# UNDERSTANDING THE HEARTWORK OF INDIGENOUS STUDENT SERVICES DURING THE CHALLENGING TIMES OF RECONCILIATION, DECOLONIZATION, AND INDIGENIZATION

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## Abstract

Indigenous Student Centres (ISCs) are student affairs units specialized to serve Indigenous students and communities. These Centres are places of significance on campus for Indigenous students for their cultural relevance and embodiment of Indigenous ways of being. Professionals working in and with ISCs ground their work firmly in Indigenous Knowledges that often evoke distinct cultural protocols and ways of being. Kirkness and Barnhardt's (1991) 4Rs of Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity, and Responsibility and Archibald's (2008) Indigenous storywork are the foundation of the co-authors' research with ISC staff and administrators. The history of Indigenous academic programming is shared to provide the foundation for the evolution of ISCs. The co-authors explore how ISCs holistically support Indigenous students while encountering resistance and systemic challenges, such as cultural illiteracy, by non-Indigenous units and reconciliation fatigue. They conclude with suggestions for supporting reconciliation work as an ally or good neighbour.

***Keywords**:* Indigenization, student affairs, reconciliation, cultural illiteracy, higher education

## Résumé

Les Centres étudiants autochtones (CEA) sont des unités de services spécialement conçues pour répondre aux besoins des étudiantes et étudiants et des communautés autochtones. Les CEA occupent une place importante sur les campus en raison de leur pertinence culturelle et de la manière dont ils incarnent les modes de vie autochtones. Les professionnelles et professionnels des CEA orientent leur travail à partir des savoirs autochtones, qui font souvent appel à des protocoles culturels distincts et à des façons d'être propres aux peuples autochtones. Les 4R de Kirkness et Barnhardt (1991) – Respect, Pertinence (Relevance), Réciprocité et Responsabilité – ainsi que le travail d'Archibald (2008) sur les récits autochtones constituent les fondements de la recherche des coauteures auprès du personnel et des responsables des CEA. L'histoire des programmes universitaires autochtones y est retracée afin de mieux comprendre l'évolution des CEA. Les coauteures examinent comment les CEA soutiennent de manière holistique les étudiantes et étudiants autochtones, tout en faisant face à des résistances et à des défis systémiques, tels que l'illettrisme culturel des unités non autochtones ou encore la fatigue liée au processus de réconciliation. Elles concluent en proposant des pistes pour soutenir ce travail de réconciliation dans un esprit d'alliance et de bon voisinage.

***Mots-clés*** : autochtonisation, affaires étudiantes, réconciliation, illettrisme culturel, études supérieures

## INTRODUCTION

Heartwork (Minthorn et al., 2023; Winder, 2021) is a term used to describe the deep passion and connection that Indigenous scholars and practitioners have to their work. We evoke this term to speak to the dedication of Indigenous student services leaders and practitioners. Based on story-based research studies within the field of Indigenous Student Services, this article provides an overview of Indigenous Student Centres (ISCs) as places of significance (Cunningham, 2022; Donald, 2009, 2016) in post-secondary institutions (PSIs) and the systemic challenges Indigenous student service professionals face. To understand how ISCs became places of significance, the co-authors provide an overview of the history and impact of culturally relevant academic programs on the evolving role, purpose, and nature of ISCs. Additionally, the co-authors explore the current challenges surrounding the call for *reconciliation through education* (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada [TRC], 2015b) that requires PSIs to address varying levels of cultural illiteracy within their organizations. The aim is to create roles for allies, or good neighbors (Borrows & Tully, 2018) to respectfully engage as active collaborators, co-conspirators, and accomplices in reconciliation.

As three Indigenous scholars engaged in Indigenous student services research, theory, and practices in higher education, we draw on decades of experience, particularly our research with ISC administrators and staff as they provide holistic and culturally relevant supports and programming while navigating colonial systems in education. From these stories emerged the values, resistance, and agency that the ISC staff express, embrace, and embody to support Indigenous students in PSIs. The lessons learned explain why supporting and advocating for Indigenous learners in higher education is heartwork.

## BACKGROUND

In striving to create an inclusive and culturally welcoming learning environment for Indigenous students and communities, ISC professionals have, for decades, experienced ongoing challenges within colonial structures that hinder equitable representation and meaningful inclusion of Indigenous students in higher education. Some of the ongoing challenges and barriers include, but are not limited to, systemic racism, inadequate human and financial resources, cultural illiteracy, and lacking leadership support from good allies (Anderson, 2021; Battiste, 2013; Bazemore-James & Dunn, 2020; Brayboy et al., 2012; Cunningham, 2022; Cote-Meek, 2014; Pidgeon, 2016a; Waterman, 2023). These challenges have led to uncertainty and instability in the delivery and development of culturally relevant support services for Indigenous students, as well as the overall sustainability of the ISC in PSIs (Cunningham, 2022; Pidgeon, 2016b; Shotton et al., 2013).

ISC staff often contend with prominent levels of cultural illiteracy with respect to Indigenous Peoples, cultures, history, and lived experiences. The term "cultural literacy" was initially coined by Hirsch et al. (1988, 1993) and is inclusive of those who are working in culturally relevant spaces with responsive pedagogies for Indigenous, African American, and other peoples of colour (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 1995; McCarty & Lee, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2017). The co-authors extend the concept of cultural illiteracy to refer to the lack of knowledge, understanding, and awareness of Indigenous cultures, perspectives, and worldviews. This additional work has created an atmosphere of reconciliation fatigue (Urbsaitis, 2009) and burnout among Indigenous staff and faculty (Cunningham, 2022; Mistretta & Dubois, 2021).

Colonial systemic barriers are often invisible to non-Indigenous people, particularly within large organizational structures where staff are often engaged in gatekeeping and maintaining settler–colonial systems that are inherently oppressive, exclude Indigenous voices in decision making, and enable micro-aggressions against Indigenous Peoples, programs, and practices in higher education (Cote-Meek, 2014). In this way, cognitive imperialism (Battiste, 2011, 2013) is maintained through mainstream curriculum and decision-making processes in hierarchical systems where Indigenous voices

are often dismissed, overlooked, or completely absent in the boardrooms, hallways, and offices of the institution. Indigenous staff and students name reciprocity and community responsibility as fundamental values, which are often in contrast to institutional ways of being (Shotton et al., 2013). Through various research studies Indigenous student services professionals have shared their stories about ongoing challenges within colonial structures, citing common concerns related to inequitable human and financial resources, a lack of sustainable resources for programs and services to Indigenous students, and cultural illiteracy in PSIs (Bazemore-James & Dunn, 2020; Cunningham, 2022; Pidgeon et al., 2013; Shotton et al., 2013). Indigenous academic programs and services laid the foundation for establishing Indigenous student centres.

## Emergence of Academic Programs and Culturally Relevant Student Services

Indigenous student services and associated Centres emerged in the late 1960s alongside culturally relevant academic programs and admissions practices designed to increase overall Indigenous learner participation in PSIs across Canada (Pidgeon, 2005; Pidgeon et al., 2013). Many of these programs were designed to address systemic sociocultural, financial, and academic barriers that historically discouraged and/or hindered Indigenous people's participation in higher education.

Since the early 1970s, academic preparation programs have been a major factor in increasing Indigenous learner participation in higher education (Walton et al., 2020). Native Teacher Education and Indigenous Studies programs (formerly Native Studies) were established at the University of Saskatchewan, the University of Regina, and the University of Alberta around this time. Early Indigenous student access programs played a role in the overall transformation of education systems (Crum, 2015). Access-type programs for Indigenous students have expanded exponentially over the last decade and include a variety of delivery models including distance learning, community-based delivery, and satellite campuses, as well as hybrid programs that include combinations of online distance and in-person/in-residence learning.

Over the past two decades, there has been an expansive growth in innovative partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous educational institutions, whereby these types of programs are "an act of sovereignty—to act on the conviction that Indigenous Post-Secondary Institutions have a responsibility for the education of Indigenous people and for the preservation of Indigenous knowledge and life-ways" (Blue Quills University, n.d., para. 3). These kinds of Indigenous degree programs align with the original spirit and intent of *Indian Control of Indian Education* (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972), calling for jurisdictional as well as curricular control over education to revitalize Indigenous cultures and languages.

In addition to access-type programs, Native Studies programs have been long-standing academic beacons in higher education, playing a significant role in attracting, motivating, and retaining Indigenous students. Native Studies programs started to appear in PSIs across Canada in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Taner, 1999). These programs were instrumental in establishing the visible presence of Indigenous scholars, becoming a hallmark for Indigenization of the academy through the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge systems in Canadian universities (Pidgeon et al., 2013). Native Studies curriculums offered Indigenous perspectives on topics such as history, philosophy, health, art, and literature, laying the groundwork for allyship and advancing intercultural understanding through the academy:

> in the case of Native Studies, universities may once have been ivory towers determining the educational needs of a predominantly White student body from a predominantly White academic perspective, but, through internal and external pressures, universities have learned the importance of responding to the needs of all of their constituents

> and encouraging Native representation within all levels of university governing bodies and in the lecture halls. (Taner, 1999, p. 291)

Indigenous and non-Indigenous students were provided access to Indigenous scholars, who—through their own Indigenous worldviews—brought Indigenous ways of knowing into the academy. Native Studies programs played a key role in both attracting and retaining Indigenous students based on the much-sought-after cultural relevancy in the academic programs.

## The Role of Indigenous Student Services

Indigenous student services and Centres have evolved in tandem with the onset of culturally relevant academic programs and access routes. Indigenous-focused academic programs, such as those mentioned above, spurred the need for Indigenized student services grounded by Indigenous community values (axiology) and relational (ontologies) ways of doing that resonated and created a culturally safe learning environment for Indigenous students. Retention studies through the 1980s and 1990s also supported the need for more culturally relevant support services, leaning to a concerted effort for institutions to create spaces and provide services for Indigenous students in a welcome and culturally safe learning environment (Cunningham, 2022; Pidgeon, 2005, 2016a; Shotton et al., 2013, 2023). In many cases, the evolution of student support services started with the hiring of a student advisor who may have worked in an open office with other advisors, been situated in Native Studies departments, or worked in isolation in a one-room office down a quiet hall somewhere within the institution (Cunningham, 2022; Pidgeon et al., 2013; Shotton et al., 2013). The evolution of ISCs, as designated Indigenized spaces in PSIs, often emerged on campuses in direct response to increased Indigenous student enrolment, sometimes at the request of Indigenous student leaders. Currently, an estimated 95% of PSIs in Canada have some form of Indigenous student support services and/or a fully-fledged Centre (Pidgeon et al., 2020).

### *The Nature of the Centres*

As noted, ISCs emerged in response to a notable upward trend in Indigenous student enrolment and the impending need for culturally grounded holistic service models. The primary role of the ISC was to provide holistic, culturally relevant support services to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students, ideally addressing the physical, emotional, intellectual, and cultural needs of students in support of retention and overall success (Pidgeon, 2005; Pidgeon et al., 2013). For decades, the Centres have served as gathering spaces and beacons of welcome for Indigenous students and community members, evoking a sense of belonging and cultural safety. Indigenous student services, alongside Indigenous academic programs, played a significant early role in the Indigenization and decolonization of PSIs in Canada (Cunningham, 2022).

What has become very clear over the years is that having a visible Indigenized gathering place, complete with wrap-around or holistic support services, including remedial, cultural, and peer support programs for Indigenous students, has become a wise practice for Canadian PSIs. Relational, rather than transactional in nature, the Centres reflect a spatial practice (Montsion, 2018, p. 136), where Indigenous-grounded programs and services are offered in an indigenized space, "facilitating a sense of belonging for Indigenous students and community members" (Cunningham, 2022, pp. 16–17) in neo-liberal/neocolonial institutions. Montsion (2018) asserts that:

> the ways in which university service delivery is organized for both Indigenous and international students is a spatial practice that is defined by the interactions between three dimensions of what makes a place: the conceived, perceived, and lived spaces. The conceived space relates to the elite understandings of a location, such as through what is portrayed in statistics and strategic documents, while the perceived space refers to the various ways in which communities and groups embody and utilize a space, including for official events and partnerships. The lived space comes from people's daily experiences of the location, including how the place fits into one's sense of belonging. (p. 136)

The Centres also have "the responsibility of being a [good] host" (Kuokkanen, 2008, pp. 133–134), where good hospitality is "derived from regional cultural protocol practices" (Cunningham, 2022, p. 235) grounded by relationality and imbued with familiar acts of reciprocity. The Centres are places where food, tea, conversation, and tears may flow freely before, during, and after student needs are met. Indeed, "welcoming and creating safety for students and guests is recognized in and by community, adding accrued meaning to the Centres as places of cultural significance and safety for students and community members" (Cunningham, 2022, p. 235). Students can gather in cohorts, share ideas, develop relationships, and share their experiences within and outside of the institution, and sometimes—speak their language(s). While other good neighbours (Borrows & Tully, 2018) are welcome, the Centres provide a sense of spatial agency, where

> the resource Centre is produced as a cultural space that is physically separate from the mainstream, where distinct events and partnerships are celebrated and where Indigenous students, staff, and faculty members are given room to understand their place at the intersection of Indigeneity and academia. (Montsion, 2018, pp. 139–140)

Despite being under-resourced, ISC professionals are often called upon to address institutional gaps with respect to Indigenization, including, but not limited to, the coordination of cultural events, community engagement/partnerships, intercultural education, and Indigenous-focused fund development (Cunningham, 2022; Shotton et al., 2013; Waterman, 2023). The expansion of services provided by ISC staff within their respective institutions has increased exponentially since the release of the TRC's *Final Report on Truth and Reconciliation* (2015b), particularly regarding the demand for Indigenous-focused intercultural education across all levels of the institution (Cunningham, 2022; Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018; Pidgeon, 2016b).

## IMPACT OF CULTURAL ILLITERACY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The fact remains that ISC units and Indigenous staff, faculty, and students continue to exist and navigate within colonial institutions. These systems predominantly operate within a deficit in understanding about Indigenous Peoples, which is a form of cultural illiteracy. With increased acts of anti-Indigenous racism and systemic barriers, despite simultaneous ongoing reconciliation efforts, cultural illiteracy and epistemic ignorance remain enduring issues in Canadian society (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018; Kuokkanen, 2008). Indigenous academic programs and ISCs continue to be under-resourced to both support the ongoing needs of Indigenous students and further the work of reconciliation for the institutions (Cunningham, 2022). Indigenous professionals are encountering resistance to reconciliation, decolonization, and Indigenization efforts (Oxendine et al., 2018; Povey et al., 2021). However, Indigenous people continue to take up the role of educating others within their professional practice, for reasons noted by Indigenous journalist, Carpenter (2017), who articulates:

> Indigenous people will continue to try to fill those knowledge gaps through the platforms and tools at our disposal. We will continue to do so despite the emotional toll it takes on us. We do so, not out of spite or hate for contrarians, but out of love for our people and the land. We may shed tears on occasion, but it gives us strength and healing. (para. 22)

In thinking about Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples' engagement with music, xwélmexw (Stó:lō/Skwah) artist, curator, and writer Dylan Thomas (2020) describes non-Indigenous peoples as "hungry listeners," wanting more and more from their Indigenous colleagues with little or no reciprocity. The challenge, as always in bridging Indigenous ways of knowing and being with Western ways, is often a misunderstanding of what such words as reciprocity mean (Archibald, 2008; Kirkness & Barnhardt,

1991). An Indigenous understanding of the 4Rs (Kirkness & Barnhart, 1991) and Indigenous storywork principles (Archibald, 2008), exemplified through the Indigenous Wholistic Framework (Pidgeon, 2005, 2016a, 2016b) provides a framework upon which to unsettle and build up the cultural literacy of non-Indigenous peoples (Hirsch et al., 1988, 1993). The desire to "unsettle" the settler draws on the work of Paulette Regan (2010) to support un-learning, advance the truth in reconciliation, and increase understanding on how settlers can be better allies (to be discussed in our next section).

The meaning of the foundational values or principles of the 4Rs are important to articulate (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991). **Respect** for Indigenous Knowledges honours the diversity of Indigenous Peoples, their experiences, and their knowledge systems that are informed by the lands and waters of their traditional territories. Indigenous Knowledge is neither static nor is it defined as one thing—it is variable and dependent on various factors, such as how one grew up within their culture, on their traditional territories, with Knowledge Holders who passed on those teachings, etc. Colonization has impacted that knowledge transmission and why many Indigenous communities are on a journey of resurgence through language revitalization and cultural revival to reclaim their ways of knowing and being (TRC, 2015b).

**Reciprocity** speaks to how Indigenous people honour others who have shared knowledge, time, or other gifts with them. This value of reciprocity is not tied solely to monetary gifts, such as gift cards or cash-handshakes; it also includes cultural gifts, such as tobacco bundles, blankets, traditional medicines, and/or food. The act of reciprocity depends on who is sharing and what is being shared (e.g., time, knowledge).

**Relevance** speaks to the meaning, connection, and/or importance a program or service holds for Indigenous Peoples. For example, in a post-secondary context, Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991) asked, how relevant are the programs, classroom experiences, and services to meeting Indigenous capacity and socio-economic needs, individual employment goals, and broader community aspirations? An ISC is seen as relevant as their programming and services are grounded in Indigenous worldview and cultural practices. Yet, we know some academic programs are not relevant to Indigenous communities because they lack the inclusion of Indigenous content, do not have Indigenous faculty, and/or are not ready to support Indigenous students taking their programs.

**Responsibility**—and, more specifically, responsible relationships—speaks to the individual and collective responsibilities at play when engaging with Indigenous Peoples. It recognizes that everyone has responsibilities in reconciliation, along with understanding collective responsibilities in walking with Indigenous Peoples (Borrows & Tully, 2018; Kirkness & Barnhart, 1991). Archibald's (2008) Indigenous s*torywork* principle of reverence, along with the 4Rs, are related to the spiritual and cultural aspects of being Indigenous. Respecting these cultural components are how Indigenous Peoples bring themselves into PSIs, into relationships with communities, and how they work with Knowledge Holders and/or Elders.

## IMPACTS OF DECOLONIZATION, INDIGENIZATION, AND RECONCILIATION ON/FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

There is a tension in balancing the "work" of being an ISC staff member, administrator, and/or associated faculty member. With the TRC's (2015b) final report and *Calls to Action* (TRC, 2015a), there have been ongoing advocacy efforts by Indigenous scholars, organizations, and communities echoing the calls of the late Honourable Murray Sinclair: "Nothing about us without us," which calls for Indigenous Peoples to be at the table when discussing matters that directly impact them. However, this has meant the gaze (and ultimately, the burden) of responsibility for anything Indigenous falls onto Indigenous Peoples. The challenge is that the weight of these responsibilities is additional,

extra, and beyond most ISC job descriptions. Furthermore, for reconciliation, decolonizing, and Indigenization, such intentional inclusion requires a decolonized, or even uncolonized (Rosa, 2020; Tuck & Yang, 2012) mindset that values the expertise and knowledge Indigenous Peoples are bringing to the table.

As discussed, ISCs were established to provide culturally relevant support services to Indigenous students. They were not designed to provide cultural education and professional development to non-Indigenous peoples. However, we learned from our previous studies across a variety of contexts that this is indeed part of the work of ISC staff now—while not often found within their job descriptions, yet clearly part of their job expectations (Cunningham, 2022; Pidgeon et al., 2020; Waterman, 2023). We have heard stories from our colleagues in the ISCs across Canada that failure to undertake this additional work can result in punitive actions—if supervisors, colleagues, or peers deem them to be "not doing their job"—or being seen or treated as "special" when asked to provide cultural education workshops. This is a double-edged sword in some ways, as providing cultural workshops for Indigenous students means sometimes going to "unseen" parts of campuses, or even off the campus entirely. Subsequently, ISC staff are often then perceived by their other student affairs/services (SAS) colleagues as "always out of the office" (the subtext being that they are not doing their jobs; Mistretta & DuBois, 2021; Oxendine et al., 2018). The other side of this is that when ISC staff say "no" to providing cultural workshops to non-Indigenous audiences they are perceived as being difficult, stubborn, or worse.

Within the ISC staff complement, it is generally understood that cultural work takes time and is part of one's regular duties, like visiting over tea, going to shop for cultural supplies, providing transportation and other supports to Elders (Springer et al., 2013). However, for those Indigenous staff working in student services roles outside of the ISC, that understanding may be lacking and consequently impact job-performance reviews (or academic performance). When cultural workshops and other related duties are not recognized as part of the role responsibilities of an Indigenous staff person, it is assumed that they are "volunteering" their knowledge and expertise—and at these moments they are *not* fairly compensated in culturally appropriate ways and reciprocity is not honoured (e.g., loss of wages, time, and sharing cultural knowledge without appropriate cultural gifts/offerings).

Another aspect of respect and relevance within post-secondary spaces is the holding of cultural spaces and ensuring the cultural integrity of Indigenous Peoples is honoured (Tierney & Jun, 2001). Oxendine et al. (2018) speak more specifically of the burnout and stress such responsibilities have on Indigenous student services staff. The lack of awareness of the emotional labour that others have referred to as the *cultural tax*, a concept Padilla (1994) describes as the institutional assumption "that we [the minoritized] are best suited for specific tasks" because of our "presumed knowledge of cultural differences" (p. 26), placing additional education labour on minoritized staff (Cunningham, 2022; Waterman, 2023). This involves ongoing education/re-educating colleagues about Indigenous Peoples, what Kovach (2018) calls re-storying, where Indigenous student services staff frequently have to share about the experiences of Indigenous Residential Schools, listen and lend support to stories of intergenerational traumas of students and colleagues, address anti-Indigenous racism events on campus and Residential School deniers—the list is endless. This constant burden goes beyond what might be seen as a typical duty for ISC staff, and Waterman (2023) points out that "behavior that might, on the surface, appear as social programming or as lacking in formal academic advising, through an Indigenous values lens is nation building…centers IKS [Indigenous knowledge systems], and involves practicing noninterference" (p. 442).

The lack of understanding by non-Indigenous administration, faculty, staff, and students about the broader systemic and lateral violence Indigenous Peoples face in their day-to-day experiences on campus stunts and constrains any advances in decolonization, reconciliation, and Indigenization.

## EXPANSION AND EXPECTATIONS OF ISC SERVICES

Since the release of the TRC's (2015a) *Calls to Action*, ISC mandates have expanded, formally or informally, but not necessarily with appropriate resources. Our independent research projects involve speaking to ISC staff and reviewing ISC websites (Cunningham, 2022; Pidgeon, 2005; Pidgeon et al., 2020). From that research we share the following themes:

- **Cultural awareness training** (both formal/informal) of non-Indigenous student services staff, along with the broader institutional community.
- **Increased institutional committee service** (e.g., extending to academic faculties or central committees) where Indigenous representation is needed at the table (e.g., hiring committees, decolonizing and reconciliation committees).
- **More community outreach** (e.g., central hub for all matters pertaining to Indigenous students) and extending networks into Indigenous communities across urban and rural centres.
- A **go-to resource** on campus for all inquiries related to Indigenous matters (e.g., non-Indigenous students seeking assistance/learning/resources, academic faculties' reliance on recruitment/support services for Indigenous students, both undergraduate and graduate).
- **Increased policy work**, in that Indigenous staff are increasingly called upon by the institution to provide input and insight into the development and implementation of various institutional policies and processes (e.g., admissions, Indigenous self-identification, hiring practices, institutional strategies, cultural protocol practices, Elder engagement, and Indigenization of space).

The expansion of ISC services for students and for the broader institution means that those increased demands do not always translate to or result in additional human or financial resources (short-term funding based on projects does not support long-term strategic initiatives). As noted earlier, while busy tending to institutional and colleague demands, ISC members are not tending to their own well-being (e.g., increased risk of burnout; Oxendine et al., 2018) and are placed in a limbo of "politics of distraction," which G. H. Smith (2003) describes as "the colonizing process of being kept busy by the colonizer, of always being on the 'back-foot', 'responding', 'engaging', 'accounting', 'following' and 'explaining'" (para. 2). It is common for ISC staff to experience these politics when assigned other tasks, responsibilities, and expectations beyond their core duties. While burnout and struggles concerning retention of staff are a reality, there is also an associated cost of high turnover that negatively impacts both the relational nature of service provision and the building of trust between ISC staff and Indigenous students and broader communities (Anderson, 2021; Mistretta & DuBois, 2021; Oxendine et al., 2018).

Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2021) speaks to being present in Indigenous communities for good research relationships as having a "seen face." This notion of relationship through presence extends to the ways that PSIs should engage with Indigenous students and their communities via their Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff in recruitment and the ISC. Indigenous students and their families build relationships with these staff, and count on them being present in the office, on campus, and at community events (e.g., being seen and present). Consequently, there is a real cost to ongoing short-term contracts and precarious staff positions that extend well beyond the position itself. Another consequence of Indigenization, decolonization, and reconciliation efforts across Canadian PSIs is that the asks also extend beyond Indigenous units, staff, and faculty. Increasingly, we see more and more asks being made of Indigenous students. They are often placed in leadership roles/spaces without compensation (e.g., no reciprocity) or recognition of how these additional responsibilities impact their well-being and academic journey (e.g., lack of relevance and respect). In fact, the tension of "nothing about us without us" requires intentional and active consideration of

how Indigenous perspectives are included at the decision-making tables that directly (or indirectly) impact Indigenous lives—and, at the same time, ensuring that these spaces are culturally safe and respectful so that the aforementioned burdens and costs to be in those rooms are mitigated, resolved, addressed, or eliminated altogether. The next section provides some insights on how non-Indigenous peoples can intentionally take up that work to be a good relative and ally in reconciliation.

## ALLIES IN RECONCILIATION: HOW TO BE AND BECOME A GOOD RELATIVE?

We now focus on working with us to be partners in reconciliation with respect, reciprocity, relevance, and responsibility (Kirkness & Barnardt, 1991). We start with Indigenous storywork (Archibald, 2008) again because of its emphasis on listening, discuss definitions of "ally," comment on developing relationships, and share final comments about being a good relative.

Archibald (2008) explained the "work" involved in oral traditions. Stories are shared usually according to the seasons, meaning is made through the listener's (or listeners') experiences within their own context. Different levels of meaning are expected as we are different people, in different contexts; as we change, we understand the lessons in new ways. Archibald (2008) emphasizes listening wholistically, with your ears and your heart, and sitting in silence. Silence is important for processing.

### Ally?

Allyship in student affairs has been mostly associated with underrepresented groups such as LGBTQ populations (e.g., Broido, 2000). The Canadian Association for College & Universities Student Services, as outlined in their "Competency Model" (Fernandez et al., 2016), identifies student advocacy and social justice as core competencies. As there are levels of competencies, consider Edwards's (2006) three definitions of allyship. An *aspiring ally* is based on self-interest. These individuals are "motivated to protect those they care about from being hurt" (p. 46). An aspiring ally acts for their friend and may not recognize systemic oppression because they see the world as fair.

Edwards (2006) defines *aspiring allies for altruism* as individuals who "as an awareness of privilege begins to develop, [seek] to engage in ally behavior as a means of dealing with the guilt that becomes a primary underlying, often unconscious, motivator" (p. 49). This process can be emotional, as people may display defensive behaviour, point out problematic behaviour in others, and see "the subordinate group as the sole victims of oppression" (p. 50). It is not uncommon for "White saviour" behaviour to be seen at this level.

According to Edwards (2006), an *ally for social justice* works with oppressed groups to "end the system of oppression" (p. 51). At this level, individuals seek knowledge and are open to criticism. Edwards (2006) advises that the levels in his model are fluid.

Reflection is a way to strengthen ally development. Broido and Reason (2005) write that "self-understanding" can "provide the foundation on which sustainable ally identity and actions are built" (p. 82). In the previous sections we shared the complexities of ISCs and engagement with the 4Rs as a foundation for working with us. Self-reflection—such as asking yourself why you want to help, where you stand within systems of oppression, and who your work will benefit—can offset the "White saviour" complex sometimes associated with allyship and service learning (Love, 2019). Becoming an ally in reconciliation requires self-reflection and learning about settler colonialism and higher education's role in maintaining that system.

A more recent "ally" term is "co-conspirator in social justice." These individuals commit to a cause, but prioritize respecting members' desires and goals, understanding that this sometimes means stepping back (Waterman, 2023). A settler reconciliation co-conspirator chooses to learn and respectfully listen. They are active supporters and educators, *with* ISCs, not *for* ISCs, and follow Indigenous leadership. Love (2019) writes that "co-conspirator functions as a

verb" (p. 117). As higher education professionals, co-conspirators may have a deeper understanding of higher education policies and language and have access to additional resources.

Co-conspirators (some also use the term "accomplices") and allies for social justice involve some risk, because questioning policies and pushing back against settler–colonial structures—such as blanket financial aid policies, hiring policies, unfair spiritual and grief policies, and campus expansion, for example—can bring unanticipated attention and increased visibility because of their actions.

Next, we share ways to be a good relative and neighbour in reconciliation. The concept of being a *good neighbour* draws on Borrows and Tully's (2018) introduction to their edited book *Resurgence and Reconciliation*. In addition, *good relative*, a term often used by traditional Knowledge Holders, implies a higher level of compassion through a relational lens that we are all related.

## Be Welcoming

We cannot emphasize enough the importance of listening when it comes to our non-Indigenous colleagues wishing to be better allies, neighbours, or accomplices. Such listening will likely take many conversations, resulting in an investment of time. That investment will not be overlooked. Some first steps for those wanting to become better allies, neighbours, or accomplices can be:

- Learn about where you are: Who are the peoples, animals, and plants, for example, of this place? Be responsible to place.
- Self-educate: Read independently, engage in workshops, seek out documentaries, and join a book club.
- Get involved: Visit pow-wows and large socials; friendship centres as well will often have programming—check their websites for events.
- Reflect, reflect, reflect: Consider starting a personal journal.

What are other ways to engage in being part of creating and sustaining a welcoming environment so that actions are not just "check-box" gestures that are one-and-done (Pidgeon, 2016a)?

## Be a Good Neighbour

Sometimes ISCs share office space with other units; For example, student affairs/services units often partner with other units in programming. Orientation may be headed by one department but involves many other offices and staff as well. When one department is developing programming, they should consider partnering with the ISC. When the ISC asks for assistance, sit and listen, as what they need may require "out of the box" thinking. If the ISC does not want to partner, remember that resourcing is always a challenge and gracefully step back. Working together makes all units and institutions stronger and supports students holistically. Some institutions have a working group of people who hold similar roles in different departments and meet monthly to learn from each other and to provide support. From a communal lens, attendance at diverse departmental events can help develop a "familiar face" or "seen face" (L. Smith, 2021). By showing up at events, staff can increase their credibility with students and staff.

Before concluding, we ask the reader to think about spatial agency. Dalla Costa (2021) defines spatial agency as "the social structures, physical relations, organizational structures, and the production of knowledges" (p. 102). Where Indigenous agency is visible, the space is culturally relevant. Every day, ISCs exercise spatial agency (Cunningham, 2022; Dalla Costa, 2021): in their vision, the documents in the space, the art and architecture, in who utilizes the space and how, in participation and consultation with the Indigenous community, and in lived daily experience. We ask the reader to engage in cross-cultural education to combat the cultural illiteracy mentioned earlier. Together, we can increase accountability and shared responsibility. Consider the role you and your office play in truth and reconciliation. Have you taken the time to listen, learn, and engage in truth-telling

with respect to Indigenous Peoples' lived experiences and the impact of colonization? Have you created spaces of inclusion for Indigenous Peoples in decision-making processes? Have you engaged with Indigenous scholars, Indigenous scholarly work, and traditional Knowledge Holders in teaching, learning, research, and in providing support services for Indigenous students? As individuals and within our organizational structures, we are reminded that:

> There is a place for good neighbours to engage appropriately and respectfully in social justice movements as good neighbours, by listening, supporting, and providing space [for] Indigenous voices and advocating for programs and resources for anti-Indigenous racism in education. (Cunningham, 2022, p. 174)

Through thoughtful consideration, there is potential for societal transformation of systems that have traditionally oppressed and marginalized others (Ahmed, 2002) and an opportunity to address reconciliation through education.

## CONCLUSION

Indigenization, decolonization, and reconciliation movements in higher education over the past five decades have required Indigenous students, faculty, and staff to advocate, make, and create culturally safe and culturally relevant teaching, learning, and research spaces—not only for Indigenous Peoples, but for Indigenous knowledge systems. As Sami scholar Rauna Kuokkanen (2008) notes, "'the institution of knowing' is going to depend on the recognition of the gift of Indigenous epistemes" (p. 7), and recognition of that gift is "vital to the well-being of Indigenous people in the academy" (p. 7). This gift is not only disseminated through the work of Indigenous scholars, but also carried in the lived experiences and embodied presence of Indigenous students, faculty, and staff as they engage in their heartwork while studying or working at higher education institutions. For Indigenous Peoples and knowledge systems to thrive in meaningful and respectful ways within an education system founded on the principles of cognitive imperialism (Battiste, 2011), we need to pull together to transform the teaching, learning, and research environments that we are all a part of. In this light, there is a need for "good relatives" to engage in transformation of the academy as both learned and compassionate allies, supporters, advocates, and co-conspirators actively engaged in acts of decolonization, contributing to a mindful journey toward the realization of *transformative reconciliation* (Borrows & Tully, 2018).

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