

# Supporting the Next Generation of Indigenous Psychologists: An Illustrative Case Example

The Counseling Psychologist

1–29

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DOI: 10.1177/00110000241283697

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## Abstract

To effectively increase American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) representation in the psychological workforce and prepare AI/AN psychologists to serve AI/AN communities, transformation is critically needed in graduate training programs. Therefore, we provide an illustrative case example of a graduate student-led, cross-institutional Indigenous Research Group (IRG) mentored by an Indigenous faculty member. Using first-person and synthesized narratives, we summarize our transformative experience in the IRG as a journey in which we found belonging and community, culturally responsive mentorship and training, and the support to become emergent Indigenous psychologists. Informed by the student and faculty mentor reflections on the IRG,

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we then provide recommendations for graduate programs to support Indigenous students. Ultimately, the IRG is a testament to the creative ways Indigenous scholars navigate the academy and serves as well as a call for faculty to support the next generation of AI/AN psychologists.

### **Keywords**

Mentoring, American Indians/Native Americans, dimensions of diversity, professional issues, training

#### **Significance of Scholarship**

*American Indian/Alaska Natives (AI/AN) are critically underrepresented in psychology graduate training and the psychological workforce. This study showcases a cross-institutional, student-led Indigenous Research Group mentored by Indigenous faculty to illustrate both some of the challenges faced by Indigenous trainees and how culturally responsive mentorship can foster belonging and support Indigenous trainee development. Ten recommendations are provided for mentors who want to better support the next generation of Indigenous psychologists.*

The inclusion of Indigenous<sup>1</sup> voices in psychology is critical to promote mental health and well-being among Indigenous communities. Psychology as a field has an ongoing legacy of enacting harmful and exploitative practices on Indigenous peoples (e.g., [Aiello et al., 2021](#)). There is increasing widespread recognition that academic psychology is dominated by one epistemological lens, rooted in objectivity, individualism, human-exceptionalism, universality, linearity, and progress ([Blume, 2014](#); [Teo, 2022](#)). Eurocentric psychological research, discourse, and practices have long been tools and forms of colonization, both in the United States and globally ([Bhatia et al., 2021](#); [Smith, 2012](#)). Therefore, Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies are critical to better address the needs of Indigenous communities through Indigenous mental health research ([Blume, 2020](#)) and practice ([Garcia & Tehee, 2014](#)). Indeed, Indigenous psychology may be better suited to address contemporary challenges than Western paradigms ([Blume, 2014](#); [Fish, Uink, et al., 2024](#)). Fortunately, there is burgeoning support for a range of perspectives in psychological science (e.g., the [American Psychological Association's \[APA\], 2021](#)).

A diversity of epistemological perspectives in psychology requires the presence and active inclusion of diverse lived experiences and worldviews, yet the field continues to struggle with equitable representation of these

perspectives. In the 1960's, it was estimated that there were likely around 10 American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) psychologists (Trimble & Clearing-Sky, 2009). Today, AI/AN psychologists remain vastly underrepresented, making up just 0.3% of the 94,000 active psychologists in the workforce<sup>2</sup> in the 2016 American Community Survey, despite comprising 2.9% of the U.S. population (APA, 2018; U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). This representation has unfortunately not improved in the past several years, with most recent 2021 data indicating that AI/AN psychologists comprise 0.15%<sup>3</sup> of the psychology workforce (APA, 2022). Of the 102,198 doctoral degrees in psychology granted in the United States between 2004–2022, 587 (0.57%) were granted to AI/AN individuals (APA, 2024). This underrepresentation extends to academia, where only 0.39% of full-time faculty (including both tenure and nontenure track) at degree-granting institutions identify as AI/AN (psychology-specific data for AI/AN faculty was not publicly available; National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

Given the disproportionately small number of AI/AN psychologists, it logically follows that AI/AN communities are underserved both clinically and in research. There is a demonstrative need to increase AI/AN representation in psychology training and the workforce. However, as cautioned two decades ago, the field must not put the “cart before the horse” (Gone, 2004, p. 125) and seek to recruit, train, and license AI/AN psychologists (Thomason, 1999) without also engaging in substantive shifts to its training models and mentorship approaches to better serve AI/AN graduate students and communities. As it stands, in a national survey administered by APA, 70% of psychologists reported that they are not at all or only somewhat knowledgeable about providing culturally responsive services to AI/ANs (APA, 2022). Consequently, AI/AN clients often face discrimination, prejudice, and culturally-incongruent care practices when seeking care through the healthcare system (e.g., Walls et al., 2015). Western educational systems have had detrimental impacts on the well-being of AI/AN students (e.g., through marginalization, surveillance, and devaluing students’ culture as seen in Brayboy, 2004), whereas integrating Indigenous knowledge systems into academic systems has promoted the successful recruitment and matriculation of AI/AN students (Brayboy, et al., 2014).

Some important inroads to recruit and retain AI/AN students in psychology have been made through the efforts of AI/AN psychologist waymakers. The Indians into Psychology Doctoral Education program was established at the University of North Dakota in 1992 through the advocacy of Dr. Arthur McDonald and APA public policy specialists (McDonald, 1994; Trimble & Clearing-Sky, 2009). Today, the University of North Dakota is one of the three grantees for the now-named American Indians into Psychology Program administered by the Indian Health Service. This grant, awarded to three APA-accredited clinical psychology programs<sup>4</sup>, includes funding support, outreach

to tribal communities, and training and development opportunities to undergraduate and graduate AI/AN psychology students (see the [Indian Health Service \[n.d.\]](#) website and student handbook for more information). As a result of this advocacy and institutional commitment, University of North Dakota has graduated more AI/AN psychologists than any other APA-accredited clinical psychology training program (D. Williams, 2019).

Unfortunately, significant gaps and barriers remain in the field at large for AI/AN psychologist trainees seeking to carry out psychological science relevant to their communities and values (e.g., values of reciprocity that prioritize bidirectional exchange vs. transactional work that solely benefits researchers and higher education institutions). Without changes to training programs and models, the Western model of doing both science and clinical practice ill-prepares the few Indigenous graduates they have (let-alone non-Indigenous graduates) to provide culturally relevant clinical service (APA, 2022) or create meaningful changes in mental health services writ large to better serve Indigenous communities (Alexander & Allo, 2021; Gone, 2004). Therefore, the goal of this article is twofold. First, to provide insight into the challenges and pathways charted by Indigenous graduate student trainees in psychology as revealed through the experiences of trainee authors in an Indigenous-led research team. Second, as informed by and grounded in our experiences as Indigenous graduate students, we provide faculty with approaches to support and mentor Indigenous graduate students in culturally responsive ways to promote their professional development as Indigenous psychologists.

To accomplish these goals, we provide a case example of one innovative cross-institutional Indigenous-led research team (the Indigenous Research Group; IRG) that facilitated the training of six Indigenous graduate students. We reflect on this unique training experience from both the faculty mentor and trainee perspectives. Next, we note four features of the IRG that we believe contributed to its impact. Finally, we provide a non exhaustive set of recommendations for faculty mentors seeking to support Indigenous trainees derived from this work. This case example underscores the gaps in existing graduate program training and illustrates a creative pathway for Indigenous graduate trainee resilience and resistance.

## **An Illustrative Case Description: The Indigenous Research Group**

### *Formation of the Indigenous Research Group*

The IRG was formed in the Spring of 2020 through the efforts of two student members of the Society for Indian Psychologists (SIP), who were seeking greater support in research skill development outside of their graduate

program. A.Y. and M.A. reflected that in their graduate program, they felt that they lacked adequate research mentorship, particularly to support engaging in research that serves Indigenous communities. These students sought mentorship from an American Indian faculty member of the SIP with decades of experience in Indigenous mental health research (J.G.).

The initial meeting with author J.G. centered the needs of the students and their vision for a potential Indigenous student-led research group. Following the meeting, an open call went out to the SIP listserv, a graduate Indigenous student social media group, and the students' personal social media inviting Indigenous graduate students who were interested in learning about Indigenous research to an open Zoom meeting. The first meeting consisted of around ten Indigenous students, from multiple educational backgrounds, who engaged in introductions, discussion of group norms, and aspirational group goals. Student members met with and received guidance from J.G. when discussing different research opportunities. Organically, students offered ideas aligned with their research interests and group members supported the designation of lead student researchers based on the selected project(s).

Ultimately, this process resulted in a core group of six Indigenous graduate students and one faculty mentor. Group members came from three psychology subdisciplines (clinical, community, and counseling) and six different academic institutions. At the time of this manuscript, five of the six graduate students have graduated from their respective programs and all are engaged in research and/or clinical practice that focuses on Indigenous mental health and well-being. For all trainee authors, serving and giving back to their Indigenous communities was a primary motivator for engaging in research and obtaining their degrees.

The IRG was primarily trainee-led, with critical direction provided by the faculty mentor. Our collaboration began with a trainee-initiated goal to complete a systematic review of AI/AN suicide research. Together, we learned to conduct systematic reviews, collaborated with outside experts (e.g., a research librarian), and ultimately produced five systematic review papers that were all accepted for publication over the following 2 years (Fetter et al., 2023; Pham et al., 2021, 2022; Rey et al., 2023; Wiglesworth et al., 2022). This process provided critical training in leading a research team, formulating and carrying out standardized procedures for reviewing and extracting information from articles, synthesizing information across a large number of studies, academic writing, and the publication process.

The group was and continues to be structured only to the point of utility for group members, without a set endpoint or point of dissolution. Given this, the group had no formal objectives, assessment, or predetermined learning outcomes beyond our scholarly goals. In 2021, we discussed if and how to continue the group. It was concluded that much as the IRG had begun, the group could continue in whatever form took shape based on the students

involved or interested. In fact, it was only through the continued collaboration of various group members and, more importantly, continued relationships that this article developed.

### *Development of this Article*

As members of the IRG, we first engaged in intentional reflection, discussion, and recording of our experiences in the summer of 2021, when preparing to serve on a panel about the collaboration at the annual SIP convention. Through this reflection, it became clear that the impact of the IRG on the student members extended far beyond the colonial and academically valued “outcomes” of the group (i.e., publications) to fundamentally reshape our experiences as psychology trainees and Indigenous peoples. Our trainee-led panel at SIP, in which we spoke about our research products and the relationships we had formed in the IRG, received positive feedback from SIP members. We came to realize that our experiences reflected the experiences of other trainees, both past and present, and that sharing these experiences may contribute to the ongoing conversation about culturally-responsive mentorship and training in the field.

Although no formal consent process was undertaken, each step of the manuscript development was agreed upon by participating authors, with decisions discussed to consensus. With the goal of sharing our experiences more widely, all authors contributed individual written reflections focused on the open-ended prompt to “reflect on their experiences within the IRG” in March, 2023. These reflections informed our co-constructed account. The level of specificity of written reflections were left to each authors’ discretion to respect individual authors’ sovereignty over their lived experience. The first author then synthesized themes from trainee authors’ reflections and led a selection of first-person narrative excerpts to illustrate aspects of our graduate experiences as IRG members. Feedback was solicited in a group meeting, and themes were then collaboratively edited throughout manuscript development. Authors then co-developed faculty recommendations, drawing from the literature and lived experiences. Author J.G. also provided the faculty mentor written-reflection on their experience in the IRG, included in its entirety below, and offered feedback on manuscript drafts.

Trainee responses and quotes were anonymized (e.g., member number does not correspond to author number or order in which trainees entered the IRG). Sharing difficult experiences as trainees from underrepresented backgrounds who already face inequities in psychology training is inherently a vulnerable position. Allowing specific author accounts to remain anonymous is an act of solidarity, which we hope provides authors with safety in detailing honest accounts without the potential for retaliation (M. T. Williams, 2019).

## Reflections on Indigenous Experiences in Graduate Education and the Indigenous Research Group

Both shared and unique graduate training experiences are essential to understanding the impact the IRG had on us as scholars. Below, we describe three themes that emerged in our reflections on our graduate school experiences through illustrative quotes from author reflections: isolation and invisibility/hypervisibility, lack of mentorship, and a devaluing of Indigenous ways of knowing and being. In response to these themes, we describe the experiential transformation of these themes through our participation in the IRG: finding belonging and community, developing through culturally responsive mentorship and training, and becoming emergent Indigenous psychologists. In doing so, we hope to reflect the transformative and healing experience that the IRG became for us as Indigenous trainees. Each of the below themes do not stand alone; they were described by authors as connected and interwoven, although they are separated for convenience below.

### *Finding Belonging and Community*

Although our specific experiences differed as a result of our unique lived experiences and specific academic contexts, all IRG members described a sense of isolation, invisibility, or at times, hypervisibility in their doctoral training experience. Some authors described this isolation and invisibility in terms of the lack of faculty and fellow students interested in conducting research to serve Indigenous communities, others in the suffocating hegemony of Western frameworks; some described it in the lack of social support, and still others described feeling isolated from community and familial support while in academia.

**Member 1:** My research interests revolve around Native American issues, a topic in which none of my faculty had expertise. I was often left to function as the expert on the subject of Native issues by default, despite the infancy of my development.

**Member 3:** They had nothing to offer me. At that time, [they] had no Native faculty, no Native mentors, and no Native clinical or research training sites or practicum rotations. They had no funding for Native students, no courses on Native peoples and mental health, and no labs actively focused on Indigenous mental health from a non-Western framework.

For most authors, the IRG was our first experience in an all-Indigenous research space with both an Indigenous faculty mentor and other Indigenous students. Critically, this space was also focused on a pressing and critical concern facing many Indigenous communities in the United States, with the express goal of moving the discipline forward to better serve Indigenous communities. The IRG provided a sense of belonging, which combatted both the invisibility and hypervisibility that we as students experienced in our academic journeys. The IRG served as a unique environment that allowed authors to be authentic, name specific barriers and challenges experienced as Indigenous graduate students, feel mutually understood, and support one another through our journeys as emergent Indigenous scholars.

**Member 5:** Although we did not have the same lived experiences, my peers in the IRG could understand and discuss with me the struggles of trying to find your way as an Indigenous psychologist in a system that was at best indifferent or ignorant to your goals. This was critical to me building radical hope for myself as a Native psychologist—hope that I could find my way AND find community.

**Member 1:** Despite the initial educational intentions of the group, IRG became a refuge for me during periods of isolation. Amid the COVID pandemic, isolation grew amongst the nation, but as a Native student engaging in decolonization and challenging genocidal approaches to education, isolation had become before the pandemic. IRG provided respite from that isolation and a place where I could experience mutual validation from my peers navigating similar experiences of isolation and anti-Indigenous racism.

### *Developing Through Culturally Responsive Mentorship and Training*

Some authors described a lack of training and development in research skills they sought during their graduate education. This reflected a lack of culturally responsive, hands-on mentorship that left authors feeling “out to sea.” Authors described feeling that faculty held low expectations or low belief in their abilities, experienced a lack of positive reinforcement, and/or lacked tangible support and resources to achieve their goal of conducting research congruent to their cultural lens. In addition to limited access to participating in research projects focused on Indigenous populations or issues, research training practices themselves did not frequently reflect the way authors would like to engage in research processes. For example, authors reported exposure to more



hierarchical rather than collaborative and relational research practices, indicative of the privileging of Western thought in psychological training as a whole.

Even among mentors who sought to be caring or supportive, some authors experienced a disconnect or lack of engagement around their career goals, related to a seeming lack of awareness of Indigenous communities or cultural competence to work with and support the development of Indigenous students: *“I have had many faculty members tell me they do not feel competent to support an Indigenous student/project due to lack of exposure.”* The absence of culturally responsive mentorship offered unique challenges:

**Member 2:** I was uncomfortable with my knowledge of research and the only experience I had was from being the “workhorse” of professors. We found that we didn’t have adequate mentorship on how to engage in research let alone how to conduct research within Indian Country.

**Member 1:** Our program held us to the expectation that we would produce research and scholarship. Still, they never gave us the tool or mentorship to navigate the research development, writing, submission, and revision process ... I felt abandoned by my program and became disillusioned with the idea that I would never learn how to become a competent researcher.

In contrast, mentorship within the IRG was characterized by tangible and scaffolded learning and skill development in both Western methodologies and Indigenous scholarship. This guidance was underlined by high belief and high support for IRG author development from the faculty mentor and one another. We were given guidance, perspective, and tangible direction throughout the research process—from the inception of student-generated research ideas to method development, data collection, writing, publication submission, and revision.

Throughout, the faculty mentor provided professional mentorship, encouraging us to reflect on our desired roles in research production and how these fit with our other professional aspirations, clinical or academic. For example, J.G. encouraged us to discuss as a group our training stages, professional goals, needs, and interests. This process was practical, allowing us to determine our personal involvement and roles in various projects of the IRG (e.g., who was interested and willing to serve as first author). However, this open facilitation was also more responsive to our developmental trajectories and needs. Rather than engagement being motivated by faculty goals, members could participate in a manner that was flexible to the type or level of

involvement that we desired at any given time given our goals and capacity. As a result of these opportunities for self-determination, authors described gaining skills, self-knowledge, and efficacy:

**Member 4:** [The IRG] supplemented my training from my program, particularly with respect to thinking about Indigenous health and well-being. It gave me an outlet to discuss ideas with, and be challenged by, trusted individuals who had some lived experience and/or academic expertise related to the content areas, and gave me access to mentorship (both in the specific projects and more generally) from an expert in the field that I would not have otherwise had. It also gave me exposure to another style of leading teams, doing research, publishing papers, which opened my eyes to the different ways to do this work.

**Member 2:** J.G. met with us to teach us different research methodologies to help guide our research project. He helped us really understand the methods and how to conduct them in a manner that I was personally able to understand. He was patient with us and challenged us to help increase our research knowledge, awareness, and skill.

### *Becoming Emergent Indigenous Psychologists*

When training in Western psychology programs, we experienced internal conflict with our values, worldviews, and ways of knowing as a result of the dominance and hegemony of Western thought in psychological training. Given that all authors explicitly pursued their graduate training to support Indigenous communities, this conflict also represented a deficit in graduate training programs. As one author described this phenomenon: “*How are you supposed to develop as an Indigenous scholar?*” Authors described being forced to learn, digest, and deliver Western approaches, which at times highly conflicted with their values as Indigenous peoples, and in fact devalued their ways of being. Some authors described that, at times, the research methodologies and clinical methods they were taught were inapplicable, unhelpful, or even harmful when working with AI/AN or other marginalized communities. For example, some reported that their programs privileged or primarily operated from a positivist or postpositivist epistemological lens. In contrast, the training curriculum did not include exposure to Indigenous methodologies, epistemologies, or ways of healing. Authors described this devaluation

of Indigeneity, how this devaluation could be internalized by students at times, and the struggle to persist in development as an Indigenous scholar as such:

**Member 3:** I saw the email to collaborate on the IRG at my lowest point in graduate school ... I felt completely stuck. “I should have never went to grad school,” I thought, “should have never left the rez. My mentor was right, I’m not cut out for this academic stuff ...” I was only ever doing what I was taught, and it is easy to comply once you have been broken down by the system long enough.

**Member 5:** Being trained in Western psychology had left me feeling adrift as a Native psychologist, fighting for ways to reconcile, incorporate, adapt, or maneuver towards culturally congruent ways of healing, being, thinking, working, learning, leading, and contributing. Given my own identity issues, I had further internalized my own struggles to learn and operate in congruent ways as evidence of my own failures.

Therefore, we took initiative to seek outside knowledge, support, and professional learning to supplement and augment our academic training programs, as exemplified by the process of forming the IRG itself. As IRG members, we then had a space to share resources, tools, methodologies, strategies for navigating academia, and even values with other AI/AN scholars. Moreover, the IRG provided exposure to AI/AN scholarship, best practices, methodologies, and ways of being and doing science that some authors had not had access to in predominantly White institutions. For example, in the formation and role assignment of IRG projects, authors described members as making consensus-based decisions, stepping up and back into leadership roles according to time, expertise, and interest, and prioritizing listening to and learning from one another in the process. As seen in the below quotes, these experiences were nothing short of revelatory for the IRG scholars:

**Member 1:** It felt as if we were in a community being taught by an elder committed to the futurity of Native people and their ways of knowing. We worked together with a mentor who was not only an expert in the areas of Native psychology in which we were all interested but also an expert in navigating the communication of ideas that threatened a Western status quo in a way that was amenable to the Western sensibilities that often prevented our ideas from

entering the psychology literature ... When the academy demanded our identities and ideas conform to the contours of a colonial subject, we resisted by creating a space that subverted the notion that we must think and produce in White ways.

- Member 2:** I firmly believe that what I learned, from IRG, has helped me stand for the legitimacy of my Indigenous knowledge as truth and fight more against the harmful narratives I received for making my Indigenous knowledge the core of my being. This helped me continue on to finish my dissertation and seek out a postdoc that allows me to start a program of Indigenous research to help our youth engage in Indigenous healing. I teach other Indigenous community cultural mentors how to utilize evaluation/research in their programming to help us understand their impact on their Indigenous youth. I found a love for research again through the IRG and I received helpful knowledge that I am now able to implement in the real world. To think, where I am and what I am doing right now may not be feasible if my brother and I did not seek out additional training and build our own community.
- Member 3:** The mentorship provided through this group was in no uncertain terms, an intervention, from a multisystemic level. I had now been taught through the IRG with J.G. and each of the other graduate students: how to write, how to feel safe, how to grieve collectively, how to laugh and how to remember who I was. I was taught the power of my ideas, how to organize research into Western, White paradigms, how to think like both a White researcher and from my authentic lived experiences as an Indigenous person.
- Member 4:** IRG truly changed the course of my graduate school experience, and by extension my career as a Native psychologist. I have always felt particularly grateful to be part of this community at such an early stage of training. I entered graduate school very excited to do research that would benefit Native communities but very naive to what that would actually look like and how to get there in a good way. In this group, I was uplifted for what I had to offer and the true reciprocal and collectivist nature of IRG meant I was also supported by all that my relatives had to

offer. IRG taught me that my values and worldview had a place in the work that I do and even more than that, that the values and worldview of the communities we hope to serve have a central place in the work that we do.

**Member 5:** As a space of community, learning, support, one where I was able to be my holistic self, IRG has been a transformative experience for me in my personal and professional identity as an Indigenous psychologist. Without IRG, I would not be where I am today. Frankly, I would not have had the needed scaffolded experience and holistic support to gain access to academia as a Native psychologist grounded in my personhood.

## Reflections From the IRG Faculty Mentor

Among my own Indigenous people, the *Aaniiih*-Gros Ventres of the Fort Belknap Indian reservation in North Central Montana, we have long-standing traditions surrounding the request by young people for specialized knowledge from older members of the community (Cooper, 1957). For example, our traditional way of life was structured through formal age-graded societies in which cohorts of men—beginning in what we would today call adolescence—would collectively move through a sequence of ceremonial “lodges” (e.g., the Fly Lodge, the Crazy Lodge) at key junctures during their adult lives (Kroeber, 1908). The transition from one lodge or society into the next required formal sponsorship of a major ritual by the cohort. To proceed, this group of age-mates had to first obtain the ceremonial knowledge to prepare and perform the induction ritual. Thus, they would approach older society leaders to petition for instruction and guidance for ritual induction into the new lodge. Beyond this specific example of navigating developmental paths through the life course, *Aaniiih* people also recognized a more general practice for seeking knowledge from older community members: young people would approach an older person with a pipe filled with kinnikinnick (a tobacco mixture) and formally request prayerful instruction, guidance, and support. Older *Aaniiih* individuals that were approached in this fashion were expected to consent to offering guidance and instruction, which they indicated by accepting the presented pipe and smoking prior to proceeding. Alongside other American Indian communities, we still practice this tradition today (Gone, 2006).

As Indigenous people who pursue formal degrees and credentials in psychology, it can be challenging to find continuity with our aboriginal knowledges and traditions in our university-based academic training. For one thing, there are too few Indigenous professors of psychology to approach for instruction and guidance. For another, there are epistemic commitments that

have long structured disciplinary psychology in ways that disqualify or even denigrate Indigenous knowledge traditions (Gone, 2023). In consequence, many Indigenous students must confront the additional challenges of finding their way through psychology, of re-imagining what psychology might offer for their families and communities (Gone, 2022), and of making psychology their own (i.e., of decolonizing psychology; Gone, 2021a, Wendt & Gone, 2012). I myself commenced my PhD training in clinical–community psychology at the University of Illinois in 1993. There were no Indigenous faculty members or other students in the program at that time—instead, the university officially sponsored a stereotypical Indian sports team mascot—but I was fortunate to obtain faculty mentorship that made ample space for me to integrate American Indian knowledge and experience into my training. As just two examples, my faculty publicly recognized the value of my master’s thesis (a thematically analyzed case study of *Aaniiih* cultural identity based on interviews with my grandmother) with a departmental award and offered practicum credit for me to live and work on my own reservation (where I taught at our Tribal college and then served as our Tribal administrator) for 8 months. In sum, my own academic career as a clinical–community–cultural psychologist who reenvisions mental health and helping services alongside Indigenous community partners could not have occurred without robust faculty mentoring (Award for Distinguished Professional Contributions to Applied Research: Joseph Patrick Gone, 2021).

Upon my election to the Presidential Trio of the Society of Indian Psychologists in June of 2019, I was approached by two Indigenous psychology doctoral students, A.Y. and M.A., who requested a meeting at the APA convention that August to discuss research mentorship. A.Y. and M.A. reached out to me again in March 2020 to convey that they had recruited other Indigenous psychology doctoral students around the nation with interests in learning how to conduct Indigenous psychology research. Would I still be willing to help mentor them in research and academic life? As I noted earlier, consent to such requests is culturally expected. Owing to the dramatic pandemic disruptions that emerged within days of this exchange, we began to meet using Zoom, identifying the eventual participants of the IRG and topics of inquiry in April. The two projects we settled on concerned the devastating problem of AI/AN suicide and a group autoethnography of Indigenous experiences in doctoral psychology training. A challenging limitation, however, was the coordination of IRB reviews across multiple institutions, and so we collectively settled on the unifying project of systematically reviewing the empirical AI/AN suicide literature. I will conclude this reflection with a final brief observation: this endeavor was student-initiated, student-driven, and student-led. I offered instruction and guidance when requested, but the achievements of this group testify to the talent, tenacity, energy, agency, ambition, and gusto—or what I have elsewhere referred to as the *eruption of*

*liveliness* (Gone, 2011, 2021b)—of these amazing Indigenous individuals. It is the highest honor of my career to have been associated with these remarkable young psychologists, who have proven beyond question as we look to the future that Indigenous psychology is more lively than ever.

## Lessons From the IRG

The themes of isolation and invisibility/hypervisibility, lack of mentorship, and a devaluing of Indigenous ways of knowing and being reflected in the IRG graduate narratives are hardly novel. Indeed, they mirror those described by AI/AN undergraduates (Johnston-Goodstar & VeLure Roholt, 2017), graduate students (Ballew, 1996; Brazill et al., 2021; Fox, 2013), and faculty in prior research (Walters et al., 2019). However, unique structural features of the IRG facilitated an inclusive, supportive, and challenging environment for students to develop as scholars in the midst of these barriers. Below, we briefly describe the features of the IRG that contributed to its transformational role in our lives: it was student-generated and led, had high-contact, consistent, and culturally responsive faculty mentorship, offered tangible research skills and experiences, and consisted of a diverse membership.

First, the IRG was student-generated and led. In being student-led, IRG members were empowered to determine research topics, methodologies, goals, and content, uplifting their scholarly perspectives. The student-led format also contributed to scholars' ability to form meaningful connections and offer support and mentorship to one another. For each manuscript, IRG scholars took different roles according to their interest, time, and efficacy. This fluid process allowed each student to obtain sought-after research skills and honor a collaborative, collectivist orientation towards their work. In contrast to academic environments that frequently operate (understandably) with advisor or principal investigator-defined outputs, the group format's dynamism allowed students to define their engagement and goals.

Second, students were offered high-contact, ongoing, and far-reaching faculty support and engagement by the faculty mentor. Each IRG student met with the faculty mentor at various points individually or in small groups about ancillary concerns, questions, or professional development issues—including career trajectory, grant writing, and job applications. Regular virtual meetings allowed for a reflexive research process and virtual “face-to-face” engagement for relationship building. Underrepresented students in psychology often receive less social support (Clark et al., 2012) and quality mentorship than their peers (Curtin et al., 2016). In this context, receiving consistent mentorship that was both tangibly beneficial to our goals and responsive to our needs and experiences as Indigenous scholars was particularly impactful.

Third, and uniquely, the IRG was founded with the goal of providing culturally relevant, values-congruent, tangible research skills and experiences.

The focus on tangible skill development through identified research products that also values congruent allowed trainees to gain valuable research skills without sacrificing their sense of selves. In keeping with other findings, reciprocity or giving back to community is and was a primary motivation for our graduate training and source of strength during the challenges of graduate education (Shotton, 2018). Therefore, working to advance Indigenous mental health equity through the IRG research led to increased academic confidence, self-efficacy, and sense of empowerment as Indigenous scholars.

Finally, the diverse subdiscipline background and training stages of IRG members became an asset to trainees through our use of peer mentorship. Rather than existing in an echo chamber of their specific training setting, subdiscipline, or research area, scholars were challenged to collaborate. This experience allowed scholars to develop critical skill sets: acknowledge their own ideological and epistemological lens, identify and empower other group members to use their strengths, and recognize and contribute their strengths to the group. The value of this interdisciplinary near-peer mentorship to our personal and academic development is reflected in findings from a recent international systematic review (Lorenzetti et al., 2019).

In summary, the IRG provided key experiences of student-driven learning, culturally responsive mentorship, culturally congruous skill development, and peer mentorship, all of which fostered self-efficacy and strengthened Indigenous academic identity (Montgomery et al., 2000). These factors are key to AI/AN undergraduate (Gloria & Kurpius, 2001; Montgomery et al., 2000; Mosholder et al., 2016) and graduate student success (Brazill et al., 2021).

However, we do not believe that broad adoption or implementation of any one particular strategy, program, or approach in isolation by any training program is sufficient to address the needs and support the flourishing of Indigenous graduate students. Therefore, we are not suggesting that the IRG as described here be summarily implemented across training programs. The IRG represents a unique constellation of circumstances and relationships. Replicating this exactly may not be feasible (or desirable based on trainee goals). Instead, we believe that the pursuit of Indigenous psychology trainee inclusion and retention necessitates ongoing and wholehearted commitment of faculty to become culturally-responsive mentors.

By highlighting the factors that necessitated the formation of the IRG as well as the creativity, generosity, and relationality that allowed it to be transformational, we aim to provide insight to faculty regarding the challenges and opportunities in Indigenous graduate students' experiences. Drawing from these experiences, we provide a (nonexhaustive) list of recommendations for faculty seeking to support Indigenous trainees in psychology programs.



## Ten Recommendations for Mentors to Support Indigenous Scholars

Graduate programs must implement innovative methods to recruit, retain, train, and prepare AI/AN scholars in culturally responsive ways. We cannot wait on a hypothetical future in which there are more AI/AN faculty to adequately support the current AI/AN trainees in their development as Indigenous psychologists (Gone, 2004). This is particularly true given that the barriers in higher education already result in attrition of AI/AN trainees in the undergraduate-to-graduate-to-faculty pipeline (Walters et al., 2019). Therefore, non-AI/AN faculty have a critical role in recruiting, supporting, and effectively mentoring AI/AN graduate students. To do so, we have generated a list of 10 recommendations for psychology faculty, informed by author reflections on the IRG.

We offer these recommendations with a spirit of humility. We caution readers that this list is not intended as a cultural “cheat sheet,” a how-to guide, or “10 steps to understand your Indigenous graduate student.” Indeed, such efforts necessarily fall short. Indigenous peoples are not a monolith, and efforts to provide prescriptive directives based on cultural assumptions will necessarily fail, and worse, inhibit the development of an authentic relationship. Instead, we offer faculty recommendations for ways to approach and think about themselves, their work, and their mentorship, to cultivate culturally responsive mentoring relationships.

1. Self-reflect on your own needs, supports, and capacities. What was your experience with mentorship, and how do you carry this with you into your own advising, mentorship, and teaching? What supports do you need, and how has that changed over time? In what ways may your experience differ from your trainees? Seek to understand your potential biases, and reflect on your own positionality (see [Inman \[2020\]](#) for an example of this reflexivity). Seek spaces where you can receive support and process your mentorship experiences.
2. Acknowledge that you carry an ideological and epistemological lens in your practice of psychology and openly acknowledge what that epistemology is with trainees (e.g., [Teo, 2022](#)). Recognize the dominant ideological and epistemological lens in the field, your subdiscipline, and department. Learn the history of psychology ([Guthrie, 2004](#)) as well as the harms psychology has and continues to perpetuate on Indigenous peoples.
3. Seek to learn about the experiences of AI/AN peoples and know that the Indigenous experience is not stagnant but consistently in motion. We have heard many times that faculty feel unaware of AI/AN issues, cultures, history, and media. This is unsurprising given the educational system’s perpetuation of AI/AN erasure ([Reclaiming Native](#)

- Truth, 2018), but it has devastating impacts for individual trainees and AI/AN communities broadly. Educate yourself by desegregating your media consumption (e.g., the *All My Relations* [Wilbur & Keene, 2020–present] and *This Land* [Nagle, 2019–present] podcasts), understanding your institution’s history with local Tribal Nations, learning about U.S. history (e.g., Blackhawk’s 2023 *The Rediscovery of America: Native Peoples and the Unmaking of U.S. History*), and reading AI/AN scholars in your discipline.
4. Acknowledge areas of ignorance or lack of expertise without relying on it to disengage from mentorship, training opportunities, or your own personal learning. Resignation to ignorance of Indigenous history, experiences, and ways of knowing, in a context of ongoing colonial harm in which the Western paradigms remain dominant, is akin to a position of “colorblindness.” Empirical evidence demonstrates that a “colorblind” approach is not a neutral or harmless position to take (Neville et al., 2013). Seek to understand and learn, but recognize that even if you don’t understand someone’s experience, you can respect it.
  5. Harness your areas of expertise to provide tangible training (e.g., specific research methodologies, disorders, writing techniques, knowledge of publication process). Use your areas of expertise to bolster and support Indigenous students through instrumental mentorship, or the development of specific knowledge and skills (Curtin et al., 2016). Be clear and direct about what types of skills and training you can provide, and help trainees identify their own needs through open and curious conversation. Seek to share knowledge and skills collaboratively as possible approaches grounded in your experience, rather than presenting them as the only way to navigate the profession. For example, rather than suggesting that mentees should avoid service or activism until they are in a more powerful position, inquire about trainees’ values in engaging in these actions, seek to understand, voice your concerns, and strategize collaboratively to support the trainee in navigating the environment effectively in a values-aligned way.
  6. Empower trainees’ development in their own identity as a scientist, even if their framework differs from your own. This is vital to culturally responsive mentorship, as it creates opportunities to provide training experiences aligned with mentees’ goals. Uplift Indigenous students’ lived experience and knowledge of Indigeneity, including shifting the power to center their voices. For example, support a student’s use of a methodology best aligned with their epistemology for their dissertation. Seek opportunities to support AI/AN students’ efforts to integrate and utilize Indigenous knowledge

- systems and methodologies (e.g., Decolonizing methodologies [Smith, 2012], the six R's of Indigenous Research [Tsosie et al., 2022], and/or Tribal Participatory Research [Fisher & Ball, 2003]).
7. Take initiative to ask about trainees' experiences with discrimination, concerns and hopes about their program, coursework, and clinical training. Demonstrate transparency: be clear about your reasons for inquiry both internally and with students (be aware that trainee responses may be anxiety-provoking, concerning, or upsetting for you). Honor that students may be in different places of identity development and will have different experiences with in-group and out-group acceptance or rejection. Students may not immediately disclose if they are experiencing discrimination and/or microaggressions. However, many graduate students of Color experience microaggressions and discrimination, which contributes to being "pushed out" of academia (Galán et al., 2023).
  8. Take a relational, dynamic approach to mentorship. Be proactive in helping students think early on about their career goals and next steps by asking questions throughout graduate training. Be explicit with your support, encouragement, and belief in their abilities. Empower Indigenous trainees with a strength-based perspective that acknowledges unique barriers and strengths as well as sources of those barriers and strengths. Introduce them to colleagues, recommend them for awards or opportunities, and check in regularly. Some students get left behind early in training because they may not have access to or may have misalignment with the "hidden curriculum" (Giroux & Penna, 1979).
  9. Support Indigenous trainees in forming collaborations, training opportunities, mentorship relationships, and community involvement that provide vital support and may necessitate stepping outside the silos of Western academia. Of note, the IRG would not have been formed without the permission, openness, and/or support of home institution mentors. We encourage other faculty to similarly support connections to potential peer and faculty mentors in- or outside of their particular graduate program and/or institution (as recommended by Benishek et al., 2004). Promote and support student-generated initiatives. Encourage students to form connections that benefit their specific career goals and research interests. For example, provide financial support for students to attend Indigenous professional conferences, even if they are not presenting or it is outside their content area, so that they can be exposed to Indigenous scholarship and increase their access to other forms of instrumental mentorship.
  10. Given that our socialization into the field begins as trainees, we must engage in programmatic change to equip the next generation of

mentors to work effectively with diverse trainees and epistemic perspectives. Work in your own institution to make the department genuinely more supportive of Indigenous trainees and Indigenous psychology, whether that be in curriculum content, pedagogy, clinical practicum sites, research foci, program benchmarks and evaluation, department cultural norms, or faculty colleagues. Create opportunities for non-Indigenous trainees to expand their understanding of AI/AN communities and the ways that the discipline has related to AI/AN nations (e.g., class discussion on cross-cultural measurement equivalence and tribally-specific idioms of distress such as “ghost sickness”; see [Trimble & Morse, 2018](#)). Recruitment without commitment to retention and departmental change harms trainees ([Galán et al., 2023](#)).

### *A Call to Action for Graduate Training*

This manuscript comes at a time of increasing calls for accountability and change in psychology as a discipline. For faculty and graduate programs looking for further resources, recommendations, and insights, we encourage faculty to utilize key resources cited within each recommendation to support and enact the above recommendations. Numerous resources are available to faculty seeking to cultivate an intentional approach to mentorship that is culturally responsive and effective for Indigenous and non-Indigenous undergraduates, graduate trainees, and early career faculty (e.g., [Chan et al., 2015](#); [Hinsdale, 2016](#)).

Most recently, the APA has issued an unprecedented *Offer of Apology to First Peoples in the United States* ([APA Offer of Apology, 2023](#)) that recounts a brief summary of psychology’s harms to Indigenous communities. These harms include “institutional racism adversely impacting Native student recruitment, learning, and retention at all educational levels” as well as “perpetuation of dominant culture-focused training and supervision that is harmful to Indigenous [student] identity and excludes their histories, traditions, and worldviews” (p. 15). Fortunately, the *Offer of Apology* also includes directions for knowledge production, health, APA and workforce, training, and education informed by the instructive recommendations in the Warrior’s Path Final Report ([Aiello et al., 2021](#)).

Finally, faculty, institutions, and leadership in APA can look toward Canadian psychology as an instructive comparative setting where efforts to Indigenousize and support Indigenous psychology are taking place ([Ansloos et al., 2019](#)). We echo [Fish, Ansloos, et al. \(2024\)](#) call for psychology to move beyond the *Apology* to engage in structural and systematic truth and reconciliation efforts, which requires substantive allocation of resources and infrastructure. Although strategic and structural changes are needed at the

discipline-wide level, we remind faculty that impactful and meaningful action steps on a smaller scale can also be advanced at the individual, departmental, and professional organization level. For example, APA divisions (such as Division 17) could enact grant funding opportunities that center and amplify Indigenous psychologists, trainees, and scholarship. Above all, we urge faculty to seek out and listen to the experiences, needs, and feedback of trainees and advisees in their program.

## Conclusion

In some ways, the creation of the IRG illustrates the critical failures of psychology graduate programs in supporting Indigenous students in meeting their professional goals. It exemplifies the ways that AI/AN trainees are forced to seek out alternative avenues to secure culturally responsive mentorship to adequately prepare them as Indigenous scholars. However, the IRG also represents the creativity, ingenuity, and proactiveness through which Indigenous graduate students and faculty can harness the power of the current AI/AN psychology community. It highlights the importance of supporting trainees in opportunities that require stepping outside silos or single-mentor models of Western academia. Finally, it exemplifies the critical role of mentors who opt in to creating opportunities and safe (and brave!) spaces for growth and challenge. This is all the more challenging in an environment that does not support or reward such mentorship, and may discourage it as an unnecessary distraction from the goals of the academy (Walters et al., 2019).

It is our hope that this illustration provides an example to encourage creative and counter-narrative engagement for graduate students navigating the academy. In addition, we hope this reflection serves to encourage faculty to commit to engaging in change processes in their mentorship and departments to support future AI/AN psychologists as both clinicians and researchers. Ultimately, we seek this not for ourselves, but for our people: to serve and strengthen our communities through the work we do as psychologists.

## Acknowledgements

We honor and express our gratitude to the many lands, spaces, and communities that create and shape our work, including the lands of our Ochéthi Šakówiij, Wahpekute, Métis, Anishinabewaki, Kiikaapoi, Gáuiǵú, O-ga-xpa Ma-zhon, Osage, Tonkawa, Wiyot, Numu nuu Sookobitu, Ndé Kónitsa a íí Gokiyaa, Jumanos, Coahuiltecan, Ohlone, Kanien'kehá:ka, Yésah, Occaneechi Band of the Saponi Nation, Massachusett, Pawtucket, Muscogee, Maidu, Miwok, and Nisenan relatives.

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## Notes

1. The terms Native American, Native, American Indian, Alaska Native, First Nations, Original Peoples, and Indigenous represent overlapping and non-overlapping groups. It is best practice to use language and terminology that individuals and communities prefer. In this manuscript, we primarily use the term Indigenous, when possible, to reflect broader inclusivity of our Indigenous relatives. In cases where we use the term “American Indian/Alaska Native”, we use language that accurately reflects the cited source. In quotes, we maintain the authors’ original language. Finally, Indigenous ways of being are not a monolith, the Indigenous authors of this article do not speak for all Indigenous experiences. The reader is encouraged to increase their knowledge, awareness, and skill when engaging with Indigenous peoples and communities.
2. Data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2016 American Community Survey (ACS). Active psychologists are defined as any individuals in the workforce with an occupation of psychologist in any field and who hold a doctoral/professional degree.
3. Percentages are provided on the recommendation of the APA Center for Workforce Studies, which no longer includes estimated numbers for small populations (such as AI/AN psychologists) due to sensitivity of weighted samples to year-to-year fluctuation (K. Stamm, personal communication, June 18, 2024).
4. According to the student handbook, other psychology programs are not eligible at this time.

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## Author Biographies

**Anna Kawennison Fetter**, PhD, EdM (she/her), is a member of the St. Regis Mohawk Tribe (Snipe clan) and a counseling psychologist by training. She is an incoming assistant professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Duke University School of Medicine, specializing in culturally responsive psychotherapy for marginalized emerging adults. Dr. Fetter's research aims to advance mental health equity through community-accountable work drawing from critical, liberation, and Indigenous psychology, utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

**Andrea Wiglesworth**, MA (she/her), is a member of the Seneca-Cayuga Nation (deer clan) and Shawnee Tribe and a clinical psychology doctoral candidate at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities. Her research takes a developmental lens to examine the emotional, behavioral, and biological mechanisms linking stress experiences and suicidal thoughts and behaviors from late childhood to emerging adulthood. Her work centers social and cultural contexts as core contributors to youth mental health and wellbeing.

**LittleDove F. Rey**, PsyD (she/her), is an enrolled member of the United Auburn Indian Community band of Maidu and Miwok Indians and a clinical psychologist by training. She is a member of the guiding coalition of

traditional knowledge keepers and healers at the UCLA Integrated Substance Abuse Program. Dr. Rey's research focuses on culturally grounded interventions to address crises in Tribal communities with an emphasis on substance use and suicide prevention.

**Amanda R. Young**, PhD (she/her/ikwe), is Hidasta from MHA Nation from Fort Berthold Indian Reservation and is Anishinaabe Ojibwe Ikwe from Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians. She is currently a postdoctoral fellow at Two Feathers Native American Family Services, where she provides clinical services to Native American youth and provides culturally respectable evaluation guidance for Two Feather's culturally grounded Native American youth programs. Dr. Young's passion focuses on bringing awareness and ultimately ending the suppressed epidemic of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Relatives through research, advocacy, and community involvement.

**Michael Azarani**, PhD (they/she), is a culturally Indigenous Mexican of Mexica descent and a counseling psychologist by training. They are a licensed psychologist at Deep Eddy Therapy In Austin, Texas, where they serve as the Director of Diversity Equity and Inclusivity (DEI) and specialize in queer psychotherapy and psychotherapy for people of the global majority. Dr. Azarani serves as an educator and supervisor in their agency's American Psychology Association-accredited internship program and provides training in DEI to post doctoral fellows.

**Joseph P. Gone**, PhD (*Aaniiih*-Gros Ventre), is an international expert in the psychology and mental health of American Indians and other Indigenous peoples. A professor at Harvard University, he has collaborated with tribal communities for 30 years to critique conventional mental health services and to harness traditional culture and spirituality for advancing Indigenous well-being. He has published more than 100 scientific articles and received recognition in his fields through 25 fellowships and career awards, including a Guggenheim Fellowship.