not coming through that mainstream scholarship, these are the barriers, this is the history of that.' And once he got it, he went, 'Okay no problem, let's make an Indigenous one.' [...] A lot of the funding issues would be solved by that broader education and understanding." – Administrator

"Another limitation is the fact that Indigenous students make up a very small proportion of the overall student population. So, it's kind of making the business case about why it's important to keep these well funded, even though it's a small number of students [...]. How else do you show that Indigenous student services is a priority for the institution to be properly resourced, even though you are really small numbers in comparison to other student populations?" – Administrator

Facilitators to Accessing Support

Encouraging Student Engagement

"We have programs like [program name], where it's recognized on their cocurricular record. They meet once a week, we organize it around their school schedules, so we know that they can attend. We bring in speakers from the local community, we eat together in that program. Each cohort actually determines what their need is, so every year it looks different." – Administrator

"Helping them [students] to realize that they can make change and their ideas are the best ideas. When students come here and say, 'Can we do this?', yes now I don't even have to program plan, you know what I mean? You guys came up with the idea, so I'll help you promote it and get the things that they need for those [ideas]." – Administrator

Creating External Partnerships

"A lot of our program money comes from outside resources. It's money that our services get through a relationship that we've been able to nurture and strengthen […]. And that's for activities and initiatives that we want to run. […] We wouldn't be able to do that without all of our friends." – Administrator

"We work with [external organization]. We refer students to and within [external organization]. You can make requests. If you're looking or prefer a First Nations counsellor, for example, or perhaps we have students that are looking for a professional that is comfortable with LGBTQ communities. So within [external organization], they can make specific requests. We do have one of those [external organization] counsellors that comes to campus." – Administrator

Increase Accessibility of Support

"It's a two-and-a-half-hour drive to three-hour drive for me [to institution]. So, I'm able to make it for some things my supervisor organizes because he gives me [notice] a month out. So, I know I can make a plan with my wife or for our child. But the Student Services, it's all just kind of like 'Oh, hey, we're gonna hang out here tomorrow', and those kinds of emails I can't really do much about." – Student

"Events [for Indigenous students] will be scheduled at one o'clock. On days, I was like this is you do not know every single person has a class at those times, every single day of the week. Like literally, the whole school kind of ran on this uniform schedule. It's like, [sarcasm] okay this is awesome, I can't wait to not be there because of class." – Student

Facilitate a Welcoming Community

*"I pass beyond [white]-passing, you know, so I'm very intimidated by the front desk
[at the Indigenous student lounge]. Because of course, that is a great thing to keep out
maybe people who shouldn't be in the space. But I can understand too, it's really difficult
for people who feel like they can't join spaces to then step in, you know, how do you go into
that space? Even for people who are reconnecting because I know that can be a big challenge."*
– Student

*"People talk about like, 'Oh, do you know this person? Do you know that person?'.
It's all about name dropping at university, everybody knows somebody else. And they all
know each other because their parents were also in school, at university, or they're tribal
leaders, or connected through Indigenous community. And, so that's great for them.
But, it's not great for us [who are disconnected]. […] You know that disconnection from
community makes me [feel] even more of a like an outcast in the academic community.
Because now with all these things about pretend Indians and stuff, it's really important
to have this membership with an organization."* – Student

Advertise Available Support

*"When you get a newsletter, I think that is also the issue. We get a lot of emails,
when you get an attachment that's like, just scrolling, scrolling, scrolling, it feels like work,
you know what I mean? There's this huge email, because it would all be in one email,
and be an attachment going down and down. I think maybe that was just a turn off for me
and that's not the way I function. So, I think if it were on a Facebook group,
I'd be more open to look at a post."* – Student

*"The best advertisement, especially for Indigenous people is word of mouth.
If you're having a powwow, you need to tell the right people and all of Canada will know
that it's happening. So, like that word of mouth, encouraging students to be our cheerleaders –
essentially out and about, when they're in their classes."* – Administrator

Indspire

Indigenous education,
Canada's future.

L'éducation des autochtones.
L'avenir du Canada.

For more information, please contact:

@ Email: research@indspire.ca

🌐 Websites: Research and Impact Unit

📝 Reports: Indspire Report Catalogue