

# BOOK REVIEW

## SUPPORTING INDIGENOUS STUDENTS TO SUCCEED AT UNIVERSITY: A RESOURCE FOR THE HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR

REVIEWED BY

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Nakata, M., and Nakata, V. (2023). *Supporting Indigenous Students to Succeed at University: A Resource for the Higher Education Sector*. Routledge. Pages: 146. Price: USD 44.95 (eb-

The 2012 *Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People: Final Report* recommends a whole-of-university approach to improving Indigenous student outcomes, with support integrated across campus (Australian Department of Education, 2012). Nakata and Nakata, authors of *Supporting Indigenous Students to Succeed at University: A Resource for the Higher Education Sector*, take this recommendation further by arguing that while increased cooperation across campus is paramount, it is not always effective. Instead, the authors suggest more focus should be on the day-to-day work and strategies of support staff, both pastoral and academic (Nakata & Nakata, 2023). They point out a gap between the theoretical knowledge presented in higher education literature and practical application for staff dealing with day-to-day issues and who have little time to wade through, analyze, and keep up with research. The book addresses this gap, championing a strategic focus on professional development for Indigenous student support staff, stressing ongoing collaboration between pastoral and academic units to holistically meet students' needs.

Before we provide further analysis, we wish to position ourselves and the context from

which we approach this review. We are both non-Indigenous graduate students studying at the Ontario Institute for the Study of Education at the University of Toronto in the Higher Education doctoral program. The university operates on the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and the Mississaugas of the Credit. Today, this meeting place is still home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work and learn on this land. We are student affairs practitioners though we do not work in Indigenous Support Centres. We read this book to increase our understanding of how Indigenous student support can impact Indigenous student outcomes from an Australian university perspective, and to assess its usefulness as a resource for fellow Canadian graduate students, Indigenous and non-Indigenous. Something to note is that, in Australia, student support tends to be integrated within the curriculum, and thus, the student affairs profession as it exists in Canada is not present.

In chapter 1, Nakata and Nakata introduce key concepts related to success in Higher Education, drawing from relevant research. For those well-versed in student development, this information is not new, but support staff who have not had the opportunity for professional

development in these areas will benefit from the thorough overview of the most salient issues in Indigenous student support. The chapter builds on the premise that students are expected to be self-motivated in their post-secondary learning, exploring concepts and theories related to academic, psychological, and emotional readiness for learning, as well as agency, self-efficacy, self-regulation, motivation, belonging, and resilience. The main message is to not assume Indigenous students will already possess the necessary skills to be independent learners—the staff's role is to provide continual guidance and support in all aspects of learning. The book homes in on potential challenges particular to Indigenous students, such as negotiating different sets of knowledge, financial hardship, cultural isolation, and experiences of racism. The support staff role is to assist students to develop strategies to navigate these challenges. The authors clearly point out it is not necessary for staff to be experts or attach themselves to one theory, but they must understand the factors that could be at play when working with Indigenous students.

Chapter 2 aims to fill a gap in the literature on Indigenous higher education regarding the logistics of implementing systems and routines to support Indigenous students who may be underprepared to enter university. Using a case management approach, the authors advocate for solid data management practices in order to know, understand, monitor, and track student needs, progress, and outcomes. This is composed of student profiles that are regularly updated as staff interact with students. Profiles are sorted using a tiered approach based on factors of preparedness, so that the most underprepared students receive the most support. Pastoral and academic staff work in tandem to support students based on their current needs, which is rare in the Canadian context. Some of the measures staff track include self-efficacy, motivation, goal setting, persistence, and help-seeking behaviours—all of which contribute to students' progression toward becoming independent learners.

Chapter 3 addresses some of the broader issues of shifting to a capacity development approach. Highlighted in this chapter is the important framing of how support staff perceive, understand, interpret, and respond to student needs. Nakata and Nakata write, “the task of student support staff is to support students in their efforts to determine what they have to do to achieve success in academic tasks and help them develop the capabilities—knowledge, skills, and strategies—they need to do so” (Nakata & Nakata, 2023, p. 105). This is a whole-of-education journey, and Nakata and Nakata unpack how this approach can be applied at various stages. Challenges addressed in this chapter include managing tensions between Indigenous cultural values and institutional and professional cultures and practices, establishing an ethic of care for all Indigenous students, using a family cultural model, and developing an argument for change. Part of the solution, from the authors' perspective, is to invest in professional development for support staff to build knowledge and capacity about Indigenous students' issues, and engage in a cycle of reflecting, reviewing, planning, and evaluating processes. Having well-informed staff and a strong audit process enables effective changes to existing supports.

From our position as non-Indigenous graduate students who have been learning through critical work done by Indigenous scholars, like Cote-Meek's (2014) *Colonized Classrooms*, Kirkness and Barnhardt's (1991) 4 R's, and Pidgeon's (2008) *Indigenous Wholistic Framework*, we were initially struck by the realization that this book did not address ways to decolonize higher education as part of supporting Indigenous students. Upon reflection on the book's goals, we recognize this book is not written for us as emerging academics and researchers, but for people currently working directly with Indigenous students in the Australian higher education system. Aspects of this book provide broader knowledge relevant to student support professionals working with Indigenous students in any context, along with some strategies that may only be applicable

in specific contexts. For example, the authors highlight the importance of getting to know all Indigenous students, having a sound knowledge and understanding of what is involved in higher learning, individualizing support and ensuring it is offered at the right time, undertaking reflective practice, having a well-devised plan, and maintaining close collaboration between pastoral and academic staff. However, one of the focuses of the book is the use of supplemental tutors, a government-funded service specific to Australia. In Canada, Indigenous students may gain access to tutors, but how this would be accomplished varies greatly by institution.

Supporting Indigenous Students to Succeed at University is a guide for Australian Indigenous support staff or senior administrators wanting to implement a case management system using a capacity development approach. Given the lack of funding earmarked for supplemental tutoring services to support under-prepared Indigenous learners, it may not be directly transferable to the Canadian context; however, there are pearls of wisdom waiting to be uncovered for anyone supporting Indigenous post-secondary students.

## References

- Australian Department of Education. (2012). *Review of higher education access and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People*. <https://www.education.gov.au/heppp/resources/review-higher-education-access-and-outcomes-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-people>
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- Kirkness, V. J., & Barnhardt, R. (1991). First Nations and higher education: The Four R's — Respect, relevance, reciprocity, responsibility. *Journal of American Indian Education*, 30(3), 1–15.