

Indigenous-Specific Spaces in Post-Secondary Education: Student Experiences and Visions for Change

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Abstract

Background: Despite institutional commitments to reconciliation, many Indigenous students in Canada continue to face systemic barriers in post-secondary education. Indigenous-specific spaces like cultural centres, Elder programs, and student groups are promoted as solutions, yet limited research centres Indigenous students' own experiences of these spaces. This completed study addresses that gap.

Research Questions: (1) What Indigenous-specific spaces and supports exist? (2) How do Indigenous students experience and value them? (3) What recommendations improve them?

Methodology: A mixed-methods study with an online questionnaire (n = 48) and interviews (n = 6) engaged Indigenous students and alumni from 40 Canadian institutions. Guided by an Indigenous research paradigm, quantitative data were analyzed descriptively, and qualitative data were thematically coded.

Findings: 91.67% of participants reported access to at least one Indigenous-specific space, and nearly 70% (n = 33) said these spaces strengthened relationships and belonging. Barriers included lateral violence, pan-Indigenism, exclusion of reconnecting students, Métis students, and 2SLGBTQ+ students, plus other systemic and personal challenges. Participants offered numerous, wide-ranging recommendations, such as stronger outreach, genuine power-sharing in governance, and better inclusion of diverse and reconnecting students.

Implications: Institutions must move beyond symbolic inclusion to support Indigenous self-determination. Findings offer student recommendations

Keywords: Indigenous students in post-secondary education, Indigenous-specific spaces, Indigenous student belonging, Indigenous student governance, Indigenous student experiences, Mixed-methods study

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