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Cathy Fournier [iD], Suzanne Stewart, Joshua Adams, Clay Shirt, Esha Mahabir [iD] and Cohen Pinkoski

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Article abstract

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Cathy Fournier
University of Toronto, Canada, cathy.fournier@utoronto.ca

Suzanne Stewart
University of Toronto, Canada, suzanne.stewart@utoronto.ca

Joshua Adams
University of Toronto, Canada, joshuaadams722@gmail.com

Clay Shirt
University of Toronto, Canada, clay.shirt@utoronto.ca

Esha Mahabir
University of Toronto, Canada, esha.mahabir@mail.utoronto.ca

Cohen Pinkoski
York University, Canada, cohenp@yorku.ca

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Abstract

In 2020 an innovative Indigenous community-led internal funding initiative was undertaken at a major university in Canada, followed in 2022 by a qualitative study of its inaugural round. This funding initiative is unique in that each research project was first identified by an Indigenous community/organization through a Canada-wide outreach process. The outreach process involved reaching out to over 700 Indigenous communities and organizations, via email or telephone, to ask if they would be interested in participating in a funded research project they identified as important and beneficial. The role of the university academic research partners was that of mentor rather than principal investigator for each project. Nine community-led research projects were funded and are currently underway. In this paper the authors outline the process of developing the initiative, its components, and findings from the study. Successes and challenges of the funding model are identified followed by a discussion of emergent themes. One of the key themes that emerged is that although there are aspects of this initiative that met its intended goals, it highlights a barrier in meeting one of the objectives, contributing to Indigenous research governance and self-determination.

Decolonizing Academic Funding: An Evaluation of an Indigenous Collaborative Funding Initiative

This paper outlines the process of an Indigenous community-identified and -led collaborative funding initiative undertaken at a major university in Canada in 2020 and provides a brief overview of the successes and challenges identified through this qualitative evaluative study. We focus on one of the major themes that emerged through this research which highlights a challenge in meeting one of the overarching goals of this initiative: Indigenous research sovereignty and self-determination. The funding initiative had three main objectives:

1. Research projects funded must be community-identified, -led and -owned.

2. The research must be collaborative.

3. The research process must be based on Indigenous principles of co-operation, relationality, reciprocity, transparency, and honesty and be grounded in Indigenous worldviews as defined by the communities involved.

Nine Indigenous community-identified, -led, and -owned research projects were funded in year one of this initiative. These community-led research projects were funded in 2020 and are either completed or in their final stages. Many of the projects had major delays as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Research projects varied widely, and included projects such as:

- Exploring the use of a specific plant-based Indigenous medicine for a common childhood condition.

- The evaluation of a project focused on the development of a transition house for Indigenous youth who have been incarcerated and want to enter back into the community.

- An evaluation of an Inuit Child and Youth health access program.

- The use of Indigenous knowledges in food security.

This funding program is unique, as each funded research project was first identified by an Indigenous community/organization through a Canada-wide outreach process. Over 700 Indigenous Communities and organizations across Canada were contacted via email or over the telephone, to ask if they would be interested in participating in a research project they identified as beneficial for their community or organization. Each participating community was then introduced to potential academic researchers, whose role was to act as research mentor throughout the project. The Indigenous community or organization had complete control over deciding if the academic researcher was a good fit for them or not. The role of the academic researchers in this funding initiative and throughout the research was that of research mentor rather than Principal Investigator (PI). The findings from this research highlight the successes of this initiative and one critical challenge in meeting one of the fundamental objectives of this initiative, to increase Indigenous community research governance and self-determination. This challenge relates to who had access to and control over the actual funding money.

Methodology

The purpose of this research was to evaluate the inaugural round of this Indigenous collaborative funding stream, a component of a larger Indigenous strategic research initiative at this Canadian University. Participants invited to take part in this research were faculty, staff, students, Elders, and community members involved in the Connaught Indigenous Funding Stream (CIFS) initiative between 2020-2021. A total of 41 individuals were asked to participate in this research: (8 Elders, 11 academic researchers, 6 administrative staff, 4 student Research Assistants and 12 Indigenous community members).

This research was undertaken to evaluate the strengths and challenges of this initiative meeting its objectives, and to inform changes to future collaborative funding rounds. In this study we sought to gather information from both academic and community researchers regarding their experiences with the CIFS. Another purpose of this study was to contribute to an Indigenous evidence base of knowledge (based in Indigenous knowledges and practices) to leverage Indigenous research policy and program change to contribute to a broader objective of promoting Indigenous self-determination and governance in academic research. Indigenous knowledges are both conceptual and operational frameworks for this research, broadly defined as the various forms of knowledge that Indigenous (local) communities accumulate over generations from living in a particular environment (Semali et al, 1999); they encompass all forms of knowledge—including technologies (broadly defined), know-how and skills, healthcare practices, and beliefs that contribute to stable and healthy Indigenous communities (Estey, Smylie & Macaulay, 2009, p.1; Smylie et al, 2016). Indigenous knowledges were operationalized through meaningful and on-going engagement and guidance from Traditional Knowledge Holders (Elders and traditional teachers). A Traditional Knowledge Holder was consistently involved in all stages of this funding initiative and the research, and acted as a guide to funding processes, relationship-building between Indigenous community partners and the academic researchers, as well as helping to formulate the research questions. Their involvement also included discussions about the successes and challenges of the funding initiative shared by research participants. The research questions necessitated a qualitative evaluative research design that emphasized co-construction of meaning through examining emergent themes and concepts.

As one of the goals of CIFS is to develop a more equitable and Indigenous research process and funding model, evaluating and refining the process of this initiative through an Indigenous model of evaluation is necessary, and that evaluation should be ongoing to help ensure the initiative meets objectives. This first evaluation will help ensure that the CIFS is meeting its objectives for the next round of funding. As such this research covers the CIFS funding initiative inaugural round 2020-2021 and examines the following questions:

1. What are challenges and successes of the Connaught Indigenous Funding Stream?

2. What are the impacts of the Connaught Indigenous Funding Stream? Have outcomes, objectives, and goals been achieved?

The narrative interview questions were designed by the research team in collaboration with a Traditional Knowledge Holder involved in this initiative.

As the purpose of the research and the qualitative interviews was to give participants an opportunity to share their stories about the strengths and challenges of the CIFS in narrative form, narrative individual interviews were the primary qualitative data collection for this study. This approach was developed by Dene scholar Suzanne Stewart (2008) and refined in her later projects (Stewart, 2009; Stewart, Reeves & Beaulieu 2014) and is grounded in Indigenous knowledges and ethics (Marshall & Stewart, 2021). Each participant participated in a 45-60 minute narrative interview over the phone or the Zoom software platform. Each interview was audio recorded and later transcribed by a research assistant verbatim.

Indigenous narrative inquiry (Barton, 2004; Clandinin, 2006) was employed in the interviews to help understand the data through an Indigenous knowledges lens because it is sensitive to cultural context and the construction of narratives embedded in the lived experience of participants (Gubrium & Holstein, 1995). Narrative inquiry is a "relational methodology" that is consistent with Indigenous oral traditions/storytelling as ways of knowing and communicating (Medicine-Eagle, 1989; Stewart, 2008; Reeves, & Stewart 2014). It also highlights how Indigenous epistemology can influence knowledge and practice in research when used in an Indigenous context (Barton, 2004, p. 519).

A total of 41 participants involved in the first round of this funding initiative were invited to participate in a narrative interview to explore their experience of this initiative. This included the Indigenous community and organization leads directly involved in the research, the Traditional Knowledge Holder (Anishnaabe) involved at the institution, the academic researchers that provided guidance and support to the communities and organizations throughout the research process, as well as administrative staff at the university involved in this initiative. The research team sent out email invites to each of the 41 participants asking if they would be interested in participating in an interview. In total we held twelve in-depth interviews with a community member (N=1), academic researchers (N=9), and administrative staff (N=2).

Study Limitations

It is important to note that this study has a key limitation related to the number of Indigenous community/organization-based researchers who participated in the research. We reached out to all of the communities involved; however, only one was able to participate. We heard back from other communities involved, but due to the COVID pandemic and competing crises in their communities, they were not able to participate. As such the findings from this study are limited and may not capture the full picture of experiences.

Data Analysis

An inductive thematic approach was employed to analyse the interviews. Themes from each individual participant interview were also used in a meta-analysis across participants to identify meta-themes for the data as a whole. The main themes that emerged were:

1. The importance of using Indigenous principles in this funding initiative.

2. The importance of community identified research.

3. The reduction of administrative barriers due to its collaborative nature.

4. The impact of COVID restrictions.

5. Perceived power imbalance between academic and community researchers.

Overall this evaluation showed that the CIFS initiative had a highly positive impact on participants. There was a high level of satisfaction with the overall CIS funding initiative and its current and ongoing potential to contribute to Indigenous community research governance and self-determination, overarching objectives of the CIFS initiative.

A key theme that emerged, however, is the need to allow the community to hold the funding rather than the academic researcher. In this paper we focus on this key theme which represents a fundamental challenge of the initiative in meeting its overarching objectives. This finding contributes to an evidence base that supports the need to shift the balance of power so that Indigenous communities have equal control over the funding.

Spiritual Considerations

It was important, in the conceptual framework of the study, that this research was spiritually and culturally grounded. Indigenous ethics and spiritual practices were embedded in the research design and procedure through engaging in a monthly ceremony at the direction of the Indigenous Research Circles's (IRC) Elder in residence, as well as ensuring Elders and Traditional Knowledge Holder from our broader Indigenous Advisory council were also present in our research meetings and planning for the project.

Decolonizing Research through Community-Identified Collaborative Funding

This inaugural collaborative funding initiative was unique in that unlike many other types of funding in academic settings, it is cooperative and was first and foremost grounded in the research interests and needs that Indigenous communities themselves first identified. It is based on a decolonizing funding framework that placed Indigenous communities in control of the research, something which was meant not only to contribute to research governance, but self-determination more broadly.

As mentioned in earlier, the first step was to reach out to over 700 Indigenous communities, organizations, and leaders across Canada to ask if they would be interested in being involved. Once expressions of interest were made, the Collaborative Funding Committee (CFC), who oversaw the initiative, arranged a preliminary meeting with each community/organization to meet and talk about their research priorities. Each meeting included a Traditional Knowledge Holder who was part of the CFC, an Indigenous student research assistant, and at least one other staff member from the CFC. In total, eleven consultations were held with communities interested in taking part in the funding call. The

next step was a research alert sent out to all university researchers through the office of the Vice President Research and Innovation to generate potential interest in the projects that were identified by the participating Indigenous communities/organizations. The email did not identify the community or organization, but gave a brief description of each community-identified research interest. After this step, an environmental scan of appropriate departments was conducted to look for researchers with expertise and interest that aligned with the specific research projects identified by the communities/organizations. After contacting potential researchers, the CFC held a preliminary meeting with each interested faculty member to outline the objectives of the funding stream and see if they were willing to collaborate with the Indigenous community on the research project with the understanding that they would be playing a supportive role in the research and not that of Principal Investigator. If the academic researcher agreed with these terms and wanted to proceed, the CFC facilitated an introductory meeting between the researcher and community so they could meet and begin building a relationship. This meeting was also a chance for the community to present their research needs and to flesh out more details of the project. If both parties agreed, further meetings were held to continue relationship building over on average 3 – 6 months. This was a crucial component of the funding initiative, and in subsequently developing the research project details and putting together the funding proposal. When the funding stream began in January 2020, face-to-face meetings were possible, but starting in April 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic extinguished any possibility of in-person meetings. As such, it took longer to establish trust both with communities and between researchers and community due to the nature of virtual meetings. Despite these hurdles, the process continued and each community was matched with a suitable researcher for their individual project.

Relationship Building

The role of the CFC was to ensure the principles of decolonizing, cooperative, community-identified and -driven research were upheld and honoured throughout the process. As Indigenous communities/organizations were the leaders in this research funding initiative, it was important to establish relations with the community first and to ascertain their specific research needs and any concerns they had moving forward before introducing them to potential academic researchers. This was fundamental to building trust with the community/organization.

Relationship building and trust is an integral part of Indigenous research and methodologies, and is a particularly important element of research given the historical and contemporary context of harm and subsequent distrust many Indigenous Peoples and communities continue to experience in relation to research and academic institutions (Castledon Morgan & Lamb 2012; Guillemin et al, 2016; Fournier et al, 2024; Kilian et al, 2019). The relational process between community and researcher, therefore, was not hurried. After our preliminary meetings, our committee introduced the community representatives with the researchers through a virtual forum. In each instance, several such meetings were held over the course of 3 to 6 months to discuss needs, interest, experience, and values, and to see if common ground could be found. This was a critical step for the community and researcher to get to know each other and decide if they wanted to work together. Throughout the process, the community had control over decision-making regarding initiating and formalizing the partnership with the researcher. There were two instances where a community raised concerns about working with the researcher they paired with

several weeks into the research process. In these instances, the CFC met with the researchers to inform them that the community had decided not to go ahead with the partnership. After meeting with the declined researchers, the CFC searched for and met with other potential researchers and followed the same initial process of reaching out and holding a preliminary meeting with each of them before introductions to the community were made. In another example, one community organization decided that they wanted to end their participation in this funding initiative due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the needs of their community in crisis; however, they remain interested in future collaborative funding calls.

Once both parties (community and academic researchers) on each team agreed on the terms of the funding and expressed the desire to move forward collaboratively in the research process, it was then the CFC's role to facilitate discussions between the two parties and begin to develop the funding proposal. These discussions continued over the course of many weeks, and it was the CFC's function to act as a mediator between community/organization and researcher to ensure that the teams were comfortable moving forward at all stages of this process, and to ensure that the researcher was there as a guide to the research and not shifting into the role of a Principle Investigator. Inevitably, tensions or slight disagreements did arise with a few research collaborations, and in those cases our Traditional Knowledge Holder, who was present at all relationship building meetings, reminded the research collaborator of the purpose of the Indigenous funding initiative, namely that the research was to be community- identified, -led, and -owned. In other instances, the community was not accustomed to being in a position of control in academic research projects, so the CFC supported them in taking on that role moving forward. The CFC's role as mediator was to help uphold principles of self-determination of Indigenous communities and organizations throughout the research development process.

The final role of the CFC was to provide academic and cultural support and feedback on the proposal development process. Originally the proposals were to be co-written with the community and academic researcher in a series of in-person workshops, engaging in Indigenous cultural protocols and ceremony with community organization representatives and academic researchers present. However, due to COVID-19 restrictions the proposal development shifted online and the process took longer than originally planned. The CFC's role in supporting proposal development took a number of different forms, foremost they provided guidance on what was involved and expected for the process of proposal writing, and ensuring that it was written collaboratively. Once drafts were complete, feedback and suggestions were provided by the CFC to strengthen the proposals as needed before they were finalized and submitted for approval by the institution.

Reconciliation through Collaborative Funding

 The Connaught funding initiative had three main objectives. Firstly, the research projects funded had to be community-identified and -led; second, the research had to be collaborative; and lastly the research process had to be grounded in Indigenous worldviews and based on Indigenous principles such as co-operation, relationship, transparency, honesty and non-interference. Ultimately the objective of this initiative was to contribute to Indigenous self-determination and research governance while ensuring the research had a positive impact on the communities involved, as defined by the communities themselves.

During analysis of the qualitative interviews, all participants stated that the funding call met most of these stated objectives and that the strengths of the initiative were the focus on the community as research leader, that the research was community-identified and -driven, and that the academic researcher's role was that of research support or mentor rather than Principal Investigator. However, despite these strengths, a number of participants pointed to one of the funding mechanisms as a barrier to allowing the communities to truly lead the research. This barrier was the requirement that funding and access to it was controlled by the university and the academic researcher. This meant that the community/organization had to go through the academic researcher and the academic institution every time they needed to access the funding money. This control of the funding for the research by the academic researcher and the institution was seen as problematic by a number of participants, as it meant that the balance of power was tipped towards the academic researchers.

As stated above, although the communities were leading the research, access to the funding dollars remained under the control of the academic researcher as the conditions of the funder meant that money had to flow through the university and not the community/organization. This created a situation where a number of the academic researchers said they felt like they were forced into the role of gatekeeper, and this meant that there was a fundamental imbalance of power in the research relationship. This imbalance was something that was meant to be mitigated through the approach of this initiative as outlined in previous sections of this paper.

Paradigm Shifting: Money, Power, and Gatekeeping

As noted above the major theme in our findings illustrates that despite the focus on the research being community identified and led, the institutional policies, and processes that remained in place for who held and controlled the funding created a power imbalance, a power imbalance that this initiative was trying to overcome. A number of participants said that this power imbalance could have been mitigated if the funding was given directly to the community themselves or if they had equal access and control of the funding dollars. To illustrate, one participant stated that despite the strengths of this initiative it remained part of a Principal Investigator (PI) system. This quote highlights this issue,

> Fundamentally in the Principal Investigator system, no matter what you do, the Principal Investigator ends up as the gatekeeper and maintains kind of a power position with respect to the community and you end up with this tension. The community is in charge and running things, but they have to run things through a Principal Investigator . . . so we just have an unnatural relationship in a system where we're trying to maintain a neutral or positive balance of power yet in this instance we are in a situation where the direction of money flow is the wrong way. (Participant #2).

Another participant agreed and stated that,

> I would say that if there's a weakness in this initiative, it's that in the machinery of funding, Indigenous leadership has not yet emerged. Meaning the way money flows looks very settler-oriented. For example, the academic researcher could not subgrant to the community partner agency, and that's something that the Tri-Council allows us to do but [name of university]

would not. We were told that this was due to the rule of the funder for this initiative. So we could not subgrant a block of funding . . . all the funds flowed through the Principal Investigator at the university, and that looks very old school, that does not look Indigenous . . . because no subgrants were permitted we had to go through the regular channels of getting pre-ethics approval to spend any of the funds. And that's fine, but that was a process that had to be initiated and led by the scholar, not the community partner. Without a sub grant, the community also had to invoice the university partner monthly (Participant #4).

Another participant pointed out that,

In order for me to pay out the communities' invoices out of the funds, which were held in my research account, I was asked by the university to provide a competitive bid as if the community were a contractor and I had to fill out a request, a procurement . . . so, something about the funder and their relationship with university admin continues to treat an Indigenous partner agency as somehow subservient or beneath the Principal Investigator, the faculty PI, where the funds are held and it's not right. I was like, this is all their project their idea. They should be in control of the money (Participant #3).

These quotes highlight a limitation of this initiative in meeting its overarching objectives of supporting and fostering Indigenous research governance and self-determination. In these academic researchers' experience, because the funding remained under their control, and ultimately the academic institution where the funding initiated, it created a barrier to ensuring the Indigenous communities involved were truly leading the research. As expressed by these researchers so clearly above, in order for the funding to contribute to reconciliation and institutional change, the communities/organizations need to have access to and control of the funding themselves and not be dependent on colonial institutional processes that ultimately keep power in the hands of the academic researcher and the institution.

Another participant reiterated the point saying that although this funding initiative was meant to ensure that the Indigenous community was the lead researcher, because the academic researcher ultimately controlled the funding they still felt they were ultimately part of a system that placed them in the role of Principal Investigator. They stated that,

In the Principal Investigator system, the PI ends up as gatekeeper, and it creates tension as the community has to run things through the PI. So, this means that the community is dependent in a subservient way on the researcher to allow things to happen and maintain interest and attention . . . the power is in the hands of the person with the money in this research relationship (Participant #4).

Despite this major challenge, all participants also pointed out the strengths of this funding initiative and how it was a big step for this university in their strategic planning related to reconciliation, as well as towards contributing to Indigenous research governance and self-determination. These strengths include the lengthy amount of time given for relationship building, that the research was community-identified and -led, and that they found the administrative support they received very helpful.

As noted, for the researchers, the overall experience with this funding initiative was positive. It helped them increase their research network, expand their expertise, and build their understanding and capacity to engage in meaningful Indigenous community-identified research moving forward. However, as the research initiative was intended primarily to benefit Indigenous communities, it was stated by a participant that,

> This initiative is great, but you gotta go all the way. Like if you want to support community research capacity and leadership, then put the money at the forefront of that. Give communities control of the money. This makes us accountable to them. Not the reverse (Participant #2).

It is clear through the experiences of the researchers involved in this funding initiative that there is room for further changes, specifically to funding policies at the university if the goals to support and foster Indigenous research governance and self-determination are to be met. These changes in the funding structure at the university are ultimately part of a necessary paradigm shift in the relationship between academic institutions, their policies, and Indigenous communities. Just as a PI controls the spending for a project which they are leading, Indigenous communities must have control over the funding if they are leading the research.

As noted earlier, one limitation of this study is that each of the CIFS projects were at different stages of completion, with three already completed, with others having had significant delays due to COVID-19 and community needs. As such, a number of the research projects were still underway at the time of this research. The stage at which the participants are may have had an impact on the findings of this evaluation. It will be important to re-evaluate once all of the projects have been completed.

Another important limitation is the number of participants and their role in the research. Only one community member researcher agreed to participate, and as such most of the respondents were academic researchers or university staff. This means that the results are less diverse than planned. It would have been helpful to have more participation from the community researchers to find out about their experience with this funding project, as their voices are critical in ensuring that future rounds build on the successes of the CIFS while addressing the challenges.

Discussion

These research findings suggest that although this imitative was successful in meeting most of its objectives, there is a need for a fundamental change in its funding structure. This change is part of a wider paradigm shift needed in the relationship between academic institutions, researchers, and Indigenous communities/organizations regarding who controls the actual funding dollars. The argument presented here is that the Indigenous communities/organizations themselves need to have equal access or complete control of the funding so that they are not beholden to the academic researcher and institution during the research process. Having the academic researcher in control of the funding not only caused a power imbalance in the research relationship, but also meant that the communities, in this instance, experienced delays in receiving payment as they waited for invoices to be processed. A fundamental shift in the funding structure is essential to ensure that the objectives of the funding initiative are met supporting and fostering Indigenous research governance and self-determination. This

would require that the university allow the communities/organizations themselves to hold the funding alongside the researcher, or on their own, to ensure that the balance of power does not remain in the hands of the institution and the academic researcher.

Conclusion

Although this community-identified and -led funding initiative at this major Canadian university is a step towards Indigenous research sovereignty and self-determination, based on these findings it is apparent that there are further and deeper structural changes needed to make sure the initiative is meeting its goals. These structural changes are a critical element of real and lasting change that have the potential to benefit Indigenous communities involved in research across Canada. Through this research we hope to help inform and transform institutional policy changes that meaningfully contribute to reconciliation between academic institutions and Indigenous communities, and to foster Indigenous research governance and self-determination.

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