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

2026 | GRAY, K., AYSON, G., FERGUSON, S., & DEGHANSAI, N.



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AUTHOR KRYSTAL'S POSITIONALITY

Krystal Gray's identity, journey, and positionality are grounded in two lands. She situates herself as a mixed-race Métis female researcher, raised in a household that prioritized western values. She is currently located within Fort Edmonton Metis District (9) of the North Saskatchewan River Territory with history, family, and community connections to the Red River Métis of Manitoba.

Her research and knowledge are guided by this and many other dualities, grounded upon a balancing act between reconnection to and with Indigenous ways of knowing and working within Westernized research structures. Her academic training and orientation were founded in quantitative research as she values clarity, comparability, and structural insights. However, numbers alone cannot fully capture living experience and the relational, complex, and connected nature of mental wellness for Indigenous peoples. For this reason, she expanded her research to focus on qualitative methodologies, for stories and contextual avenues require more than statistics. This combination, like her identity, influences how she engages, listens, interprets, and makes meaning of the knowledge shared, honing her constructivist epistemology and bias.

COVER DESIGN—*BLOSSOM GREEN* BY ALANAH JEWELL

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.

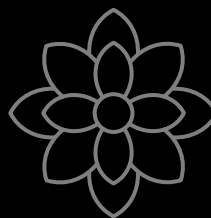
At the same time, student realities have become increasingly complex. Indigenous students carry strength, knowledge, and deep connections to community that enrich the post-secondary environment, yet these experiences often unfold within systems that are based on colonial foundations. Many continue to 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,
President and Chief Executive Officer,
Mental Health Commission of 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

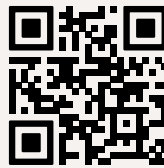
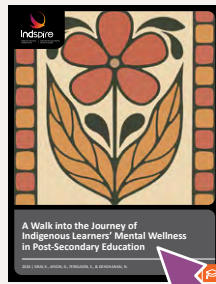
Authors: Budhathoki et al., 2026



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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TABLE OF CONTENTS

10	ABSTRACT		
11	KEY TAKEAWAYS		
12	INTRODUCTION	Background	12
		Purpose	12
13	METHOD	Research Questions	13
		Methodology	13
16	RESULTS AND DISCUSSION	Foundational Principles: Balance and Place/Space	16
		Thematic Analysis	17
24	IMPLICATIONS		
25	RECOMMENDATIONS	The Tree Analogy	25
28	CONCLUSION		
29	REFERENCES		

ABSTRACT**ABSTRACT**

Post-secondary institutions are well-positioned to address and support the mental wellness of Indigenous students. Three focus group learning circles ($n = 22$) with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit post-secondary students were conducted to discuss students' mental wellness and their recommendations for effective support. Discussions identified two foundational principles—balance and place/space—and six action-oriented themes: 1) fostering relationships and community, 2) nurturing cultural connection, 3) cultivating professional development, 4) expanding avenues to healing, 5) encouraging life skills development, and 6) increasing access to emergency resources. Participants emphasized the importance of culturally safe physical spaces, Elders and Knowledge Keepers, land-based and language activities, Indigenous-centred counselling, and practical supports (e.g., childcare, food security, transportation, and technology). A tree analogy is offered to align stages of institutional growth to practice. Limitations include the small, self-selected sample, reliance on virtual data collection, and limited intersectional subgroup analyses. Implications include concrete steps post-secondary institutions can take to Indigenize services, reduce fragmentation between campus and community supports, and evaluate change.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Supporting the mental wellness of Indigenous post-secondary students requires a holistic approach that acknowledges the interconnected nature of emotional, cultural, academic, spiritual, and practical well-being.
- Two foundations of mental wellness:
 - **Balance:** holistic sense of well-being
 - **Place/Space:** physical spaces that are safe and culturally representative.
- Six pathways to supporting Indigenous students:
 - Fostering relationships and community building
 - Nurturing cultural connection
 - Cultivating professional development opportunities
 - Expanding avenues to healing
 - Encouraging life skills development
 - Increasing access to emergency resources.
- Post-secondary institutions can begin with focusing on students' fundamental needs, then branch into diverse pathways of support.

INTRODUCTION

Background

Indigenous post-secondary students face unique challenges that can impact their mental wellness. These challenges include, but are not limited to, mental health diagnoses, familial stress, systemic challenges, cultural disconnection, financial barriers, and community commitments (Bunting, 2022; Garriguet, 2021; Herkimer, 2022). To address these challenges, post-secondary institutions can play a pivotal role in creating opportunities to build competencies that promote the health and well-being of Indigenous students. Post-secondary institutions could significantly reduce systemic barriers to wellness by providing comprehensive and culturally responsive services, programs, and policies that address both the current and evolving needs of the Indigenous student population (Canadian Standards Association, 2020). Adequate programming, resources, and support can help Indigenous students navigate the stresses of academic and everyday life, empowering them to recognize their strengths, cultural identity, and social networks, while meaningfully contributing to, and within, their families and communities (Bunting, 2022).

Currently, there is a lack of coordination between provincial governments, institutions, and student groups in the development and implementation of initiatives that support Indigenous post-secondary students' mental wellness (Hop Wo et al., 2020; Pidgeon, 2016). This in turn, creates a disconnect that often limits the accessibility and effectiveness of support, impacting the academic success of Indigenous students (Cameron et al., 2024; Herkimer, 2022; Pidgeon, 2016). The present study examined the mental wellness experiences of Indigenous students in post-secondary education to identify effective services, programs, supports, and resources that post-secondary institutions can offer to foster personal and academic success. This research aims to highlight key areas for improvement and provides recommendations for institution-led student-centred initiatives, while prioritizing systemic change, Indigenous perspectives, cultural safety, and holistic well-being. By incorporating Indigenous ways of knowing and being that emphasize Indigenous student voices and needs, post-secondary institutions can build support systems that foster resilience, belonging, and mental wellness, thereby making a meaningful and culturally respectful contribution to the academic and personal success of Indigenous learners.

Purpose

The research in this report is part of a broader initiative to better understand the mental wellness of Indigenous post-secondary students. This report examines how post-secondary institutions can better support Indigenous students by centering the voices of current and former students and outlining a clear path forward to strengthen institutional supports. Findings from this research will be used to develop recommendations to improve institutional support of Indigenous student mental wellness.

METHOD

Research Question

This report employed focus group learning circles to explore the experiences and perspectives of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit post-secondary students regarding mental wellness during their post-secondary journeys.

Methodology

A focus group learning circle was selected as the primary data collection method, as it aligns with both Western and Indigenous ideologies, promotes lively discussions, and enables participants to expand on each other's ideas through detailed, situated responses (Krueger & Casey, 2000). This method also provides foundational Indigenous pedagogy, fostering co-created dialogue and respect, with opportunity for all participants to actively speak and listen (Hanson & Danyluk, 2022).

Three 90-minute focus groups were conducted in March 2025 via Microsoft Teams video conferencing. Each focus group was recorded and transcribed through the platform's built-in functionality. Discussions were guided by a semi-structured approach using open-ended questions (Creswell, 2007). The interview guide followed a systematic approach to facilitate meaningful and insightful discussions about individuals' personal experiences of mental wellness as post-secondary students, as well as perceived strengths and gaps in supports across post-secondary institutions. The discussion encouraged storytelling, reflection, and dialogue, while the semi-structured format ensured key topics were covered. Questions progressed from inquiries into participants' perceptions of mental wellness, exploring personal experiences, challenges, and supports, and concluding with recommendations for improvement in the post-secondary space.

Participants

A social media advertisement was used to recruit participation from Indspire's network, which includes Indigenous post-secondary students and graduates from Indspire's bursaries, scholarships, and awards programs. Participation was sought from current Indigenous post-secondary students, Indigenous individuals who graduated from a recognized post-secondary program in 2024 or 2025, and Indigenous students who left their studies, but have completed at least one semester of post-secondary education within the previous 12 months. Interested parties were asked to complete an online intake form. One hundred and nine individuals expressed interest in participating, of which 36 were shortlisted. Participants were selected to represent a range of perspectives and experiences, including Indigenous

METHOD

identity, age, gender, living on- or off-reserve, and disability, with a prioritization of intersectional identities. Of the shortlisted participants, 22 provided written informed consent and participated in one of three focus group sessions held in March 2025 via Microsoft Teams ($n_1=7$; $n_2=8$; $n_3=7$). Table 1 provides a breakdown of participant demographics. A total of 22 participants took part in one of three focus group sessions, including seven in the first, eight in the second, and seven in the third session.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Demographic Variable	<i>n</i>	Percentage of Total Sample
Indigenous Identity		
First Nation	14	64
Métis	6	27
Inuit	2	9
Gender		
Male	5	23
Female	15	68
Diverse	2	9
Age Range		
18 – 23	2	9
24 – 29	2	9
30 – 35	3	14
36 – 40	7	32
41 – 45	1	5
46 – 50	4	18
51 – 55	1	5
56 – 60	1	5
60+	1	5
Enrollment Status		
Currently an undergraduate student at a university	5	23
Currently a college student	2	9
Currently a graduate student at a university	5	23
Graduated from a post-secondary program in 2023/24	8	36
Left post-secondary studies in 2024/25, but completed at least a full semester	1	5
Other	1	5
Previously or currently lived in community	10	45
Self-declared individuals with disability	13	59

Note: *Self-identified demographic data submitted during the letter of expression intake process.*

METHOD

Data Analysis

A constructivist worldview was applied, recognizing that participants' lived experiences and interactions shape their understanding of mental wellness (Wright et al., 2016). Data analysis followed a thematic coding approach, where transcripts were systematically reviewed to identify recurring themes, patterns, and key insights. Initial coding involved open coding to capture emergent ideas, followed by axial coding to establish relationships between themes (Creswell, 2007). The final stage involved synthesizing findings into actionable recommendations, to keep the data both interpretive and applicable to real-world contexts. This approach ensured that the voices, insights, and priorities of participants were centred and highlighted in a meaningful way.

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 participants remained confidential with the project's core 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. Participant data is held on a secure cloud drive shared only with the research team. To maintain confidentiality, only aggregate data is presented. More information on how participant data is used at Indspire can be found in our [Privacy Policy](#). Participants were informed that the material could be triggering and were encouraged to prioritize their psychological well-being, including the option to skip questions, take breaks from the learning circle, and/or withdraw from the study. Support resources were provided to all participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings from the thematic analysis identified two foundational principles—balance and place/space—and six action-oriented themes outlining pathways to support, including: fostering relationships and community, nurturing cultural connection, cultivating professional development, expanding avenues to healing, encouraging life skills development, and increasing access to emergency resources. These are discussed in the following subsections, with literature and participant quotations used to further contextualize the findings.

Foundational Principles: Balance and Place/Space

“It’s so important if there’s places where you could go, like even sometimes you have to take the initiative and say, well, here I wanna do a walk. Like we’re gonna meet. We’re gonna have some tea. We’re gonna sit around. You know, people talked about that safe space where you see yourself. Yeah, you’re walking on campus and, like you wanna walk somewhere, but you’re walking together. And I think the connection part, is really important just for your own state of mind.”

– Learning Circle Participant

Participants highlighted the need for mental wellness within their post-secondary institutions to be viewed as a holistic system of care that combines traditional Indigenous practices with Western and psychological approaches. This idea is based on students seeking a balance in their personal mental wellness journey, which is closely connected to their relationship with self, community, and the natural world. In many Indigenous cultures, balance represents a holistic sense of well-being, covering physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects, and emphasizes interconnectedness with the environment, community, and ancestors—often illustrated by the Medicine Wheel (Hart, 2002). In Western psychology, the socio-ecological model considers the various systems influencing mental health and well-being, including individual, interpersonal, institutional, community, and societal systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Therefore, programs, supports, and resources should be grounded in a dual perspective that promotes and safeguards holistic student well-being. This includes recognizing the mental health dual continuum, which acknowledges that mental health and mental illness are not simply opposite ends of one spectrum. Instead, individuals can enjoy positive mental health while living with a mental illness, or experience poor mental health without a mental health diagnosis (Canadian Standards Association, 2020). This model ranges from languishing (poor mental health and well-being) to flourishing (optimal mental health and well-being), a framework that is reflected throughout this study (Canadian Standards Association, 2020).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Participants also spoke of place/space, indicating the need for post-secondary institutions to have dedicated physical spaces that are safe and culturally representative. This also includes being staffed by Indigenous individuals and decorated with Indigenous art and artifacts. Such spaces are more than just a geographical area; they are a vital part of Indigenous students' identity, culture, and spiritual connection. These spaces may include dedicated Indigenous student centres, along with outdoor areas such as gardens or parks. *Wisdom Sits in Places*, a book by anthropologist Keith Basso (1996), highlights the importance of place within Indigenous cultures, emphasizing that physical space serves as a living archive of experiences, knowledge, and cultural memory.

Thematic Analysis

Beyond the principles of balance and physical space, further exploration and thematic analysis yielded six themes as pathways to support. These themes provide structure and understanding on how to approach programming, support, and resource needs that assist with fostering and advancing Indigenous post-secondary students' mental wellness. The six themes are as follows:

- Fostering relationships and community building
- Nurturing cultural connection
- Cultivating professional development opportunities
- Expanding avenues to healing
- Encouraging life skills development
- Increasing access to emergency resources.

Fostering Relationships and Community Building

“Over time I’ve focused on connections, building relationships, people that I can trust and confide in, and people who are supportive as well, and that’s helped me cope with the stresses of school.”

– Learning Circle Participant

Participants ($n = 13$) spoke of the importance of connecting with other Indigenous students within their post-secondary institutions to help foster a sense of belonging and build a community of individuals who understand their background, culture, current journey, and the obstacles they may face. Relationships and community are fundamental to Indigenous individuals, with community being

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

a pillar of identity, and relationships, including those with the land and other beings, seen as vital for well-being and cultural preservation (Jensen, 2022). Through the psychological lens, relationships provide social connection and community building that are paramount to mental wellness (Wickramaratne et al., 2022).

Often, Indigenous students leave their families, friends, and homes to pursue post-secondary education, fostering their isolation in mainstream academic institutions (D’Antimo et al., 2025; Pidgeon, 2016). This creates an extensive need for new relationships and a community to assist with maintaining mental wellness. One participant highlighted the need to talk with other Indigenous post-secondary students:

“Talking about like our shared experiences with school and maybe, you know, maybe there’s opportunity too, to help each other. And then also even networking and just building that community because I find it’s hard.”

Peer support, along with buddy and mentorship programs, were identified as initiatives that would foster relationships and build community, especially between first-year and upper-year students. Building strong relationships and a sense of community, both with the broader campus as well as other Indigenous post-secondary students, lays the groundwork for mental wellness among Indigenous post-secondary students. Extending on this premise, cultural connection also emerged as a powerful and deeply rooted pathway to further strengthen well-being.

Nurturing Cultural Connection

“Being connected enough to my culture, I realize sometimes I go through phases where I realize I’m doing really not good. And then I’m like, wait, what’s missing? Oh, I haven’t gone to a sweat in a while. I haven’t like smudged. I need a smudge. I haven’t smudged in a while.”

– Learning Circle Participant

Cultural connection was a robust and recurring theme throughout the learning circles. Participants spoke of the crucial role culture plays in their lives, fostering a sense of identity and belonging. The integration of opportunities to connect with one’s Indigenous cultural roots while completing their education is paramount to student success, contributing to holistic mental wellness by affirming Indigenous identities and fostering environments where students can thrive. The participant quoted above spoke of how culture was the avenue and path to rebalancing mental wellness.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

For many Indigenous students, leaving their home community or reserve to pursue post-secondary education can result in a profound sense of cultural disconnection. Removed from familiar traditions, languages, land, and support systems, students may struggle to find spaces where their identities are acknowledged and respected. This separation can lead to feelings of isolation, not being understood, or even a sense that their cultural values are not seen as valid within the academic environment (Berger et al., 2006). These challenges can weigh heavily on mental wellness, making it essential to connect with Indigenous student centres or other culturally supportive entities. These spaces provide community and understanding, along with opportunities to engage in cultural practices, reaffirming their identities and fostering a sense of belonging. Research shows that engagement with Indigenous cultural practices, such as ceremony, language, and traditional teachings, strengthens a student's sense of identity and overall well-being (Kurtz et al., 2013).

While culture is central to understanding and fostering mental wellness in Indigenous Peoples, it exists alongside other interwoven considerations, such as physical space. Through their intersection, these domains produce an integrated account that situates individual experience within broader cultural and ecological systems. Identity, interpretation, and wellness are not isolated traits but emerge relationally—co-produced in practice. It is important to note that cultural connection contains many components and lenses, encompassing both tangible and intangible aspects. Culturally relevant supports, such as an Elder in-residence, land-based learning activities, language classes, and traditional creative workshops such as drum making, soapstone carving, beading, and dreamcatcher building, were outlined as powerful avenues to foster cultural connection. Hosting ceremonial events such as pow-wows, round dances, and pipe ceremonies were also outlined as supportive avenues for Indigenous students to connect with their culture. The intersectionality of cultural connection with space ties into a need for physical representation. Participants ($n = 7$) discussed having a teepee on campus, a space where Indigenous students can go to smudge, or an outdoor learning space that fosters connection with the land, as vital to supporting mental wellness.

Cultivating Professional Development Opportunities

“I guess successful or very passionate or people that are creating change to like speak as role models and empower the students and further motivate the students, and perhaps like during these sessions ... create a sense of connectivity.”

– Learning Circle Participant

Participants ($n = 3$) emphasized the need for programming and resources that foster professional development—ongoing, intentional opportunities that build competencies and knowledge that advance career potential. These opportunities can foster feelings of success and accomplishment outside of course assessments and vastly contribute to mental wellness. Indigenous individuals pursue post-secondary education for various reasons including: improved employment prospects, enhanced skills and knowledge, the pursuit of self-determination and community goals, and the desire to address historical inequities and advance reconciliation (Davidson, 2018). Participants identified the importance of advancing key skills, such as digital literacy, communication, leadership, time management, and organization, along with the need to access professional development workshops, either provided on campus or externally, as a meaningful form of support. The participant quoted above spoke to the benefit of being able to connect with Indigenous professionals and the impact it could have on students.

Programs, support, and resources such as resume writing, interview coaching, industry mentorship, Indigenous-focused speaker series and workshops, and networking events, would be extremely beneficial, as many Indigenous post-secondary students may not have had access to programs, services, or resources of this nature.

Expanding Avenues to Healing

“We need to have culturally appropriate counselors. They need to be culturally safe. They need to be trauma-informed. They need to know enough. So that we’re not bridging the gaps when we’re sitting and talking to them. They know the background and they know the historical challenges.”

– Learning Circle Participant

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

One circle surfaced the experiences of first-generation post-secondary students who framed the higher education pathway as a locus of personal and intergenerational healing, facilitated by access to institutionally provided culturally relevant healing supports and related student services. The participant quoted above eloquently outlined the duality that can exist within Indigenous post-secondary students when confronting mental wellness and engaging with services.

Participants shared stories of their journeys fraught with suffering from intergenerational trauma due to the Sixties Scoop and residential schools, resulting in addiction and maladaptive coping mechanisms. Two participants discussed experiences of systemic discrimination and cultural disconnection, identifying post-secondary education as an avenue to grow, heal, and reclaim their future.

“Of course, racism, discrimination, microaggressions, and academic settings. These, of course, affect the mental wellness of Indigenous students. We have stereotyping, overt racism that results in stress, anxiety, and low self-esteem. We can internalize the racism. We can internalize the oppression, and it makes sense.”

– Learning Circle Participant

“In society we have some folks, the dominant group, you know, white folks, who are more highly valued, and we want to become like them. So, it makes sense that we would internalize this impression. But what can we do to combat that? We can do that with combat, with a sense of belonging and cultural identity.”

– Learning Circle Participant

Mental wellness requires avenues that attend to both the flourishing and languishing ends of the mental health continuum (Canadian Standards Association, 2020). While pursuing post-secondary education, negative mental health symptoms and illnesses can occur, especially for Indigenous post-secondary students. Indigenous post-secondary students across Canada experience a higher prevalence of mental health and related issues compared to the non-Indigenous student population (Hop Wo et al., 2020). Healing was a theme woven into numerous avenues of Indigenous post-secondary students' lives that supports positive mental health and well-being, and is rooted in reclaiming identity, culture, and self-determination.

Healing for Indigenous post-secondary students requires a holistic and culturally responsive approach that combines conventional mental health services with traditional practices. This includes access to Indigenous-centred counselling and addiction services, crisis support, pet therapy, and wellness programming that incorporates traditional knowledge and practices. It was also recommended to have

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

a list of external health supports, such as medical clinics accepting patients, proximal hospital locations, external mental health supports, pharmacies, and crisis services. Participants ($n = 3$) also highlighted the need to integrate Indigenous knowledge and practices into academic environments as ways to attend to student healing, such as trauma-informed pedagogies and education programs. Land-based learning, Indigenous language revitalization, access to traditional medicines, Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and space for reflection and ceremony help students reconnect with cultural traditions that foster resilience and well-being (Hart, 2002). Importantly, a distinction-based approach will ensure effective support for all students. When institutions acknowledge and actively support Indigenous healing journeys, they contribute not only to academic success but also to the broader well-being and empowerment of Indigenous students, creating more equitable and compassionate learning environments.

Encouraging Life Skills

“I’d like to see some traditional parenting teachings or classes. A lot of us are like intergenerational trauma, you know, residential school survivors. We don’t know how to parent.”

– Learning Circle Participant

A gap in support identified by participants pertained to overall life skills. Life skills are the capacities that enable individuals to accomplish everyday activities, tasks, and challenges, comprising areas such as self-care, cooking, money management, parenting skills, and social interaction. One participant spoke of the difficulty she experienced when leaving her home to attend post-secondary school and not having the necessary skills to budget appropriately or sign up for online bill payments. The participant, quoted above, commented on needing support with parental knowledge.

Often, life skills are taken for granted by the time individuals enter post-secondary environments, as it is assumed they have levels of independence and experience that will help them navigate their path forward. However, this is not always the case with students entering post-secondary education. Many students balance multiple responsibilities, including caregiving and financial obligations, often while adjusting to academic stresses and life away from their home communities. Equipping students with practical skills can alleviate stress and build confidence in their ability to manage daily challenges. To ease the burden on students, Indigenous student centres could provide self-care workshops (e.g., nutrition, sleep hygiene, and stress management), financial literacy programs (budgeting, loan processes, and building credit), parenting support circles, cooking classes (traditional Indigenous and westernized recipes), and resources to develop time management and study skills. By embedding these skills into campus programming, post-secondary institutions can empower Indigenous students to thrive, both personally and academically.

Increasing Access to Emergency Resources

“You know, especially as students, I find it can be hard, sometimes even to meet our physiological needs with food and shelter.”

– Learning Circle Participant

Helping Indigenous post-secondary students grow personally through life skills development can assist with easing the challenges of everyday life. However, life also has a propensity to be difficult and uncontrollable, yielding unexpected adverse situations that can threaten a student’s stability and mental wellness. Participants spoke of having to overcome unforeseen situations, and how often they navigated them alone without avenues for support, especially when additional and unbudgeted expenses arose. Situations such as a broken laptop, lack of access to food, or transportation issues can create immediate stress and disrupt mental wellness and academic progress. These challenges are often compounded for students who may not have family or community nearby for social and financial support. One participant spoke of difficulties their friend needed to overcome:

“I know one of my Indigenous friends, you know, their car broke down and then they don’t have the money to repair it. So now they can’t get to the class. They’re trying to bus it, but they have kids that they got to drop off at the daycare and it’s just such a hassle.”

– Learning Circle Participant

Financial barriers continue to be one of the largest factors impeding Indigenous post-secondary students’ success. Indigenous students often receive external funding and support for direct schooling costs, but are left in a deficit position for life and unexpected expenses (Cameron et al., 2024). Participants commented, “I’m worrying about how I get food” and “How do I keep gas in my truck so I can keep pulling around my trailer?” demonstrating the detrimental impact that financial strain has on their mental wellness. Participants cited examples of cars breaking down, not having money for gas, not having funds for groceries or transportation to school, needing assistance in paying a babysitter to attend classes, and technology issues, all of which impacted their mental wellness.

It is recommended that, when life puts unexpected burdens on Indigenous students, post-secondary institutions provide mechanisms to access emergency resources such as grocery cards, hampers or a food pantry, short-term housing assistance, transportation support such as bus tickets, technology-lending programs, and emergency funding assistance to provide meaningful and shame-free support. Proactively addressing these issues not only provides stability in times of crisis, but also reinforces a sense of belonging and institutional commitment to student success and mental wellness.

IMPLICATIONS

Indigenous post-secondary student mental wellness requires a holistic and culturally responsive approach. This approach promotes the overall well-being and strengths of this population, while addressing systemic barriers and acknowledging their unique historical context and cultural identities. Findings from this work support an institution-wide, holistic, multi-themed approach to fostering mental wellness (Canadian Standards Association, 2020), encompassing a system of care that interlaces traditional Indigenous components with Westernized approaches, processes, and strategies. It cannot be solved with a single, one-size-fits-all approach. Instead, it requires a holistic, foundational strategy that prioritizes basic needs (such as safety, belonging, and cultural connection) while supporting growth and transformation in deeper ways.

RECOMMENDATIONS



The Tree Analogy

In many Indigenous cultures, the tree is a symbol of traditions, values, and spiritual beliefs. It provides essential resources, balance, sustainability, life, and knowledge. The tree is thought to connect land, people, and spirit. Each part of the tree represents an evolution, a commitment to protection, and a promise to support growth. Using the analogy of an apple tree, we can view the growth and development of holistic mental wellness supports within post-secondary institutions. Each stage highlights and calls attention to an important avenue for consideration, building a tree of life.



The Seed: Starting and Potential

The seed represents the starting point, the core from which we build and grow. It contains and prioritizes meeting fundamental needs for support and culture for Indigenous post-secondary students. This can be manifested by a defined physical space for Indigenous cultural reconnection, introductory cultural connections such as hosting elders, and emergency supports and resources such as computers and free meals for students.



The Roots: Stability and Nourishment

The roots symbolize the foundation, the unseen work, and the necessary preparation for growth, akin to building a strong base of knowledge, skills, or resources. This is where post-secondary institutions can focus on building relationships and community through mentorship (e.g., new student ambassador programs and peer support connections). Extension of cultural connections is needed for this stage of growth. This can be fostered through culturally focused workshops, hosting ceremonies, and recognizing important cultural days (e.g., Truth and Reconciliation Day and National Indigenous Peoples Day) and traditions that Indigenous post-secondary students cherish (e.g., smudging and dancing). This stage is also critical for fostering life skills through programs that support academic success (e.g., tutoring and test preparation), while

RECOMMENDATIONS

providing opportunities for socialization and physical activity that promote well-being and stability. Providing emergency resources is another way post-secondary institutions can provide stability and nourishment.



The Trunk: Strength and Development

The trunk represents growth, resilience, and the ability to stand strong despite external pressure. Institutions can manifest this stage through culturally representative healing supports and programming, such as access to Indigenous counsellors or psychologists, traditional medicines, and connections to referral networks for additional support. Strength can also focus on avenues that provide emergency assistance and support required to overcome unforeseen obstacles that Indigenous students may encounter.



The Branches: Expansion and Exploration

The branches extend outward, seeking sunlight and space. They take different paths, extending in different directions. Institutions can expand their programming and build community through connections with Indigenous alumni, or by providing opportunities for current students to participate in external professional events and conferences. Post-secondary institutions can also extend resourcing into further advancing life skills development outside of academic endeavours,

through self-care, financial management, daily skills, and/or parenting workshops. Growth and exploration can also be fostered by attending healing workshops focusing on resiliency building, mindfulness, and meditation.



The Leaves: Knowledge and Growth

The leaves capture sunlight and convert it to energy, representing the intake of knowledge, experience, and personal enrichment. Mirroring how they reach and extend outward toward the sun, non-Indigenous individuals within post-secondary institutions must also grow, expanding their understanding, awareness, and actions to create campus communities that genuinely support the mental wellness of Indigenous students. Post-secondary institutions can activate internal cultural connections and professional development for non-Indigenous staff and faculty, such as decolonization workshops, Indigenous pedagogy training, culturally safe practices, land-based learning opportunities, and workshops on Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Each leaf symbolizes a step toward deeper knowledge, cultural humility, and meaningful allyship to uphold equity and inclusion. Drawing resources from truth, respect, and reconciliation, the leaves represent collective growth in cultivating spaces where indigenous students feel seen, heard, and supported in aspects of their academic and personal journeys. Strength can also expand career potential and preparedness through professional development avenues, such as cross-collaboration, increased representation, and Indigenization of available supports through career centres.

RECOMMENDATIONS



The Bark: **Protection and Resilience**

The bark represents the protective layer, boundary, and ability to withstand challenges and change. Just as bark shields a tree from harsh conditions and the seasons of change, Indigenous post-secondary students rely on their cultural identity, community, and inner strength to persevere. This is where we focus on expansive and systemic healing avenues, such as trauma-informed pedagogies and physical representations of reconciliation, such as a teepee on campus or other traditional nature-based spaces for students to connect with. It can also involve showcasing Indigenous art throughout the campus. Representation is a meaningful step in fostering relationships and community building through connection with Indigenous culture.



The Fruit: **Impact and Contribution**

The fruit is the result of growth and achievement. It nourishes others and plants new seeds, ensuring ongoing growth and evolution. This can be actualized by having defined processes, budgets, and resources to actively review, update, and expand services, programming, and supports that meet the needs of Indigenous post-secondary students. This also includes representation in convocation ceremonies, such as through eagle feather or Métis sash presentations to graduates. This stage also recognizes a re-investment by the students through alumni networks, re-seeding their knowledge to other Indigenous students through peer support or mentorship. A final important aspect of this stage is for Indigenous students to provide feedback on system functionality and recommendations on how to evolve and grow, fostering new and future growth.

CONCLUSION

CONCLUSION

Supporting the mental wellness of Indigenous post-secondary students requires a holistic and sustained commitment that acknowledges the interconnected nature of emotional, cultural, academic, spiritual, and practical well-being. This study identified two foundational principles: 1) the need for balance—mental, spiritual, physical, and emotional, and 2) a deep connection to place/space, which for many Indigenous students is rooted in land, language, and community. The need to create culturally affirming environments has been a sub-theme that repeats throughout this study, one that honours Indigenous worldviews, supports connection to traditional practices, and reflects a respect for representation and place. Providing access to professional and developmental opportunities, healing-centred supports, life skills training, and responsive emergency resources fosters resilience and ensures that students are well-equipped to navigate both challenges and successes. Through this lens, it is not merely a service but a responsibility to create inclusive, culturally grounded environments where Indigenous students will be empowered to thrive in all aspects of their journey—honouring both who they are and who they become.

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