

Indigenous Post-Secondary Institutes in British Columbia, Canada: Exemplars of Indigenous Control over Indigenous Education

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Abstract

Indigenous post-secondary institutes are a significant topic of study when considering Indigenous learners, Indigenous knowledges, and Indigenous self-determining efforts in places of higher education. Profiling three of these institutes in British Columbia, this article describes the promises and challenges they experience when weaving Indigenous knowledges into the academy. Using Indigenous and Western theory to support a case study design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 participants including Elders, academic leaders, instructors, staff, and current/former students. Four prominent themes emerged regarding Indigenous post-secondary institutes: (1) Elders have a core role in supporting the integration of Indigenous knowledges, (2) the institutes impact Indigenous identity and a sense of belonging in the academy, (3) they lead in partnership and relationship building, and (4) they demonstrate resiliency despite systemic challenges. This study offers an important understanding of how Indigenous post-secondary institutes exemplify Indigenous control of Indigenous education while simultaneously modelling decolonization and reconciliation in higher education.

Keywords: Indigenous education, post-secondary, self-determination, Indigenous knowledges, decolonization, reconciliation

Résumé

Les établissements d'enseignement postsecondaire autochtones constituent une source non négligeable pour étudier les apprenants autochtones, les savoirs autochtones et les efforts d'autodétermination des autochtones dans les établissements d'enseignement supérieur. En dressant le profil de trois de ces établissements en Colombie-Britannique, cet article décrit les attentes et les défis rencontrés lors de l'intégration des savoirs indigènes dans le monde universitaire. En utilisant des concepts autochtones et occidentaux pour soutenir une étude de cas, 22 participants — incluant des anciens, des leaders pédagogiques, des instructeurs, des membres du personnel, et des étudiants actuels et diplômés — ont participé à des entretiens semi-structurés. Quatre thèmes principaux se dégagent concernant les établissements postsecondaires autochtones : 1) les anciens jouent un rôle essentiel dans l'intégration des savoirs autochtones ; 2) *les établissements* ont un impact sur l'identité autochtone et le sentiment d'appartenance à l'université ; 3) ils favorisent le développement de partenariats et de relations ; 4) ils font preuve de résilience en dépit d'obstacles systémiques. Cette étude permet de mieux comprendre comment les établissements d'enseignement postsecondaire autochtones prennent en charge l'éducation autochtone tout en modélisant la décolonisation et la réconciliation dans l'enseignement supérieur.

Mots-clés : éducation autochtone, enseignement postsecondaire, autodétermination, savoirs autochtones, décolonisation, réconciliation

Introduction

In 1972, the Chiefs of the National Indian Brotherhood (NIB), now called the Assembly of First Nations, released a policy paper titled, *Indian Control of Indian Education*. This paper described the philosophy, goals, principles, and directions that must form the foundation of any school program for Indigenous children (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972). Since then, Canada has witnessed a growth of Indigenous self-determined education at pre-school, primary, secondary, and post-secondary levels. Indigenous post-secondary institutes (IPIs) in the province of British Columbia (BC), Canada, are exemplars of Indigenous-controlled education. Not only do IPIs in British Columbia actualize the wishes of the NIB Chiefs, but they simultaneously make important contributions to decolonization and reconciliation efforts in post-secondary education entirely.¹

As described by the First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC), IPIs are community-driven, community-controlled, and offer programming for Indigenous learners that is relevant and responsive to local needs and interests (FNESC, 2008). The framework document for the Indigenous Adult and Higher Learning Association (IAHLA), British Columbia's representative organization for Indigenous-controlled adult and post-secondary educational institutes across the province, states:

Aboriginal institutes occupy an important but not widely recognized third sector in adult and post-secondary education in British Columbia, distinct and separate from the public and private sectors. The combination of their Aboriginal character, their expertise in

adult education, and their attention to individual support make Aboriginal institutes important both within their local communities and in the Province as a whole. Through the Indigenous Adult and Higher Learning Association, local communities and the provincial and federal governments can coordinate their recognition and support for this third sector, allowing it to flourish and develop. (IAHLA, 2007)

1 It is important to note that terminology used for Indigenous peoples in Canada has changed over time. Indigenous is the common term utilized in academic, legal, and political contexts and is used prominently in this article. However, Aboriginal, First Nations, and Indian are also used and when doing so, are referring to Indigenous peoples. In addition, rightful Nation-affiliated names (e.g., the Nisga'a Nation) are used, as appropriate.

In response, this article offers a concise history of IPIs before describing some of the promises and challenges of integrating IK into an IPI through the perspectives of Elders, IPI leaders, instructors, and staff, as well as current or former students from three IPIs in British Columbia, including: the Nicola Valley Institute of Technology (NVIT), the Wilp Wilxo'oskwhl Nisga'a Institute (WWNI), and the former Cariboo Chilcotin Weekend University (CCWU) program. Representatives from one mainstream institution, the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC), are also included in this research due to their affiliation and knowledge of IPIs.

Topics explored in this study include: (a) how the integration of IK in an IPI at the academic level impacts students, staff, and the local community; (b) the challenges and benefits IPIs experience in partnerships with mainstream institutes; and (c) the formal policies and/or lack of formal policy for IPIs. Through this research, emerging themes include: (1) Elders have a core role in higher learning, (2) the integration of IK at a post-secondary level impacts higher learning (3) IPIs lead in partnership building, and (4) IPIs demonstrate resiliency despite systemic challenges. Given the fact that IPIs exist outside the public and private sectors of higher learning options in British Columbia, and broad efforts to decolonize and realize reconciliation in higher learning continue to evolve, perspectives of British Columbia's IPIs must be shared. This article offers a distinct opportunity to honour IPIs and all that they represent.

About the Author

I was drawn to profiling IPIs in my graduate research and this research represents what was undertaken as part of my doctoral studies (Robinson, 2016). As a Métis scholar and a member of the Manitoba Métis Federation, I have a long history as a student, and now as a professor, in the Department of First Nations Studies at the University of Northern British Columbia. I am also a former instructor for the Cariboo Chilcotin Weekend University program. I am inspired by the compelling scholarship of Indigenous educational leaders such as Archibald (2008), Atleo (2004, 2011), Battiste (1998, 2013), Kovach (2009), Smith (1999), and Wilson (2008), to name a few who boldly celebrate the role of IK in academia. Profiling the self-determined efforts of IPIs and their representation of IK in higher education reflects my learning from the remarkable academic discourse of Indigenous educational leaders I admire.

Indigenous and Western Theory to Support a Case-Study Methodology

The theory of Métissage, which is complemented by the foundation of Indigenous and critical theory, is integral to the research paradigm for this study (Chambers et al., 2008, Donald, 2011; Fook, 2002; Freire, 1974/2005, 1970/2009; Kovach, 2009; G. H. Smith, 2000a, 2000b, 2005; L. T. Smith, 1999). Métissage welcomes an integration of diversity (including non-Indigenous influences) while enabling a distinct inclusion of Indigenous representation (Burke & Robinson, 2019). In addition, Donald (2011) expresses how a “central goal of doing Indigenous Métissage is to bring Aboriginal place-stories to bear on public policy discussions in educational contexts in appropriate and meaningful ways” (p. 10). When contextualized in relation to the Indigenous and critical theoretical influences, Métissage is ideal for this work.

Therefore, with the inclusion of diverse IPI-related stories and the selection of several sites for examination, this research engages a *multiple-case* analysis (Yin, 2003, 2009a, 2009b, 2012). Yin (2012) explains that while a multiple-case design is usually more difficult to implement than a single-case design, a multiple-case study allows the researcher to broaden the bases of analysis so as to analyze within each setting and across settings so that the similarities and differences can be better understood (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Other Indigenous education-related studies like Bell et al. (2004) and Robinson (2007) gravitated to a multiple-case analysis to optimize the research.

The unique Indigenous foundations of all three of the IPIs are explored through the qualitative method of interviewing to centre Indigenous voice and experience (Denzin, 2001; Seidman, 2006; Stake, 1995). Kovach (2009) notes that because of “the expectation that the majority of findings will be presented in some categorical way...qualitative research concerns itself with uncovering knowledge through human subject research via observations and inquiry into phenomena” (p. 132). This multiple-case study method provides a rich scope to integrate the findings in a respectful way while inherently privileging Indigenous voice (Mayeda et al., 2014).

This study includes the Nicola Valley Institute of Technology (NVIT), the Wilp Wilxo’oskwahl Nisga’a Institute (WWNI), and the former Cariboo Chilcotin Weekend University (CCWU) program. One non-Indigenous institute, the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC), is secondarily represented in this study due to some participants holding a primary academic appointment at UNBC but involved with an IPI (e.g., as an instruc-

tor and/or in an administrative role) at the same time. Participant recruitment was initiated following ethics approval at the institute where my PhD was completed, Indigenous community-based ethics reviews, and other permissions required (e.g., NVIT's President, WWNI Board of Directors approval, approval from former CCWU leadership, and the UNBC Research Ethics Board). Due to my prior relationship with some participants, direct invitations were offered to some participants. Others I directly invited on the recommendations of IPI leaders or other research participants.

In total, the study included interviews with 22 individuals. There were 10 participants from NVIT, six participants from WWNI (including one individual associated with UNBC), and six participants representing the CCWU (including two individuals associated with UNBC). Participants were selected from three categories: (1) individuals representing the institutional leadership of the IPI; (2) individuals from the community who hold, or have held, the role of an Elder, staff, or instructor; and (3) current or former students at the IPI. All participants were asked similar questions including: (1) How do IPIs include IK within their programs and course offerings, (2) What are the challenges of including IK, and (3) How do IPIs address IK, policy development and decision making in relationship with non-Indigenous post-secondary institutes?

During the interviews, participants described their role at the institute and answered several questions related to their IPI affiliation. Many of the individuals interviewed in this study held more than one role at the IPI. Participants were selected to be interviewed as a member of a certain category (e.g., student or Elder) but used the breadth of their experience to answer all questions. Written or verbal consent was received from each participant and all interviews were completed face-to-face or by telephone. Each interview took approximately 30–60 minutes. Following the interviews, each recording was transcribed, reviewed, and then forwarded to the individual participants for their approval. All participants received a card and a small gift of gratitude for their participation in the research.

Indigenous Post-Secondary Institutes: A Decolonizing Journey

Some examples of First Nations people taking control of their education at a post-secondary level started in the 1960s with the creation of the Native Education Centre in Vancouver, British Columbia, in 1969; Blue Quills First Nations College in St. Paul, Alberta, in 1971; the Qu'Appelle Residential School in the Qu'Appelle Valley in Saskatchewan

in 1973; and the Yellowhead Tribal College in Edmonton, Alberta, in 1977 (Aboriginal Institutes Consortium et al., 2005; Haig-Brown, 1995, 2000; Stonechild, 2006). Hampton (2000) explains:

Our students and communities should have the choice of benefitting from what provincial universities have to offer, but Indian control of Indian education is not just for elementary and secondary education. It is even more important that we seize our responsibility for university education as an expression of self-government. (p. 213)

IPIs model a positive shift in the management and delivery of higher learning by Indigenous peoples for Indigenous learners (Barnhardt, 1991; Hampton, 1995). The prevalence of IPIs in Canada continues to grow.

However, this growth has not been without challenge. While the Canadian federal government has a legal responsibility for First Nations people, as set out by Treaties and the Indian Act, when Indigenous peoples began asserting post-secondary educational changes, the provincial and federal governments were unprepared to support initiatives like IPIs (Fisher et al., 2005; Stonechild, 2006). As such, with a need to tighten formal policy and funding for IPIs in Canada and the provinces, cultivating relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous post-secondary schools is paramount to ensure IPIs remain sustainable (FNESC 2008; IAHLA, 2007; MacIvor, 2012). Cooper (2021) acknowledges that “in 2020 there were about 80 Indigenous institutes across Canada serving around 10,000 students a year” and there are currently 45 IPIs that are associated with IAHLA (IAHLA, n.d.). Undeniably, even in the wake of the cultural genocide committed toward Indigenous peoples within the Indian Residential School System as affirmed in 2015 by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC), IPIs demonstrate persistent self-determination to decolonize and reconcile higher education for Indigenous learners.

Indigenous Post-Secondary Institutes: Examples from British Columbia

First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC), a key organization established in 1992 that supports First Nations learning and Indigenous-controlled education in British Columbia, has identified three types of IPIs, including: (1) full-fledged colleges where

fully accredited programs, including degrees or certificates, are offered; (2) affiliated institutes; and (3) community learning centres (FNESC, 2008). This article offers a representation of NVIT as the first type of IPI, WWNI as the second type of IPI, and the now-defunct CCWU as the third type of IPI included in FNESC's categories. An overview of each of these institutes and their associated type is provided below.

Nicola Valley Institute as full-fledged college. Most closely associated with the first type of IPI, a full-fledged college, is NVIT. As British Columbia's Indigenous public post-secondary institute, NVIT sits in a unique position of being firmly grounded by IK in its philosophy and practice (NVIT, n.d.). Stonechild (2006) explains that NVIT is "generally affiliated with a local tribal council and focused on brokering programs" (p. 103). It also "operates as a provincial institution under the *British Columbia College Institute Act*, with 230 students, 80% of whom are Aboriginal" (p. 121). NVIT has two campuses in British Columbia. NVIT's main campus is in Merritt, a small city in the south-central interior of British Columbia, while the other campus is in the Lower Mainland region of British Columbia, in the city of Burnaby.

NVIT has a history that is as exceptional as the school itself. NVIT did not always exist as a "public" higher learning institute. It opened its doors in 1983 as a private post-secondary institute and did not enter the domain of public post-secondary education until the 1990s. Tourand (2004) explains that NVIT, "started in the early 1980s as a private post-secondary institution; in 1995, NVIT received public status through an order in council of the provincial government and became a public post-secondary institution with a mandate to serve Indigenous students and communities" (p. 18). NVIT is known for its inclusion of Elders in all facets of educational programming and delivery, the hiring of Indigenous instructors, and the use of many traditional practices, such as talking circles, in the pedagogical delivery of programming (Price & Burtch, 2010). As a public post-secondary school that is supported by funding from the provincial government, NVIT offers a breadth of programming that includes certifications one could find at Canadian colleges (e.g., trades) or universities (e.g., Bachelor of Arts degree). Although NVIT must navigate being the only Indigenous-based academic institute in a non-Indigenous system of higher education in British Columbia, NVIT offers an all-encompassing inclusion of Indigenous representation in their public post-secondary framework. Including the experiences of NVIT's Indigenous scholarly platform is important.

Wilp Wilxo'oskwhl Nisga'a Institute as an affiliated institute. WWNI is included as an example of an affiliated institute as described by FNEESC (2008). Translated into English as “the Nisga'a House of Wisdom,” WWNI is a community-based IPI, incorporated in 1993 under the Societies Act of British Columbia (Government of British Columbia, 2015). The institute came into being through the determination of the Nisga'a to have greater control and autonomy over the post-secondary education curriculum being delivered to their Nation members. WWNI is in the community of Gitwinksihlkw, in the Nass Valley of northwestern British Columbia, on the lands of the self-governing Nisga'a Nation. WWNI is smaller, more locally focused, and provides programs, courses, and training relevant to Nation members through its affiliation with other post-secondary schools.

Although initially governed by an interim Board of Directors appointed by the Nisga'a Tribal Council (Evans et al., 1999), the current WWNI Board of Directors is made up of one representative from each of the four villages in the Nass Valley and a Chair elected at-large to represent the Nisga'a Lisims Government (Wilp Wilxo'oskwhl Nisga'a Institute & University of Northern British Columbia, 2014). This Board of Directors has a close relationship with UNBC, a public university with a regional responsibility to a vast area of the province, which includes northwestern British Columbia, and regularly negotiates with UNBC to ensure appropriate course instructors and course curriculum is being delivered to the Nation.

Barriers related to funding, especially as WWNI is not a “public” post-secondary institute, but rather a non-profit organization, continue to be a priority consideration for the operation and sustainability of WWNI. Therefore, the history of WWNI, and its affiliation with a university such as UNBC, is invaluable to this study. WWNI provides a living illustration of how an Indigenous-based institute with affiliation agreements leads to having Nisga'a knowledge-specific courses integrated into the academic calendar of a mainstream university like UNBC.

Cariboo Chilcotin Weekend University as community learning centre. The final IPI included in this study is the former CCWU. Operationalized out of the Thompson Rivers University (TRU) campus in the south-central British Columbia community of Williams Lake, CCWU began through tremendous community-based efforts to see post-secondary degree earning opportunities being made available to Indigenous peoples in the Williams Lake region. With this, the CCWU is included as an example of the third type of IPI as described by FNEESC (2008), a community learning centre.

The CCWU was founded by the late Sister Mary Alice Danaher, who was a former educator in the First Nations community of Canim Lake, British Columbia. Robinson et al. (2019) describe how Sister Mary Alice explored “innovative ideas and options to bring culturally relevant, accessible educational opportunities to the First Nations with whom she was working” (p. 172). In her capacity as the Education Coordinator for the Cariboo Tribal Council, now the Northern Shuswap Tribal Council (NSTC), Sister Mary Alice brought leadership from the NSTC, TRU, and UNBC together to create a partnership agreement. As a result, a flexible, weekend-based, post-secondary opportunity was enabled and post-secondary credential opportunities were offered to members from three First Nations, including the Southern Carrier, Chilcotin, and Northern Shuswap and the 15 First Nations Bands included within those Nations (Robinson et al., 2019). Individuals who were not members of the Nations/Bands were also welcomed into the CCWU program.

While the CCWU is no longer operational, CCWU is an important part of this research. As described by Robinson et al. (2019), the dissolution of their partnership with mainstream public post-secondary institutes resulted in a revitalization of a community-born initiative to take control over post-secondary education in the Williams Lake area, with courses offered to students through the Tsilhqot’in National Government (TNG), and where the decision-making processes were led by the Tsilhqot’in Elders and Nation members. The impact of the CCWU remains a remarkable and enduring example of an IPI.

Weaving Emerging Themes from the Research Together

Following an analysis of the interviews, there are four key themes that emerged from this study: (1) Elders play a core role in the development and ongoing direction of an IPI, (2) IPIs impact identity and a sense of belonging in the academy, (3) IPIs lead partnership-building, and (4) IPIs demonstrate resiliency despite systemic challenges. The entirety of the interviews completed for this research are too fulsome to include here. However, key quotes and other academic references are provided below to support the thematic categorizations and represent self-determining efforts leading to decolonization and reconciliation overall.

Elders Have a Core Role

Elders' presence and knowledge was honoured as an essential part of the foundation and continuance of the IPIs. Elders, as storytellers, are holders of traditional knowledge and are an integral part of assuming Indigenous control over Indigenous education. Elders' lived experiences and oral traditions contribute to the powerful IK representation in a post-secondary educational setting.

At NVIT, Elders hold prominent roles in multi-faceted and varying ways. In addition to being included in classroom experiences, at the Burnaby campus, the Elders have a dedicated space to meet with one another and with the students, staff, and faculty. At the Merritt campus, there is an acknowledgement on a main entrance wall of who the Elders are and the communities and/or Nations that they represent. One interviewee for this study, a leader from NVIT, explained:

We had Elders involved with NVIT right from the very beginning.... They always brought us back to understanding that...being Indigenous, wasn't about the beads and the blankets. It was about the knowledge we kept, the relationship to land, the relationship to ceremony, and the relationship to learning. It was that relationship to learning that really built NVIT. So, the knowledge that learning in an Indigenous way is about...understanding your Elders, understanding your kinship systems, understanding your ceremonies, all intricately.... They weren't segregated, they weren't separate. So, the value for NVIT around that was having the Elders very comfortably enshrined in the institution.

As part of this study, four Elders at the NVIT Burnaby campus were interviewed. They described how they provided shared resources and support to students, staff, and instructors within the NVIT community and how important it was to support each other. The NVIT Elders are deeply committed to the respective roles that they hold and to higher learning entirely. The sense of pride they had for student success and achievement is irrefutable.

At WWNI, the inclusion of Elders and their wisdom regarding Nisga'a lands, culture, and traditions is also prominent. One of the ways the presence of Elders at WWNI is represented is that the only full-time instructor at WWNI is an Elder. This participant described:

I think every single Nisga'a [person] should take courses here because there is so much of our history that our people don't know about... The courses that are here aren't traditional First Nations Studies [courses]. They're Nisga'a... it's all Nisga'a. People can learn so much about us. [Our] Elders used to say you have to know about yourself and your past before you can move forward.

Leaders, staff, and instructors at WWNI ensure Elders are treated with deep respect. For staff members, the importance of having the knowledge of Elders kept alive cannot be understated. Instructors and institute leaders prioritize course curriculum at WWNI being embedded with the knowledge and wisdom of the Elders from the Nisga'a Nation and the traditional practice of oral knowledge transmission is optimized.

For CCWU, Elders from the three Nations involved with CCWU was key to its success from the outset. Elders remained a significant part of CCWU as guest speakers and advisors. One former student explained:

CCWU brought in guest speakers to speak about traditional practices: berry picking, language, preserving food, tanning hides, and making clothing. Many of the traditional education has been lost in our generation but many of the communities are teaching the young people traditional education. We learned from what the Shuswap, Chilcotin, and Carrier [guest speakers] brought to the classroom.

From language to cultural traditions the students, staff, and instructors at CCWU experienced a rich engagement with Elders' knowledge.

NVIT, WWNI, and CCWU all celebrated the inclusion and representation of Elders as a meaningful part of the IPI. Elders are teachers in Indigenous societies and their knowledge holds a necessary place within the structure and function of the self-determining IPI educational systems.

IPIs Impact Identity and a Sense of Belonging in the Academy

Participants talked about how being at an IPI impacts student identity and sense of belonging. At NVIT, one Elder said, "I see some students learning their identity...it's the identity [where] they were having trouble. And it's why this institute is really growing."

By including Elders, students are provided with opportunities to learn more about themselves and their histories. When asked why they selected NVIT to pursue post-secondary studies, one student explained:

Because I am First Nations and that's important to me. I think with education having...support is what I was looking for. The fact that the institution is small, and it felt like a home feeling, a community feeling, because it was...integrated with First Nations and First Nations teachers and the teachings.

Obviously, the identity-related experience at NVIT cannot be understated, and for the students the opportunity to be supported in this regard is invaluable.

Study participants from WWNI celebrated a “full circle” experience of being able to learn more about themselves at an academic level. One former WWNI student explained:

I think it's just been wonderful...to learn your own language and culture. I mean, for some of us, some of our grandparents passed away when we were young.... My grandmother passed away when I was in high school and I had no idea that my grandmother spoke Nisga'a.... She talked to another Elder and I heard her. [I said] “You speak Nisga'a!” I had no idea. It was never spoken, and we lived with her. They didn't teach their children because they didn't want them to get in trouble because they were used to the Residential [School] ways.

Language and culture are the cornerstones to the Nisga'a peoples. One WWNI staff representative explained the identity-related benefit of having an IPI:

A lot of our Nisga'a courses, our language, our culture, is written by the Nisga'a people themselves. So, they're learning their history...they look at the [documented histories] and they're like, “That was my aunt.” Like, how many people can read a book and relate to it at that level? It's neat to hear that in the hallway.... Most of the instructors are Nisga'a and a lot of them [had] to go to school elsewhere. To have them come back and teach is amazing.

All WWNI participants discussed the importance of being able to be educated close to home with curriculum content that can reflect Nisga'a language, cultural, and educational values. Having access to courses, support, and personnel for students, instructors, and administrators (including the library and student resource opportunities) is critical. In addition, being able to hold celebratory events like the WWNI Convocation every spring brings forward a legacy of memories as a result of the IPI.

Like NVIT and WWNI, former students, staff, and instructors from CCWU remarked on the impact of having the CCWU program on identity and belonging. Having the opportunity to participate in an educational setting that was closer to home and during a weekend format where the history, traditions, and cultures of the local communities were prominently integrated was meaningful. In addition, holding gatherings for dinners, potlucks, and graduation was especially impactful. One former CCWU student explained:

I started with the program because it was within our community and I really wanted to go to university. I'd already tried a couple of different times with a couple of different local programs and I felt uncomfortable. I felt marginalized and there was a lot of racism and not a lot of awareness within the classroom and because I'm not visibly First Nations, like some people would easily recognize me, others wouldn't. There was a lot of times where I was overhearing conversations within classroom that made me uncomfortable. When I started going to [CCWU], I just felt a lot more comfortable. I felt I didn't have to defend, like, who I am or what my perspective is, and I didn't have people, you know, making assumptions about me or my background. It was a lot better. My grades improved a lot. It was good just to be within my community and to feel good about the delivery and everything.

Another former CCWU student reflected on the rewards of identity in Robinson et al. (2019):

My identity is to accept and be proud of who I [am], that my ancestral background is Chilcotin, Carrier and Secwepemc (Shuswap)... My life in the public school became the beginning of seeing racism. I became a victim and ashamed of where I came from.

When all of the students began to share their backgrounds [at CCWU] we [realized] that we all had similar backgrounds. Some worse. We all began to heal. The other niche that the late Mary Alice had was that we all had to get up in front of the class to tell our story. At the beginning we needed support, someone to stand beside us and little by little we could proudly raise our head and then it became second nature until we could proudly walk across that platform to accept our degree. (pp. 176–177)

For former CCWU students, having a safe and celebratory space to share their cultures and be proud of who they are and where they come from was powerful.

Indeed, there is value in having representations of Indigeneity in academia. Pidgeon (2008) writes that, “the value of having Aboriginal peoples on campus and within the curriculum was important for students to feel appreciated and respected” (p. 161). Pidgeon’s PhD dissertation was focused on how universities can be successful places for Indigenous learners. She found that:

Students acknowledged that having courses and academic programs grounded in IK helped make the university a successful place.... Other participants recognized that the presence of Aboriginal faculty, staff, and Elders improved their understandings of IK and assisted them in building relationships with Aboriginal peoples. (2008, p. 227)

For the Indigenous institutes included in this study, participants remarked about how IPIs positively impact identity and belonging. This was key to the creation of these IPIs and their continued success.

IPIs Lead in Partnership Building

For each of the IPIs within this research, there is a prominent role of partnerships in the delivery of courses and the creation of academic opportunities. During the interviews, IPI leaders from NVIT, WWNI, and CCWU noted the role of partnerships within their institute. Indeed, through these partnerships that were driven by IK, there is a sense of communities being able to realize IPI opportunities.

IPI leaders from NVIT discussed the many partnerships that NVIT has had with mainstream institutes as well as other IPIs. As an institute that values the premise of com-

munity-driven and community-controlled partnership arrangements, NVIT can celebrate being a leader in partnership-building. A leader at NVIT noted in their interview:

NVIT has several partnerships. We've finessed partnerships. We have partnerships with other public post-secondary institutes at the degree level. We have partnerships with IAHLA institutions at the certificate and diploma level, at the trades level, and at the literacy level. So, if you had a diagram, NVIT would be in the middle and we'd have, on this end, the degree track and, at this end, what I would call the "transition in." Some of our most successful partnerships have been with Simon Fraser University at a degree track level and with University of the Fraser Valley.

They are proud of the multiple partnerships that NVIT holds with various other post-secondary institutes and they realize that partnership arrangements can model shared successes between institutes. As the smallest public post-secondary school in British Columbia, NVIT can share the gifts of some of the embedded attributes of British Columbia's only publicly funded IPI.

At WWNI, institute leaders celebrate the partnerships WWNI has with post-secondary institutes like UNBC and Coast Mountain College, which was formerly called Northwest Community College. Anderson and Nyce (1999) write about how "the Nisga'a were not compelled to infuse Western thought or values into the process, the academy was enriched with a new perspective that brought high academic standards and a unique way of understanding the world" (p. 291). They acknowledged how proud they are to have the partnership with UNBC and the opportunity for shared resources and shared learning between the institutes. The Agreement of Federation between WWNI and UNBC defines the parameters of WWNI's partnership with UNBC and the expectations of each institute. The Agreement describes in section 1.3, that it will "recognize and include Nisga'a contribution to academic scholarship and to establish inter-institutional dialogue to further human understanding" (Wilp Wilxo'oskwhl Nisga'a Institute & University of Northern British Columbia, 2014, p. 1). Nisga'a culture and language forms the content of many WWNI courses. While the courses are taught with Western-style grades, the content comes from the Nisga'a.

Further, the agreement articulates the role of IK and the essential aspects of community-driven contributions to the development and delivery of courses taking place at

WWNI. The partnership has had long-term positive impacts with the successful delivery and completion of courses and degrees for students participating in WWNI. As demonstrated in some of the language put forward in the agreement, space to acknowledge IK formally within the realm of higher learning is acknowledged. A representative from WWNI explained in their interview:

I think our partner institutions are very sensitive to the fact that we have our ways of doing things and they're very respectful of that. I'm very happy every year when we have the representatives from both UNBC and [Coast Mountain] College come to be part of our convocation. That's a big deal when students can celebrate their successes and we make a big deal of it because it opens the doors for other people to see that. They say, "Well, if they can do it, so can I." The other institutions have been very, very respectful and appreciative of local culture and the way we choose to do things. It has been good.

The main partnerships at CCWU were with UNBC and Thompson Rivers University. These partnerships were guided by a community-based coordinating council that set the direction for CCWU programming. Having partnerships with public post-secondary institutes as well as the IAHLA proved to be a positive (and critical) part of CCWU functioning and operation.

This study posits that IPIs are indeed partnership-building leaders. From the examples of arrangements discussed by research participants, it was noted that when the premises of community-driven and community-built partnerships remain supported, the enduring success of course delivery and programming prevail.

IPIs Demonstrate Resiliency Despite Systemic Challenges

At NVIT, real challenges exist that impact the IPI structure and, ultimately, the experience of some of the learners that choose to attend school there. From the perspective of NVIT leadership, a prominent challenge persists to ensure there is an understanding of IK and how it can be integrated. Due to this, the premise of ensuring that Indigenous control over the inclusion of IK in NVIT programming cannot be understated. Additionally, participants acknowledged that the hiring of course instructors and union-related issues may present some difficulties, but that often these can be overcome.

For the instructors at NVIT, some of the major challenges exist with Indigenous-related academic resource issues and ensuring that there is enough support available for students who attend the institute, especially since the impact of the Canadian Residential Schooling system can continue to permeate the walls of the educational experience. An interview participant explained:

[We] are still seeing some of the remnants of the Residential Schools. It affects [students] in two ways. Number one is the fear of education and educational institutions. So, to try and decrease that nervousness and that fear of the institution is sometimes a challenge. The other thing, especially with a lot of the courses I teach and the social sciences, is that we sometimes push some buttons. Social Work, Psychology, Sociology, like, the Racism class is probably one of the most disturbing classes. I have built into that class time to do debriefing at the end of the class, so students don't leave angry or they don't leave very upset. Residential School issues do pop their head up within the system.

For the students interviewed for this research, having more Indigenous course instructors was noted as an important challenge to overcome. Finally, a leading issue is ensuring that NVIT is being recognized as an institute in the same way the other major post-secondary institutes are recognized so more degrees, including those at a graduate level, can be offered.

Interview participants from WWNI recognized that funding and budget-related matters pose a challenge. Considering the history and current realities of universities profiting from Indigenous disposessions (Daigle, 2019; Harvey, 2022), it is imperative to deeply consider financial matters related to sustaining IPIs. Evans et al. (1999) explained that “budget is a key issue...the WWNI is an Aboriginal post-secondary institute that functions on ‘soft’ monies...UNBC, on the other hand, is established under a provincial act and is financially supported by the province” (p. 202). Anderson and Nyce (1999) described how, even though UNBC was successful in the creation of a First Nations Studies Program and developing community-based relationships with IPIs like WWNI, these developments “highlighted structural barriers in the form of government funding processes as well as predictable resistance to First Nations’ exercise of authority within the university’s governance and administration” (p. 282). Indeed, asserting control in financial sup-

port and security for Nisga'a-driven programming within the WWNI-UNBC partnership was a necessary measure for the protection of this initiative.

A participant from WWNI noted that ensuring that students from all four Nisga'a communities have access to the institute was a challenge, since there is no public transportation available between the communities. For other participants included in the study, it was noted that it can be a challenge to have individuals from the Nation attend WWNI instead of going elsewhere for their post-secondary education, but WWNI is building on Nisga'a-related resources like a Nisga'a language dictionary and the *yuukhl* (i.e., Nisga'a laws) for the benefit of Nation members.

Since CCWU is no longer in operation, an obvious challenge for this IPI was the withdrawal of financial support for continued operation and sustainability. This is directly related to funding issues and the availability of programs to support a grassroots institute like CCWU. However, there are other important challenges that CCWU faced when it was in operation. Since many of the students travelled from one of the three Nations and 15 Bands in the Cariboo Chilcotin region that were outside of the community of Williams Lake, travelling every second weekend from a rural community where many students held full-time jobs could be complicated, especially in the winter months, with treacherous road conditions.

Further, it was noted by CCWU participants that it could be challenging to ensure course instructors were Indigenous or had knowledge about Indigenous history, culture, and values. In addition, many of the participants relayed that it is important to have funding available to Elders who are contributing to the IPIs. Compensating Elders as co-instructors was not possible given that the courses were not self-sustaining even without a co-instructor. Since instructors need to have Western academic qualifications, Elders without such training do not qualify to instruct the students. A participant from the CCWU explained:

One of the challenges we had was [having] First Nations Instructors.... Because of university protocols and other things, it wasn't always possible.... [Also], a lot of the students needed tutors and extra time to try and get through some of those core courses...so we would offer tutoring. [Also] if we look at the geography of the CCWU communities, like one community being three and a half hours away, travel was sometimes a huge challenge

for students.... We solved that by giving students gas cards and other things. We were really trying to make it an easy transition for students.

The resiliency of IPIs to be creative, innovative, and responsive to community needs is something that all higher learning institutes in British Columbia could aspire toward.

In the Spirit of Self-Determination, Decolonization, and Reconciliation, IPIs will Prevail

Indeed, the key themes that emerged as a result of this study demonstrate that despite each institution studied being a different type of IPI according to the FNESC structure, significant commonalities exist between them. The Indigenous-related theory and case study approach to this work affords a presentation of a breadth of responses that were categorically aligned to offer important messages about the lived experiences of those involved with an IPI.

The role of Elders, impact on student identity, achievement of critical partnerships, and demonstration of remarkable resiliency all make IPIs a strong and leading example of Indigenous control over Indigenous education in British Columbia. Indeed, these findings should influence post-secondary institutes in their decolonization and reconciliation efforts and to acknowledge and address funding gaps in partnership with communities and federal government and/or private sector. All three institutes acknowledged that having appropriate course instructors, increased accessibility to attend the IPI, and student support optimized for First Nations learners are essential. Finally, looking toward greater access to academic funding was common, and indeed the issue of resources was the one that closed CCWU.

The major area of difference between the three IPIs is related to funding. NVIT, as a publicly funded IPI, does not face the same challenges as WWNI or CCWU since there is a guaranteed source of funding from the government that can be expected on a yearly basis. Affiliated institutes, such as the federated institute of WWNI or community learning centres like CCWU, must face a yearly prospect of uncertainty due to the availability of funding and resources. Realities of the federal and provincial government struggles to commit to supporting IPIs as described by Fisher et al. (2005) and Stonechild (2006) are alive through the words of participants here.

Conclusion

The influence of IPIs will continue to prevail, and post-secondary schools should be looking to IPIs as leaders in decolonization and reconciliation. By studying how the integration of IK at the academic level impacts students, staff, and the local community; the challenges and benefits IPIs experience in partnerships with mainstream institutes; and the formal policies and/or lack of formal policy for IPIs in British Columbia demonstrates that the words of the NIB Chiefs in 1972 have not faltered.

As eminent Indigenous scholar Marie Battiste (2013) confirms, “the decolonization of education is not just about changing a system for Indigenous peoples, but for everyone. We will all benefit by it” (p. 22). Further, as Murray Sinclair, Chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) reminds us, “education is the key to reconciliation” (Watters, 2015). In a survey following the TRC completed by Indspire (2016) with Indigenous post-secondary students, the students noted: (1) gratitude for access to Indigenous support and services; (2) a need for further student funding; (3) the need to make culture, identity, and belonging part of the healing journey for Indigenous learners (and indeed, the survey notes First Nations-run schools were satisfactory in this regard), (4) quality Indigenous course content is imperative; and (5) the need for Indigenous role models in spaces of higher learning. IPIs remain strong and emblematic spaces of self-determination, decolonization, and reconciliation that are meeting the desires of Indigenous students, community, and scholars alike. Further research to ground the impact IPIs continue to have on individuals, community, and the entire post-secondary education system in British Columbia must be supported. IPIs continue to be transformative and integral spaces of education for Indigenous students in British Columbia and are set to provide continued and profound leadership for all post-secondary experiences.

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