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Indigenous Student Voices on Mental Health and Indigenous Supports: Barriers and Benefits

2026 | SIDOROVA, E., AYSON, G., BUDHATHOKI, R., & DEGHANSI, N.



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Alanah Astehtsi' Otsistóhkwa? (Morningstar) Jewell (she/her) is a mixed French-First Nations artist. She is Bear Clan from Oneida Nation of the Thames, grew up off-reserve, and currently lives in Kitchener, Ontario. Alanah is an illustrator, painter, and muralist, and organizes local Indigenous Art Markets through @IAmKitchener on Instagram. She received an Honours BA in Sociology from Wilfrid Laurier University and had dreams of attending law school or pursuing a master's degree in the years following graduation. However, life took a turn when she decided to pursue art as a hobby in 2019; she quickly developed a love for creating and felt that she could pursue art part-time. Illustrating and painting soon became her life's work, and through this she has been able to connect with other Indigenous creators, participate in community, and express culture, love, and connection.



FOREWORD: BALANCING MENTAL WELLNESS AND INDIGENOUS STUDENT SUCCESS

It is our privilege to present this report regarding balancing mental wellness and Indigenous student success. Across Canada, Indigenous learners consistently identify mental health challenges as one of the most significant barriers to achieving their educational goals. These challenges are not isolated experiences, rather, they are shaped by history, society, family, and ongoing inequities, systemic gaps, and environments that too often fail to understand Indigenous realities, identities, cultures, and ways of knowing.

At Indspire, we walk alongside Indigenous students as they pursue post-secondary education. We understand that success cannot be measured by credentials alone. A balanced state of mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical well-being contributes to the health of both individuals and communities. Through initiatives such as *Pathways to Wellness* and in collaboration with partners including CAMH, Jack.org, and We Matter, we are working to strengthen culturally grounded supports. Yet, students continue to highlight where meaningful gaps remain.

In 2022, Indspire released *Indigenous Learners' Mental Health Needs*, a foundational literature review that examines what is known and what remains insufficiently understood about Indigenous students' mental wellness. While the research identified persistent individual, socio-cultural, and systemic barriers, it also highlighted a critical gap: limited research directly centred on the voices and lived experiences of Indigenous post-secondary learners themselves.

In response, and in partnership with the Mental Health Commission of Canada, Indspire launched a multi-phase research initiative to ground future action in student realities. Through a national *Mental Wellness Survey* and a series of student learning circles, Indigenous learners shared not only the pressures they face but also their strengths, insights, and clarity about what meaningful support looks like. These were not transactional research exercises. They were spaces of trust, reciprocity, and shared responsibility.

The four reports presented here provide a national landscape analysis of available resources, detailed survey findings, and direct lived experiences from Indigenous students across the country. They offer both evidence and direction, identifying persistent barriers and illuminating pathways toward belonging, resilience, and thriving.

This work is an invitation and call to action for institutions, governments, and partners to build culturally grounded, responsive, and accountable systems. Affirming the importance of supportive learning environments will allow Indigenous students to thrive and lead into a bright future.

Meegwetch,



Jocelyn W. Formsma, H.B.Soc.Sci, J.D.
President and CEO, Indspire

FOREWORD: HONOURING COLLABORATION AND INDIGENOUS WELL-BEING

The Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) is honoured to support Indspire in this important research focused on the mental health and well-being of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis students in post-secondary.

The MHCC champions the National Standard for *Mental Health and Well-being for Post-Secondary Students* (the Standard) — a voluntary, flexible framework to help institutions create supportive, holistic, and student-centred approaches to mental health. Since its release in 2020, campuses across the country have made meaningful strides to adapt their systems to better meet the needs of their students.

At the same time, student realities have become increasingly complex. Indigenous students carry strength, knowledge, and deep connections to community that enrich the post-secondary environment, yet these experiences often unfold within systems that are based on colonial foundations. Many continue to experience challenges tied to the ongoing experiences of colonization, racism, and cultural disconnection, highlighting the importance of fostering campus environments where Indigenous ways of knowing and being are practiced, supported, and celebrated as an asset.

It has been clear to us since the release of the Standard that further guidance is needed to reflect the distinct perspectives and priorities of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis students. This series of reports is a step in that direction. Through these reports, Indigenous students share powerful insights about the kind of supports and systems they need to feel seen, respected, and able to thrive throughout their post-secondary journeys. Without their voices, meaningful support of Indigenous students in post-secondary would be unattainable.

The MHCC is grateful to Indspire for their leadership in this work and to the students who courageously shared their stories. Their voices are the heart of these reports. We are committed to being accountable to these voices to foster more inclusive and culturally safe environments for Indigenous students, and we encourage readers to join us in reflecting on their own responsibility in advancing this important work.



Lili-Anna Pereša,
Présidente - directrice générale,
Commission de la santé mentale du Canada

INDSPIRE'S MENTAL WELLNESS RESEARCH PROGRAM

Research Program

Mental health is a foundational element of students' ability to thrive academically. To better understand the mental wellness landscape for Indigenous post-secondary students, Indspire's Research and Impact Department (R&I) conducted a literature review, which identified individual, socio-cultural, and systemic barriers along with key facilitators that influence students' mental wellness (Bunting, 2022). Most notably, the review highlighted a significant gap in research that focuses on the mental wellness of Indigenous learners.

To address this gap, R&I partnered with the MHCC to launch a two-phased research program aimed at deepening the understanding of Indigenous students' mental wellness and identifying effective supports throughout their post-secondary journeys. This initiative led to the development of a series of four interrelated research reports.



Phase 1: Mental Wellness Survey

To address the limited documentation of mental wellness experiences of Indigenous learners, R&I developed and administered the *Mental Wellness Survey* to former recipients of Indspire's Building Brighter Futures program. The survey explored key factors influencing Indigenous students' mental wellness, including cultural connectedness, sense of belonging, and the support services provided by their post-secondary institutions.

The *Mental Wellness Survey* invited students to share their experiences in their own words—identifying barriers to accessing support services and assessing whether those services met their needs. The findings, disseminated across three reports, emphasized the importance of fostering a strength-based discourse that centres Indigenous student voices in shaping mental wellness supports.

Phase 2: Learning Circles

To enable Indigenous learners to share their experiences of mental wellness in post-secondary contexts, the second phase of the research program involved a series of learning circles with current and former students. These discussions sought in-depth insights into students' lived experiences related to mental wellness during their academic journeys, as well as their perspectives on the strengths and limitations of institutional support. Findings from the learning circles emphasized the need for holistic support, including professional development opportunities, life skills training, and healing support. A guiding analogy was developed to outline pathways for post-secondary institutions to strengthen mental wellness supports for Indigenous learners.

Indspire's R&I Mental Wellness Reports



Phase 1

Understanding the Interrelationship of Mental Wellness Factors— A Study of Indigenous Post-Secondary Student Experiences

Authors: Ayson et al., 2026



Phase 1

Exploring the Impact of Key Demographic Variables on Indigenous Students Well-being and Support Service Utilization

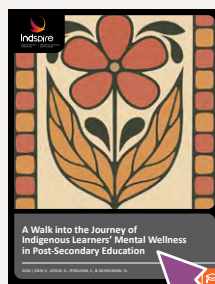
Authors: Budhathoki et al., 2026



Phase 1

Indigenous Student Voices on Mental Health and Indigenous Supports: Barriers and Benefits

Authors: Sidorova et al., 2026



Phase 2

A Walk Into the Journey of Indigenous Learners' Mental Wellness in Post-Secondary Education

Authors: Gray et al., 2026

Reflections

This body of work fills a critical knowledge gap in understanding the factors that influence Indigenous students' mental wellness throughout their post-secondary journey. It highlights the ongoing harm that colonization has on Indigenous students and the barriers placed on their educational attainment. Importantly, this research brings forward the voices, experiences, and perspectives of Indigenous learners to inform how institutions and policymakers approach mental wellness in post-secondary education.

Looking Ahead

Drawing on insights gathered across both phases, we will synthesize the findings into an informed, evidence-based position statement that outlines recommendations for the sector. This statement, along with the four interrelated research reports, will serve as a guiding resource for post-secondary institutions, government bodies, and community organizations working to strengthen mental wellness supports for Indigenous students across Canada.



ABOUT INDSPIRE

Indspire is a national Indigenous registered charity that invests in the education of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people for the long-term benefit of these individuals, their families, and communities. In partnership with Indigenous and private- and public-sector stakeholders, Indspire educates, connects, and invests in Indigenous people to help them achieve their highest potential. Indspire provides resources to students, educators, communities, and other stakeholders who are committed to improving success in education for Indigenous youth. Since 1996, Indspire has awarded over \$250 million through more than 70,000 bursaries and scholarships to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis youth, making it the largest funder of Indigenous post-secondary education outside of the Canadian federal government.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to begin by acknowledging and thanking our *Building Brighter Futures* program recipients who shared their experiences with us and provided valuable insight into the experiences of Indigenous students across Canada. We also wish to acknowledge Indspire's staff, funding partners, and other stakeholders, whose support has enabled us to provide thousands of bursaries, scholarships, and awards each year to students pursuing post-secondary education and training. At Indspire, it is important for us to provide space for Indigenous communities to feel seen, represented, and celebrated. The success experienced by Indigenous students, and the ways they use their education to demonstrate reciprocity in giving back to their communities, are truly inspiring and tell the story of how brighter futures can be built when we work in partnership.

Chi-Miigwetch for all of the hope and encouragement that you all bring.

RESEARCH SPONSORS



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of Canada

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

9	ABSTRACT		
10	KEY TAKEAWAYS		
11	INTRODUCTION	Background	11
		Purpose	11
12	RESEARCH DESIGN	Research Questions	12
12	METHOD	Recruitment and Participants	12
		Methodology	12
		Data Analysis	13
15	RESULTS AND DISCUSSION	Key Factors Contributing to Effective Support at Post-secondary Institutions	15
		Barriers to Accessing Support Services	21
		Preference for External Services	30
34	LIMITATIONS		
35	RECOMMENDATIONS		
36	CONCLUSION		
37	REFERENCES		
40	APPENDIX A: OVERVIEW OF THE CODING PROCESS		
41	APPENDIX B: MAJOR THEMES AND DESCRIPTIONS		

ABSTRACT

This report is part of a four-report series which seeks to understand how effective support services offered by Canadian post-secondary institutions are for Indigenous students. A total of 3,024 Indigenous post-secondary students completed Indspire's *Mental Wellness Survey*, launched in early 2023 to understand the mental health experiences of Indigenous students in post-secondary education. Through qualitative analysis of open-ended responses in the survey, this report summarizes student feedback on mental health and Indigenous services offered on campus. Specifically, the report investigates factors influencing the use or non-use of these services, along with the utilization of external services located off campus.

The findings revealed three critical factors influencing students' perceived effectiveness of mental health and Indigenous support services: acceptance, providing safe spaces, and the implementation of a trauma-informed approach. However, lack of information regarding the support services, feeling unaccepted, and unavailability were the primary barriers for students to utilize support services at their post-secondary institutions. Many Indigenous students turn to external, non-post-secondary institution-affiliated support services (academic, health, cultural, and financial) due to shorter wait times, the availability of Indigenous-specific care, and perceiving better protection of confidentiality. The report concludes that it is crucial to create spaces on campus where Indigenous students can feel included, especially to connect with their own Indigenous culture. Promoting awareness of existing services and expanding appointment availability are also important to increasing student utilization.

Underpinned by the findings from this work, Indspire's research developed recommendations to address issues identified in student feedback that include:

- Creating safe, inclusive, and accommodating environments within post-secondary institutions to reflect the priorities of Indigenous students.
- Increasing the representation of Indigenous cultures within Indigenous-specific services to better reflect the diversity of Indigenous students and their cultures.
- Adding virtual services for online-based students, who may be remote or lack access to transportation; this would significantly increase access to services.
- Ensuring specialists, particularly therapists, adopt a trauma-informed approach to these essential services.
- Hiring more staff to reduce burnout and overload, especially in counselling and support services.
- Expanding Indigenous-specific services by hiring more staff to reduce overload and offering more workshops.
- With the use of external, off-campus services reported by students, it would be valuable for on-campus services to collaborate with, learn from, and promote these external organizations.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Survey respondents ($n = 3,023$) provided their open-ended feedback on mental health and Indigenous-specific services are the following:

- Three key factors contributing to effective services are the following: providing safe spaces, acceptance, and a trauma-informed approach.
- Four barriers to accessing services are the following: not feeling accepted, lack of need for these services, lack of advertising, and difficulties of access.
- Creating safe, inclusive and accommodating post-secondary environments through adopting a trauma-informed approach, increasing representation of different Indigenous cultures, offering virtual services, and hiring more staff for Indigenous services.
- Post-secondary institution services could collaborate with, learn from, and promote external non-post-secondary institution support services and organizations.

INTRODUCTION

Background

Mental health challenges among Indigenous students cannot be separated from Canada's colonial legacy. Indigenous Peoples are disproportionately affected by psychological distress, depression, and suicide—particularly among youth—due to colonization, globalization and migration, loss of traditional languages, cultural disconnection, and marginalization (Hop Wo et al., 2020). Furthermore, not enough attention has been paid to addressing the connection between systemic racism and microaggressions against Indigenous students (Canel-Çınarbaş & Yohani, 2019). Anti-Indigenous racism remains a barrier to the inclusion of Indigenous students, faculty, and staff members at post-secondary institution (PSI, Bailey, 2016). While the concept of colonial and intergenerational trauma among Indigenous peoples has been discussed in mental health research (Gone, 2013; Mitchell et al., 2019), its impact is often overlooked by non-Indigenous mental health practitioners. This underscores the need for trauma-informed and culturally significant approaches tailored to the lived realities of Indigenous students.

Some studies suggest that culturally relevant services can improve access and offer protective benefits against mental health issues (Hop Wo et al., 2020). Despite this, the availability and quality of these resources vary significantly across Canada. While some barriers to accessing mental health services (e.g., busy schedules and lack of promotion of these services) are common to all students, Indigenous students also face unique challenges. For example, reconnecting with their Indigenous culture can be a challenge for some Indigenous students (Efimoff & Starzyk, 2025). Further, post-secondary research often places the burden of academic success on Indigenous students themselves, rather than examining institutional barriers and responsibilities (McMillan, 2019).

Indspire values the voices and experiences of Indigenous students and is deeply committed to learning how to improve their mental wellness during post-secondary education. While most research on Indigenous student feedback for mental health support services focuses on First Nations, there is limited attention paid to the experiences of Inuit and Métis students (Bunting, 2022). Recognizing both the gap in the literature and the importance of mental wellness for post-secondary success (Herkimer, 2022), R&I explored the mental wellness landscape for Indigenous post-secondary students. To this end, the *Mental Wellness Survey* was developed to understand the Indigenous post-secondary students' mental wellness, their use of mental health and Indigenous support services, and how these services could better meet their needs throughout their educational journey.

Purpose

The research in this report is part of a broader initiative to better understand the mental wellness of Indigenous post-secondary students. Specific to the report is understanding the qualitative feedback from students on their access and satisfaction with mental health and Indigenous services. Findings from this research will be used to develop recommendations to improve institutional support of Indigenous student mental wellness.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Research Questions

This research explored the respondents' feedback on post-secondary institution support services and their experience in accessing those services to answer the question "What are their experiences in accessing and utilizing mental health and Indigenous services provided by their post-secondary institution?"

METHOD

Recruitment and Participants

Using SurveyMonkey®, a cross-sectional survey was carried out in March 2023. Invitations were emailed to 10,104 individuals who had received a bursary or scholarship from Indspire's Building Brighter Futures program from 2020 to 2022. Reminder emails were distributed to enhance the number of responses. The *Mental Wellness Survey* was self-administered online, allowing easy access for participants across different geographical areas of Canada. In total 3,023 Indigenous students participated in the survey, representing a 30% feedback rate. Throughout data collection, ethical considerations, such as informed consent and confidentiality, were carefully observed.

Methodology

Employing a mixed-methods design, the *Mental Wellness Survey* gathered both quantitative and qualitative data through 57 questions (44 fixed-response and 13 open-ended). Quantitative measures were used to assess students' self-rated mental wellness, sense of belonging, cultural connectedness, and support service utilization and satisfaction. Respondents selected from a 5-point Likert scale their agreeability with statements related to each of these factors (e.g., for cultural connectedness, "I have a clear sense of my Indigenous identity or culture and what it means to me."). Findings from the quantitative data can be found in two reports in this series: *Understanding the Interrelationship of Mental Wellness Factors—A Study of Indigenous Post-Secondary Student Experiences* (Ayson et al., 2026) and *Exploring the Impact of Key Demographic Variables on Indigenous Students Well-Being and Support Service Utilization* (Budhathoki et al., 2026). The qualitative data, collected through open-ended questions, aimed to support these quantitative findings and further explore the reasons behind students' utilization and of resources available either in or outside their post-secondary institutions. This report focuses on the insights derived from the qualitative data of the *Mental Wellness Survey*.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process for this study consisted of the following two steps: 1) summarizing and organizing the feedback to open-ended responses on the *Mental Wellness Survey* (a descriptive topic summary); and 2) conducting a thematic analysis of the descriptive summary. The thematic analysis offers a deeper interpretation of the underlying meaning and significance of these reflections. Due to the volume of responses and the similarities between them, answers were grouped and summarized based on shared topics to facilitate the coding process.

The thematic analysis of the qualitative data was conducted using NVivo software and followed the guidelines outlined by Braun & Clarke (2021). This approach systematically identifies patterns (i.e., themes) across the dataset.

Thematic Analysis

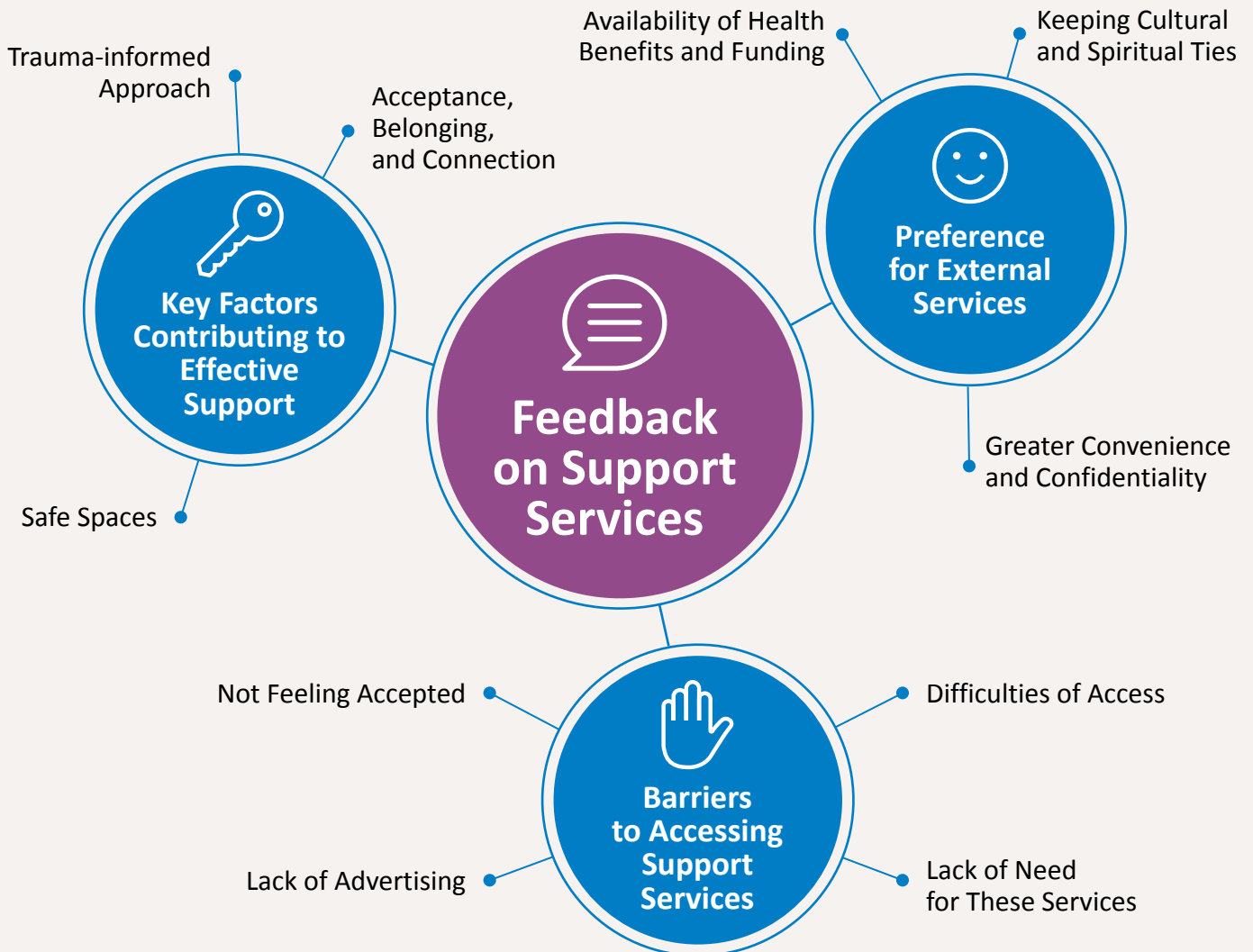
In this study, thematic analysis was chosen as the preferred method of data analysis due to its ability to systematically identify patterns (i.e., themes) across a dataset. Thematic analysis is a qualitative analysis method used in social sciences to identify and present recurring patterns or themes in data. It involves careful reading of material to extract meaning and understand different subjects and interpretations. Furthermore, by focusing on shared meanings, experiences, and insights, thematic analysis offers researchers the possibility to explore patterns through a deeper interpretation of the underlying significance of the participants' responses. An outline of the thematic analysis coding process used in this report is summarized in [Appendix A](#).

METHOD

Overview of the themes

The thematic analysis generated the following themes and subthemes (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Themes and Subthemes Generated from Feedback on Support Services



Ethical Considerations

Indspire seeks to frame research in a way that empowers Indigenous communities, using a strength-based approach that emphasizes resilience and positive cultural practices. All individual information shared by survey participants remained confidential to the research team, and responses were anonymized prior to analysis. Participants were informed that, by voluntarily participating in the survey, they were giving Indspire consent to use their responses for research purposes that benefit Indigenous students. They were also reassured that their data would be handled confidentially, with only aggregate data being presented. More information on how participant data is used at Indspire can be found in Indspire's [Privacy Policy](#).

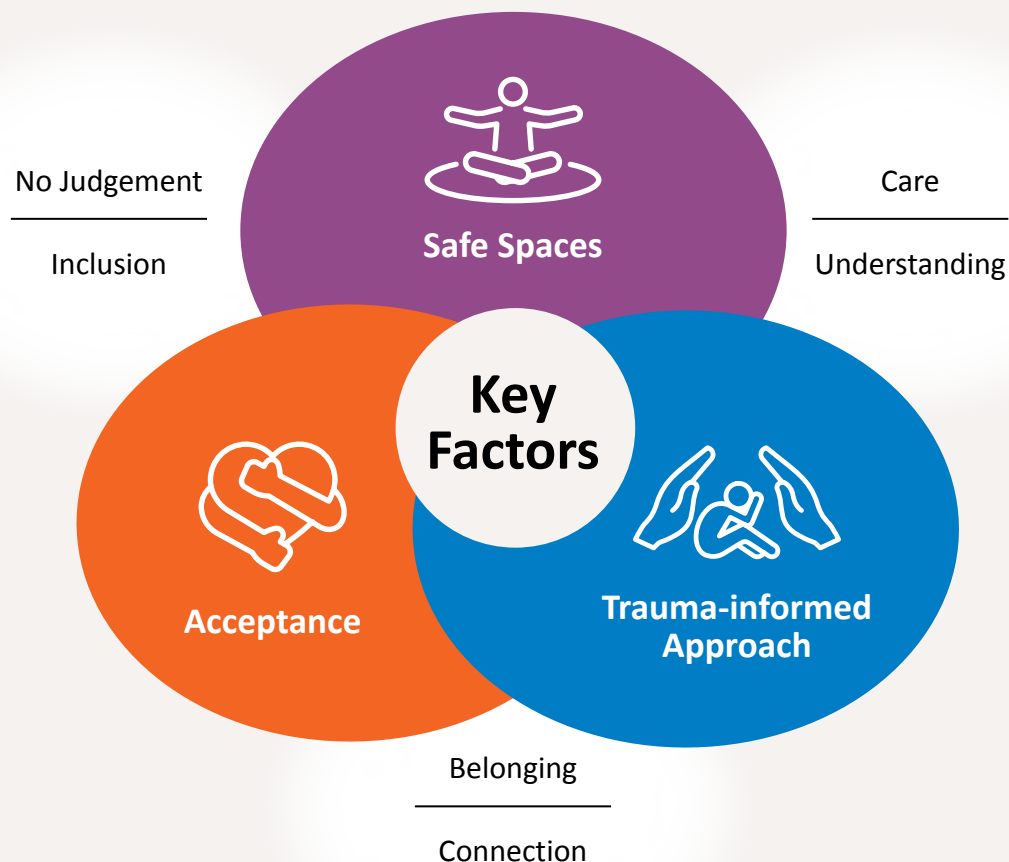
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The three overarching themes identified in students' feedback were: 1) key factors contributing to effective support at post-secondary institutions, 2) barriers to accessing services, and 3) preference for external services. Each theme contained subthemes that provide a more detailed understanding of the findings (see [Appendix B](#) for a summary of the themes and sub-themes). The following sections will further describe each theme and its subthemes. To further contextualize the findings, the results are supplemented with academic literature and quotes from survey respondents.

Key Factors Contributing to Effective Support at Post-secondary Institutions

Students emphasized the importance of having safe, inclusive, judgment-free spaces where they could feel a sense of belonging, connection, and acceptance. They also noted the value of mental health services—specifically, trauma-informed approaches in service delivery—which help provide better care and understanding (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Key Factors Contributing to Effective Services at Post-secondary Institutions



Safe Spaces

The *Mental Wellness Survey* revealed that an important function of post-secondary institution services is to provide safe spaces where Indigenous students can be open, included, and assured that their private information remains confidential. Having access to physical safe spaces at post-secondary institutions allows Indigenous students to feel more comfortable on campus and fosters a sense of community. Findings from the literature highlight that, even at a faculty level, Indigenous scholars do not always feel safe to openly identify as Indigenous, seek advice, or trust either their colleagues or institutional policies and practices—often due to inappropriate expectations and judgments or criticisms from other faculty members (Locke et al., 2024). A culturally safe space is both a practical reality—requiring structural arrangements to create an environment that evokes feelings of privacy, security, and confidentiality—and a metaphor for having adequate time and appropriate procedures to allow for mutual recognition and reflection (D’Souza et al., 2024).

Locke et al. (2024) identified four main attributes of safe spaces from the perspectives of Indigenous scholars. These elements included: 1) being safe to be Indigenous, 2) being safe to seek advice and make mistakes, 3) being safe to speak openly, and 4) being safe to trust.

The *Mental Wellness Survey* highlighted the ability of physical spaces of Indigenous support centres to provide safe spaces for students, along with resources such as food, printing facilities, and study areas. *Mental Wellness Survey* participants indicated that the connection to Indigenous cultures is an important determinant of mental health and wellbeing.

“The First Nations house is a safe space. My university can feel pretty lonely and alienating, so it’s nice to have an inviting space that truly cares about my needs as a student, as well as my greater needs as a person and community member.”

– Survey Respondent

“When I attended university, I would go to the Indigenous department to study in the lounge. They would smudge and play calming music, which was very relaxing and helped me focus. They also provided snacks and drinks, and Elders were present on-site.”

– Survey Respondent

Acceptance, Belonging, and Connection

Mental Wellness Survey respondents highlighted the significance of being accepted and having the opportunity to be themselves around support staff members. When reflecting on their positive experiences with accessing on-campus services, students consistently emphasized the importance of belonging, understanding, and connection. They specifically appreciated Indigenous services for fostering this sense of acceptance and care.

“When going through mental health issues, my university has supported me in multiple ways. From counselling, to providing me with medicines, having Elders I can meet with, and support in the classroom.”

– Survey Respondent

“I like when the Elders have knowledge sharing activities. I like learning about the local First Nations culture.”

– Survey Respondent

Recent studies on the experience of Indigenous students at post-secondary institutions in Australia have revealed that Indigenous centres play a crucial role in developing a sense of connection and belonging (Fredericks et al., 2024). For Indigenous Peoples, connection to Indigenous cultures is an important determinant of health. Strengthening connections to culture can be a viable program objective (and outcome measure) in developing programs and interventions for Indigenous students.

“As an Indigenous person, I have a different cultural behaviour and background that society doesn’t understand. It would make me comfortable to have Indigenous-specific mental health supports that can understand me on a cultural level.”

– Survey Respondent

“For Indigenous events, the school tries very hard to make it clear that they are open to everyone, but it can still feel a little nerve-wracking deciding to go to a cultural event, where I have no personal experience with them.”

– Survey Respondent

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

It is particularly important to create culturally relevant spaces for all Indigenous Peoples. A study conducted by Métis scholars showed that fostering a community in post-secondary institutions among Indigenous Peoples who share the same culture reduces feelings of isolation and empowers students (Delgado & Forsythe, 2025). The researchers shared an example of organizing a Métis-specific academic gathering, *the Métis Research Symposium*, which had significant implications for both the academic world and the community. Several participants used words like “familiar” and “homecoming” to describe the space, and some shared that they shed “good” or “happy” tears being there. The authors themselves, as Métis scholars, also felt this sense of homecoming when joining Métis-centered spaces (Delgado & Forsythe, 2025). This yearning for community and belonging was echoed by respondents in the *Mental Wellness Survey*.

“I wish we had an Elder that spoke Mi’kmaw at school.”

– Survey Respondent

“I would appreciate someone Métis to talk to about identity and belonging.”

– Survey Respondent

Indigenous mentoring also strengthens the sense of cultural connection and belonging. Mentoring reflects an Indigenous cultural, intergenerational approach to helping or teaching others (Pidgeon et al., 2014). Research conducted in British Columbia evaluated the effectiveness of a peer-mentoring program, Supporting Aboriginal Graduate Enhancement (SAGE), where experienced Indigenous scholars mentor Indigenous undergraduate and Master’s students. This program provides a space where cultural knowledge is used to understand the complexities and intricacies of systemic barriers and shared experiences at post-secondary institutions. The relationships in SAGE foster sense of belonging and networking opportunities for students, improving both their well-being and support (Pidgeon et al., 2014).

Trauma-informed Approach

Respondents to the *Mental Wellness Survey* also emphasized the importance of services that could address colonial and intergenerational trauma. Trauma arising from the direct and indirect impacts of colonization negatively affects Indigenous health (Mitchell et al., 2019). There are many terms used to characterize the enduring trauma of Indigenous Peoples, including: historical trauma, collective trauma, colonial trauma, and colonial injury (Mitchell et al., 2019).

“Like I’ve mentioned earlier in the survey, people are so affected by the generational trauma, not even our own people help each other.”

– Survey Respondent

Colonial trauma can be defined as a collective, complex trauma inflicted on a group of people who share a specific group identity or affiliation. It is a collective phenomenon shared by members of an identifiable group who have experienced deliberate conquest, colonization, or genocide (Gone, 2013). Colonial trauma affects individuals on the emotional, spiritual, intellectual, physical, and social levels, impacting not only the individual, but also the family unit, the community, and the Nation (Mitchell et al., 2019). Furthermore, colonial trauma is cumulative in its impact over time, such that multiple traumatic experiences result in proportionately greater distress and disability compared to the implications of more limited traumatic exposures (Gone, 2013).

Indigenous students living with colonial trauma often expend considerable energy to conceal their experiences, which leaves them with less energy to engage in the classroom (Steinman & Kovats Sánchez, 2023). As a result, colonial trauma profoundly impacts students’ sense of control, connection, and meaning in their educational experiences. In response, the principles of trauma-informed care should be incorporated into educational practices (Steinman & Kovats Sánchez, 2023). It is crucial to recruit more Indigenous faculty and staff at post-secondary institutions who are trained to support the mental and spiritual health of Indigenous members of their academic community (Steinman & Kovats Sánchez, 2023).

“Having an Elder to talk to more often and knowing you can go to them to talk with and learn from would really benefit the students who come from a trauma-filled environment.”

– Survey Respondent

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A trauma-informed approach is required to create culturally safe and relevant mental health services that meaningfully support Indigenous students. The development of a trauma-informed campus should take a student- and community-engaged approach, involving students, faculty, staff, administration, and representatives from communities around campus (Schroeder et al., 2023). Groups can provide an opportunity for students who have experienced trauma to find a community with whom they feel engaged, welcome, and valued, and in which their voices are centred. These groups can work together to recognize factors that may be traumatizing and those who may be healing (Schroeder et al., 2023).

Several students in the *Mental Wellness Survey* expressed concerns that non-Indigenous therapists might not fully grasp or appreciate the unique and deeply ingrained effects of colonialism, particularly intergenerational trauma and racism, and their ongoing repercussions. Some respondents to the *Mental Wellness Survey* argued that only Indigenous-specific mental health support services would be fully equipped to understand and address the complex layers of colonial and intergenerational trauma.

“I’ve done therapy with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous therapists, and I’ve found that Indigenous therapists tend to have a deeper understanding of the generational trauma that impacts my mental health. They also help me stay grounded in my culture, which I find deeply healing. Ideally, I would love to find a therapist who is both Indigenous and queer, like myself. I know this kind of intersectionality can be hard to find, but I believe it would make a significant difference—creating a space where I can feel truly safe discussing my relationships and the trauma I’ve experienced related to homophobia and lesbophobia.”

– Survey Respondent

Barriers to Accessing Support Services

This theme focuses on challenges students face in accessing services, including long waitlists, lack of transportation, and scheduling conflicts. Additionally, students expressed feelings of rejection from Indigenous service spaces due to being “white-passing”, and some noted an absence of these services altogether. Some also mentioned a lack of awareness of available services due to insufficient promotion of these services from post-secondary institutions to the students.

Barriers to the use of campus services can be of two types: a) student-related barriers and b) institution-related barriers (Dietsche, 2012). Student-related barriers to the utilization of counselling services include perceived self-sufficiency, denial, and unwillingness to discuss personal problems. Institution-related barriers include limited promotion of these services, long waitlists, and barriers related to physical access to in-person services (Dietsche, 2012).

Mental Wellness Survey respondents wrote about their negative experiences with services at post-secondary institutions. Some students reported not feeling accepted by the student community due to structural racism and practical barriers, such as limited transportation and long waitlists. They also cited personal or social factors for not using services at their post-secondary institutions, including lack of need, reliance on family and friends, and busy schedules (see Figure 3 for a depiction of the barriers within this theme).

Figure 3. Barriers to Accessing Post-Secondary Support Services



Not Feeling Accepted

Many respondents shared feelings of isolation and not belonging to the larger student body. Findings from the *Mental Wellness Survey* are not the first to reveal this sense of loneliness among Indigenous students. A study conducted at McMaster University in Ontario also showed that many Indigenous students feel isolated, with several students speaking at length about how they believe the university system limits and marginalizes them and their issues (Bailey, 2016). The level of interaction between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in the university setting is extremely low on average (Bailey, 2016). This is a serious issue that requires further research to identify the specific circumstances fostering this sense of isolation and explore ways to improve Indigenous students' sense of belonging in university settings (Bailey, 2016).

In the *Mental Wellness Survey*, students reported feeling isolated due to the colonial framework underlying mental health services. While mainstream mental health services for non-Indigenous populations often focus on clinical treatment and symptom management, Indigenous Peoples understand mental health and wellness as inherently holistic—interconnected with land, spirit, community, and relationships, and guided by frameworks such as the Medicine Wheel that emphasize balance and harmony.

“I have accessed non-Indigenous specific mental health resources and found that either clarification was needed from me to put things into context or the therapy rational didn't prescribe to my worldview. It didn't end up helping. But, rather made me feel more isolated.”

– Survey Respondent

“Even the concept of 'mental health' is from colonizers. I think we need to stop isolating 'issues' or deficits and live and work/study in a way where Indigenous values of balance and relationships and indirect healing, connecting to land and spirit are nurtured.”

– Survey Respondent

“In my experience, universities are not prepared to support Indigenous students regarding mental health.”

– Survey Respondent

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Non-Indigenous students are often unaware of the systemic discrimination and enduring effects of colonial violence (Schaepli et al., 2018). Moreover, they frequently lack understanding of Indigenous rights (Schaepli et al., 2018). These findings were reflected in responses to the *Mental Wellness Survey*. Respondents expressed reluctance to educate non-Indigenous therapists and counsellors about Indigenous identity, noting that many practitioners do not understand the implications of colonial histories and the ongoing impacts of colonialism on Indigenous Peoples. As a result, some students avoided non-Indigenous therapy providers altogether, recognizing that being asked to educate them could perpetuate harm.

“My Indigeneity is not a topic I feel safe and comfortable discussing with non-Indigenous therapists.”

– Survey Respondent

“Some non-Indigenous mental health clinicians are excellent. I am lucky to have a counsellor who understands me and doesn’t need explanations/teaching about Indigeneity. But if students have to play the role of educator to their therapist, that is not a helpful dynamic. I worry about culturally unsafe clinicians perpetuating harms to Indigenous clients.”

– Survey Respondent

“Settler mental health supports are based in settler supremacy and if a care provider doesn’t have an understanding of colonialism, they are not helpful.”

– Survey Respondent

In a focus group study with Indigenous university students, researchers identified the following seven categories of racial microaggressions: overt discrimination, assumption of intellectual inferiority, assumption of criminality, invalidation or denial, second-class citizenship, racial segregation, and the myth of meritocracy (Canel-Çinarbaş & Yohani, 2019). Experiences of microaggression and discrimination were also reported in the *Mental Wellness Survey*. Respondents described facing discrimination and harassment from non-Indigenous staff members because of their race. Some respondents avoided using support or accommodations provided by their post-secondary institution because they did not want to appear incompetent to their professors. Others also cited experiences with abusive instructors.

“ Racism and discrimination are very much prevalent in our society and non-Indigenous people don’t understand our trauma from colonization. ”

– Survey Respondent

“ The Indigenous services at the law school included a professor with a history of inflicting violence against Indigenous students of colour. One of my classmates had to take time-off of school because she was experiencing bullying and harassment on the basis of her race from a white professor and did not get any support from the school. I was also later victimized by this same professor who made up rumours about my character that were untrue. The Dean helped me address this issue, but I was not offered Indigenous-specific supports as the school did not have an Indigenous support worker at the time. ”

– Survey Respondent

“ I stopped using student accessibility services because I felt as though I would be judged by professors and TAs. It made me worry about appearing reliable to these professors if I was to study under them for graduate school. ”

– Survey Respondent

In a study conducted with 13 racialized and Indigenous academics at Canadian universities, participants routinely described feeling that they did not belong in academia, most often due to microlevel interactions that positioned them as outsiders (Mohamed & Beagan, 2019). Such instances of everyday racism frequently began in graduate school, where several participants had been discouraged from continuing their studies, despite excellent performance. Participants interpreted these experiences as reflecting an unacknowledged belief that racialized and Indigenous People do not belong in academia (Mohamed & Beagan, 2019). The Indspire *Mental Wellness Survey* revealed similar feelings among participants.

“There is an Indigenous counsellor at my school, and they have told me that their space is no longer culturally safe for them, so they have moved to only online services. As a result, there are no more in-person meetings with them, and they frequently need time off to deal with their own mental health due to the structural racism that exists there.”

– Survey Respondent

The *Mental Wellness Survey* also revealed that some students didn’t feel welcomed at Indigenous centres because they were mixed-race or white-passing. Disconnection from their cultures was a significant reason they felt they could not belong. As the study of Australian Indigenous centres at post-secondary institutions revealed, while many students praised Indigenous spaces, others noted that these spaces can generate feelings of nepotism, cliquish dynamics, and exclusion (Fredericks et al., 2024). Thus, Indigenous spaces can either include and engage or marginalize and oppress (Fredericks et al., 2024). Recent studies note that Métis participants seemed particularly likely to experience racial microinvalidations, in which their identities as Indigenous People were denied. The researchers connected these microinvalidations with internalized racism and poor understanding of Métis people (Efimoff & Starzyk, 2025).

“As a white-passing Métis student who did not grow up with a strong personal connection to my culture, I do not think I was subjected to many of the hardships that my Indigenous peers experienced growing up.”

– Survey Respondent

“The Indigenous co-op service thought I was a white person trying to get in on more opportunities and insulted me (I’m light-skinned and Métis).”

– Survey Respondent

Hiring more Indigenous staff members at Indigenous centres is not enough for the Indigenization of academia (Pidgeon, 2016). Indigenizing post-secondary institutions requires including more Indigenous Peoples at all levels—from university administration to faculty and students. The colonial mindset has become so ingrained in everyday life that even Indigenous students may sometimes perpetuate it. Having Indigenous spaces is essential for re-rooting Indigenous students as they navigate their journeys through post-secondary education.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Difficulties of Access

It is crucial for these services to ensure accessibility to all. The *Mental Wellness Survey* showed that some students faced challenges in accessing these services, such as limited transportation options and/or living off campus.

Some *Mental Wellness Survey* participants mentioned that their busy schedules left them with limited time, making it difficult to access services that were not immediately or easily available on campus.

“ I haven’t accessed these services as much since moving off campus. I think there could be more services in place that can be accessed remotely for students living off campus. ”

– Survey Respondent

Limited transportation is not just an issue for *Mental Wellness Survey* participants. It is a widespread challenge affecting many students across Canada. The study conducted in Western Canada showed that low-income students living in rural and remote areas, including Indigenous students, often encounter a lack of proximity to post-secondary institutions, which are usually located in major cities and urban areas (Shankar et al., 2013). In the University of Calgary’s study, lack of time was identified as a barrier for 43.5% of the sample, with this being the most common reason for those in psychological distress (54.3%) (Robinson et al., 2016). Other studies suggest that students feel they lack time because they are overwhelmed by the sheer volume of schoolwork (MacDonald et al., 2022).

Other institutional barriers identified in the *Mental Wellness Survey* included long waitlists for appointments, a shortage of available counsellors, the high cost of services, inconsistent scheduling of counseling sessions, long booking times, and absence of availability of Indigenous support staff and/or Elders.

“ I stopped using most of the tutors and extra class help because they are usually booked for months, and there’s rarely a time when I can book a session for myself. ”

– Survey Respondent

Online services help to remove barriers related to physical access to on-campus services (Dietsche, 2012). The use of web-based communication strategies that enhance a two-way exchange of information in real time could potentially provide more efficient service. Academic advising, for example, could provide a wide range of online services to students, including e-mail advising and adviser chat rooms that allow

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

either live or asynchronous discussions of student questions (Dietsche, 2012). Yet, online students who participated in the *Mental Wellness Survey* indicated that numerous services at post-secondary institutions were only available for on-campus students, and online students couldn't use many of the student services.

“There isn't a lot available to me because I'm an online student. Only services and programs are for on-campus Indigenous students.”

– Survey Respondent

Staff capacity and physical space have also been cited as issues for planning and implementing programs and workshops (MacDonald et al., 2022). Many staff positions are comprised of contract work, in which there is high staff turnover. This makes it difficult for staff and faculty to plan programs to address student needs such as tutors, mental health support, and special programming for Indigenous students in the long term (MacDonald et al., 2022).

Lack of Need for These Services

A study conducted at the University of Calgary in Alberta in 2016 demonstrated similar findings. The majority of students (54.5%) said that the main reason for not accessing services is because they were not in distress. Less surprisingly, 71.8% of the participants below the psychological distress threshold indicated this as a reason for not accessing services (Robinson et al., 2016).

The same study revealed that many service providers observed that students often express a preference for spending time on their work, as they believe this will decrease their anxiety, rather than using that time to seek help (Robinson et al., 2016). Several participants noted that students prioritize completing their work to earn their degree, rather than focusing on enhancing their stress management or resiliency skills (Robinson et al., 2016).

Respondents to the *Mental Wellness Survey* referred to family and friends as valuable sources of emotional and mental health support, highlighting the importance of community and social connections outside of academic environments.

“I have never used mental health supports; I have always relied on family and friends. I would imagine that Indigenous-specific mental health would be my go-to, but I would be open to other options.”

– Survey Respondent

Self-sufficiency, denial as a coping style, and an unwillingness to discuss personal problems were commonly noted in student responses to the *Mental Wellness Survey*.

Having family or friends who can help and a belief in their ability to solve their own problems have also been reasons that respondents did not access services. Reliance on oneself and one’s community may reflect a post-colonial response rooted in distrust of institutions. Of note, psychological factors also contribute to student avoidance of help-seeking, including: social stigma, treatment fears, fear of emotion, anticipated utility and risks, self-disclosure, social norms, and self-esteem (Dietsche, 2012).

“I do not access many organizational supports. I talk with and spend time with family/friends who support and encourage me.”

– Survey Respondent

Lack of Advertising

Mental Wellness Survey respondents reported a lack of promotion or advertising regarding support services provided at post-secondary institutions. Participants reported that they had to research what services were available. Larger campuses had greater visibility of support services. Some students, particularly first-year students, may not be aware of the services available at their post-secondary institutions, so it would make sense to more effectively advertise these services.

“There should be workshops for first-year students, describing what services are available, where to get them, and who to approach.”

– Survey Respondent

“I largely attended a different campus than where the Indigenous resource centre was located—so I felt I missed out on an opportunity to use it as much as if I had been on the main campus. Mental health services should be more visible within the school during the whole school year.”

– Survey Respondent

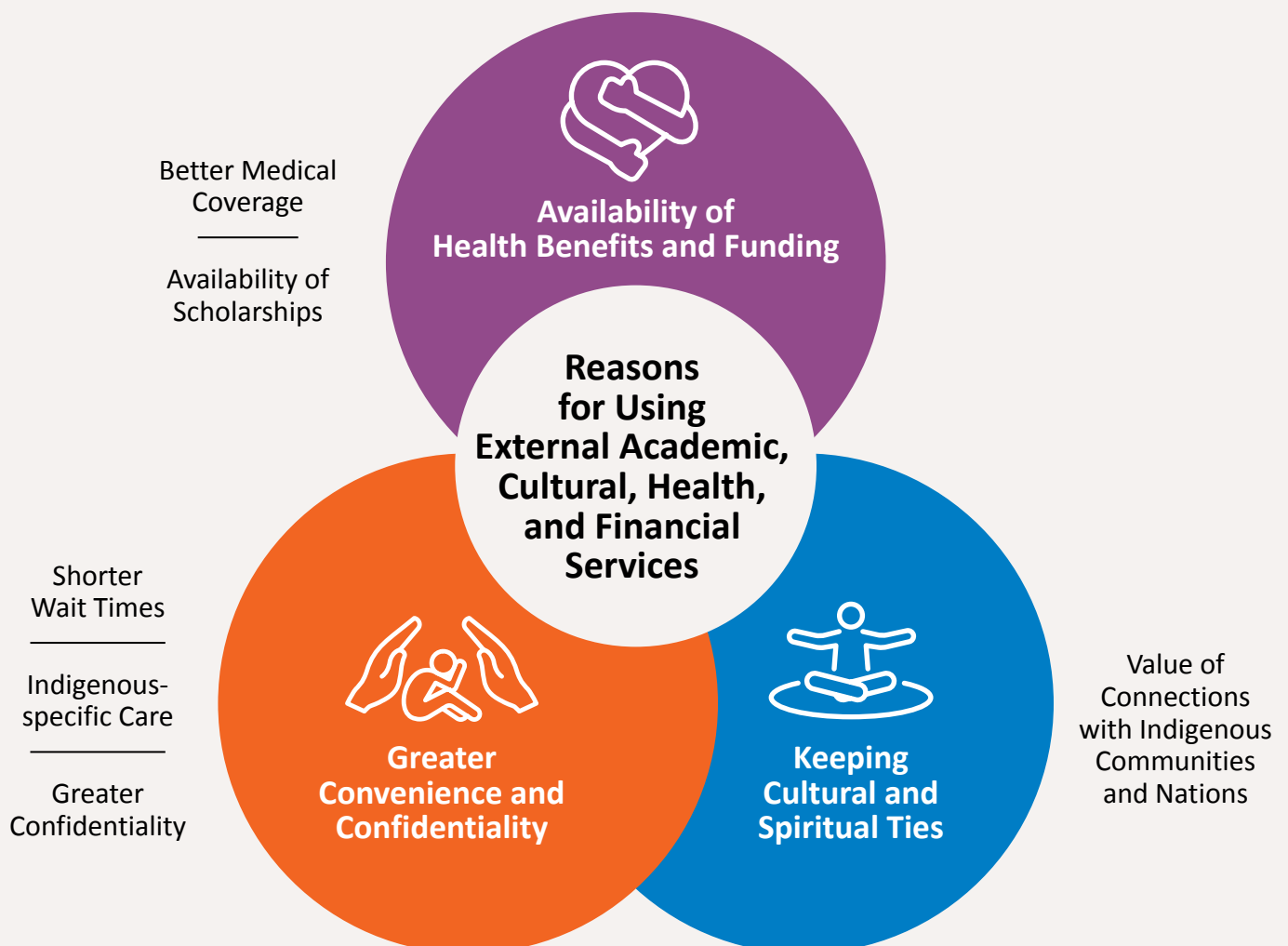
Lack of knowledge about services is a common institution-related barrier (Dietsche, 2012). According to a survey on mental health services conducted across 168 institutions in 2016, enhancing promotion and outreach programs targeting specific disorders (e.g., eating disorders) was identified as a need across Canadian post-secondary institutions, especially smaller institutes (Jaworska et al., 2016). Eighty-four percent of respondents agreed that their institutions could benefit from expanding mental health promotion and outreach programs (Jaworska et al., 2016). In universities, limited awareness of support services among students may stem from the extensive range of specialized services offered, making it difficult for them to be aware of all available resources or know where and how to access these services (MacDonald et al., 2022).

Study findings suggest that a new service delivery model is necessary to remove key institutional barriers (Dietsche, 2012). Incorporating structured meetings with advisers, mandatory activities such as academic planning, and close tracking of student success has shown to be effective with Ontario college students (Dietsche, 2012). Additional options include implementing a wholistic wraparound service. Studies have shown that allowing connections with trusted adults who can direct and lead students to different supports can be very beneficial for students (Olson et al., 2021).

Preference for External Services

The *Mental Wellness Survey* revealed that services on campus cannot always meet students' needs, and external services can provide significant academic, cultural, health, and financial support. As the study conducted at Australian post-secondary institutions revealed, the support provided should consider the whole student-life experience—in particular, support provided from outside of the university (Benton et al., 2021). Participants indicated that external services were appealing due to the availability of health benefits and academic scholarships. These services were also viewed as offering better quality, with shorter wait times, Indigenous-specific care, and greater confidentiality. Moreover, many students felt external services provided connections with Indigenous communities, nations, and organizations to maintain cultural and spiritual ties seen as vital. Reasons for accessing external support services are summarized in Figure 3 and further described in subsequent subsections.

Figure 3. Reasons for Using External Academic, Cultural, Health, and Financial Services



RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Greater Convenience and Confidentiality

In response to the *Mental Wellness Survey*, students explained that they used external academic services because they needed scholarship advice, took courses at other institutions, used external writing services, or accessed academic coaching outside of their post-secondary institution. Some students mentioned using external academic services due to a lack of trust in internal academic services. Online students found it easier to access external online options due to distance.

Respondents to the *Mental Wellness Survey* felt that external counselling and healthcare services provided greater confidentiality and were more personal compared to those at their post-secondary institutions. Some students had access to health services through their work benefits or through organizations like the First Nations Health Authority, which offered more comprehensive mental health coverage and pharmaceutical assistance.

Other *Mental Wellness Survey* respondents appreciated that external services specialized in issues such as sexual trauma and other forms of trauma. Students expressed a strong preference for Indigenous-owned and -led services, feeling more comfortable with the support rooted in their own cultures.

“I access counselling for trauma and depression with a counsellor in the community.”

– Survey Respondent

“I regularly receive support from a traditional knowledge holder, and I pay her out of pocket since she is not registered with the First Nations Health Authority. I prefer to work with her.”

– Survey Respondent

External mental health services often had shorter wait times for counselling and provided more timely access to the help students needed. Some students had been seeing the same therapist for years, fostering a deeper and more consistent therapeutic relationship outside their post-secondary institutions. This makes it difficult for staff and faculty to plan programs to address mental illness in the long term (MacDonald et al., 2022).

Availability of Health Benefits and Funding

Students reported using external counselling and healthcare services due to the First Nations Health Authority and/or their work having provided health benefits. External financial assistance, such as funding from the government and Indigenous organizations, was important to many respondents. They appreciated receiving external financial support, even if it was a small contribution.

“ I do like the services that the city provides for food security. With prices going up in Canada, these services do give me a sound mind without worrying about the next meal, especially when I am busy with school most of the day. ”

– Survey Respondent

Students shared that they had access to various forms of support, which helped alleviate some of the financial burdens of their academic journey.

“ I go to the Gabriel Dumont Institute [for additional funding opportunities] and use Government of Canada Student Loans. ”

– Survey Respondent

Some of the sources of assistance, which the *Mental Wellness Survey* participants mentioned, included Indigenous organizations that provided financial support, scholarships, or bursaries tailored to the needs of Indigenous students. Other funding sources included government programs designed to financially assist students with covering tuition, living expenses, or other academic-related costs.

Keeping Cultural and Spiritual Ties

Many *Mental Wellness Survey* respondents said they felt their connections with Indigenous communities and nations, as well as with Indigenous organizations, was a way to maintain cultural and spiritual ties. Participants specifically mentioned Indigenous coordinators and Elders as important sources of support. Some participants noted they felt welcomed and not judged. In the Australian study of post-secondary institutions, family and community support, and associated commitments have previously been identified as both an enabler of, and constraint on, Indigenous students enrolled in higher education (Benton et al., 2021).

“Our coordinator is very close to all of us, and that means a lot to the Indigenous students.”

– Survey Respondent

“I went to an outside Indigenous service that had doctors, nurses (blood work), counselling, massage therapy, and Elders all in one location that was far more welcoming and nonjudgmental.”

– Survey Respondent

“Having an Elder to talk to more often and knowing you can go to them to talk with and learn from would really benefit the students who come from a trauma-filled environment.”

– Survey Respondent

In research conducted in British Columbia in 2014, many Indigenous graduate students reported that they chose their graduate programs close to home to remain near family and reduce financial costs (Pidgeon et al., 2014). In the study conducted with Western Canadian universities in 2013, students reported not accessing university counselling services because it was not a part of their culture to see counselors or doctors for personal problems (Shankar et al., 2013). Many expressed that they relied on community Elders, band members, and both close and extended family for advice and emotional support (Shankar et al., 2013).

LIMITATIONS

LIMITATIONS

It is important to note that this research was not without limitations. This research interprets the data from a pan-Indigenous lens. Therefore, feedback on support services is not disaggregated by Indigenous identity (First Nations, Métis, or Inuit), Nation, or community. Future research should take a disaggregated approach to further understand the differing experiences of Indigenous students across Turtle Island (see Budhathoki et al., 2026 for disaggregated quantitative findings from the *Mental Wellness Survey*).

Additionally, the *Mental Wellness Survey* did not include specific protective measures to support students who may have been emotionally triggered by the questions or reflections prompted during the survey. Moving forward, it is essential to implement safeguards to ensure that students have access to support resources if needed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From the findings of Indigenous student feedback on mental health and Indigenous services offered by post-secondary institutions, the research team make the following recommendations:

- Create safe, inclusive, and accommodating environments within post-secondary institutions to reflect priorities of Indigenous students.
- Increase the representation of Indigenous cultures within Indigenous-specific services at post-secondary institutions to better reflect the diversity of Indigenous students and their cultures.
- Include virtual services for online-based students, who may be remote or lack access to transportation, thus significantly increasing access to services.
- Adopting a trauma-informed approach is essential for specialists, particularly therapists, who are serving Indigenous students.
- Reduce overload by hiring more staff, especially in Indigenous-specific and counselling services. Offering more workshops, hiring more Elders, and expanding services at Indigenous-specific locations would also help students access support more regularly. Searching within Indigenous communities to hire Indigenous staff would help to reduce overload and ensure there are culturally significant options.
- With reported use of external, off-campus services by students, it would be valuable for on-campus services to collaborate with, learn from, and promote these external organizations.

CONCLUSION

This report examined Indigenous post-secondary student experiences with post-secondary support services to improve understanding of how they can be better supported throughout their education. Findings from the *Mental Wellness Survey* highlight that a sense of belonging, cultural connection, and trauma-informed approaches are central to students' mental wellness. However, many respondents reported barriers to accessing support, including feeling excluded from Indigenous-specific services due to being "white-passing" and/or disconnected from their Indigenous culture. Institutional challenges—such as service overload, understaffing, and long wait times—further restrict access to support. As a result, students are seeking off-campus support—either through their personal networks or external, non-post-secondary institution-affiliated services—which typically offer shorter wait times, availability of Indigenous-specific care, and greater protection of confidentiality.

To create more inclusive and responsive learning environments, it is essential to centre students' perspectives and consider the local context to ensure that accommodations are responsive to the specific needs and concerns of each community. Further investigation should identify accommodations and contextual factors that most significantly influence Indigenous students' sense of belonging and safety. Responses from the *Mental Wellness Survey* will continue to inform Indspire's R&I in developing recommendations for post-secondary institutions to better meet the needs of Indigenous students.

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APPENDIX A: OVERVIEW OF THE CODING PROCESS

The data analysis process for this study follows the guidelines outlined by Braun & Clarke (2012). The six-phase approach is illustrated below:

In the **first phase**, researchers are asked to familiarize themselves with their data through a deep immersion involving multiple readings and note-taking. To facilitate the coding process, more than 3,000 responses and answers were condensed and summarized based on shared topics or ideas. During this phase, we were able to group the data according to three topics—such as effective support, barriers, and preference for external services. These topic summaries were then used as the primary material for the second phase of the process.

The **second phase** begins with a systematic and thorough analysis of the data through coding. The coding process was conducted using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo (Version 15). The coding orientation was both descriptive and interpretative. For example, the child code “No Access” for the code “Barriers” was created.

The **third phase**, the analysis starts to take shape. During this phase, we reviewed all coded data and identified trends between codes. Acting as building blocks, our codes were then clustered based on shared meaning to form themes. This process allowed the generation of three themes and 10 subthemes, which were reviewed and refined in the subsequent phase.

The **fourth phase** includes a thorough review of the potential themes developed during the previous phase. This phase is particularly important to: a) ensure that the themes reflect and capture the relevant data and b) validate that themes encapsulate the entire data set.

While the **fifth phase** involves defining and naming the themes, the **sixth phase** assures that each theme has a clear and unique focus, scope, and purpose in the analysis, but also that each theme contributes to the overarching story told by the participants. During the final stage of the analysis, key extracts were selected, and themes were organized and ordered in a logical and coherent manner to best represent the experiences of the participants.

APPENDIX B: MAJOR THEMES, SUBTHEMES, AND DESCRIPTIONS

Major Themes

Key Factors Contributing to Effective Support at Post-secondary Institutions

Many students shared positive experiences with services at their post-secondary institutions. They felt their needs were met and appreciated having someone to talk to who would listen. These services were particularly valuable in helping students manage crises and emergencies.

Barriers to Accessing Support Services

Students also identified barriers to using services at their post-secondary institutions. They expressed concerns about accessibility, provided critiques of the services, and indicated that they did not need these services at all. Common critiques included feelings of not belonging, service providers' lack of understanding of colonial trauma and Indigenous identities, and a general lack of awareness about the services available at post-secondary institutions.

Preference for External Services:

Students also provided feedback on their use of both in-person and online services outside of their post-secondary institutions.

Subthemes

Safe Spaces

Students expressed a strong need for safe spaces, citing challenges such as abusive instructors, exams, balancing studies with childcare, and a lack of motivation.

Not Feeling Accepted

Many students reported not feeling a sense of belonging in either Indigenous or non-Indigenous services. This feeling stemmed from various factors, such as being mixed or white-passing, not being raised in Indigenous households, or lacking a personal connection to their cultures. Students emphasized the importance of services tailored to their specific cultural backgrounds, rather than a generalized pan-Indigenous approach. Some students also reported experiencing lateral violence and racism.

Availability of Health Benefits and Funding

Students reported receiving financial support, with some mentioning assistance from Indigenous organizations and government programs, and healthcare coverage through work benefits and First Nations Health Authority for some students.

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APPENDIX B: MAJOR THEMES AND DESCRIPTIONS

Subthemes *(continued)*

Trauma-Informed Approach

Students emphasized that any mental health support is valuable, provided it includes support, understanding, active listening, trauma-informed care, and a non-judgemental approach.

Therapists must recognize the impact of colonial trauma on Indigenous students and its effects on their overall well-being.

Difficulties of Access

Students shared challenges in finding or accessing appropriate mental health support and other needed services. Reasons for lack of access to services included scheduling conflicts and a lack of need. Online students found it difficult to access in-person services and preferred external online options due to distance.

Greater Convenience and Confidentiality

Many students reported using external counseling and healthcare services due to enhanced confidentiality and a more personal approach. Students shared their experiences of seeking help from external academic advisors, especially for scholarships. Some students prefer services that specialize in sexual or other types of trauma, or those that are Indigenous-owned and -led. External services also tend to have shorter wait times for counseling.

Acceptance, Belonging, and Connection

Most students expressed a strong sense of cultural connection to Indigenous teachings and values. They praised Indigenous services for being able to understand their unique needs and personal stories. Some students shared positive feedback about their experiences with Indigenous therapists and were pleased with the support provided.

Lack of Need for These Services

Students provided several reasons for not using in-person services at their post-secondary institutions. The reasons for not needing these services included having strong mental health, living off campus, being busy with work or studies, accessing support from Indigenous communities, or relying on family and friends.

Keeping Cultural and Spiritual Ties

Students shared that they maintain connections with their Indigenous communities and nations, as well as Indigenous organizations and friendship centres. Additionally, students attend ceremonies and speak with Elders for support. Also, students value support from family and friends as important external sources of help.

Lack of Advertising

Participants highlighted issues with the promotion and advertising of both in-person and online services, noting that they were unaware of the support available at their post-secondary institutions.



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