

On the (In)Comparability of Indigenous Community-Based Research Within University Merit Systems

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Abstract: *Through equity, diversity, inclusion, and decolonization, universities attempt to prioritize Indigenous scholars and knowledge systems. However, there are key problems with the structure of evaluation and performance that Indigenous scholars like myself are placed in. Bringing forward a Nêhiyawak, Four-Spirit, perspective, I challenge the university merit system and evaluation process by defining accountability, authenticity, intentionality, relationality, and reciprocity within a Nation-specific approach for cross-cultural knowledge sharing to the broader public. While there have been calls to support emerging Indigenous scholars, the systems we find ourselves in are still problematic and fail to address the key roots of White dominance and control that we face daily.*

Keywords: *community-based research, Indigenous, merit systems, resurgence, university*

Résumé : *Par l'intermédiaire de l'équité, de la diversité, de l'inclusion et de la décolonisation, les universités tentent d'accorder la priorité aux chercheurs/chercheuses et aux systèmes de connaissances autochtones. Cependant, il existe des problèmes clés avec la structure de l'évaluation et le rendement attendu de chercheuses autochtones comme moi-même. Dans une perspective Nêhiyawak, quadrispirituelle, je remets en question le système de mérite universitaire et le processus d'évaluation en définissant la responsabilité, l'authenticité, l'intention, les relations et la réciprocité dans le cadre d'une approche spécifique aux nations pour la mise en commun de connaissances interculturelles avec un public élargi. Alors qu'on entend parler de la nécessité d'appuyer de nouveaux chercheurs/nouvelles chercheuses autochtones, les systèmes dans lesquels nous devons évoluer restent problématiques et ne s'attaquent pas aux principales racines de la domination et du contrôle blancs auxquels nous sommes confrontés chaque jour.*

Mots clés : *recherche communautaire, autochtone, systèmes de mérite, renouveau, université*

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, universities have increased their focus on Indigenous research. This, in some measure, is an extension of settler state efforts to incorporate Indigenous knowledge into mainstream institutions through equity, diversity, inclusion, and decolonization (EDID) initiatives. Despite the good intentions, fundamental flaws and tensions endure.

Through a focus on the Western Door and Northern Door, this article braids two approaches for working in a good way with Indigenous people. The first comes from the traditional teachings that value health, fairness, respect, and being relevant. The second comes from the knowledge passed down through generations by our ancestors and Elders. By understanding both of these perspectives, readers can understand what it means to be a good relative and be respectful of Indigenous ways of knowing.

To give readers a glimpse of the world that I carry, I narrow in on Nêhiyawak, Four-Spirit-specific literature and experiences to do so. In particular, I critique how universities use measures of “excellence” and “productivity” to define “merit” in ways that impair Indigenous research. In place of this system of quantified knowledge, I propose a design based on accountability and authenticity, intentionality, and relationality and reciprocity. This approach, called AAIRR for short, is a more appropriate way to evaluate how teaching methods are created and maintain relationships with and for communities.

In the current academic system, Indigenous research is expected to be published in journals with a high “impact factor” or shared in the “right places.” Doing so denies a crucial teaching of Indigenous knowledges. That is, as scholars, we are responsible first and foremost to our communities. Indigenous and community-based scholars face challenges because our work is rooted in different philosophical and ontological realities. We, therefore, should be recognized for our service and contributions to community well-being rather than being forced to obsess about publishing for a narrow, elite audience or seeking validation through citation counts.

This article aims to inform readers, especially those in administrative and committee roles, to reassess and address how the evaluation of Indigenous community-based research is conducted. Many universities reward research that adheres to a strictly Western approach. So, they never consider how Indigenous Knowledge Keepers and peoples co-produce, create, and share knowledge from and with community. Because of this, the evaluation of Indigenous community-based research is held within the confines of colonial objectives of extraction, exploitation, and erasure.

Academic evaluation frameworks effortlessly ignore, undervalue, and minimize the work of Indigenous or community-based scholars. Placing Indigenous research in merit systems tied to annual production causes unfathomable harm and disconnect. When this occurs in Indigenous community-based research, we prioritize settler-colonial standards that endorse Whiteness and White superiority in higher education, normalizing research, production, and knowledge

mobilization that undermines meaningful thought and the true impact of the work. In order to confront these deficiencies in evaluation design, this text extends the discussion beyond the academy and into everyday resurgence for Indigenous peoples that is based on real impact rather than performative accolades.

INTERNALIZED COLONIAL IDEOLOGIES OF EDID

Should we abandon the values and sacrifices that brought us to where we are today? Or are we being forced to accept “opportunities” that our communities do not recognize as being part of our way of life? These questions are important because we face new settler mandates for EDID within institutions that still minimize our presence.

Black, Indigenous, and people of colour are acutely aware of how to act, speak, and often think within an institution that is not made for us. For Indigenous peoples, one of the most stressing aspects of the academy and the neo-liberal institutions in Canada is the idea that hiring Indigenous scholars will, in and of itself, satisfy reconciliation initiatives and the promotion of decolonial mandates. While these hires and initiatives are often well intentioned, not everyone is on board, and the system in place will drive the existing colonial policies forward, therefore maintaining its dominance and control. As a result, eager young Indigenous academics looking to push the boundaries for collective improvement are treated as a problem when it turns out that their commitments differ from standard academic measures or expectations. They will seek out their colleagues, chairs, or deans, and heartbreak will come when they hear, “That’s the way it is done.” No more, no less. You will sit in meetings hearing about Indigenization and the importance of your presence, but you sulk as you are given a temporary solution that asks you to code-switch and assimilate by adopting White cultural norms or better known to me and my people as *môniyâw*, meaning “not of us,” and I add not of our heart, soul, or power.

Gaslighting becomes the way for committees, colleagues, and administration to say, “Oh, I did not see it that way,” when we are not the first scholars of colour to walk through these doors. We will question our reality with the truth before us, and cognitive dissonance becomes all too real. As Indigenous people, our intuitions and overall knowledge of microaggressions tell us when we are compromised and make us question who we can trust. This creates an internalized issue where we feel like an imposter within the institution. What’s worse, however, is that when we look at ourselves in the mirror, we question if we have compromised our principles and ethics of how we want to live. How easy it must be to never live without the voices and perceptions of others in your head? What is it like to live without the emotional and mental toll of constantly working to change a system that serves Whiteness and White supremacy?

Within all our frustration with the institution is the knowledge that we, as Indigenous individuals, are expected to represent the entire community and

constantly guard against cultural stereotypes, norms, and assumptions. What is even more disheartening is the pressure to prove that we are not threats, to be “good li'l ‘nd’ns” who should be grateful for our presence and title and are to never ask for more than what the institution is ready to commit. And even if they do not get their “‘nd’n,” at first, they eventually will because minimizing and gaslighting will eventually fatigue someone into serving their interests. As such, these institutionally sanctioned behaviours normalize the fact that Indigenous peoples—by simply being reminded that they do not belong—are forced to survive in a colonial system that breaks us by exhausting us or triggering intergenerational trauma. This is especially true when universities force Indigenous scholars to be evaluated based on standards that fail to consider their way of doing research. These standards are what I like to call the “Four Es” of academia, and many Indigenous researchers feel the negative effects of these practices.

THE FOUR E’S OF ACADEMIA FOR INDIGENOUS RESEARCH(ERS)

While other professors prepare for their classes, we are actively over-preparing for questions that may be weaponized against us. In addition to being experts in our fields, we have to function as wizened spokespeople who have complete knowledge of every subject at hand. We must explain when things are jokes and when they are not as well as emphasize our humanity to dispel the perception of being a threat. And when we speak, we are constantly aware of the collective representation imposed on us. Unlike our co-workers, it means we rarely have space to consider our positionality or individuality.

The first cost of this labour is *exhaustion*—simply for existing—because we constantly need to inform and provide context. Yet, despite university claims that we belong, there are failures to ensure our physical and emotional safety. Without proper support, we are vigilant and apprehensive, as every word we use has to be measured—which, again, is something our colleagues rarely have to consider.

The second cost is an attempt at *enfranchisement*, in which colonial institutions have structural trajectories where they want us but only for the select parts of what they need for their progressive agenda. To these attempts, I say, “Do not make us part of the system that credits overworking and isolation. We cannot be isolated; we are collective and communal beings. We cannot be confined to our offices to perform, produce, and publish.” Enfranchisement of this nature is involuntary, as we are being forced into a structure that does not support us because it was not designed for us in mind. Settler colonialism is a structure and not an event (Wolfe, 2006). This is ongoing; this is not when we get here the problem arises, and it has been here long before us. Using merit-based systems to state whether we are performing or not is not based on random events; rather, these systems are built into the institutions themselves. It is difficult to see this embeddedness if you have never had to worry about it impacting your world. Nonetheless, it exists and is designed to colonize us.

On that note, *elimination* is a core component of legitimizing that attacks our humanity. Do not pick and choose what aspects of Indigenous culture, language, traditions, and community you want. You cannot bring in our embodiments of who we have always been and fail to address how harm is still being conducted within your policies and procedures, do not brush these facts under the rug for a great news article header for the “progressive” work that you are doing if it is not foundational to our needs and spirits.

Extraction works to replace us, meaning to choose to only take parts of us and not the entirety. Doing so will destroy us. Extraction takes only what it wants and not the beauty of us as a whole. Academia likes to silo us and break us down into parts that they can easily understand—this compartmentalization into hierarchies is what created the problem in the first place (see [Linnaeus, 1735/2003](#)). Much of the experiences of the Four Es lie in the tensions that exist within EDID initiatives advocated across universities that seek out Indigenous scholars.

THE TENSIONS OF EDID IN COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH

Equity, Diversity and Inclusion and Decolonization (EDID) is a façade that hides the letdowns and disillusionment that pervade universities. For most purposes, EDID focuses on surface-level issues, and it rarely takes notice of the deep-seated systemic barriers. In particular, the role of heteropatriarchy, especially for women of colour is never questioned. I recall being on an evaluation committee that thought Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) was supporting mothers in the department but not the structures in place. In everyday practice, EDID is defined by White dominance. For example, equity from an Indigenous perspective is realizing that when we are in the field conducting our gathering of knowledge, this will go beyond the typical field season and will require years of time to “research” and then publish, meaning work is still being done by Indigenous researchers, but it is not yielding fast-paced articles and knowledge dissemination—this will penalize and impact the scholar. While annual merit reviews examine the research process, they overlook the unique challenges for Indigenous scholars tied to ceremonies and the crucial maintenance of relationships with Elders, Knowledge Holders, and the community.

We are here for our community. Our communities are constantly told that we are needed in these institutions but when we are here, we find out that we are not needed. Instead, we are expected to conform to a system maintained by colleagues who refuse to appreciate our perspective or comprehend our work. This raises a vital question—What is a community? For us, it is a living entity that needs support—whether institutional or external, to support the overarching systemic injustices such as poverty or a lack of capacity building. Community is also linked to a knowledge system maintained through generations of individuals working to ensure the spirit of the knowledge is maintained. As such, expectations to publish rapidly undermine the relationships and knowledge being shared. Furthermore, because our “research” needs to be accessible to the

community, it often cannot be published to the narrow readership of top-reaching high-impact-factor academic journals.

If we are talking about impact, it will never be found in the pages of journals. The real measure is the impact it has on people like the girl who never had an Elder to teach her about menstruation or the new father who struggled to find the information he needed. As [Linda Tuhiwai Smith \(2012\)](#) in “Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples” points out, research “is one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary” (p. 1) because it, so far, has only extracted knowledge from our communities ([Wilson, 2008](#)). What we do, instead, needs to be rooted in ceremony—which is immeasurable. For there to be real diversity and inclusion, universities should consider how we extend knowledge beyond citations and the number of sources listed. It could be our presence, our humour, and, importantly, our ability to recognize the gaps and disconnections overlooked in our everyday lives. Our diversity is not about ticking a checkbox and claiming we have Indigenous representation; it is about giving knowledge the platform, respect, and reverence it deserves.

Inclusion within this system is problematic because it focuses on ensuring that we have a seat, but that seat may be restricted with a “do not talk, let us talk for you” mandate. Our words are promises ([Wheeler, 2010](#)), and when we give our word, it is bound by our teachings, so when you give us your word—do not falter, backtrack, ignore, or “forget.” We do not have the privilege of forgetting, no we carry all that we are inside of us, within our collective consciousness and blood memory that ties us to all of creation. So, when you ask us to publish or perish, our words echo every memory and tradition within us, and it takes time for us to reground ourselves and heal what has been gifted. Equity should see that spirit within our works is more powerful than publications on publications, as it is our very being.

Although inclusion may have given us a place in the university, it has never come with a guarantee that we have a voice. More often than not, we are mere invitees to conversations where we get the privilege to watch others speak for us because to hear our voices means actual change. I have seen non-Indigenous individuals jump at the opportunity to save me, wield me away from harm, shy me away as a child. I do not need that protection, and if I have asked for it, it has not been to you who thinks I need you to be my champion.

If you read this and wonder what else you should know and what else can you do, follow one of the grandfathers who have gifted us this world and creation through the natural elements. The air in our lungs breathes fire into our passion so that our words can be heard. It also moves the blood within us to channel a continuance across all our relations. We follow *yotin*, “air”—or in the context of what I write here, AAIRR.

AAIRR

The following section addresses my concepts of AAIRR. AAIRR also stands as a critique of neoliberal universities and the idea of the ‘acceptable/accepted’

scholar as an individual that is unlinked to the world which is not seen as necessary to the academic effort, or the much-needed work properly engaged in by the institution.

Accountability and authenticity

Nitisiyihkàson Sipiħkokisikowiskwêw, my name is Blue Sky Woman, and I am a Nêhiyawiskwêw, Four-Spirit woman, and a citizen of Samson Cree Nation in Maskwacis, Alberta. I am the daughter of Paul (*Little Bird*) and Luci (*One Who Works with Creator*) Johnson (Nêhiyaw), granddaughter of Chris Johnson (Nêhiyaw), Ginger Wildcat (Nêhiyaw), late Fred Hodgson (Metis), and late Grace Swampy (Nêhiyaw), and great granddaughter of those in our Spirit World including Louise Wakeno (Nêhiyaw) and James Johnson (Nêhiyaw), George Piche (Nêhiyaw) and Emma Child (Nêhiyaw), Magnus Swampy (Nakota) and Sara Lee (Nêhiyaw), and Frederick Hodgson (Môniyâw) and Melvina Minde (Nêhiyaw). My accountability is to the three generations above me and those three who may come below me. I share this lineage, also known as the Seven Generations, taught to us through the teachings of the stars and of our hands since the work that I do is in line with the lives of these individuals.

Although generations apart, everyone has had a role in my teachings and how I come to know. I am accountable to these individuals because I carry their lived experiences in my blood memory (Struthers, 2000). Since I connect to the past, I am also accountable to those that are to come, and this includes those that I interact with and educate, both *iyiniwak* (Indigenous) and *Môniyâwak* (not of us).

My accountability is not only to my family but also to the territory and Nation that I have identified. The territory of Maskwacis is within Treaty Six and home to the four Nations of Samson Cree Nation, Ermineskin Cree Nation, Montana Cree Nation, and Louis Bull Tribe. My descent through the Piche and Child family lines connects to Chief Ermineskin, the name holder of the present-day Ermineskin Cree Nation and a signatory to the adhesion of Treaty Six. Therefore, I am accountable for his intention for this territory and the treaty relationship he envisioned. This reality is not only of great importance but also in the care about the work that I do. I must hold myself within authenticity because I do not have the ability within my teachings of humility, honesty, and respect to act otherwise. *The Seven Grandfather teachings* of wisdom, love, respect, bravery, honesty, humility, and truth are foundational to our connections to one another. Often these teachings are not found in the academic realm, but I hear that Sabe—whom the Western world likes to call Bigfoot—like decolonization roams around campuses always being talked about but never actually seen or implemented. It makes sense since he connects to honesty in these teachings—and honesty is always talked about but hard to find.

Honesty is our greatest strength in our communities, but our weakness in universities. To be disingenuous or to apologize is not in line with *miyo-pimâtisiwin*, “the good life,” and is not acceptable in the way we are taught to carry ourselves,

meaning how we present ourselves to not only each other but also those we do not see. While the Western world is mandated to the tangible, we acknowledge the intangible or those who surround us both ancestral and spiritual therefore, we cannot lie for our own benefit. Although it may seem simple on the surface, the work of Indigenous researchers is maintained across generations and aligns with our family, kinship, and collective understanding of community needs. This means what we do often differs from quantifiable Western standards. Likewise, because of our prior commitments and dedication to sovereignty, well-being, and community solutions, we often lack the freedom to choose our research topics or indulge our research interests.

Accountability comes from our authentic selves. It ensures that we prioritize the interests of those before us as well as those to come. We do not aim to climb the ranks of the hierarchy, and I often think that the pretension can do so willingly because they do not know these laws or adhere to them. Within the academic system, however, recognition and rewards come only when our work aligns exactly with what institutions and the wider academy desire.

With accountability, there's another significant issue to consider: the concept of "Special Calls" for funding. In the provision of services to First Nations, non-community funders expect innovative approaches that always push the boundaries of people's needs or what they can do. While the idea of bringing change might sound good in theory, in communities, it often requires people to act simply for the sake of "saving face" against a backdrop of unreasonable demands.

Most often, when First Nations seek program and service funds, government funding is typically granted for a maximum of 5 years. This means that a project will be considered a success if it hits "innovative" targets—even if it falls short of its original objectives and goals. This raises a critical issue: How can real change occur within a 5-year timeframe when our community connections exist long before and long after the funding deadlines? Is the problem not evident? Those 5 years, especially in projects related to mental health, well-being, or inter-generational trauma, are only being asked to work on the surface level by "looking into it." The same is true for external grants awarded to universities to examine pressing social justice needs and activist work. As it is, these special calls guarantee funding for 5 years. After that, they are seldom repeated, which gives the impression that those issues were adequately addressed. And when applied to Indigenous issues, external granting ultimately replicates the work of Indigenous affairs. As an Indigenous woman, I do not find this to be a wise or effective plan, and my people share this sentiment based on our notion that time is all connected.

Intentionality

When I was younger, my parents and grandparents would tell me stories of Elder Brother, our cultural hero, and how he would trick his younger brothers and sisters with bad intentions. My favourite story of him was that of the "Shut Eye Dance." In this story, Elder Brother suddenly sees ducks and geese while

walking along a shore, and he thinks to himself, “How am I to kill these ducks?” because he is hungry. So, he tricks them by filling up a bag he has with moss and other items and walks by them stating he is carrying his “Shut eye dance songs.” Curious as they are, the ducks, geese, and other birds ask him, “What are you carrying Elder Brother?” “Just my songs.” “Please show us!” “Only if you close your eyes and enter my lodge.” “Yes!” they all exclaim. So Elder Brother sings his song and as each bird passes by him, he hits them on the head, killing them. This all goes on until *sîsîp*, “the duck,” opens his eyes and yells, “Elder Brother is killing us!!” All the remaining birds flee, but as the duck races for the door, Elder Brother kicks him in the behind, and that is why the duck waddles today.

This story makes me think of Indigenous academics. Just as the birds trusted Elder Brother, we are supposed to believe in the “good intentions” of universities, only to be knocked down or left for dead. What about those of us who may make it out but end up hurt and betrayed? Am I *sîsîp*, who just got kicked in the behind? Or did I just become the target of university systems that will forever be watched? Oral narratives remind us that we cannot enter relationships with bad intentions because it can affect *Kôtâwînow Wiyasiwêwin*, the natural law of our people. This means that the energy we put out will come back to us 10-fold. A simpler version of this concept is linked to karma, but in our perspective, it also signifies that previous generations laid down prayers and tobacco so that we could do the necessary work. We must approach this work with a good mind and good spirit.

Our values have no place in neo-liberal settings where competition determines who rises to the top and who does not. The Western belief in merit fails to consider how networks benefit some over others. Instead, it forces us to trust a system that is not “for us” and works actively against us for so-called success.

Kôtâwînow Wiyasiwêwin, also known as Universal Law, is

very different from the understanding of law that Indigenous peoples generally have. The Eurocentric concept of “natural law” revolves around humans and is based on a certain notion of human nature and rationality; it is concerned only with human beings in human societies. By contrast, Indigenous views of law generally describe a lawfulness inherent in the nature of things—humans, the natural world, and the unseen worlds all woven together.

(McCaslin & Breton, 2008, p. 523)

The fact is, natural law “can be seen to flow from the consequences of the creation of the ‘natural’ world or environment” (Borrows 2010, p. 28). As *nimosôm*, “my grandfather,” Chris always tells me, “Your actions and negative thoughts will always come back to you, so you have to think and act right.”

The right meaning—to think honestly and purely—holds us accountable. More than that, it extends to those we love and even those who have not been born but will bear the consequences of our actions. That is not to say we create fear in our people. The point, rather, is to emphasize that no human has control over natural law. Only the universe does, and the universe has no master.

Building and maintaining relationships takes time. Our commitment to community hinges on genuine and meaningful connections. We aim to improve our reality and address the harm, violence, and disconnect evident in our daily experiences that have been caused by damage-centred research that normalizes the victimization of marginalized communities (Tuck, 2009). Our intentions must be sincere, aligning closely with ceremony and sacred teachings. We often cannot share these with others from the university, especially those who assess our merits, because they lack the knowledge needed to ensure we are doing the right thing. Even in research teams, there is knowledge passed on to Indigenous people alone, like when a 96-year-old Elder, who speaks only Nêhiyawêwin, insists she will not speak unless the White woman leaves, we make sure the outsider abides. There is no measurement for this work, and there is no way to teach it except by bringing guests into the folds of ceremony—even that takes time.

Relationality and reciprocity

Relationality is tied to the concept of *wâhkôtowin*, or kinship. As explained by Nêhiyaw scholar Evelyn Steinhauer: “When I hear the word *wâhkôtowin*—it is like being blanketed by my ancestors, love has been shared” (cited in Louis, 2014, p. 99). Put another way, this methodological technique intends to build meaningful connections with ancestors and spirits around us, Elders and Knowledge Holders, and the community (Johnson, 2017, p. 96). These relationships are crucial to the research we conduct and do not develop overnight or even over years. This is integral to our work. They occur in everyday settings from a coffee shop to a grocery trip in town. What might seem like simple tasks are profoundly important to the people we engage because they establish trust and lay the foundation of care. We do not enter into these relationships thinking of a publication or for a 1-year research extraction. No, we cannot, because this will be a lifetime commitment that can never be measured.

Our relationships must rely not on what we are given but on what we can also give back. Research and knowledge should always make their way back to the community, as this is the true core of reciprocity. Relationality and reciprocity go hand in hand because neither works without the other. They are founded on relationships past, present, and future.

According to Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2017), a Goenpul woman of the Quandamooka Nation on Stradbroke Island, Queensland, Australia: “Relationality is the interpretive and epistemic scaffolding shaping and supporting Indigenous social research and its standards are culturally specific and nuanced to the Indigenous researcher’s standpoint and the cultural context of the research” (p. 69). Where we stand in community is linked to our accountability, and when we enter different Nations other than our own, we state who we are, who we belong to, and who we descend from. It means that we carry not just our name and the work we do but also the names of our ancestors and lineage. When we do this in a good way, we hear, “You are my relation; come and sit.”

Relationality teaches us the understanding that everything in creation possesses *ahcâhk*, “spirit” or “soul,” and indicates the presence of a specific *Manitou*, or force. While we represent the *ayisiyiniw*, “people,” and Nation, there are Nations for plants, animals, and water that we must recognize (McAdam, 2015, p. 52). Fundamentally, within relationality and reciprocity, our work is tangible and intangible—and this allows us to recognize that our physical labour has emotional and spiritual dimensions.

When we participate in ceremony, are we supposed to simplify it into a statement for non-Indigenous people to merely check a box? Should we detail our sweat lodge experience, including the Elders present, just to allow an outsider to quantify that we are doing our work? This invasive idea is harmful because it can be used to assess if our work aligns with the agenda of the neo-liberal regime. Merit is not given for emotional and spiritual labour, and where we find meaning in our work will never align with the values of colonial institutions. Thus, we will not become Mônîyâw. Doing so would break everything we are and stand for.

CONCLUSION

AAIRR includes the five aspects of the laws of my people and is also shared amongst Indigenous communities. Anishinaabe scholar John Borrows (2010), when referring to the Haudenosaunee and the Great Law of Peace, talks about how “Law lies in the heart [of the people]” (p. 72). Our research is bound to the laws of our people. It lives within the best intentions and must be thought of in good ways to create meaningful research in underserved communities. Therefore, when considering us against our colleagues who do not engage in community-based research, remember all that is written here.

Indigenous research cannot be compared in narrow metrics that do not mean anything to us who give heart precedence over ego. Publications do not change the work that we do when the work cannot be quantified through Western academic measures that uphold “White intelligence.” By doing so, you are insulting the communities we work in and insulting us as well. Forcing us into a system that is violent and maintained by those who are unwilling to open their minds to our ways of knowing and seeing will ultimately leave us hurt, damaged, and avoidant—a cautionary tale that all Indigenous scholars know too well. Alice Te Punga Somerville (2023), in “Behind Every Job Ad for Indigenous Studies,” writes how we are brought in with open arms but are told immediately, not to move too quickly or too rapidly, but importantly, it is EDID on university terms and “as if those who run the show were ever going to let any of the words run off the page to change the world anyway” (lines 7–8). Let us keep our humanity first and foremost and let us embrace the Four Doors gifted to us as we navigate this world alongside our relations, ancestors, Elders, and those who will follow because *we will* “do these jobs with guts and support; do them with righteous anger and rigour and love” (Te Punga Somerville 2023, line 33–34) without complying to what is deemed successful or “academic.”

These merit-based systems we are placed in are grounded in colonial evaluation that reiterates what “good scholarship” is while failing to shift power institutionally. AAIRR offers the ability for researchers and evaluators to reassess and create a new evaluation process that upholds Indigenous knowledge, teachings, and legal traditions. Since the majority of researchers are trained in Western institutions, many do not know what Indigenous community-based research entails or what is not told for the sake of community regarding data sovereignty and autonomy. But because these evaluation criteria exist it fails to support Indigenous pedagogies and ontologies that work for the benefit of the collective and community.

As a result, we end up asking ourselves if we belong and if we deserve to be here. But the answer is that academia does not deserve us because it is not ready for the work that we do and are capable of. Our work dismantles and challenges colonial systems, and so working within these systems goes against our intentionality and accountability to ourselves to begin with. But we are here as we have always been, watching, learning, and being aware of the structures in place. Indigenous people have been observing since time immemorial, may I suggest it is time that universities catch up to what we know by holding each other accountable—faculty, administrators, students, and so on.

If institutions are truly in line with the aim of decolonization and want to work toward accountability, then they need to be clear on who is upholding the current colonial systems of research and evaluation and how their actions are colonizing. Without such ongoing and critical self-reflexivity, there will never be a place for Indigenous research or Indigenous people in universities. AAIRR is a concept that draws on one of the four elemental teachings we have in my community and is also an appropriate tool for accountability in “measuring” Indigenous productivity. If you say that you support our work but then do not value this work on our terms, then you are just wasting air.

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