

# Indigenous Wellness Research Institute: Narratives on Social Work Education and Mentorship for Indigenous Health & Wellness

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**Abstract:** This manuscript introduces the Indigenous Wellness Research Institute (IWRI), a research and training institute at the University of Washington's School of Social Work. Through the narratives of former and current students, mentees and staff, this manuscript documents the impact of three founding faculty members and reveals how their specialized knowledge of Indigenous health and wellness, awareness of unique barriers and decolonizing strategies for success and vocational calling, have created an organization that works for Indigenous health and wellness. IWRI is an organization that is larger than the sum of its parts; it plays a unique role in social work scholarship and education and we anticipate it will continue to do so for generations to come.

**Keywords:** Native Americans, social work education, elders

## Introduction

I remember sitting around the oval table in the dean's office conference room, the sunlight intermittently glimmering through the large pane windows. The squeak of my swivel chair and the sound of voices echoed through the hall as individuals shuffled into the room. We were hosting internationally renowned Maori scholar Dr. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, author of the groundbreaking text *Decolonizing Methodologies* (1999). The excitement was palpable. Dr. Karina Walters, director of the Indigenous Wellness Research Institute (IWRI) at the University of Washington School of Social Work welcomed Dr. Smith with a traditional smudging, a protocol observed by Native American tribes across Turtle Island. The familiar smell of sage drifted through the air and provided a sense of serenity. Admittedly, I was bit star-struck and as time passes, the details of Dr. Tuhiwai Smith's introduction have begun to fade. I cannot however forget what happened next...

Over Dr. Walters' shoulder I saw a young woman hurriedly rushing through the door. I thought there must be an emergency or an urgent message to deliver. Without hesitation, the young woman boldly announced that we "could not smoke *that* in the dean's office." With ease, Karina shifted away from the task at hand and assured her: "it's ok, we are just welcoming an Indigenous scholar" adding, "I am a faculty member, it's ok." Karina motioned for her to leave but the young woman stood her ground, brows furrowed, stating once again, "you cannot smoke *that* in the dean's office." It became increasingly clear that we had a lack of cultural awareness on our

hands; this young lady had mistaken the scent of traditional sage for marijuana.

For many in the room, this was an unsettling but common experience. The young lady's insistence however, was striking. Standing in front of her was a tenured professor; director of a nationally acclaimed research and training institute; and recipient of multi-million dollar research grants and countless academic accolades. This professor was standing at the head of a room with windows facing a very public hallway and holding a smoking shell. Numerous guests (many of whom were familiar as students, faculty and staff) were gathered around the table participating in this protocol. If those signs weren't obvious enough, the look of surprise in everyone's eyes may have provided an ominous hint. And yet somehow, she persisted.

Karina's demeanor remained calm but firm as she instructed the young woman to leave. The door was closed and she returned seamlessly to the task of welcoming our guest. Dr. Smith took it all in stride; she laughed and reassured everyone that while she was far from home, these moments were nothing new to her. "It's not your fault, I understand," I remember her saying. To this day, many IWRI faculty, students and staff recount this story. On some days those recollections sting with disappointment over the stereotypes and systems of power that were displayed. On other days, the recollections are expressed with healing, forgiveness, even humor. I knew IWRI was a place that supported the development of scholars and scholarship for Indigenous health and wellness. I knew it was a place willing to push the profession of social work to new heights and responsibilities. I knew it was

a proverbial house of refuge for many, but on that day I learned even more; I learned how places such as IWRI are created and I learned about the character of those who build them.

I began with this story to set the stage. Through it and the text that follows, I hope to illuminate the vital role of the Indigenous Wellness Research Institute and the importance of the mentorship that occurs in such spaces. This article introduces the institute, explores its history and approach to education and mentorship. More important however, it reveals the *spirit* of this education and mentorship—and its impact—through narratives collected from former and current students, mentees and staff.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Indigenous Wellness Research Institute**

What is the Indigenous Wellness Research Institute and what has it meant for the profession of social work, the development and advancement of Indigenous research and the production of knowledge for Indigenous health and wellness? Created in 2005, the Indigenous Wellness Research Institute is housed in the University of Washington's School of Social Work. It is a research and training center with a vision to "support the inherent rights of Indigenous peoples to achieve full and complete health and wellness by collaborating in decolonizing research and knowledge building and sharing." IWRI pursues this goal by marshaling "community, tribal, academic, and governmental resources toward innovative, culture-centered, interdisciplinary, collaborative social and behavioral research and education" with the goal of achieving improved health status and reducing health disparities among Indigenous populations (IWRI, 2015).

The academic records and intellectual influence of the scholars housed at the Indigenous Wellness Research Institute are unrivaled. IWRI staff and faculty members rank among the most well-cited

social welfare scholars in the country. They consistently receive highly competitive research contracts, keynote at national and international conferences and provide leadership for professional associations. They testify for legislators, participate on review panels, influence public debate and produce empirical data for some of the nation's most pressing social issues. Through their work, major advancements in Indigenous community-based and participatory research methodologies, historical trauma, health and child welfare disparities and culturally-responsive health interventions have been made (Walters & Simoni, 2002; Duran & Walters, 2004; Wallerstein & Duran, 2006; Evans-Campbell & Walters, 2006; Evans-Campbell, 2008; Walters & Simoni, 2009; Walters, Stately, Evans-Campbell, Simoni, Duran, Schultz, & Guerrero, 2009; Walters, Mohammed, Evans-Campbell, Beltran, Chae & Duran, 2011).

Faculty at the Indigenous Wellness Research Institute have not only advanced scholarship for Indigenous health and wellness, they have developed a cadre of scholars to continue this work into the future. They have been accessible, humble role models and played vital roles in the education and mentorship of countless students. As I was collecting narratives for this article, I constantly heard the phrase "*I never would have made it*" or, "*I never would have even considered [getting an MSW or PhD]*" without the support of IWRI! Shavers et al (2005) previously articulated obstacles for scholars of color in the academy and the need to develop specific structures to attend to these barriers in order to advance research for improved health in minority communities. Walters and Simoni (2009) concurred, identifying barriers specific to Indigenous scholars and calling attention to the dearth of American Indian/Alaskan Native (AIAN) researchers which has left Indigenous communities particularly "vulnerable to insensitive or irrelevant research" (§71). Recognition and engagement with the unique culture, history, experiences and barriers faced by AIAN scholars (and those allied scholars with shared academic goals and methods) is essential so that those individuals may be able to successfully navigate institutions and engage in meaningful research practices with Indigenous communities.

### **Barriers and Strategies: Narratives of Mentorship**

A host of Indigenous scholars, staff and allies have contributed to and played various roles at IWRI over

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the years. My utmost respect is given to those individuals and their acts of mentorship. Given the constraints of a single article, and the availability of mentees, I chose to highlight mentoring narratives focused on three faculty members of IWRI: Dr. Karina Walters, Dr. Tessa Evans-Campbell and Dr. Bonnie Duran. The reputation of the institute is well documented but the depth of IWRI mentorship and the collective impact it has had on mentees has rarely been celebrated. I share these narratives here utilizing the framework for decolonized mentorship presented in Walters & Simoni (2009).

The legacy of mainstream educational institutions among Native American communities has been well-documented. Designed with intentions to assimilate Native children into Western culture (Adams, 1995), these schools often included forcible removal, English-only curriculum, forced labor and exposure to patriotic propaganda; they worked “explicitly with the U.S. government to implement federal policies servicing the campaign to ‘kill the Indian and save the man’” (Grande, 2004, 14). Sexual and physical abuse was rampant, and death was a very real possibility (Evans-Campbell & Walters, 2006; Schwartz, 2015). Research conducted by individuals in these institutions has also raised significant concern (Cochran et al, 2008), treating Indigenous Peoples “as scientific objects with scant regard to community needs or the potentially harmful implications of research processes and findings” (Walters et al, 2009, 148).

Given this history, Native American communities experience a **justifiable mistrust of education, systems, and research** (Walters & Simoni, 2009). Indigenous students interested in becoming researchers, and (Indigenous and allied) students interested in conducting community-based research within Indigenous communities encounter the impacts of this legacy. Finding mentors in mainstream education systems that not only understand this history, but also have experienced it in their own families and are dedicated to addressing it, is rare. IWRI provides space for such mentors and encourages these mentoring relationships, as Lynn Palmenteer-Holder recounts in her narrative:

*Boarding schools disempowered Indigenous women; the purpose of this oppressive institution was to produce brown domesticated women that*

*prayed to their [colonial settlers’] God and honored the American flag & military. These young women were taught to speak little; they were shamed if they demonstrated anything relating to their tribal culture or language. The more that an Indian girl looked, acted and spoke like White nuns/teachers, the more rewards she’d receive... I represent the fifth generation, the first to be raised under the same roof by my mother, the first to attend a public school and the first one in my family to even think about college. IWRI is an authentic Indigenous epistemological space and this rez-girl is indebted to these Indigenous warrior scholars (Walters, Evans-Campbell and Duran). Together we will continue to indigenize the academy; the knowledge of our ancestors has returned, and so it is, and so it will be. Way’ Lim Limt’. Thank you for inviting me to this most rewarding space.*

Walters & Simoni (2009) further identify the experience of **discrimination and microaggressions** as an institutional barrier for AIAN scholars. These experiences can be hurtful and demeaning to the scholar but can further have a direct impact on the completion of research in Indigenous communities as Melissa Walls’ story reveals:

*For our research projects, we have meetings on the reservation in the evenings. This can include a project dinner and discussions at local casinos, which are both convenient and tribally owned. It was an incredible struggle to permit direct billing through our university system - as one accountant told me, “you are not there to monitor and they (the Native research partners) might order alcohol.” IWRI and its scholars taught me how to navigate these experiences. They taught me how to write culturally meaningful budget justification statements and how to use these experiences as teaching moments for staff and University administration by discussing the broader context of stereotypes about Native people, and pointing out that such allowances were routinely made for non-Native people in similar collaborative or consultative roles.*

As seen in both the introductory narrative and this vignette, IWRI mentors not only recognize and validate microaggressive experiences, but they provide examples of leadership in response to stereotypes. For many, they help to navigate the treacherous waters of the academy, making it feel a bit more welcoming.

Moreover, they craft spaces where scholars can learn specific skills to interrupt stereotypes, educate others and engage for social and institutional change so that these harmful stereotypes don't continue to impact research and the pursuit of health equity in Indigenous communities.

Indigenous faculty as well as those with other marginalized identities (race, gender, sexuality, etc.) face heavy mentoring, administrative and liaison roles. Institutions of higher education often express public commitments to diversity and equity but fail to financially support and academically reward this work. Faculty members' personal identities frequently lend to a sense of responsibility to support students from similar backgrounds. Here, Melissa documents her multiple experiences:

*Indigenous people are heavily sought to fill the "diversity" role on search committees, mentoring teams, and on any report, project, or task force appointed to work on "cross-cultural" issues. We are assumed to know how to mentor minority and Native students because we ourselves are Native. When a Native student faces a scholastic or personal struggle, we are asked to a) explain it, and b) fix it. Each year, I encounter a new colleague or two who comes to me, requesting: "introduce me to a local tribe" so she/he can "do research there."*

Learning to manage these commitments, which Walters and Simoni (2009) refer to as **role burden**, as well as determining when and how to advocate for these commitments to be recognized and rewarded, is essential for success. IWRI has not only acknowledged these unique burdens but mentors have provided individualized support for former students and mentees, and they have been active in issuing a public call for academic recognition of these efforts.

The **marginalization of research interests** also serves as a barrier for scholars invested in Indigenous health and wellness, particularly those who use Indigenous methodologies/theories, pursue collaborative research with Indigenous communities or present analyses of Indigenous inequalities which challenge mainstream history or privilege. This "[t]heoretical and methodological marginalization can stifle the academic development of AIAN

scholars, who have few opportunities for the preliminary airing of new ideas, receipt of constructive feedback on pilot work, and guidance for initial research" (Walters & Simoni, 2009, p. 73). Walters & Simoni further argue that embracing traditional knowledge and worldviews and challenging colonial research practices such as the "noninclusion of AIAN people in research" (p. 74) are crucial strategies for responding to these barriers. Despite the wealth of evidence to support such strategies, the marginalization of research continues to pose a problem in mainstream institutions and academic journals as Angela Fernandez demonstrates in her experience:

*I applied to one other doctoral program, and while the majority of the faculty and students I met were kind and welcoming, one administrator questioned the sovereignty of tribal nations as I explained my research question to them. I got the sense that there was greater emphasis and respect for publishing than there was on using research methods that were community-based and community-driven. I felt my worldview as an Indigenous person would not be understood or respected as equally valid science. I knew what I needed and what would sustain me – IWRI was the only choice where I felt I could grow and flourish as an Indigenous scholar.*

Melissa's narrative also exemplifies this struggle, particularly revealing a lack of value for Indigenous elders and wisdom:

*The university will consistently pay hundreds if not thousands of dollars in honoraria to "esteemed" PhD guests and speakers, but they scoff at the mention of a \$50 honoraria for an elder who shared his or her wisdom and blessings at gatherings and academic events.*

Further contributing to this marginalization is the fact that a "[d]earth of qualified reviewers for...manuscripts and grant applications may further stymie" academic progress (Walters & Simoni, 2009, p. 73). This lack of knowledge (historic, substantive and methodological) among those who serve as peer-reviewers of manuscripts and tenure files can impede the growth of scholars, the dissemination of important findings and the advancement of the field. Katie Johnston-Goodstar's narrative demonstrates this issue:

*I received an email from the editor. They were*

interested in my manuscript, it had received a very positive review and the lead editor found it quite intriguing. A third reviewer however disagreed with my use of the word “genocide” in reference to Native American historical experiences. There is extensive literature documenting the genocide of Indigenous Peoples and yet, this reviewer was questioning my use of the word **and** in the position to provide a blind peer-review of my work? I reached out to Karina at IWRI for advice. She listened and validated but then firmly redirected me to a solution. In no time, I had drafted a response to the editor not only refusing to change the terminology but also providing the official United Nations definition of genocide, examples matching the criteria for genocide and previously published academic citations to support my claim. Needless to say, it was just what the editor needed to override the reviewer’s expressed concern.

### **A Special Something....**

In addition to identifying unique barriers and providing exemplary strategies for mentorship, IWRI faculty members are known to go above and beyond any typical notion of mentorship. Their commitment is what Palmer (1999) labels a vocational calling, an intentional way of being in the world that bridges the personal and the professional. Their cultural, historical and socio-political experiences, combined with their vocational calling situate them to understand and provide guidance in remarkable ways. Katie recalls the intense level of support she received particularly around issues of class, personal insecurities and family during her job search:

*I’d never been a great public speaker, was never very comfortable tooting my own horn and my dissertation research method was unique and political. As you can imagine, this made going on the job market an emotional affair for many reasons. My mentor Karina prioritized me during this time. Drawing on her wealth of knowledge and experience, she provided advice at every turn. She literally made herself available at all (reasonable) hours and for every imaginable question. After I secured job offers, she advised me on negotiating salary and start-up funds. That’s when things got interesting; one of my*

*offers provided me the opportunity to come home. To put it frankly, I don’t come from money, so the idea of negotiating salary was foreign to me and it became apparent that it was also foreign to my mom, especially if it were to put anything at risk. Long story short, Mom (who deeply respected Karina and admired her work) wasn’t exactly pleased with her advice to negotiate salary! What happened next was something....a special something, it’s a type of mentoring that I’ve only seen at IWRI. Karina begins reassuring my mom over the phone that salary negotiations are par for the course in academia etc. What other mentor even considers taking on that discussion let alone navigates numerous social identities, skillfully getting your mom to buy into the deal?*

Lynn also documented this ‘something special’ in her relationship with her mentor. She recalls the deep sense of connection and personal understanding she received:

*Dr. Tessa Evans-Campbell was my advisor; she provided me a great deal of technical advice, guided my academic schedule and coursework and supplied me with scholarly resources. Moreover, she was my confidant and counselor. When I was called to consult with a coastal tribal community during a political upheaval, her experience as a former Tribal Leader and community activist allowed me to complete this project without interference. More than that, she was a fellow mother and friend providing support and connection during times of crisis such as during the loss of my father. She has shown me unconditional support. In 2010, I was recruited home to serve as my tribe’s top administrator. At that time, I had a contract to lecture at the school; my advisors encouraged me to take the quarter off and hold on to the contract in case the experience wasn’t a good fit. I didn’t take their advice...I believed my heart had to be given whole for my tribe. It didn’t last, as my mentors anticipated, but still they support me.*

Melissa provided yet another example of the seemingly endless supply of support and mentorship provided by IWRI faculty:

*Bonnie is incredible. She shares so selflessly. She is the champion of posting important reports, papers, and events for all of us ‘Facebookers.’ She is incredibly busy, but will never say “no” to writing a*

letter or recommendation for an award, a grant, or a tenure file. She eagerly builds bridges and connects us to allies. When I was struggling to explain CBPR at my institution, she took a trip to my university, gave a powerful talk, and bragged about me throughout the speech in front of all of those who would be voting on my tenure - these are the kinds of networks that have been available to non-minority scholars all along, and we are now starting to see how they work! Further, Bonnie reminds me often to spread joy and love for all - even those who may not understand us. This is such a freeing and powerful thing when I so often feel defeated and alone.

### Conclusion

Without a doubt, IWRI is a unique space. Through specialized knowledge of Indigenous health and wellness, decolonized mentoring strategies, and a vocational calling toward mentorship, IWRI has become an institute that is larger than the sum of its parts. This narrative tells the story of IWRI mentorship and its impacts on the work of junior scholars but it also provides a roadmap for replication, particularly for administrators and faculty members in social work education. Our professional commitments to social justice and service distinguish us from other professions (National Association of Social Workers, 2015). As such, schools of social work have pursued efforts to increase the recruitment and retention of faculty of color and Indigenous Peoples. As IWRI would teach us however, it is not enough to train a cadre of scholars if those scholars go on to positions in departments where they experience discrimination, marginalization and a lack of support and understanding for their scholarship.

Administrators and faculty members can attend to these issues through improving departmental policies and practices, which attend to the aforementioned barriers. For example, administrators can require continuing education on issues of racism and implicit bias in the hiring, mentoring and tenure review processes. Tenure codes can be written in a way to measure and provide value to community-engaged research efforts and to account for additional mentoring, administrative and liaison roles. Additionally,

departments could encourage the inclusion of community-based elders or key mentors from other institutions on professional development and review committees, thus providing a space for knowledge exchange and limiting the theoretical and methodological marginalization experienced by junior faculty. All of these actions must be met with strong leadership to ensure that these policies and practices are adhered to. IWRI provides us with a unique example but their mission is not exclusive; schools of social work can and should heed their call.

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