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Indigenous research sovereignty within academia: Challenges and opportunities

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ABSTRACT

Indigenous Peoples' inherent right to self-determination includes authority over research, yet university systems centralize control in ways that constrain Indigenous sovereignty. This article examines how academic institutional structures and processes—well beyond the actions of individual researchers—shape the possibilities and limitations of Indigenous-focused research within universities. Drawing on a collaborative, story-based process involving Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers working with Indigenous communities across diverse regions and contexts internationally, we synthesize shared experiences to identify recurrent challenges and the systemic conditions that produce them. We describe both barriers and solutions within five themes: governance, institutional fit, burden, capacity, and relationships. Examples of barriers include paternalizing ethics boards, cumbersome financial systems, rigid timelines, and narrow evaluation metrics, which often conflict with community-defined governance and relational approaches to research. Examples of solutions include Indigenous-governed funding pathways, community ethics bodies, Indigenous-led research units, and institution-level efforts to embed relational accountability. We argue that strengthening Indigenous research sovereignty requires universities and funders to redesign their infrastructures (not simply adjust procedures), meaningfully share authority, align practices with Indigenous governance, and support long-term relationship building. By centering community leadership and relational accountability, universities can move beyond symbolic or superficial commitments to Indigenous self-determination in research, toward research environments rooted in respect, reciprocity, and community-defined outcomes.

1. Indigenous research sovereignty within academia: Challenges and opportunities

The right of Indigenous Peoples to self-determination predates the formation of colonial nation-states and reflects their inherent authority to self-govern (United Nations, 2007). Indigenous research sovereignty is a critical extension of this self-determination. Indigenous Peoples have conducted research for millennia, including the maintenance of systems to care for and use data in ways that benefit the communities to which they belong. This work includes Indigenous knowledge systems grounded in observation, experience, relational accountability, intergenerational transmission, storytelling, and kinship (Smith, 1999; Smylie et al., 2014). Indigenous communities continue to build their own research governance infrastructures today, advancing methodologies and practices grounded in Indigenous knowledge systems, values, and priorities (Wilson, 2020). Research sovereignty includes oversight and control over the acquisition, use, storage, and reuse of Indigenous data, including data collected by external researchers and institutions (Garba et al., 2023). Indigenous governance structures, cultural protocols, and expectations for research vary across Nations, communities, and contexts. Accordingly, decisions regarding data governance, ethics, knowledge sharing, and research practices must be determined by each community based on their own priorities and norms.

Indigenous research sovereignty—while inherent and not dependent on legal recognition by national or international bodies—is recognized in treaties with settler-colonial nations and has been affirmed by many governmental and institutional policies (Garba et al., 2023). In Canada, Indigenous sovereignty is upheld through numerous numbered treaties that are recognized in Section 35 of the 1982 Constitution Act (Constitution Act, 1982, 1982, s. 35), as well as other foundational treaties (e.g., Two Row Wampum) and more modern agreements; research sovereignty is operationalized ethically through Canada's Tri-Council research agencies. In the United States (U.S.), Indigenous research sovereignty is recognized in nation-to-nation treaty relationships with federally recognized tribes, supported by federal trust obligations, and operationalized through tribal governance structures such as tribal research ethics boards (Garba et al., 2023; Schelly et al., 2024). In Aotearoa (New Zealand), the 1840 treaty between Māori and the British Crown (Te Tiriti o Waitangi) guarantees that Māori continue to have sovereignty over their possessions and treasures, including traditional ways of being; the treaty informs research processes and the conduct of academic institutions, through each of its three articles: *Kawanatanga* (governance), *Tino rangatiratanga* (sovereignty), and

Oritetanga (equity) (Hudson and Russell, 2009). In Sápmi, Indigenous research sovereignty is an extension of constitutional and statutory recognition of Sámi rights across Norway, Sweden, and Finland and is operationalized through Sámi Parliaments, institutional agreements, and research protocols (Falch and Selle, 2019; Larsen, 2025).

Varying colonial and institutional contexts shape how sovereignty is exercised in legal or practical ways, including how Indigenous Peoples navigate relationships with external entities such as governments, corporations, and universities (Borrows, 1992; McNeil, 2022). These principles of sovereignty and self-determination directly intersect with the role of universities, which have been both central sites of research and sources of colonial harm (Came et al., 2024; Lee and Ahtone, 2020; Pitawanakwat and Pedri-Spade, 2022). Eurocentric research carried out without the consideration and interrogation of past and ongoing colonialism can perpetuate systemic and epistemic oppression, reinforcing colonial power imbalances rather than dismantling them (Kovach, 2010; McAllister et al., 2025; Lavallée, 2009; Walters et al., 2019).

Universities have too often conducted research *on* (rather than *with*) Indigenous communities, which Indigenous and other critical scholars have criticized as being extractive rather than beneficial to communities (Burnette and Sanders, 2014; Love and Hall, 2020; Smith, 1999). Such research has frequently been led by non-Indigenous researchers and structured through hierarchical relationships that involve little meaningful feedback from, or partnership with, communities (Smith, 1999). These extractive approaches often produce limited benefit or even harmful impacts (Gone, 2023), including stigmatization in connection with research that operates from a deficit-oriented frame (Gittelsohn et al., 2020; Tahatikonhsontontie' Quebec Network for Indigenous Health Research, 2024). Extractive approaches also frequently fail to acknowledge distinctions between Indigenous groups, Nations, and communities (Mongeon and Dubois, 2025). Persistent challenges in forming effective and mutually beneficial partnerships between university researchers and Indigenous communities include geographic and logistical barriers; limited institutional understanding of Indigenous governance and cultural systems; a lack of institutional flexibility to accommodate Indigenous ways of working; and limited administrative support from universities to researchers and Indigenous communities (Solomon and Randall, 2014; Walters et al., 2019). Another challenge is the minimal representation of Indigenous Peoples within university systems and broader institutional environments (especially positions of power and decision-making) due to longstanding patterns of exclusion, which further constrains opportunities for equitable partnership (Fredericks, 2009; Canadian Commission for UNESCO, 2021).

In recent years, scholars, Indigenous leaders, and policy bodies have paid considerably more critical attention within postsecondary institutions internationally to these problems, along with many recommendations aimed toward greater Indigenous sovereignty within academic research contexts (Marley, 2020; Wick et al., 2024). However, a fundamental challenge with this recognition has been that universities and other research institutions often delegate the responsibility for building and maintaining Indigenous relationships to individual researchers, providing little formal guidance, oversight, or structural support (Bourgeois and Palmer, 2022; Gittelsohn et al., 2020; Walters et al., 2019). Institutions also may lack the resources, awareness, or willingness to align their administrative processes (such as contracting workflows, financial reporting requirements, or incentive structures) with the realities of Indigenous communities, which creates barriers to research partnership and implementation. Although universities are often unavoidable as research partners for Indigenous Peoples due to funding agency requirements, research infrastructure, and training, their ongoing bureaucratic and administrative processes and limitations create tension in Indigenous research contexts. While research takes place across interconnected systems, including funders, regulatory bodies, and community governance structures, this paper focuses specifically on universities as a key site of institutional action. Although universities are embedded within these broader systems and are often constrained by external requirements (e.g., government investment, funding timelines, regulatory frameworks), they retain significant authority over internal processes such as ethics review, contracting, financial disbursement, hiring, and evaluation systems. In this paper, we use the term “structures” to refer to formal organizational arrangements (e.g., governance bodies and policies), “processes” to describe how research is operationalized in practice (e.g., ethics review, contracting, and funding workflows), and “systems” to capture the broader institutional environment within which these structures and processes are embedded.

We therefore distinguish between challenges that originate within universities and those shaped by external actors, while also recognizing that “slippages of authority” frequently occur when responsibility is diffused across these systems. Clarifying these distinctions is essential for identifying where universities can enact meaningful change and where broader systemic coordination is required.

Decolonizing research requires interrogating the assumption that Eurocentric science holds universal authority and a shift toward centering Indigenous voices and ways of knowing (Smith, 1999; Williams et al., 2020). While incremental progress in this direction has occurred in recent decades, such as the growth of community-university partnerships, major tensions continue to shape the research landscape. Public institutions have a documented pattern of expressing rhetorical commitments to reconciliation, equity, or diversity, yet failing to implement structural changes to support Indigenous research in practice (Gaudry and Lorenz, 2018; Kirkness and Barnhardt, 2001; Tamtik and Guenter, 2020; Wang, 2025). Against this backdrop, university leaders, administrators, and research funders must engage in critical reflection on how universities structure and support Indigenous-focused research, in order to identify challenges and potential solutions in Indigenous-focused research.

1.1. Current collaboration

While much of the existing literature highlights the responsibilities of individual researchers in conducting ethical Indigenous-focused research, far less attention has been directed toward the institutional challenges that shape these efforts (Ball and Janyst, 2008; Fraser, 2025). This gap is particularly significant given that the ability of researchers to engage ethically with Indigenous communities is shaped by the institutional conditions in which they work, and addressing these structural issues is essential for strengthening accountability, supporting Indigenous governance, and improving the effectiveness and sustainability of

Indigenous-focused research. This article draws on a collaborative, story-based process grounded in the shared experiences of researchers working in Indigenous research contexts. We aim to identify and critically examine key challenges and potential solutions in Indigenous-focused research that arise at the institutional level within universities. In doing so, we ask the following key questions.

1. What key barriers within universities limit self-determined Indigenous research?
2. What strategies have shown promise in addressing these barriers?
3. How can universities be held accountable to Indigenous communities in ways that move beyond token gestures to instead elicit structural change?

Our analysis is organized around five interconnected themes: governance, institutional fit, burden, capacity, and relationships, which together capture the structural and relational dimensions of Indigenous research within university systems. By drawing on lived experiences of researchers and communities and existing scholarship, this paper fills a gap in the literature by focusing directly on barriers and strategies at institutional levels that shape and influence self-determined Indigenous research conducted with academic partners. Although we acknowledge that funders, governments, and regulatory bodies play significant roles in shaping Indigenous research contexts, our analysis centers on how universities interpret, implement, and operationalize these broader requirements in practice. In doing so, we aim to contribute to ongoing conversations about research sovereignty, equity in knowledge production, and the evolving role of universities in Indigenous research.

2. Process

This manuscript is rooted in decades of university-based Indigenous research experience among a large group of Indigenous and non-Indigenous collaborators. The concerns and ideas we discuss are based on many years of experience and conversations with colleagues and research administrators about challenges we have faced. Further inspiration came to the senior author (DW)—a non-Indigenous researcher with over 15 years of research partnership experience with Indigenous communities—after attending a panel at the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association conference in Sápmi (traditional homelands of the Sámi people in northern Norway, Sweden, Finland, and northwestern Russia) in May 2024 (Arola et al., 2024), that discussed problems and solutions in connection with Indigenous research administration. The senior author subsequently elaborated the design of a collaborative project to gather stories more broadly from scholars working with Indigenous research contexts across institutions, disciplines, and geographies. This collaboration began in the context of an invited workshop at the University of Washington-Bothell in August 2024 with a small group of mostly Indigenous psychology researchers working on manuscripts focused on Indigenous self-determination. Afterwards, the senior author explored the idea further with several Indigenous collaborators who were enthusiastic about the potential of such an endeavor.

In the Spring of 2025, the senior author began to invite other scholars to be collaborators on this project. The goal was to bring together a broad group of researchers with extensive experience working within Indigenous research contexts internationally. Invitations for collaboration began with inviting scholars from within the senior author's wide networks, and the enthusiastic response underscored both the urgency of the topic and the desire among university-based researchers to connect with others negotiating similar tensions. Through this process, collaborators recommended other researchers in their own networks, with particular focus on those with extensive experience as well as a desire to have a diverse group of contributors.

This process resulted in 25 co-author collaborators—mostly Indigenous—from across Turtle Island (United States and Canada), Sápmi, and

Aotearoa (New Zealand). In addition, an internal coordination team (of 7 Indigenous and non-Indigenous research assistants), also co-authors, helped organize communications and logistics. We each work in research-intensive university environments, primarily private and land-grant R1 universities in the U.S. and research-intensive public universities in eastern Canada. We work primarily in health research (i.e., public health, clinical/counseling psychology, psychiatry, family medicine, nursing, and occupational therapy) but also Indigenous studies, writing/rhetoric, education, anthropology, human development, social work, and social psychology. We are diverse in our career stages, comprising 11 full professors, 7 assistant professors, 5 associate professors, 5 graduate students, and 4 research associates/assistants.

Early exchanges between collaborators informed the development of a set of domains that reflected recurring aspects of academic Indigenous research, such as relationships with administrators, funding mechanisms, and research ethics boards. Collaborators reviewed and expanded these domains, adding considerations such as timelines, jurisdictional differences, and other sources of institutional friction, while continuing to share their personal experiences. This iterative exchange broadened and refined the project's scope. A group email chain served as a central space for dialogue, where collaborators shared experiences, exchanged stories, and offered feedback throughout the process. To guide deeper conversation, the coordination team circulated a short survey inviting collaborators to identify domains most relevant to their work. The coordination team used this initial framework to shape the group and individual conversations that followed, organizing ourselves around shared areas of interest while welcoming discussion on any topics that collaborators felt were important. These discussions were conversational and story-based, centering the challenges and innovations collaborators felt were most important to share. This approach was appropriate for our team and project, with oral tradition informing and grounding the project from the outset. The purpose of these conversations was to synthesize collective perspectives, not to extract "data."

From these conversations, the coordination team identified five overarching themes consistently raised across narratives, which were subsequently shared and discussed with the rest of the collaborators. The coordination team reviewed notes and transcripts from the conversations, reflected together on topics that surfaced repeatedly, and clarified how these topics connected to both each other and to the previously determined domains. We then substantiated these themes with stories and concrete examples. Throughout, the coordination team aimed to maximize accuracy and collective ownership by circulating drafts of the themes and summaries to all contributors for review—resulting in extensive email exchanges, dialogue, manuscript commentary, and comprehensive reformulations and revisions. This collaborative process also played a role in developing relationships among researchers who had often experienced these challenges in isolation, creating space for mutual support and solidarity.

We present key themes below using a collective voice (representing the consensus of all co-authors) to reflect common patterns and shared knowledge, while also including first-person quotations to honor some of the individual experiences shared and to preserve the emotional, relational, and practical realities detailed by collaborators. The following sections explore these themes in greater detail, highlighting key barriers encountered in university-based Indigenous research and potential solutions at both the individual and institutional levels.

3. Themes

In this section, we structure our discussion around five themes: governance, institutional fit, burden, capacity, and relationships. This order is intentional: it reflects how our discussions unfolded and how these themes logically build upon one another, with relationships placed last because they are foundational to Indigenous research systems and to potential transformations of institutional practice. Within each theme, we discuss key challenges and offer opportunities for progress that we

have experienced, observed, or which we can envision. These themes are not self-contained but interrelated; many of the experiences we describe could easily fit within more than one theme because they emerge from overlapping structural conditions. Together, these interconnected dynamics shape the realities we outline. The themes have many ramifications and the examples we provide are therefore intended to be illustrative rather than exhaustive. Further, although we provide some citations in connection with these themes, the core points and examples are drawn from our own experience, contributing practice-based insights that advance and enrich the broader literature and research practices.

3.1. Governance

Challenges. There are many problems in the context of research governance, including persistent structural inequities that limit Indigenous sovereignty and decision-making in academic research. These inequities are embedded in colonial hierarchies that prioritize institutional control over research processes, data, funding, and intellectual property, rather than Indigenous values, priorities, control and authority. While some institutions have begun moving toward Indigenous-led and self-determined approaches, the majority of universities and funders continue to operate through top-down bureaucratic systems that limit meaningful community self-governance. We have encountered visible inequalities in the "front-yard" areas of governance – leadership, senior decision-making, and policy – where Indigenous representation remains limited. These are the outward-facing spaces where institutions often signal their commitments. In contrast, "back-yard" barriers include the less-visible administrative controls that shape how research unfolds in practice, such as internal funding timelines and disbursement processes, contracting delays, and project approvals. Although these barriers may attract less public attention, their impact on Indigenous self-governed research can be just as significant, because they determine when work can begin, whether communities must front costs due to delayed institutional disbursements, and how closely projects can align with community-driven timelines and decision-making processes. Their harms vary by context, but across our experiences, these internal institutional administrative constraints have meaningfully limited Indigenous autonomy in research. Together, these inequities preserve colonial power and limit Indigenous leadership at both institutional and project levels.

From our experience, university governance mirrors colonial hierarchies, centralizing control over what counts as "ethical", "valid", or "appropriate". These dynamics are perhaps most evident in ethics and funding decisions, where we have frequently experienced institutions overriding community authority. For example, one of us submitted a community-approved letter of agreement that the university ethics board rejected, not because the community objected, but because the wording did not align with the institutional template. The community viewed the ethics board's response as infantilizing and paternalistic.

We recount multiple instances where institutional inflexibility, whether from funding agencies or universities, has undermined trust and derailed otherwise strong community-researcher partnerships (D'souza et al., 2024). In one case, a study funded for a five-year period was underway when tensions arose in the final year because a funder insisted that money be spent on its schedule rather than the community's. The research team had committed to a relationship-building process that needed extended consultation and slower pacing than the funder's schedule allowed, including time for community discussions and guidance before starting data collection and any money was spent. Throughout the five-year funding period, much of the work focused on trust building and community engagement, which extended timelines beyond initial expectations. In the fifth year of the grant, the funder reassigned the remaining budget to other teams without notice, despite the researchers' efforts to honour community timelines. Reactions like these reinforce longstanding mistrust among Indigenous communities

and researchers and show that institutional self-protection often takes precedence over accountability and reconciliation.

While some university policies claim to “protect” Indigenous communities through measures such as additional oversight or mandatory institutional ethics review, the result is often to tighten institutional control, thus reinforcing colonial paternalism rather than dismantling it. In some contexts, for example, legislation or institutional policies that prohibit or restrict the collection of racial or ethnic data is framed as a safeguard against discrimination. Yet these restrictions can also deny Indigenous Peoples the ability to self-identify in research and obscure inequities within institutions. As a result, Indigenous Peoples often remain invisible within systems that shape research and resource allocation. At the same time, appropriate approaches to data collection, identification, and governance vary across Indigenous Nations and communities, and decisions about whether and how such data are collected or shared should be determined by communities themselves. These forms of protective paternalism further entrench institutional control while undermining Indigenous sovereignty in defining and pursuing community priorities.

Opportunities. Despite these challenges, we are aware of promising examples of Indigenous-led and institutionally supported governance approaches in academic research contexts that demonstrate what is possible when decision-making and resources are meaningfully grounded in Indigenous control. While many of these initiatives originate from funding structures, they demonstrate governance models that universities can adopt, support, or align with in their own systems. In particular, recent decades have seen incremental improvements in Indigenous research governance and community–university research partnerships. In 2000, the US Indian Health Service (IHS) and National Institutes of Health (NIH) instituted the Native American Research Centers for Health (NARCH) program to support partnerships between Tribal Nations and academic institutions (National Institutes of Health, 2001). The NARCH program has strengthened Tribal control over research priorities and enhanced local research capacity by enabling more Indigenous researchers to lead projects within their own communities. More recently, the NIH instituted the Native Collective Research Effort to Enhance Wellness (N CREW) program, which provides funding directly to Tribes and Indigenous-serving organizations to support research prioritized and led by Indigenous communities (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2024). In Canada, the Canadian Institutes for Health Research (CIHR) re-instituted the Network Environments for Indigenous Health Research (NEIHR) program in 2018 (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, 2025). The NEIHR program prioritizes Indigenous governance, supports community-led research agendas, enhances local research capacity, and works toward greater autonomy in how funds are accessed, managed, and directed. Across these initiatives, structures that embed Indigenous governance contribute to more consistent alignment with community values, more stable research relationships, and clearer accountability to Indigenous leadership (Bisset et al., 2024; Davis, 2017; Rasmus et al., 2020). These initiatives are surely positive developments and ought to be expanded, but they currently account for only a fraction of university-partnered Indigenous research. They also can be administratively cumbersome for academic institutions and Indigenous community partners.

Other promising developments and opportunities pertain to improved ethics oversight and research partnership training. The First Nations Information Governance Centre in Canada has developed its Ownership, Control, Access and Possession (OCAP®) data sovereignty framework, indicating training and guidance for ownership, control, access, and possession of First Nations data (First Nations Information Governance Centre, n.d.). In the US, Indigenous-led research ethics boards (e.g., at Tribal Colleges and within some Nations) embed community governance at the core of research processes—requiring that research priorities, methods, and decision-making structures be determined or vetted locally and that researchers operate within established community protocols and oversight mechanisms. We also are aware of

proposals for a pan-Sámi ethics review board to formalize Indigenous oversight across nation-state borders. Other developments include a Canadian Tri-Council ethics training program that includes a chapter on Indigenous partnership (TCPS-2, Chapter 9; Government of Canada, 2023), and training initiatives offered through Indigenous health research centers housed in academic institutions. One example of an institutional approach is the recently developed Tribal-University Relations training required for all research team members at the University of Minnesota who engage in research with Tribal Nations (University of Minnesota, 2024). However, the availability, depth, and alignment of institutional training with Indigenous governance, as well as with the distinct cultural, relational, and community-defined priorities of different Indigenous communities, vary widely (Government of Canada, 2023; Pearson et al., 2018). Further, there is a risk that increased ethics training or oversight are operationalized in ways that result in just another burden that falls on individual researchers, including Indigenous researchers, who remain under supported by their institutions in their efforts to engage in ethical community partnerships.

While funding agencies, ethics boards, legal systems, and other institutions all play significant roles in shaping the conditions for Indigenous self-determination in research, universities remain one of the most immediate and actionable sites for institutional change. However, we recognize that authority is often distributed and at times obscured across these systems, creating “slippages” in responsibility, for example, when universities attribute rigid timelines to funders, or when funders rely on universities to ensure ethical and relational accountability. This diffusion of responsibility can make it difficult to identify where change must occur, reinforcing the need to clarify institutional roles.

From our experience, responsibility for perhaps the largest gap between reality and possibility for self-determined Indigenous governance lies with academic institutions themselves. Many universities have advanced initiatives such as integrating Indigenous research principles into institution mission statements and establishing Indigenous advisory councils and formal agreements, which can indirectly support ethical community engagement (Kilian et al., 2019). However, these developments are quite limited in scope, and advisory councils, by their nature, do not govern research decisions. When it comes to universities making structural changes pertaining to financial management and data governance that are not simply offloaded onto individual researchers, unfortunately, we cannot offer many examples. We are aware of a community-partnered project in which university finance offices transferred funds directly to Indigenous organizations for independent hiring and compensation, which increased project efficiency, reduced administrative delays, and strengthened community autonomy. We also see increased Indigenous activism in “talking back” to universities, including through accountability initiatives like the TRUTH Project (2023), a Native American organized and led community-driven research movement that offers concrete recommendations for how universities can be in better relations with Indigenous Peoples. Ultimately, equitable governance requires that universities recognize Indigenous jurisdiction over knowledge, relationships, and outcomes – and center Indigenous ethical frameworks at every stage of research.

3.2. Institutional fit

Challenges. These structural challenges in research governance are mirrored in day-to-day tensions around problems of “fit” or misalignment between institutional systems and Indigenous community-based research. These tensions arise from different understandings of research priorities, timelines, ethics, and methodologies. University ethics review board processes, from our experience, may be one of the greatest sources of conflict. These processes often reflect institutional assumptions about risk, consent, positionality of a researcher with the community-partner, and emphasis on individual autonomy that do not align with community-based or relational approaches to ethics (Collins et al., 2018). For example, institutional ethics frameworks tend to

prioritize standardized procedures and documentation, whereas Indigenous ethical approaches tend to emphasize trust, reciprocity, and collective responsibility (Mashford-Pringle and Pavagadhi, 2020; Putaioa Writing Group, 2010; Tsosie et al., 2022). When research crosses provincial, state, or national boundaries, it often must comply with multiple research ethics boards and legal frameworks that may contradict each other, even though the key relationships and responsibilities extend beyond those imposed borders.

We frequently encounter institutions misinterpreting or prohibiting cultural and ceremonial practices in the context of research. For example, when research meetings took place at a tribal casino because that is where space was available, a university department objected out of a deeply problematic concern that, due to the setting, the Indigenous individuals convening the meeting would buy and consume alcohol during the meeting. In another example, an ethics board prohibited offering tobacco to Elders contributing to a research project because “tobacco is bad for health,” ignoring its traditional ceremonial use and cultural significance. These examples reflect institutional racism fueled by longstanding stereotypes and an inadequate understanding of Indigenous cultural contexts. These problems are also frequently compounded by structural and professional conditions within Indigenous research, including the precarities faced by early-career researchers, women, gender and sexual minorities, Elders, community members without reliable Internet or phone access, and researchers working with geographically remote communities (Loppie et al., 2014; Povey et al., 2023).

Funding and administrative structures, as implemented through university systems, further compound these misalignments. Delays, rigid spending conditions, and cumbersome reimbursement systems make it difficult to compensate community partners in timely or appropriate ways. Grant restrictions frequently exclude from approved spending the costs of essential cultural practices that are fundamental to culturally founded community-engaged research such as Elders’ honoraria, drumming, or ceremonial openings, and even shared food or meals. These practices are fundamental to culturally grounded community-engaged research, as well as relational practices such as offering or receiving gifts. In some contexts, these practices are governed by community-specific norms and responsibilities, including expectations of collective sharing and accountability rather than individual accumulation. These exclusions reveal how institutional definitions of “legitimate” research expenses continue to marginalize Indigenous knowledge systems and relational practices. As a result, we often experience institutions as obstacles rather than partners, with one of us stating, “it felt like the institutions were working against us.”

Opportunities. Improving fit requires reconfiguring research processes to align with Indigenous communities and realities. Institutions must shift their policies to accommodate the realities of community-based research across cultural contexts and shift the power towards Indigenous communities. True reconciliation and support for Indigenous research requires rethinking entrenched “business as usual” practices, policies, and procedures. This support may require more flexible timelines, budgets, and governance structures, as well as embedding skilled personnel within universities to advocate for self-determined Indigenous research. The presence of a single persistent and knowledgeable administrator in a relational role, or “someone who gets it,” can meaningfully reduce institutional barriers.

Some of us have developed creative workarounds to navigate these misalignments and uphold our responsibilities to Indigenous community partners—though these should be seen as short-term solutions to issues that demand structural change. For example, to maintain flexibility and continuity in local funding, some of us have split payments or used ad hoc arrangements such as hiring through temp agencies or paying costs out-of-pocket to ensure collaborators were compensated fairly and on time when institutional systems or business-as-usual processes failed to do so. Another concrete solution is to use discretionary or bridge funds to support community partners between grant years. Subcontracting can

take months, and institutions often expect less-resourced partners to carry these costs during the gap, even though large universities themselves are unwilling to take on this burden. One of us has also found it helpful to institute subawards with Indigenous organizations, who are then able to compensate community collaborators more efficiently than through the university processes. While these adaptations demonstrate the persistence and care of researchers, they may also shift administrative burden onto Indigenous, community, or local organizations and highlight the need for institutions to create structures that do not force such improvisation.

One structural solution that could have an enormous impact is for universities to enact financial systems in which Indigenous Elders and advisors are remunerated immediately for their expertise. These collaborators typically endure many layers of paperwork and prolonged delays even for relatively infrequent forms of participation (e.g., periodic advisory council meetings). We have observed delays in payment of nearly a year, well beyond the ability of the research team to mitigate, which can have devastating effects on researcher-community relationships. Some Canadian universities have published guidelines to reduce delays and streamline the payment processes (e.g., University of British Columbia, 2021); however, these guidelines have not led to systemic change and financial systems continue to impose onerous burdens. In contrast, virtually all research universities have already implemented relatively nimble remuneration systems for research participants, reflecting the reliance on such participants for efficient research completion. Rather than creating isolated or exceptional processes, these existing systems demonstrate that universities can build integrated institutional mechanisms that could be extended and adapted to support Indigenous expertise as a core function of research. If university leaders genuinely consider Indigenous knowledge and leadership fundamental to ethical research, they must embed such supports within their standard administrative infrastructure rather than treating them as special accommodations.

3.3. Burden

Challenges. A consistent shared experience of researchers – across institutions, contexts, and academic disciplines – is a pervasive sense of personal burden in conducting Indigenous community-based research within systems that have not been designed or adapted to support it. The responsibility of navigating competing institutional and community expectations and structural/institutional gaps falls heavily on individual researchers (usually Indigenous researchers), producing financial, emotional, professional, and relational strain. We highlight three interrelated forms of burden: rigidity in institutional systems, university gatekeeping that limits participation and support, and role strain created by balancing academic and community expectations.

First, we have encountered how rigid administrative processes generate significant barriers. Ethics approvals often delay access to funds required for early relationship-building with community partners, such as travel and food, forcing many of us to pay out of pocket and seek reimbursement later. One of us explained, “I had to fight the university’s finance system just to pay a local family who provided food for an event. After dozens of emails, I paid in cash myself. It was such a waste of time and energy”, also highlighting the hidden ‘expectation’ from universities that all researchers have the financial means to do this. This situation, sadly, is not exceptional; all of us have experienced similar burdens. These structures create unnecessary financial and emotional strain by shifting personal financial costs onto researchers, generating unsupported administrative labour, and introducing procedural barriers that undermine respectful engagement.

These practices create barriers to participation and repeatedly force us, as researchers, to mediate between institutional systems and community needs and expectations. We consistently experience universities acting as gatekeepers of resources, controlling access to funds and imposing requirements that exclude or discourage Indigenous partners.

Requirements to collect private identification numbers, bank account information, or proof of Indigenous status often delay or even prevent compensation for Indigenous partners who may not have this information or trust such systems. In one case, one of us shared: *"Payments were delayed for months, and some people quit the project out of frustration"*.

Finally, the role strain that researchers experience navigating academic and community expectations is a significant burden. We are expected to represent institutional interests, carry the emotional weight of advocacy, maintain deep relational commitments to communities, and educate colleagues and administrators unfamiliar with research in Indigenous contexts. For Indigenous researchers working in their own communities, role strain is compounded by expectations that we will leverage personal relationships to facilitate projects, rather than receiving institutional support for the process of community engagement and capacity building. Early-career scholars also face performance metrics and tenure expectations that undervalue long-term relational work central to Indigenous methodologies (Locke et al., 2024; Foulds et al., 2025); these mismatched expectations persist even when these scholars are hired because of their community-based research agenda, setting them up for failure or perceived "underperformance" relative to their peers.

Opportunities. If academic institutions truly wish to support Indigenous research, then they need to take on more of the burden of designing infrastructure to support such research rather than offloading it onto under-supported researchers. Universities can do more to take responsibility by embedding sustained support structures and recognizing the time required to build community relationships. This includes incorporating flexible research timelines, creating funding models that acknowledge relational processes and labor, hiring additional support staff, and adjusting tenure and performance evaluation criteria to value community engagement. For example, many researchers regularly return to communities to share results, yet this work is seldom tracked or rewarded despite its importance to ethical research practice. Institutions can also develop guidance that preserves the relationships and governance pathways created by Indigenous researchers so that these do not fall away when staffing changes. Existing initiatives to promote community-engaged scholarship can be strengthened by ensuring they are responsive to the specific needs and governance structures of Indigenous communities.

There are emerging examples of institutions working in this direction. The Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT; 2025) has developed guidelines for instituting support for Indigenous academics within collective agreements, including recognition for disproportionate service demands and different forms of knowledge mobilization, special processes for tenure/promotion, commitments to cluster hiring of Indigenous faculty, provisions for workload adjustments (e.g., course releases), leaves for cultural and community reasons (e.g., ceremonial leave), and expanded definitions of "family" in connection with compassionate care and bereavement leaves. The CAUT report contains many examples of collective bargaining language from faculty associations across Canada. Given that the vast majority of academic staff in Canada are unionized, continued progress in this respect could greatly alleviate Indigenous researcher burden in that country and hopefully can improve working conditions for Indigenous faculty elsewhere.

There are also examples of institutions supporting reduced researcher burden through streamlining research ethics review processes. One of our universities now defers oversight of Indigenous community-based research to Indigenous research ethics boards whenever an Indigenous Nation has its own ethics body. In these cases, researchers no longer need approval from the university's research ethics board, which eliminates duplicative review and meaningfully supports Indigenous sovereignty. Not all Indigenous communities have their own research ethics boards, and Indigenous boards modeled on university structures may still replicate some institutional challenges. In some cases, Indigenous research ethics boards (e.g., at Tribal Colleges) have supported ethics review for nearby Nations that do not have their own

systems. From our experience, Indigenous research ethics boards tend to be more culturally grounded, relational, and responsive than university boards. It is important to note, however, that the structures, expectations, and protocols of Indigenous research ethics boards vary across Nations and communities, reflecting distinct governance systems and priorities, and should not be assumed to operate in uniform ways.

We also have seen universities reduce ethics review burden in other ways. In one recent project, the University of Cincinnati collaborated with the University of North Dakota to bridge infrastructure for Indigenous research through the sharing of administrative resources, ethics review processes, and institutional knowledge. North Dakota served as the research ethics board of record, and both teams worked together to develop funding arrangements and research processes that respected Indigenous governance.

Meaningfully addressing researcher burden requires restructuring institutional frameworks to reflect the distinct needs of Indigenous and community-based scholarship. This includes ensuring continuity in staffing and partnerships and developing intentional hiring initiatives such as Indigenous faculty clusters or doctoral cohorts to reduce isolation and workload inequities. In the absence of long-term funding, even short-term internal grants that help initiate or sustain academic-community partnerships can make a meaningful difference. Strengthening mentoring and institutional support for faculty engaged in community-based work would further reinforce these efforts and ensure that researchers are not navigating this work alone. These forms of support are also important for students and trainees, who in many programs have limited access to mentors or supervisors who are familiar with Indigenous methodologies or community-engaged approaches and often must seek guidance outside their departments. Revising performance evaluation criteria at both the faculty and student level would reduce pressure and allow for community-responsive timelines.

In like manner, academic institutions need to stop placing undue burdens on Indigenous communities, advisors, and Elders who contribute to research. This requires recognizing the unique demands of this work and providing appropriate support systems so that those hired to conduct Indigenous research have clear expectations and sustained commitments. For example, one of our universities recently hired a full-time Indigenous community member and scholar to support investigators and work directly with communities. While this is a promising step, there is concern that this research project concierge may quickly become overextended if broader changes are not made, effectively placing the weight of community engagement on a single individual rather than the institution as a whole. A more sustainable solution of which we are aware is a university that allocates a portion of its pool of federal research funds to employ Indigenous staff members who can consult and liaise across multiple funded community projects. In some settings, there has also been emerging discussion about establishing research agreements that involve the responsibility of the university, rather than leaving accountability solely with individual researchers, particularly in cases where communities have multiple collaborations with the same university. These conversations highlight the potential value of creating internal university mechanisms that can monitor, coordinate, and support ongoing partnerships, reducing duplication and helping ensure communities are not repeatedly burdened with orienting new academic teams. Institutions should therefore develop shared expectations between universities and communities to ensure responsibilities are fairly distributed.

We call on universities to "step up their urgency" and for funders to "put their money where their mouth is" when supporting Indigenous partners by ensuring commitments are backed by tangible action and resources. From our experience, when communities control resources, projects move faster: *"When communities manage the funds, everything goes faster. They can pay people quickly, avoid bureaucratic traps, and reduce delays that harm trust and participation"*. Shifting control of resources strengthens Indigenous autonomy and reinforces institutional accountability.

3.4. Capacity

Challenges. We have consistently experienced constrained institutional capacity as a central challenge. In many cases, university systems lack not only the personnel and coordination mechanisms to support community-based research, but also the institutional commitment to build such mechanisms. Limited staffing, fragmented administrative structures, and inconsistent support for Indigenous-led initiatives point to broader underinvestment rather than mere overextension. From the perspective of Indigenous partners, such patterns can be rightly understood as reflecting a systemic undervaluing of Indigenous research and relational practices, particularly in the absence of sustained, comparable institutional investment. As a result, Indigenous research initiatives remain vulnerable to delays and breakdowns in coordination and communication between researchers, administrators, and community partners, even when goodwill exists at the individual level. Without flexible institutional support, some of us have had little choice but to develop alternative systems to keep projects moving and to be accountable to our community partners. These improvised “work-arounds” have become a recurring necessity rather than an exception, illustrating how current systems fail to meet the needs of Indigenous research.

Human resources delays are a widely shared frustration across academic contexts. Job postings, hiring approvals, and payment processing often leave community collaborators waiting months to receive compensation. Although these concerns are not unique to Indigenous research, their impact is magnified in Indigenous contexts, where these delays strain relationships and undermine trust with communities and, in some cases, discourage future collaboration. One of us lost the opportunity to hire a data analyst due to excessive paperwork and time sheet requirements. Contract delays jeopardize community partnerships and timelines, with some communities paying out of pocket while waiting for universities to release funds. These dynamics shift pressure back onto the community, creating a situation that is neither equitable nor sustainable. We often find ourselves caught between institutional systems and community accountability.

These problems also reflect a larger issue: universities do not adequately invest in administrative capacity for Indigenous research. Although some institutions may emphasize reconciliation in their messaging, this rhetoric rarely translates into culturally grounded systems for community engagement, relationship-building, or ceremony. Non-academic organizations are frequently more flexible in this regard. One of us has collaborated with a non-profit in a research project that enabled the project team to enact cultural leave, smudging, and direct hiring practices, which are difficult to negotiate within university structures. Another of us has collaborated with a non-profit to create programs for Indigenous youth and accept direct donations from supporters, without getting stalled in university bureaucracy. It is striking to us how community partners, often with vastly inferior resources in comparison to universities, are often far more flexible and efficient than university finance departments.

Limited administrative flexibility reflects a broader pattern of underinvestment in Indigenous research capacity. Although universities often cite funding constraints, they remain comparatively well-resourced and could allocate support differently. The gap between institutional rhetoric about reconciliation and the funding of necessary resources for relational work is especially stark. Activities such as community dissemination, ceremony, long-term engagement, and the administrative labor needed to sustain partnerships are rarely resourced, even though they are essential to ethical Indigenous research. In many cases, efforts to increase Indigenous faculty hiring have not been matched with the structural systems required to support relational, community-driven research, leaving researchers without the administrative capacity to uphold their commitments to communities.

Opportunities. The workarounds we have developed — though born of necessity — also point toward what is possible when systems are

redesigned around accountability. For instance, hiring staff through temporary agencies, routing payments through community organizations, and managing project logistics outside conventional university processes have proven effective at maintaining project momentum and community trust. As mentioned above, one of our teams hired Indigenous employees through a temporary agency because it was the only way to ensure timely payment. Others found it faster to have a community organization pay a student by invoice than to go through the university's human resources department. While these adaptations should not be required, they demonstrate the forms of flexibility and responsiveness universities could adopt permanently and the need to create formal pathways that make such practices accessible without relying on individual improvisation.

Of course, a major need in terms of supporting Indigenous research capacity is greater institutional commitment in hiring and supporting Indigenous university leaders and researchers. This need extends beyond representation alone; Indigenous leaders and researchers bring critical expertise in Indigenous governance, relational accountability, and community-engaged methodologies that are essential for transforming institutional practices. At the same time, systemic barriers within universities, including internalized racism, inequities in promotion and tenure processes, and disproportionate service and advocacy demands, can limit the ability of Indigenous scholars to enact change from within. These conditions also contribute to some Indigenous researchers and leaders choosing to avoid or leave university settings altogether, further constraining institutional capacity for meaningful transformation. This commitment would include increased support in leadership development and greater support for emerging researchers. Although there has been recent progress in hiring Indigenous researchers, they continue to be very underrepresented. This progress is fragile, especially in an era of public underinvestment in higher education across the globe. Further, in both the U.S. and Aotearoa (New Zealand), many Indigenous researchers are nearing retirement and there is worry that they will not be replaced in the current financial and political climates in these nations. Though we acknowledge financial constraints, we worry that university executives do not clearly recognize how much indiscriminate financial cuts could set back progress when it comes to Indigenous research. If institutional land acknowledgments and commitments to Indigenization mean anything in such a context, surely this means prioritizing Indigenous hires and supporting Indigenous research as much as possible.

We note some encouraging examples of institutional progress. Some institutions have created departments of Indigenous health and Indigenous studies that promote self-determination, enable “for us, by us” research approaches, and amplify Indigenous voices within academic and health research systems. These developments signal meaningful institutional commitment and help provide a clearer institutional ‘home’ for Indigenous research; however, such departments often continue to have limited authority over broader governance, financing, and ethical procedures. To strengthen this progress, we propose increasing the number and role of dedicated Indigenous research offices that function more like community organizations - managing payments, ethics, and logistics in ways aligned with relational accountability. We believe that sustained investment, streamlined administrative pathways, and formal recognition of community collaboration would make the biggest difference. Despite frustrations, we remain optimistic. Successful models already exist within many of our own networks: non-profit research arms, community partnerships, flexible hiring arrangements, and donor-based support systems that have proven effective in filling institutional gaps. As one of us said, universities “don't need to reinvent the wheel,” they can learn from what already works for other community-based partnerships by prioritizing sustained investment in Indigenous research infrastructures.

3.5. Relationships

Challenges: The theme of relationships runs through every issue we have raised. The challenges we face in Indigenous community-partnered research are not only technical or logistical—they are rooted in conflicting worldviews. Academic systems often prioritize short-term efficiency, individual achievement, and standardized outputs, whereas Indigenous research emphasizes long-term relational accountability, reciprocity, and collective wellbeing. When universities attempt to support Indigenous research without grounding their actions in these relational principles, they risk reinforcing paternalism and performative inclusion (Gone, 2023). From our collective experience, we identified two interrelated dimensions of relationships: accountability and engagement.

First, accountability is defined by community expectations rather than institutional checklists. Building relationships between the bureaucratic, colonial structures of universities and Indigenous research communities is often challenged by differing understandings of relational accountability. Institutional reliance on procedures can overshadow trust and reciprocal responsibility, both essential to Indigenous research. For us, accountability in this context means that academic institutions must actively share responsibility for the relationships they enter into with Indigenous communities. This includes demonstrating commitment through reliable support and follow-through, being transparent about decisions and processes that affect the work and maintaining sustained engagement rather than leaving the burden of partnership entirely on individual researchers or communities.

Second, relationships require genuine institutional engagement, not just individual effort. Engagement necessitates that institutions recognize relationality as the foundation of genuine involvement. Universities frequently fail to acknowledge the relational work required to conduct research within our own communities or alongside others. Universities also rarely offer structured, distinctions-based training to prepare researchers for engagement with Indigenous communities, leaving relationship-building to individual initiative and personal experience (Curci et al., 2025). This not only places an unfair burden on researchers but also creates risks when individuals attempt to navigate cultural or governance protocol without guidance, which can inadvertently harm relationships with communities. Genuine engagement demands more than compliance; it requires recognition of political and systemic relationships alongside interpersonal ones. We believe universities must move beyond superficial fixes to meaningfully engage with Indigenous governance and sovereignty.

Opportunities. If academic institutions truly want to build relationships with researchers and collaborating communities, a partnership is required. This partnership depends on shared decision-making, mutual respect, and distributed responsibility, yet few structures are based on these conditions. Siloed departments and narrow staff roles limit opportunities for connection. Institutions must create space, time, and flexibility for genuine relationality to flourish within research. Approaches such as “slow research” center deep and sustained engagement rather than treating relationships as optional add-ons (Berg and Seeber, 2016). Institutions must also recognize that this relational work is often disproportionately carried by Indigenous community members and Indigenous leaders within universities and create supports that more equitably distribute these responsibilities. One of us observed, “*The most effective solution was building relationships and aligning expectations from the start. When the community helped co-create the agreement, they were more responsive.*” Another example involved retaining community advisors throughout an entire study and meeting with them consistently. Although the onboarding process was initially burdensome, the continuity of the relationship created trust and longevity that made the investment worthwhile.

Shifting from procedural compliance toward relational accountability requires long-term support and expanded involvement of Knowledge Holders, including Elders and Knowledge Keepers, within

institutional systems. This shift is also reflected in emerging frameworks that position cultural humility and relational accountability as foundational to ethical community-engaged research, rather than as optional or individual-level competencies (e.g., Itchuaqiyag, 2023). From our experience, it is rare to find individuals within research ethics boards, finance offices, or other administrative units who possess such awareness. Bringing Elders and Knowledge Keepers into these roles as advisors, reviewers, or decision-makers can strengthen relational integrity by ensuring that funding decisions, ethics processes, and administrative practices reflect Indigenous values and ways of working. We also note that even simpler practices, such as having regular shared meals between researchers and administrative staff, can strengthen mutual understanding and accountability, promoting team-based approaches that distribute relational responsibilities more evenly. However, such practices must be approached with attention to local context, as meaningful relational approaches require community-specific engagement rather than standardized or superficial solutions. Finally, reviewing institutional policies through a relational lens, including those governing timelines, deliverables, and hiring practices, can help align research environments with Indigenous values of reciprocity, care, and collective responsibility. Building and sustaining relationships is not peripheral to Indigenous research – it is the core.

4. Conclusion

This article illustrates how university systems often inhibit, rather than support, Indigenous research sovereignty. Across themes of governance, institutional fit, burden, capacity, and relationality, we have described patterns that consolidate institutional power while constraining Indigenous research sovereignty. These dynamics operate across both “front-yard” (visible commitments such as policies, leadership, and public statements) and “back-yard” (less visible administrative systems such as ethics review, contracting, and financial processes) domains, which together shape how authority is exercised in practice. When institutions retain authority over what constitutes appropriate ethics, spending, or data stewardship, they effectively limit Indigenous self-determination in research. This is particularly evident in institutional fit challenges, where ethics boards and administrative systems misinterpret or restrict Indigenous cultural practices, reinforcing institutional norms over community-defined protocols. Further, a mismatch between university and Indigenous conceptions of research manifests in avoidable delays, strained partnerships, and unnecessary emotional and administrative labor for both communities and researchers. Yet within these challenges lie clear pathways for transformation. We have shared experiences that point to workable alternatives already in use, many developed informally by researchers and communities, which illuminate what more supportive, sovereignty-aligned systems could look like. These include relational ethics processes, culturally grounded governance mechanisms, and administrative adaptations that better align with Indigenous knowledge systems and practices. These pathways also require intentional investments in mentorship, training, and capacity-bridging initiatives that strengthen the ability of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars to engage in Indigenous-governed research in ethical and competent ways.

A consistent observation throughout our conversations together is that, in the absence of supportive infrastructure, the burden of navigating these misalignments often falls on individual researchers, especially Indigenous scholars and early-career researchers. Many of us described taking on unpaid labor, financial risk, and emotional strain simply to keep projects aligned with community expectations while meeting institutional requirements. However, this burden is interconnected with broader relational and capacity challenges, including the uneven distribution of relational labor and the lack of institutional investment in administrative systems that can sustain community partnerships over time. If universities and funders are serious about strengthening Indigenous research, they must structurally absorb this

Table 1
Recommendations for universities, funding agencies, and researchers.

Partner	Recommendations
Universities	Delegate decision-making authority to Indigenous communities (e.g., ethics, budgets, data governance) in ways that reflect community-specific governance structures, cultural protocols, and preferences regarding data use, sharing, and stewardship.
	Establish Indigenous-led research offices with contracting and payment authority and who have the capacity to support communities with grant and finance reporting requirements.
	Redesign financial systems to allow timely payments, honoraria, and ceremonial costs, and eliminate delays that require communities to front costs or navigate complex reimbursement systems.
	Fund relationship-building as a core research activity, recognizing the time, labor, and continuity required for ethical community engagement.
	Reform tenure and evaluation policies to recognize relational work, community-defined outputs, and non-linear project timelines.
	Reduce procedural burdens by removing unnecessary documentation and reforming ethics processes to respect Indigenous cultural practices, community governance, and relational accountability.
Funding Agencies and Administrators	Increase the creation of physical spaces in universities that have been co-designed with Indigenous communities, feel culturally safe and welcoming of community partners, and help facilitate conversations.
	Allocate funds directly to Indigenous communities or Indigenous organizations.
	Include budget categories for ceremony, Elders, and relational labor.
	Support long-term infrastructure building (e.g., Indigenous research offices, community governance bodies) to address gaps in institutional capacity and reduce reliance on individual workarounds.
	Remove spending rules that penalize community-paced or seasonal timelines and ensure that timelines for submitting grants and implementing funded projects allow for respectful engagement of Indigenous partners.
Researchers	In partnership with Indigenous communities, identify inclusive and appropriate ways to describe experiences of researchers working with Indigenous communities as part of grant applications.
	Prioritize community-defined timelines, outputs, and governance from project inception, including aligning project pacing with community consultation processes and decision-making structures.
	Build relational accountability rather than relying solely on procedural compliance.
	Advocate internally for structural change and resist institutional norms that undermine Indigenous authority.
	Share workarounds and emerging practices to support collective transformation.
	For non-Indigenous researchers: defer decision-making power and co-create governance agreements that uphold Indigenous leadership.

burden rather than offload it or expect for researchers and department staff to come up with creative workarounds. Such a commitment would include hiring more Indigenous leaders at the highest levels of university governance, building Indigenous research offices with real authority (not only advisory roles), strengthening institutional capacity through dedicated staffing and coordination mechanisms, and designing payment and contracting systems that can operate according to community timelines and alleviate researcher burden. Investing in long-term relationship building and adjusting evaluation metrics to value relational, community-centered scholarship is also essential. We further summarize recommendations for universities, funding agencies and administrators, and researchers in Table 1.

Importantly, our collective experiences show that stronger models for Indigenous-university research partnerships already exist. Some communities have created their own funding pathways and research governance structures, and these approaches have allowed projects to move at a pace and in a manner defined by the community rather than by university bureaucracy. Indigenous-led ethics bodies offer another example, demonstrating how review processes can be grounded in relationships, local protocol, and community authority. Alongside these broader structures, researchers have created everyday practices, such as co-developing governance agreements with partners, planning publications collaboratively, or blending university processes with community-based administrative systems, that keep projects moving despite institutional constraints. These examples also demonstrate how relational approaches and capacity-building efforts can work together to support more sustainable and equitable research systems. These efforts show real ingenuity, but they should not rely on individual persistence alone. For these approaches to take root, institutions must adopt and formalize them rather than leaving them as temporary solutions invented on the margins.

The wider instability within higher education makes this work

especially pressing. Many universities are navigating financial pressures and public skepticism, and these stresses reveal how fragile current administrative systems have become (Ngan, 2023; Robertson et al., 2024). The difficulties we encounter around contracting, timelines, and data oversight are not just inconveniences; they are signs of systems that struggle to function even for those they were designed to serve. Neoliberal and capitalist pressures that shape research funding, outputs, and academic career advancement standards, exacerbate these inequities by privileging efficiency and relatively inaccessible academic outputs over relationship-building and community benefit (Poirier et al., 2022). In this context, Indigenous research sovereignty is not only a corrective to historical and ongoing harms; it also offers a practical model for research environments built on trust, adaptability, and shared responsibility. Approaches grounded in relational accountability tend to be more sustainable and more responsive to community needs, and they ultimately support healthier research cultures for everyone involved (Fraser, 2022; Redvers et al., 2024). The solutions we have articulated in this article are natural extensions of the land acknowledgments that have become customary in university communications. Indeed, if these acknowledgments are intended to be substantive rather than performative, then universities must transform research systems in ways that uphold Indigenous governance, uplift diverse knowledges, and enable equitable partnerships (Native Governance Center, 2019; Robinson et al., 2019; Tremblay et al., 2025).

To move forward, universities need to redesign policies in ways that genuinely share authority with Indigenous partners, particularly within the domains they directly control (e.g., ethics processes, contracting, financial systems, and evaluation structures). While some barriers originate in broader funding or regulatory environments, universities play a critical role in how these constraints are interpreted, enacted, and, in some cases, challenged. Clarifying these boundaries of authority is essential to ensuring that accountability is appropriately located, and

that institutional change is both realistic and actionable.

This process includes addressing front-yard commitments (e.g., governance structures and leadership representation) alongside back-yard administrative systems (e.g., ethics review, contracting, and financial processes) that directly shape research practice. This means creating governance structures where Indigenous decision-making is not symbolic, but central. It also requires reforming ethics processes to respect Indigenous cultural practices, investing in institutional capacity to support community partnerships, and embedding relational accountability into administrative systems. Funders also have a role: their processes must be flexible enough to follow community timelines and governance practices rather than forcing communities into externally imposed schedules. Researchers, in turn, can continue to model practices that prioritize relationships, reciprocity, and adaptability, helping demonstrate what a successful partnership looks like even within imperfect institutional environments. Across all levels, Indigenous sovereignty cannot be a discretionary add-on. It must be understood as a core requirement of ethical research. Looking ahead, institutions must also be willing to work toward more transformative futures: ones in which Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination fundamentally reshape how research is conceived, governed, and evaluated. In such futures, Indigenous communities define research priorities and pathways, universities act as accountable service partners rather than gatekeepers, and governance, funding, ethics, and measures of success are collectively organized around community authority and responsibility, rather than being constrained by incremental modifications to colonial academic systems.

A strength of this article is that it is experientially grounded: rooted in the real-world experiences of researchers working with Indigenous communities (from a range of institutions, Nations, and research contexts internationally). We acknowledge, however, that our collective experiences do not capture the full diversity of Indigenous research experiences. Partnerships unfold differently across places, histories, and governance systems. Even so, the patterns we describe reveal systemic issues that many researchers and communities continue to face, along with changes that institutions can begin implementing now. There are surely other important insights—especially from within Indigenous communities and from nonacademic university staff working on the front lines—that can open up new possibilities. Our hope is that these insights offer inspiration and practical guidance for those seeking to strengthen Indigenous research sovereignty and support research futures grounded in accountability, respect, and community authority.

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