

# SUPPORTING INDIGENOUS STUDENTS IN POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

Thriving from Application to Graduation



SAMUEL CENTRE  
FOR SOCIAL  
CONNECTEDNESS



**TakingITGlobal**  
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Connected North

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# Introduction

## About the Author



As a Social Connectedness Fellow, Emma Greenfield partnered with TakingITGlobal to document the barriers that Indigenous students face in post-secondary institutions as well as the hopeful practices that support First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and Afro-Indigenous students.

As someone of mixed First Nations and European identity, Emma's sense of belonging was greatly supported in post-secondary education by Indigenous staff, faculty, and spaces.

## About TakingITGlobal

TakingITGlobal designs and delivers youth engagement programs leveraging the power of creativity, technology and community. TakingITGlobal offers grants, fellowships and mentorship for young social entrepreneurs, and facilitates sector-wide knowledge sharing and mapping of youth-led initiatives.

The Connected North program of TakingITGlobal fosters student engagement and enhanced education outcomes in remote Indigenous communities.



## About the Social Connectedness Fellowship



**SAMUEL CENTRE  
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The Social Connectedness Fellowship, run by the Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness, provides recent graduates with the opportunity to carry out research, writing, analysis, and outreach in thematic areas related to overcoming social isolation and building social connectedness.

# Executive Summary

## Goal

The purpose of this research is to identify the barriers that First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and Afro-Indigenous students face in post-secondary institutions by analyzing the policies, practices, and resources of post-secondary institutions across Canada. It also explores the already existing supports that allow Indigenous students to thrive in college and university. Recommendations for post-secondary institutions are based on the findings.

## Methodology

This research project involves both qualitative and quantitative data. Online surveys were completed by 24 staff and faculty that work with Indigenous post-secondary students in different capacities. Follow-up interviews were conducted with 11 of the participants who completed the survey. Additionally, an online community engagement of 46 staff and faculty from across Canada provided information about barriers specific to COVID-19.

## Key Findings

The survey and interviews with staff and faculty illuminate two factors: what colleges and universities are currently doing to support Indigenous post-secondary students, and barriers that continue to impact Indigenous students despite these supports in place. Barriers specific to COVID-19 are also addressed. Most frequently mentioned in both the survey and interviews are challenges with inadequate funding towards Indigenous student services and the lack of Indigenous staff and faculty in full-time positions throughout the campus. Other key challenges are explored.

## Recommendations

The recommendations based on the findings are organized into the following categories: Recruiting, Applying, Transitioning, Studying, Graduating, and Recommendations Specific to COVID-19.

# Understanding the Issue

The challenges that First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and Afro-Indigenous students face in obtaining post-secondary education are a culmination of both historical and contemporary factors. Prior to the establishment of the westernized educational system prevalent across Canada, Indigenous people engaged in land-based and experiential education that has existed for thousands of years. Assimilative policies, like the Indian Act, greatly impacted traditional forms of education as government-funded Indian Residential Schools physically removed generations of Indigenous children from their families and communities, and, therefore, from their culture, language, and ancestral knowledge.[1]

In response to the recommendations outlined by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada,[2] many contemporary schools have progressed the agenda of reconciliation that supports Indigenous student success. Although the federal government is responsible for policies that pertain to Indigenous people, higher education falls under the jurisdiction of Canada's provinces and territories. Colleges and universities are fairly autonomous in how they engage in academic matters and each educational institution across the country varies greatly on their responsiveness to reconciliation.[3]

Education for Indigenous people is considered a treaty right.[4] Imperative to this right is the obligation of the Canadian government to provide adequate funding. As it stands today, the treaty right to education is not always upheld. This is evidenced by the insufficient and capped funding levels that contribute to the backlog of Indigenous students awaiting post-secondary education.[5]

[1] Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. "Final Report."

[2] Ibid.

[3] Sarah Trevellean, "How Canadian Universities are Responding to the TRC's Calls to Action," Macleans, December 7, 2018, <https://www.macleans.ca/education/how-canadian-universities-are-responding-to-the-trcs-calls-to-action/>.

[4] Sheila Carr-Stewart. "A Treaty Right to Education," Canadian Journal of Education 26, no. 2 (2001): 125-143.

[5] Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. "Final Report."

Once enrolled, Indigenous students face a variety of barriers presented in the early stages of their journey that can have long-term consequences to their future learning and completion rates.[6] The barriers include inadequate financial assistance, inequitable academic preparation, and policies and practices on campus that are not reflective of their diverse cultures and contexts.[7] Experiences of racism, social isolation, and marginalization on campus are also experienced by many Indigenous students.[8] For some students, obtaining education means having to travel from geographically distant or fly-in communities, which poses its own challenges.

For Afro-Indigenous students, challenges specific to their unique experiences as being both Black and Indigenous may also arise in post-secondary spaces. Generally, Black students confront many forms of anti-Black racism on campuses across the country.[9] Despite intersectional histories, anti-Black racism due to settler colonialism can also be experienced within Indigenous communities. This can happen when Indigenous community members question the Indigenous ancestry of a mixed-race person or does not validate both their identities simultaneously.[10]

Colleges and universities have made institutional commitments towards Indigenous education, including infusing Indigenous content, establishing Indigenous-specific services and spaces, seeking partnerships with Indigenous communities, and fostering an inclusive and respectful environment where First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and Afro-Indigenous students can thrive.[11] The driving force behind this current research is:

***How are colleges and universities doing in supporting Indigenous students? What supports are in place for each phase of the students' journey? What could colleges and universities do to remove the barriers imposed on Indigenous students?***

In order to further explore these questions, it becomes necessary to seek the perspectives of staff and faculty from across Canada who work with Indigenous students...

[6] Jacqueline Ottman, "Canada's Indigenous Peoples' Access to Post-secondary Education: The Spirit of the 'New Buffalo,'" in *Indigenous Pathways, Transitions, and Participation in Higher Education*, eds. Jack Frawley, Steve Larkin and James A. Smith (New York: Springer Nature, 2017), 95-117.

[7] Ibid.

[8] "Post-secondary Experience of Indigenous Students Following the Truth and Reconciliation Commission", Indspire, September, 2018, <https://indspire.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/PSE-Experience-Indigenous-Students-Survey-Summary-Sept2018.pdf>.

[9] Kristin Moriah, "How Anti-Black Racism on Canadian University Campuses Robs Us All," *The Conversation*, July 2, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/how-anti-black-racism-on-canadian-university-campuses-robs-us-all-140927>.

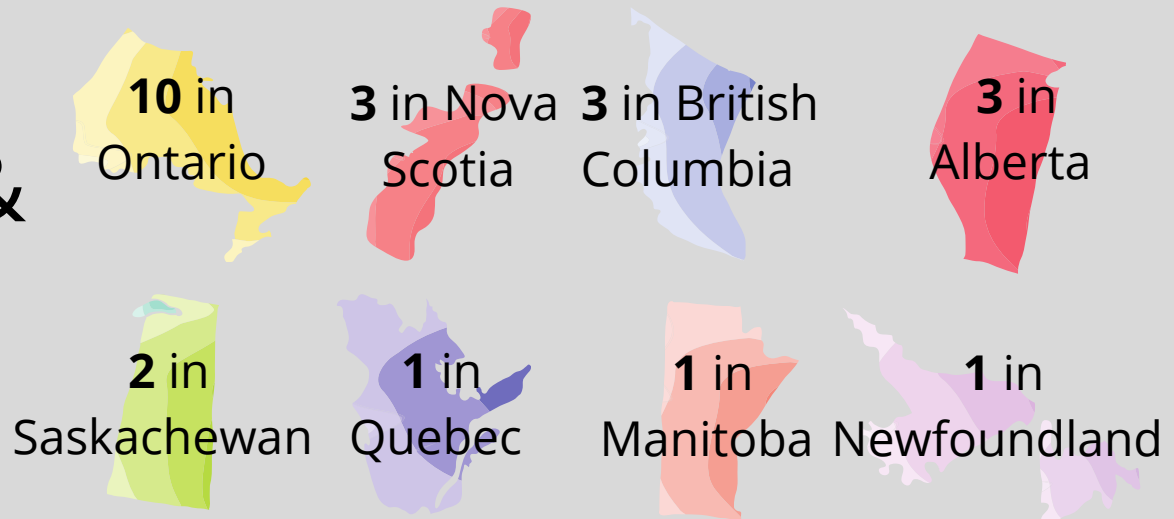
[10] Shelby Lisk, "Rallying Against Racism: How Black and Indigenous Communities can Come Together," *TVO*, June 12, 2020, <https://www.tvo.org/article/rallying-against-racism-how-black-and-indigenous-communities-can-come-together>.

[11] "Indigenous Education", *Colleges and Institutes Canada*, accessed August 1, 2020, <https://www.collegesinstitutes.ca/policyfocus/indigenous-learners/>; "Universities Canada Principles on Indigenous Education", *Universities Canada*, June 29, 2015, <https://www.univcan.ca/media-room/media-releases/universities-canada-principles-on-indigenous-education/>.

# The Current Research

## Who completed the survey?

**24 Staff & Faculty**



## Roles of participants included:

**Counsellors/  
Student  
Support**

**Recruitment/  
Transition**

**Educators/  
Curriculum  
Specialists**

**Programmers/  
Planners**

**Directors/  
Administrators/  
Coordinators**



# What Are Post-Secondary Institutions Doing to Support Indigenous Students?

Most participants could identify strategies at their college or university that support Indigenous students in the following areas: **recruitment, applying, transitioning, and accessing housing**. Many of these strategies are carried out by staff and/or faculty that have positions dedicated to supporting Indigenous students specifically.

Many participants also identified **cultural, mental, emotional, financial, and academic** supports available to Indigenous students once enrolled. Again, these supports are mostly implemented by those with positions dedicated to Indigenous students.



All participants identified an **Indigenous student centre** at the college or university, although not every campus may have one. These spaces are crucial in carrying out a variety of cultural events and activities that take place such as feasts, ceremonies, traditional teachings, craft workshops, and hosting Indigenous guest speakers.

## Some Supports Mentioned in the Survey for

**Recruiting, Applying, Transitioning, Cultural, Mental/Emotional, Financial, and Academic**





# Barriers that Continue to Impact Indigenous Students

Some participants noted that their institutions have declared Indigenous education and reconciliation a priority without adequate action to support these aspirations. Not all participants were able to rate their colleges and universities favourably in the following areas: making Indigenous learning a priority; representing Indigenous perspectives, knowledges, and worldviews throughout the campus; and supporting a sense of belonging between Indigenous students and the college/university. Although there is evidence of this at some colleges and universities, these are all areas that could be improved on.

## Participants identified challenges that continue to impact Indigenous students:



Inadequate funding towards Indigenous services



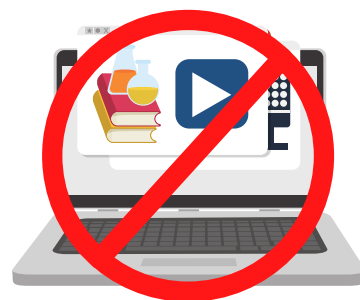
Lack of Indigenous staff and faculty in full-time positions throughout the campus



Lack of resources to support with housing and childcare



Absence of representation in course content, programs, art, languages, place names and spaces



Lack of opportunities for non-Indigenous staff and faculty to learn about Indigenous history

# Recommendations

Based on findings, the following are recommendations to support Indigenous Students at various stages of their educational journey: **recruiting, applying, transitioning, studying, and graduating.**

## Recruiting

Create thoughtful and extensive strategies for recruitment

Provide funding to staff and faculty for materials, travel, and attending events

Create and maintain reciprocal partnerships with local, remote, and urban communities

Employ an Indigenous recruitment team

## Applying

Create tutorials, workshops, and/or resources that walk Indigenous students through the process

Hire Indigenous alumni and students in at least their 2nd year to support new students through this process

Train all student services staff/faculty on funding and supports specific for Indigenous students who are applying

Employ an Indigenous recruitment team to help with this process

## Transitioning

Ensure transition tools and strategies are culturally and contextually relevant for Indigenous students

Create a student handbook for Indigenous students

Create online resources to make Indigenous students feel more at home

Fund a welcome feast and cultural events specifically for Indigenous students each term

Provide financial assistance for travel expenses and initial costs required to get situated

Prioritize supporting Indigenous students in finding housing and child care

## Studying

Hire more Indigenous staff and faculty in full-time positions in all departments/campuses

Provide more funding to Indigenous student services in general

Ensure there is campus-wide Indigenous representation in course content, programs, art, languages, placenames, and spaces

Provide non-Indigenous staff and faculty with more opportunities to learn about Indigenous history and contemporary circumstances

Create a committee dedicated to Indigenous education with Indigenous staff, faculty, students, and communities

Ensure non-Indigenous staff/faculty are doing the work required of them in advancing Indigenous education

Ensure Indigenous people are not just the *voice* behind decision-making but also the *decision makers*

## Graduating

Indigenous students should celebrate their successes with each other. Ensure Indigenous students have their own graduation in addition to mainstream graduation

Provide paid opportunities for Indigenous alumni to work with future students through mentorship

Provide financial assistance to ensure family and community members can see their loved ones graduate (whether in person or through technology)

Create online resources with Indigenous alumni stories

## Recommendations Specific to COVID-19

1. Ensure **every** Indigenous student has access to technology and WIFI capabilities to participate in online learning.
2. Help alleviate the heightened financial burden Indigenous students are facing at this time.
3. Be flexible with policies to ensure Indigenous students are being wholistically supported.
4. Continue to build stronger relationships with local Indigenous communities.
5. Continue to make Indigenization a priority.
6. Be creative in fostering collaboration and community with on-campus and off-campus partnerships.
7. Listen to Indigenous students and ensure their voices are centred in decision-making.

# The Hopes Staff and Faculty Have for Indigenous Students in Post-Secondary Education

*Participants were asked what their hopes are for Indigenous students in post-secondary education.*

*This is what they said...*

"A sense of **belonging** and personal **success**"

"That each student recognizes that they have the **capacity to succeed**, however they chose to define it"

"That they feel **hope about the future**; that they feel their education can make a change in their lives and in their people's lives; that they feel **empowered** and can enact agency in their own lives"

"[That] they **succeed** at their program and get **employed** at the end"

"To achieve **success** while feeling **safe** and **supported**"

"For them to **achieve their goals** and be **included**"

"[That] they are **successful** and **inspire others**"

"[I hope for] a welcoming and supportive environment, a **home away from home...**"

"My hope is that we can increase the idea that **post-secondary is an option for youth.**"

"It is my hope that the university setting can be part of a student's academic journey while simultaneously acknowledging and respecting the power, importance, and necessity for **Indigenous-based knowledge and ways of being**"

"My hope is for them to graduate and use the **sense of achievement** to continue to further education or to meaningful employment"

"To be **happy** with their work [and] to be our **future leaders**"

"I hope that Indigenous students learn, grow, and find their passion...I hope they do not experience racism...and I hope that they feel like **they matter** and **they belong**"

"That they all succeed in **achieving their vision of success**"

"...to ensure their time on campus is **rewarding**"

"To feel **confident**, reach their potential, [be exposed] to different cultures, environments, and opportunities..."

"I hope to see a **higher number of Indigenous graduates**

and Indigenous students attending college or post-secondary school"

"That they take up space, create, and **demand changes that better them and the future Indigenous learners...**"

"That there is space created for them to **be Indigenous** and not have to conform or educate others to respect that they don't need to conform"

"...[For] a sense of **safety** and **community** where they can **heal** from trauma and gain skills to accomplish their goals"

"[That] the barriers to success become less and less until one day we see **equal opportunity** across the board on all levels for Indigenous students"

"That they **succeed** without burning out... that they feel **connected** to home and other Indigenous students"

"I would love to see as many as possible enjoy their journey"

"To achieve academically and launch their careers...while having an **exceptional, safe, and meaningful cultural experience** that they can take on their life journey"

"That we can eradicate experiences of racism for our students and that we can **create better pathways** to employment"

"...[to] share their **new skills** to assisting their **communities**"

"That they feel **supported** and **cared for** during their time in college"

"**Resilience** for the challenges they face...**strength** and **perseverance** to see it through to graduation"

"...[to] learn about and/or practice their **Indigenous heritage** and culture with **pride**"

"Shifting the colonial persecution victim-framed history mindset to **self-directed, empowered future** for Indigenous people to be achieved through education"

# Closing Thoughts

One of the most noteworthy findings from this research endeavour is that staff and faculty who work with Indigenous students are profoundly aware of what would be required to better support them. As staff and faculty who work with First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and Afro-Indigenous students are continuously advocating for their success, it is important that colleges and universities actively listen to their concerns, suggestions, and hopes for the future in order to engage in meaningful change. Social connectedness in this context means upholding Indigenous students' ability to feel valued, seen, and heard;[12] colleges and universities must commit themselves to providing more opportunities for Indigenous students to feel this sense of connectedness and belonging on campus.

It is important to understand that Indigenous people are in charge of their own successes so long as the systemic and structural barriers in their way are removed by those responsible for upholding them. Indigenous people are succeeding in many aspects within and outside of academia. For Indigenous students, higher education means more than the ability to contribute to the economy but, rather, an opportunity to feel empowered along their journey to achieving self-determination both individually and collectively.[13]

***As colleges and universities provide more opportunities for Indigenous students to realize their dreams of post-secondary education attainment, the possibilities for their futures become increasingly abundant.***

*Thank you to all those who participated.*

# INDIGENOUS STUDENTS THRIVING FROM APPLICATION TO GRADUATION (ISTAG)

## Ways to Engage in Campus-Wide Indigenous Student Support and Advocacy

- ☐ Are there Indigenous staff and faculty at every campus and in most of the departments?
- ☐ Are there large, open, and culturally-responsive spaces designated for Indigenous students, staff, and faculty at every campus?
- ☐ Are Indigenous students reflected in the course content, programs, art, languages, placenames, and spaces?
- ☐ Are there multiple opportunities every term for non-Indigenous staff, faculty, and students to learn about Indigenous history and contemporary circumstances?
- ☐ Are there Indigenous people in leadership roles? Are Indigenous staff, faculty, and students directly involved in decision-making?
- ☐ Is there an Indigenous Recruitment Team and/or an Indigenous Transitions Team?
- ☐ Are there multiple bursaries and awards dedicated to Indigenous students? Is financial aid requirements supportive of diverse learning contexts?
- ☐ Are there healthy, reciprocal, relationships made with local Indigenous communities, including urban communities?
- ☐ Are Indigenous students compensated for their time participating, planning, and facilitating campus events, workshops, and tutoring?
- ☐ Are the Elders, Knowledge Holders, and/or Métis Senators in full-time positions?
- ☐ Have names, statues and/or the art of colonizers been acknowledged, addressed, or removed?
- ☐ If the school is named after an Indigenous placename or nation, is it common knowledge amongst staff, faculty, and students?

Note: This checklist is by no means meant to indicate that reconciliation is a linear process or one that can be measured through a checklist. What this checklist is meant to do is prompt critical reflection on important areas an institution should consider if Indigenous education is regarded as a priority. It is a tool of advocacy to see what areas need improvement.

