OUSA
Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

Walking Between Two Worlds: Indigenous Wellness in Post-Secondary Education

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Positionality

I approach this review as an Italian and Mohawk Wolf Clan woman from Six Nations of the Grand River and a fourth-year Bachelor of Public Health student with a minor in Indigenous Studies at Brock University. I bring first-hand experience navigating post-secondary mental health supports as an Indigenous student, which deepens my understanding of how institutional structures, campus culture, and the availability of culturally relevant supports shape mental health outcomes. Additionally, my work with the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance as the Indigenous Policy Intern, my role as Southern Youth Director for the Ontario Native Women's Association, and my experience supporting Indigenous students on campus have shaped my understanding of the barriers and supports that influence Indigenous students' mental health in post-secondary education. These experiences inform my interpretation of the literature and my awareness of the systemic, cultural, and relational factors that affect Indigenous well-being in academic spaces.
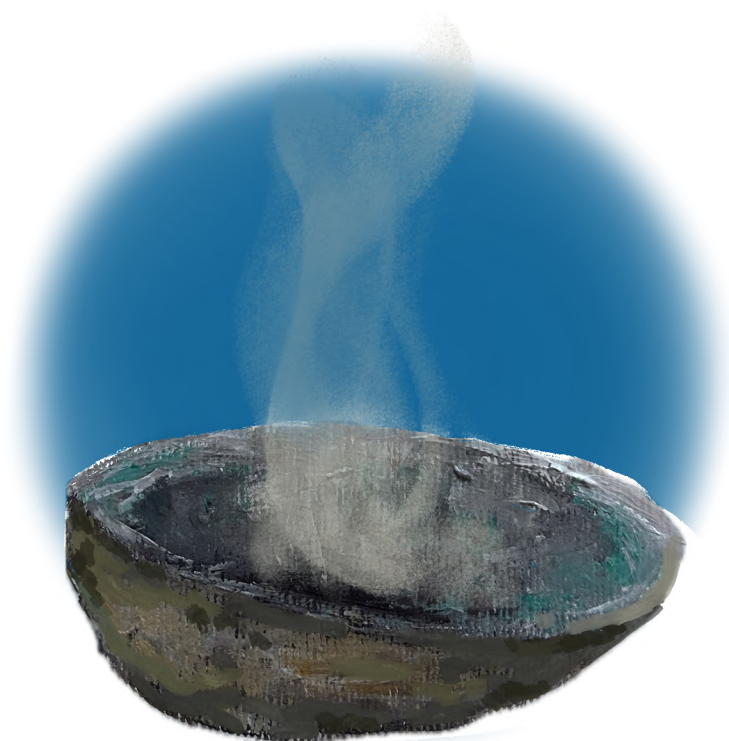
Artist's Note

The illustrations created for this literature was primarily done by-hand. Each piece was primarily painted by Emily, with acrylic paint on canvas paper, which intends to celebrate and show her appreciation for the human connection and spiritual intention behind the art. With so much art solely created digitally, there is a common assumption that professional projects will or should appear 'clean', crisp and digitalized. Creating these elements primarily by hand, and to see the grain of each painted project shine through in its digitized form, was done with intention.The painting featured on the title page- showing two hands together, delicately holding a medicine bag with a beaded medicine wheel- intends to shine light on the theme Sophia speaks on through-out her paper: the importance of Indigenous student cultural supports on student mental health. It represents both the cultural strength, resilience and delicate appreciation for coming together to preserve and appreciate sacred medicine and the medicine wheel, representing community, culture and sacred interconnectedness. Having two hands come together, adorned in warm light, signifies the peace that culture and connection provides.
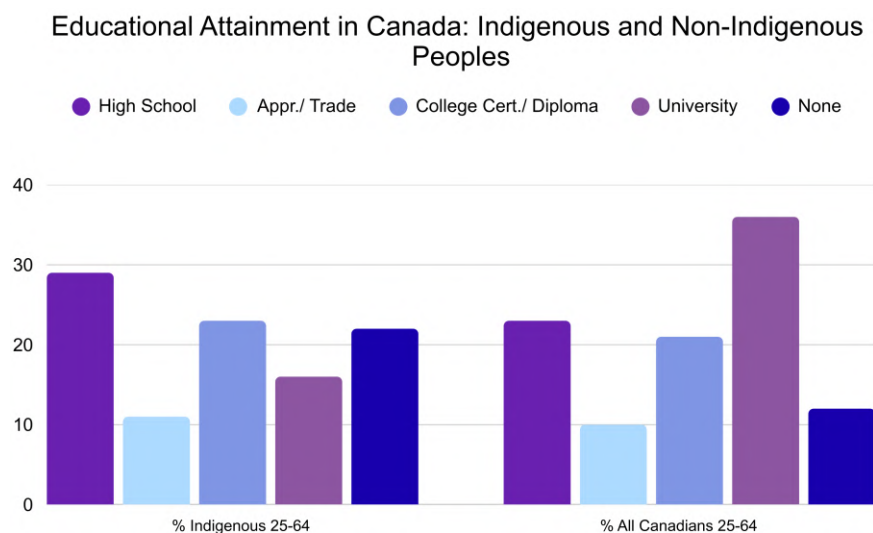
Emily DuBois Brooks

Introduction

For this literature review, the focus will be on Indigenous groups in Canada, encompassing First Nations, Inuit, and Métis. However, due to the lack of research on each specific population, it is difficult to assess the variations of each group. As a result, this review will mainly discuss the generalizations of Indigenous populations in Canada.

Research has consistently found that Indigenous students face unique challenges in post-secondary education, particularly related to mental health, cultural and community connection, and financial pressures, all of which can hinder their academic success. A study by Hop Wo et al (2020)[1] found that Indigenous students attending Canadian post-secondary institutions are more likely to experience mental health issues, including a diagnosis of depression or anxiety, increased self-harm, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts, and higher rates of binge drinking, marijuana, and other substance use compared to their non-Indigenous peers. These mental health disparities are rooted in both historical and ongoing systemic factors.

Key Statistics

The 2021 Canadian Census revealed that fewer than half (49.2%) of Indigenous individuals aged 25 to 64 had earned a post-secondary certificate, diploma, or degree, a rate significantly lower than that of non-Indigenous people (68.0%). Post-secondary attainment rates were 45.3% for First Nations, 56.3% for Métis, and 33.6% for Inuit. The most commonly achieved level of education for both Indigenous men and women was a college, collège d'enseignement général et professionnel (CEGEP), or other non-university certificate or diploma.[2]

Educational Attainment in Canada: Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Peoples

● High School　● Appr./ Trade　● College Cert./ Diploma　● University　● None

1 Hop Wo, Nolan K, Kelly K Anderson, Lloy Wylie, and Arlene MacDougall. "The Prevalence of Distress, Depression, Anxiety, and Substance Use Issues among Indigenous Post-Secondary Students in Canada." Transcultural Psychiatry, 2020. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31575332/.

2 Melvin, Alexandria. "Postsecondary educational attainment and labour market outcomes among Indigenous peoples in Canada, findings from the 2021 Census." Statistics Canada, 2023. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2023001/article/00012-eng.htm.

Data from Statistics Canada's Survey Series on First Nations, Métis and Inuit (2024) found that nearly half (47%) of off-reserve First Nations, 43% of Métis, and 35% of Inuit reported needing mental health support within the previous year. Women in all three groups, First Nations, Métis, and Inuit, were more likely than men to report needing mental health care. Younger individuals in these populations were also more likely to report a need for mental health support compared to older age groups, with notable gaps between the youngest and oldest respondents. Among those who sought help, only 28% of off-reserve First Nations, 23% of Métis, and 22% of Inuit said their mental health care needs were fully met. The vast majority, nearly 75%, reported that their needs were either only partially met or not met at all.

Furthermore, the majority of First Nations people living off reserve (86%), Métis (70%) and Inuit (82%) reported that it was very or somewhat important to have health care services that support Indigenous traditional medicines, healing and wellness practices.

Contributing Factors

Indigenous students in post-secondary education face a range of complex, overlapping factors that negatively impact their mental health. These challenges stem from both structural and cultural barriers embedded within Canada's broader colonial legacy, which continues to shape educational institutions through systemic racism, the marginalization of Indigenous knowledge systems, and the intergenerational impacts of assimilationist policies, such as residential schools. As a result, mainstream health and mental health services in Canada are often not adapted to the distinct needs of Indigenous Peoples, resulting in a significant lack of Indigenous-specific services.[5][6][7] As a result, Indigenous individuals, particularly youth, receive less health care overall, despite facing greater mental health challenges.[8][9] This systemic neglect is exacerbated in post-secondary contexts, where institutional structures frequently fail to reflect Indigenous perspectives, cultures, or support needs.

Indigenous students must also navigate academic environments that were not designed with them in mind. Many institutions continue to operate within a colonial framework that offers minimal Indigenous representation[10], lacks cultural integration, and provides little in the way of culturally safe services[11].

3 "Health Care Access and Experiences among Indigenous People, 2024." Statistics Canada, 2024. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/241104/dq241104a-eng.htm.

4 Ibid

5 Tu, David, George Hadjipavlou, Jennifer Dehoney, Elder Roberta Price, Caleb Dusdal, Annette J Browne, and Colleen Varcoe. "Partnering with Indigenous Elders in Primary Care Improves Mental Health Outcomes of Inner-City Indigenous Patients: Prospective Cohort Study." Canadian Family Physician, 2019. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6467659/.

6 Kitching, George Tjensvoll, Michelle Firestone, Berit Schei, Sara Wolfe, Cheryllee Bourgeois, Patricia O'Campo, Michael Rotondi, Rosane Nisenbaum, Raglan Maddox, and Janet Smylie. "Unmet Health Needs and Discrimination by Healthcare Providers among an Indigenous Population in Toronto, Canada." Canadian Journal of Public Health, 2020. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm. nih.gov/articles/PMC7046890/.

7 Montesanti, Stephanie, Kayla Fitzpatrick, Bryan Fayant, and Caillie Pritchard. "Identifying Priorities, Directions and a Vision for Indigenous Mental Health Using a Collaborative and Consensus-Based Facilitation Approach." BMC Health Services Research, 2022. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8958486/.

8 Carrier, Leah, Hwayeon Danielle Shin, Melissa A Rothfus, and Janet A Curran. "Protective and Resilience Factors to Promote Mental Health among Indigenous Youth in Canada: A Scoping Review Protocol." BMJ open, 2022. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8765014/.

9 Ibid

10 Orlowski, Paul, and Micheal Cottrell. "From Colonialism to Neocolonialism: Indigenous Learners and Saskatchewan's Education Debt." New Proposals: Journal of Marxism and Interdisciplinary Inquiry, 2019. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/337568079_From_Colonialism_to_Neocolonialism_Indigenous_Learners_and_Saskatchewan's_Education_Debt.

11 Culturally safe services are supports that provide students with an environment of respect and trust, where their cultural identity is affirmed, and where systemic inequities and power imbalances are actively acknowledged and addressed.

On top of this, students are often subjected to microaggressions and systemic racism, while navigating the ongoing effects of intergenerational trauma. These experiences increase the risk for mental health challenges and discourage help-seeking. The erasure of Indigenous histories and cultures from campus spaces contributes to a larger pattern of exclusion. As Johnston-Goodar and Roholt (2017)[12] and Shankar et al. (2020)[13] argue, this absence signals to Indigenous students that they are unimportant or invisible within both the institution and broader Canadian society, which can significantly harm their mental health and academic persistence.

In addition to cultural exclusion and systemic neglect, many Indigenous students face socioeconomic and geographic challenges that compound mental health stressors. Leaving home communities to pursue education, dealing with financial insecurity, and experiencing housing instability all contribute to heightened mental health concerns.[14] For many, these stressors are more overwhelming than academic difficulty itself. St. Germaine and D'Antimo (2023)[15] found that students frequently cited mental health issues, exacerbated by financial strain, academic pressure, and intergenerational trauma, as the primary barrier to completing their degrees. Similarly, Indspire's 2023 National Education Survey reported that 70% of Indigenous student respondents experienced financial hardship, 73% felt the stress of fulfilling multiple obligations, and 69% identified mental health as a major challenge in their educational journey.[16]

12 VeLure Roholt, Ross, and Katie Johnston-Goodstar. "'Our Kids Aren't Dropping Out; They're Being Pushed Out': Native American Students and Racial Microaggressions in Schools." Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work, 2017. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/313584876_Our_Kids_Aren't_Dropping_Out_They're_Being_Pushed_Out_Native_American_Students_and_Racial_Microaggressions_in_Schools

13 Shankar, Janki, Eugene Ip, and Ernest Nene Khalema. "Addressing Academic Aspirations, Challenges, and Barriers of Indigenous and Immigrant Students in a Postsecondary Education" Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work, 2020. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15313204.2017.1409675.

14 "Following the Path." Indspire, 2021. https://indspire.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Following-the-Path-Report-EN-FINAL-WEB-1.pdf.

St. Germaine, Nicholas, and Shawna D'Antimo. "An Introspective Look into Barriers and Facilitators to Accessing Post-Secondary Indigenous Support." Indspire, 2023. https://indspire.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Indspire-Barriers-and-Facilitators-to-Support-Report.pdf.

15 D'Antimo, Shawna. "Building Brighter Futures for Indigenous Learners: Insights into the National Education Survey." Indspire, 2024. https://indspire.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/NES-Building-Brighter-Futures-Report-Final.pdf.

16 D'Antimo, Shawna. "Building Brighter Futures for Indigenous Learners: Insights into the National Education Survey." Indspire, 2024. https://indspire.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/NES-Building-Brighter-Futures-Report-Final.pdf.

Protective Factors/Strengths

Improving mental health among Indigenous students in post-secondary education is essential, particularly given the ongoing effects of colonialism and intergenerational trauma, which have had lasting negative impacts on the mental well-being of Indigenous Peoples. Protective factors — the cultural, social, and personal supports that strengthen resilience — must be understood through a culturally grounded and holistic lens. From an Indigenous worldview, mental health is deeply connected to history, identity, and language. [17]

One of the most significant protective factors for Indigenous students is a strong sense of belonging, which has been shown to buffer against academic and personal stress.[18][19] This sense of belonging can be nurtured not only through culturally safe spaces on campus but also through the integration of Indigenous languages and cultural practices in post-secondary settings. Indigenous languages are central to cultural identity[20] and learning, understanding, or speaking them can serve as a powerful cultural resource that enhances a student's connection to their community and heritage.[21][22] As such, language reclamation and cultural engagement play a critical role in maintaining cultural integrity, fostering belonging, and ultimately improving mental health outcomes for Indigenous students. By centering these strengths within mental health initiatives, institutions can promote resilience and support holistic wellness for Indigenous learners.

17 Lavallee, Lynn F, and Jennifer M Poole. "Beyond Recovery: Colonization, Health and Healing for Indigenous People in Canada." International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction, 2010. https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11469-009-9239-8.

18 Gopalan, Maithreyi, and Shannon T Brady. "College Students' Sense of Belonging: A National Perspective." Educational Researcher, 2020. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11156233/.

19 Gopalan, Maithreyi, Ashley Linden-Carmichael, and Stephanie Lanza. "College Students' Sense of Belonging and Mental Health Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic." The Journal of Adolescent Health, February 2021. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8741285/.

20 Sterzuk, Andrea, and Russell Fayant. "Towards Reconciliation Through Language Planning for Indigenous Languages in Canadian Universities." Current Issues in Language Planning , 2016. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14664208.2016.1201239.

21 Ibid

22 Ibid

23 Chatoor, Ken, Natalie Pilla, Lena Balata, Haleemah Shah, and Amy Kaufman. "Supporting Student Mental Health in Ontario: Exploring Best Practices and Identifying Gaps." Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, 2023. https://heqco.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Supporting-Student-Mental-Health-in-Ontario-FINAL-ENGLISH-VERSION.pdf.

Barriers to Accessing Support

Indigenous students encounter multiple barriers when seeking support during their post-secondary education, particularly when it comes to accessing mental health services. A scan conducted by HEQCO (2023)[23] of Ontario's 44 publicly funded post-secondary institutions' websites revealed that only about 50% referenced culturally responsive services, such as Indigenous counsellors. This limited visibility reflects broader issues of structural accessibility. While 91% of public Canadian universities have counseling services, many lack the capacity to meet the needs of all students.[24] For Indigenous students seeking culturally grounded mental health support, these challenges are intensified by the limited availability of staff.[25]

In addition to service shortages, lack of awareness is another significant barrier. Several studies have found that many students are simply unaware of the mental health resources available to them.[26][27] As a result, students have recommended that institutions not only expand their mental health service capacity but also improve outreach and visibility to ensure that supports are more accessible and well-publicized.[28]

Stigma also plays a major role in deterring help-seeking behaviour. Both private stigma (self-judgment) and public stigma (fear of judgment from others) were identified across cultural contexts as barriers to accessing mental health care.[29][30][31] This suggests a need for post-secondary institutions to address stigma directly through awareness campaigns, peer education, and the normalization of mental health discussions, especially within culturally safe spaces designed to support Indigenous students.

24 Jaworska, Natalia, Elisea De Somma, Bernice Fonseka, Emma Heck, and Glenda M MacQueen. "Mental Health Services for Students at Postsecondary Institutions: A National Survey." Canadian Journal of Psychiatry, 2016. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5564891/.

25 Ibid

26 Baik, Chi, Wendy Larcombe, and Abi Brooker. "How Universities Can Enhance Student Mental Wellbeing: The Student Perspective." Higher Education Research & Development, 2019. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/07294360.2019.1576596.

27 Bighead, Lisa. "Helping Indigenous Students at First Nations University of Canada to Thrive." Royal Roads University, 2019. https://www.viurrspace.ca/server/api/core/bitstreams/c8bc1be4-bf3e-4858-a71e-7a30ee19f2c2/content.

28 Ibid

29 George, Julie, Melody Morton Ninomiya, and Samantha Wells. "The Rationale for Developing a Programme of Services by and for Indigenous Men in a First Nations Community." AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples , 2019. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1177180119841620.

30 Martinez, Andrea B, Melissa Co, Jennifer Lau, and June S L Brown. "Filipino Help-Seeking for Mental Health Problems and Associated Barriers and Facilitators: A Systematic Review." Social psychiatry and psychiatric epidemiology, November 2020. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7578164/.

31 Tuliao, Antover. "Public and Private Stigma, and Help-Seeking Intent for Mental Health Issues: A Cross-Country Comparison Between the U.S. and Philippines." Stigma and Health, 2024. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349818686_Public_and_private_stigma_and_help-seeking_intent_for_mental_health_issues_A_cross-country_comparison_between_the_US_and_Philippines.

Promising Practices

Effective approaches to improving Indigenous mental health in post-secondary education prioritize supports that are culturally grounded, community-driven, and accessible. In recognition of the increased mental health challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ontario government allocated $7 million in February 2021 and an additional $2.39 million in May 2021 to enhance mental health programming for Black, Indigenous, and Francophone students in post-secondary institutions.[32] These targeted investments have allowed institutions to expand mental health services that reflect Indigenous knowledge systems and cultural values.

Findings from George et al., (2019)[33] emphasize the healing value of traditional practices such as sweat lodge ceremonies, drum circles, and access to traditional healers, particularly for Indigenous men. These methods were seen as more effective than conventional Western therapies because they addressed the historical and cultural roots of trauma, including the impacts of colonization and disconnection from identity.

As such, promising practices must include dedicated space and funding for ceremony, culturally informed mental health programming led by Indigenous communities, and the involvement of Elders and Knowledge Keepers in support roles. These culturally responsive frameworks provide safe and affirming environments for Indigenous students to navigate mental health challenges, reclaim cultural identity, and foster resilience within post-secondary institutions.

32 Ibid
33 Ibid

Recommendations

To improve the mental health of Indigenous students in post-secondary education, institutions must take a holistic and culturally grounded approach that aligns with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action.[34][35] Specifically, Call to Action #7 urges the federal government to work with Indigenous communities to eliminate educational and employment gaps, while Call to Action #9 calls for transparency in funding and outcomes for Indigenous students compared to non-Indigenous students. These gaps contribute directly to disparities in mental health, as access to equitable education and economic opportunity are key determinants of well-being.

- #7: We call upon the federal government to develop with Aboriginal groups a joint strategy to eliminate educational and employment gaps between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians.

- #9: We call upon the federal government to prepare and publish annual reports comparing funding for the education of First Nations children on and off reserves, as well as educational and income attainments of Aboriginal peoples in Canada compared with non-Aboriginal people.

With reconciliation and education equity comes healing. This healing is linked to improved perceived mental health, which is not only essential to the academic success and career development of Indigenous students but also critical to disrupting cycles of intergenerational trauma that have been reinforced by colonization and the residential school system. Importantly, healing must move beyond Western clinical models and instead recognize the interconnectedness of the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of well-being, consistent with Indigenous worldviews.[36] This requires institutions to not only offer conventional mental health supports but also expand them to include culturally appropriate and community-informed approaches. This may include integrating traditional healers and Elders within campus life, and strengthening cultural competency training for faculty, students, and mental health care professionals. [37]

34 "Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action." National Centre for Truth & Reconciliation, 2015. https://new.nctr.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf.

35 To see up-to-date status reports on each call to action by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, visit https://www.cbc.ca/newsinteractives/beyond-94?&cta=84.

36 Ibid

37 Ibid

38 Herkimer, Jaiden, and Megan Earle. "The Importance of Indigenous Languages: An Investigation of Sense of Belonging and Mental Health Among Students and Non-Students." Indspire, 2022. https://indspire.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/The-Importance-of-Indigenous-Languages-An-Investigation-of-Sense-of-Belonging-and-Mental-Health-Among-Students-and-Non-Students-FINAL.pdf.
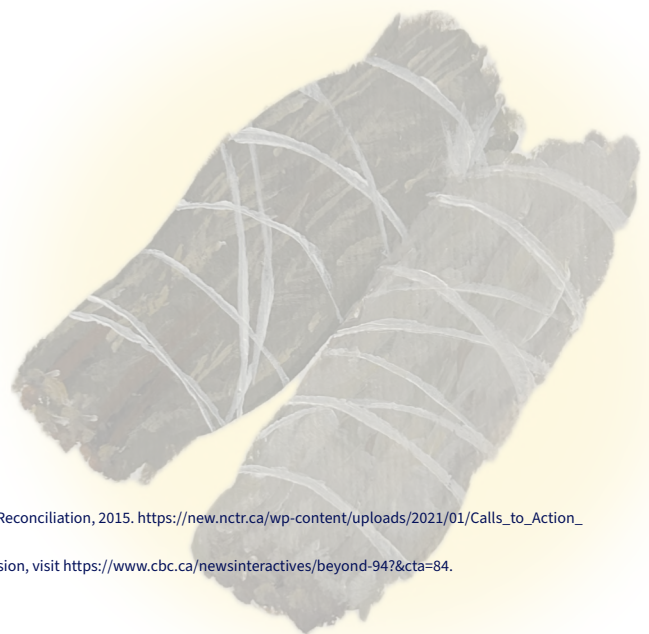
In conjunction, the integration of Indigenous languages and cultural content into post-secondary education has been proven to increase cultural integrity and sense of belonging.[38] Small acts like incorporating Indigenous languages into courses, signage, and student support services help to validate and uplift Indigenous ways of knowing. This promotes cultural safety, increases students' sense of belonging, and reinforces their self-worth. All of which are protective factors that reduce the risk of mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, and isolation. Creating opportunities for Indigenous students to see themselves and their communities reflected in their learning environment contributes to long-term resilience and well-being.

Another critical strategy is the recruitment and retention of Indigenous mental health practitioners. Many Indigenous students come from communities where healthcare services, particularly culturally relevant mental health care, are scarce. In rural, remote, or Northern regions, access to practitioners may require extensive travel, which can lead to gaps in care and feelings of disconnection. By offering incentives, such as tuition subsidies, competitive salaries, or funding for continuing education, institutions can work to build a network of Indigenous professionals equipped to support their peers within campus settings. These practitioners are often uniquely positioned to understand the historical and cultural contexts of trauma, making them better able to deliver effective, empathetic support.[39]

When institutional budgets do not allow for the hiring of full-time Indigenous counsellors, a promising solution is to form partnerships with local mental health organizations. Some Indigenous student support centres have successfully partnered with these agencies to bring in counsellors on a part-time or rotating basis. These partnerships are valuable because they not only extend the reach of services, but also connect students to a broader network of support, increasing the likelihood that they will find a practitioner who meets their specific cultural or mental health needs.[40] Such models are particularly important for institutions with small Indigenous student populations, where funding a full-time position may not be feasible. However, even in these cases, ensuring that some form of culturally competent mental health support is consistently available must remain a priority.

For recommendations focused on improving Indigenous students' post-secondary educational experience in Ontario, explore OUSA's Indigenous Students Policy Paper available at www.ousa.ca/policies.

39 McGuire, Michaela. "Let's Talk About Indigenous Mental Health: Trauma, Suicide & Settler Colonialism." Yellowhead Institute, 2022. https://yellowheadinstitute.org/2022/lets-talk-about-indigenous-mental-health-trauma-suicide-settler-colonialism/.

40 Ibid

Resources

Hope for Wellness Help Line

- If you require immediate support, please contact the Hope for Wellness Help Line at 1-855-242-3310 to access toll-free, 24/7 counselling and crisis intervention. Hope for Wellness Help Line offers immediate mental health counselling and crisis intervention to all Indigenous peoples across Canada. Experienced Helpline counsellors, many are Indigenous, can help if asked to find wellness supports that are available in your area.

National Indian Residential Schools Crisis Line

- Crisis support is available to former Indian Residential School students and their families 24 hours a day, 7 days a week at 1-866-925-4419 (toll-free).

Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Crisis Line

- Crisis support is available to individuals impacted by the issue of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people 24 hours a day, 7 days a week at 1-844-413-6649 (toll-free).

Crisis Services Canada: Dial or text 9-8-8

- If you or someone you know is thinking about suicide, call or text 9-8-8. Support is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
- Support is: bilingual, trauma-informed, culturally appropriate, and available to anyone in Canada

Kids Help Phone

- Call 1-800-668-6868 (toll-free) or text CONNECT to 686868. Available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to Canadians aged 5 to 29 who want confidential and anonymous care from trained responders.
- Visit the Kids Help Phone website for online chat support or to access online resources for children and youth.

Noojimo Health (Canada-wide All-Indigenous Virtual Mental Wellness Clinic):

- 1.833.277.5678 or https://noojimohealth.ca/index.php