

Towards haudenosaunee research sovereignty: Investing in local research and training to support community development

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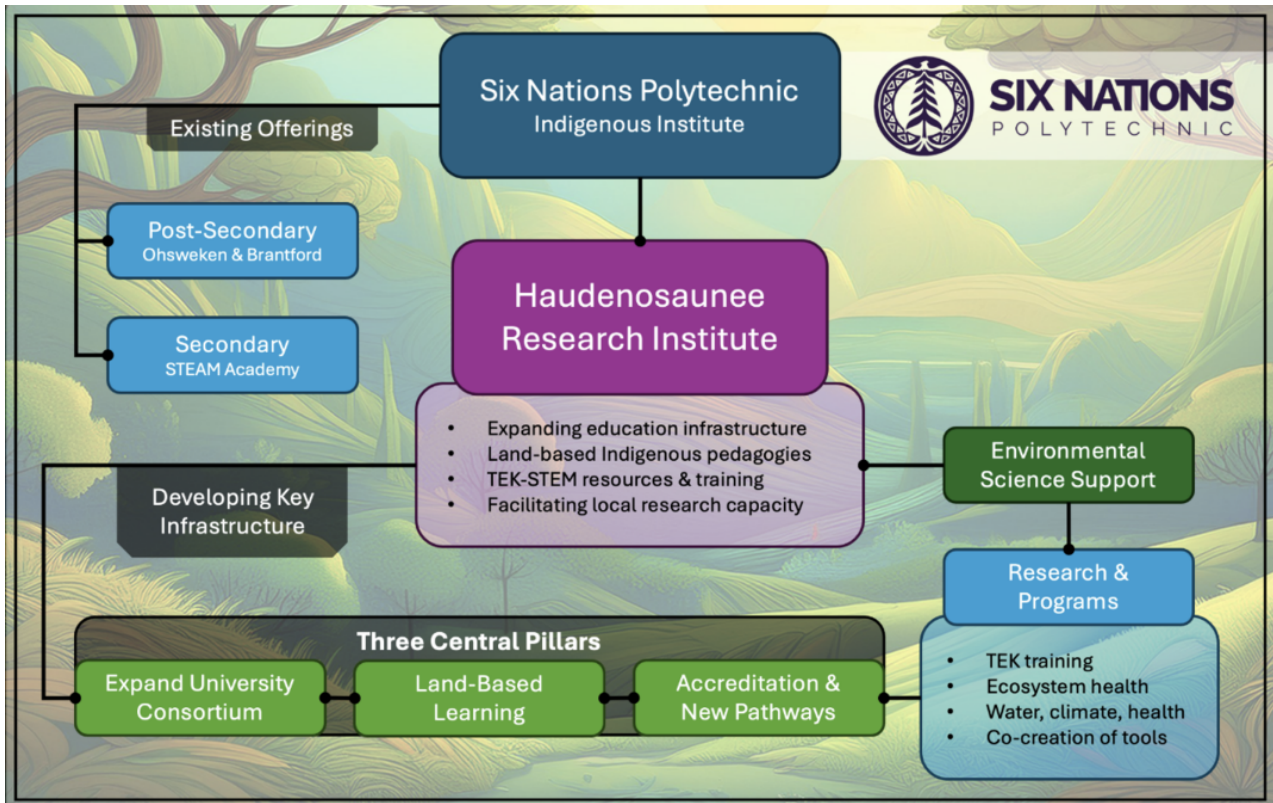


Figure 1: Situating community-led research through a Haudenosaunee Research Institute at Six Nations Polytechnic

The article emphasizes the importance of Indigenous Research Governance in Six Nations of the Grand River, addressing the harmful historical effects of academic research on Indigenous Peoples and advocating for structural changes that promote Indigenous data sovereignty and community ownership of research

In both Canada and the United States, academic research has long been part of the colonial project (Hodge, 2012; Williams et al., 2020). The impact research has had on Indigenous Peoples has resulted in a legacy of deep mistrust and negative perception of research by many Indigenous communities (Garrison et al., 2023). Indigenous scholars and leaders who have advocated for repairing this relationship have led major transformations away from the way in which research has traditionally been approached and administered. Most recent paradigm and policy shifts seek to support the establishment of self-determined Indigenous Research Governance (Garba et al., 2023;

Morton et al., 2017), which encapsulates many interconnected key concepts, including Indigenous data sovereignty (Schnarch, 2004; Kukutai & Taylor, 2016; Cannon et al., 2024), Indigenous research ethics (Castellano, 2004; Kuhn et al., 2020; Fournier et al., 2023), Indigenous/ decolonizing methodologies (Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2021), and Indigenous epistemologies (McGregor et al., 2010; Karanja, 2019).

For Six Nations of the Grand River (Six Nations), structural changes are required to operationalize Indigenous Research Governance and realize community development through Haudenosaunee-led research and training. In Canada, public research funding programs are primarily managed and administered by the Tri-agency, which includes the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, Canadian Institutes of Health Research, and the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada. Together, either individually or jointly, these agencies provide federal funding to support specific research initiatives based on their disciplinary nature or specialization. Significant and detailed eligibility criteria for securing funding often requires university affiliations. From an Indigenous perspective, the current funding system and structures that support academic research significantly inhibit the ability for research to be community-led, consequently subordinating Indigenous Knowledge (Stein et al., 2024).

Key issues

Ownership, control, access, and possession of research funds

Funds for Indigenous research projects are almost always held outside of the community because most Indigenous communities do not have a research institute that aligns with the eligibility criteria required to hold Tri-agency funding. This can make it incredibly difficult for communities to effectively govern, manage, and keep track of their research portfolio, which includes ensuring that community-based research is conducted ethically and oriented according to community needs and priorities. Like Indigenous data sovereignty, Indigenous research sovereignty requires that communities have – in some way – ownership, control, access, and possession (OCAP) over the research that relates to or focuses on them (Funnell et al., 2020). This includes research directly involving community members as research participants but also extends to the cultural heritage of communities and their lands (e.g., reserve and treaty territories; Wong et al., 2020). Research funding being held by non-Indigenous academics housed in university systems outside of the community leads to inequity in knowledge production and creates a scenario where Indigenous communities often make concessions to accommodate the careers and interests of external scholars and their students.

The current public funding structure also facilitates or systematizes extractive research and exploitative practices; communities become ‘labs’ for ‘parachute’ research (Kardashevskaya et al., 2024). Parachute researchers tend to disappear and abandon the project when the finite or discrete pockets of outsider funding are depleted. Without the infrastructure or capacity to monitor research or retain data once the project is over, tangible or sustainable benefits to Indigenous communities are limited. The few Indigenous communities that do have a post-secondary institute are not provided

equitable resources to engage, employ, or manage the data they need to create or sustain, such as longitudinal studies. Six Nations Polytechnic (SNP), the flagship postsecondary Indigenous Institute in Six Nations, is an example; SNP is unable to secure funding arrangements with Tri-agency and receive funding to retain full-time tenured faculty. Although the Global Center for Climate Change Impacts on Transboundary Waters is a financial supporter of SNP, the Center needs to receive funding from Tri-agency at, for example, McMaster University before distributing it to Indigenous researchers and community partners at Six Nations. The Center strongly backs the work of Indigenous community researchers seeking funding autonomy.

Pursuing scholarship often requires leaving the community

Six Nations has produced dozens of graduate and doctorate-level Haudenosaunee scholars, many of whom are employed by major universities in the surrounding region. SNP is uniquely situated to bring these scholars together with local knowledge holders and language specialists to advance the Six Nations research agenda, but SNP does not have the resources to establish permanent tenured faculty. For many Indigenous people, the pursuit of higher education, and research scholarship in particular, often requires leaving their community or reserve, which inhibits long-term capacity building within the community.

Post-graduation, pursuing a career in research similarly requires maintaining university affiliations that are outside of their home community.

Haudenosaunee scholars have expressed that they have little to no means to work with each other or together with Indigenous students from their community for community research. On top of isolation, pursuing research in the academy presents the double burden of Indigenous scholars also having to train, mentor, and fund non-Indigenous graduate students (and, in many cases, colleagues) unfamiliar with ethical engagement with Indigenous people, culture, knowledge, and communities. This often includes leveraging (and risking) their social capital, networks, and relationships for colleagues and research ‘teams.’ Indigenous scholars and students are also tasked with significant university administrative work and service and navigating the red tape to adequately compensate the community for their involvement in Indigenous research projects (for instance, paying Elders and youth or issuing subgrants to Community Partners). Despite some improvements, academic interests continue to overshadow community development in research; training and capacity building are often quite limited, which is a consequence of the funding system inadequately addressing the needs of Indigenous scholars and community-led research projects.

Indigenous research is holistic, complex, and fundamentally interdisciplinary

The challenges of obtaining funding for community-led Indigenous research are also shaped by the nature of the Tri-agency funding structure, which separates disciplinary research in ways that are incongruent with the fact that (a) Indigenous Knowledge, values, and pedagogies are holistic and place-based, and (b) complex community challenges and inequities are inherently interdisciplinary. This holds far-reaching

implications that limit the advancement of Indigenous community-centred research. Challenges in obtaining funding are exacerbated by budgets for Indigenous Knowledge-led research projects lacking appropriate funding for community engagement, community support (e.g., navigators or coordinators, service providers), administrative support (e.g., ethics reviews, community reports, etc.), and Knowledge Holders. Equity in the intellectual property of Knowledge Holders and proper accreditation for the community are also major sources of inequity under the current system.

Starting points for fundamental change

Efforts to address such concerns will require two fundamental changes. Firstly, this entails the establishment of a Tri-agency funding structure or system that allows for highly interdisciplinary, community-based research projects and/or an Indigenous-specific research stream. Addressing real-world issues (e.g., responding to climate change, water and food security, culture and language acquisition, etc.) is imperative for the Tri-agency, especially in the context of Indigenous community-based research. For this to be successful, Indigenous Knowledge and Traditional Ecological Knowledge must be recognized as being central to addressing real-world issues, and truly interdisciplinary projects (with flexible eligibility requirements) must be supported. Secondly, the establishment of fully-funded Indigenous research institutes is required so that (a) research can be for, with, and by community and (b) large grants may be held in-community (i.e., on-reserve), subjecting research to the ethical principles and protocols established by the Indigenous institute itself. The concept of a Haudenosaunee-led Research and Training Institute in Six Nations – to be housed at SNP and centred around Indigenous Knowledge pedagogies – is an example of such an institute that would support Indigenous epistemologies and methodologies while also working collaboratively and in tandem with Western Science.

By focusing on strategic research in key areas using both Indigenous Knowledge and Western Science, the ‘Research and Training Institute’ is being designed to facilitate the co-creation of advancements in environmental health and wellbeing for Haudenosaunee Nations. Funding community-led, on-reserve, Indigenous research institutes such as this would directly address concerns related to extractive research and ensure that communities drive community research and educational priorities.

Advancing Indigenous-led research

At all levels – locally, regionally, nationally, and globally – Indigenous Knowledge is increasingly being recognized for its value in adaptation and resilience-building in the face of environmental change and biodiversity loss (Raygorodetsky, 2018; Martin-Hill, 2023; Adaptation Committee, 2024). Creating a Haudenosaunee-led Research and Training Institute will allow for the best Haudenosaunee minds to gather, develop, and strategize across international boundaries that often serve as an impediment by current Canadian and American research agencies. Haudenosaunee has had the border cross through their traditional territory; an international funding arrangement could provide the ability to

have scholars and communities working cohesively on applied experiential research. Fundamentally, this would support self-determination and reconciliation, as well as community-led resilience rooted in connection to culture, land, and place.

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