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Indigenous Community Research Partnerships: The Development of an Open-access Training Resource to Promote Community-centered and -driven Research

Janet Jull^{1,2}, ORCID: 0000-0002-0404-4313, Melody E. Morton Ninomiya³, Lindsay Marie Brant^{4,5}, Priscilla Ferrazzi⁶, Jaime Flamenbaum⁷, Moses Gordon⁸, Ian D Graham^{9,10}, Darrel Manitowabi¹², Angela Mashford-Pringle¹¹, Penny Moody-Corbett¹², Patricia O’Campo¹³, Rebecca Sweetman¹⁴, Cassandra Wajuntah¹⁵, Malcolm King^{15,*}, ORCID: 0000-0002-1712-0303, and Alexandra King^{16,*}, ORCID: 0000-0003-0102-0137

(1) Department of Health Sciences, Carleton University; (2) School of Rehabilitation Therapy, Queen’s University; (3) Department of Health Sciences, Wilfrid Laurier University; (4) Weeneebayko-Queen’s Health Education Campus Project; (5) Queen’s Health Sciences, Queen’s University; (6) Faculty of Rehabilitation Medicine, Department of Occupational Therapy, University of Alberta; (7) Science Policy Branch, Canadian Institutes of Health Research; (8) Indigenous Peoples’ Health Research Centre, First Nations University of Canada, Regina Campus; (9) School of Epidemiology and Public Health, University of Ottawa; (10) Ottawa Hospital Research Institute; (11) Waakebiness Institute for Indigenous Health, Dalla Lana School of Public Health, University of Toronto; (12) Northern Ontario School of Medicine University; (13) Dalla Lana School of Public Health, University of Toronto; (14) Educational Technologies, Faculty of Arts and Science, Queen’s University; (15) Department of Community Health and Epidemiology, College of Medicine, University of Saskatchewan; and (16) School of Public Health Sciences, Faculty of Health, University of Waterloo

*Co-senior authors.

Corresponding Author: Janet Jull, Tier 2 Canada Research Chair in Accessibility and Person-Centred Care, Department of Health Sciences, Carleton University, Ottawa Ontario, Canada; Associate Professor (Adjunct 1) School of Rehabilitation Therapy, Queen’s University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada. E-mail: janet.jull@carleton.ca

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Abstract

Indigenous Community Research Partnerships is an open-access online training resource. It supports researchers and others in academic and institutional research settings to engage in learning about ethical and equitable research partnerships that respect and honor Indigenous priorities and benefits in research. Our interdisciplinary team of Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers, with the support and encouragement of community partners, have developed the training resource to promote community-centered and -driven research approaches through all aspects of the research lifecycle. A survey of learners who have used the training resource perceive it as a positive and helpful

resource. We are working to obtain support to engage in a fulsome evaluation of the training resource *by* and *with* Indigenous partners. We propose the training resource has potential to complement initiatives that advance Indigenous self-determination and research sovereignty.

Keywords

Community-Based Participatory Research, Indigenous, Education, Training Resource, Ethics, Equity, Health Care Quality, Access, and Evaluation

Society relies on research to contribute knowledge that informs policies and practices and can be translated into improved health and wellness. Western-oriented

research systems and structures perpetuate coloniality,* and researchers often reinforce and privilege Western forms of knowledge while marginalizing Indigenous knowledges.¹

* We adopt the term coloniality to mean “the existence of ideas, beliefs and narratives that legitimise and sustain colonial hierarchies and that shape the social, political and economic systems that drive unjust resource exploitation, appropriation,

and extraction” (United Nations University, International Institute for Global Health (2024), What we mean by colonialism & coloniality | United Nations University)

This exclusion results in policies and practices that fail to meet the needs of Indigenous people[†] and contributes to unfair and avoidable health burdens.² For example, biomedical health care models often overlook Indigenous values, knowledge systems, and care practices and result in health services that do not meet the needs of Indigenous people or communities.

There is an urgent need for researchers to work in partnerships with Indigenous people. Reciprocal research relationships with shared governance and decision making can develop evidence that addresses Indigenous peoples' priorities, that Indigenous people can identify as beneficial.^{3,4} Research conducted in genuine collaboration promotes Indigenous self-determination and research sovereignty; however, many researchers lack the understanding and resources to conduct research that is ethical and equitable, inclusive and respectful of diverse knowledges and practices.

THE INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS TRAINING RESOURCE AND PURPOSE

We are an interdisciplinary team of Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers, who are members of communities and/or have long-standing research partnerships with Indigenous people, communities, and organizations. The work we present here was initiated in 2017 with a community partner. Since then, these relationships have expanded to include additional community-researcher partnerships across five different academic sites, with at least one and up to three or four community partners connected to each academic site. These sustained and reciprocal relationships which include community leaders, Elders, Knowledge Holders, and other community members, have been integral to the development of the training resource. All coauthors on this paper are directly connected to these partnerships, which have shaped

the content and purpose of the training resource³ (see Appendix 1). We are committed to ethical and principled research partnerships and the advancement of reconciliation⁵ and share a collective goal of supporting Indigenous self-determination and sovereignty in research. Our work was initiated and developed in response to Indigenous community partners' requests that researchers take action in educating their peers in ethical and equitable research partnerships that respect and honor Indigenous priorities and benefits in research.

Our goal is to promote community-centered and -driven research approaches that privilege Indigenous ways of knowing, doing and being throughout the research lifecycle. Many researchers are trained with Western-oriented perspectives and practices in academic and institutional research settings that are dominated by coloniality and set within dominant socio-political-economic and cultural contexts. Recognizing the gaps in researcher preparation, and to prepare researchers and others in institutional research settings to work in ways that are in alignment with a rights-based approach and important to Indigenous people and communities,^{5,6} we developed the training resource. Ultimately, our intent is that the training resource will guide learners to engage in ethical and equitable, collaborative, and culturally supportive research partnerships.

WHY THE INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS TRAINING RESOURCE IS NEEDED

The training resource provides those in academic and institutional settings with an opportunity to learn about how to engage in research partnerships and activities that Indigenous partners can define as ethical and equitable. It aims to educate researchers on engagement with ethical space⁷ and research that aligns with ethics important to Indigenous partners.⁸ The training resource encourages researchers to understand the needs and focus on the priorities of Indigenous people and communities, and to value diverse Indigenous knowledges and practices in research. In addition, it complements existing initiatives that promote research that is culturally safe, and centers on Indigenous self-determination and sovereignty, health equity, and socio-political change.^{9–12}

A key feature of the training resource is that it is an open-access, living-resource, designed to be adaptable and shareable. The open-access license ensures that users cite the original training resource, maintain open-access status for adaptations,

[†] We use "Indigenous people" to refer to individuals or a group of people who are Indigenous and are not referring to distinct nations. In this instance, we are focusing on general characteristics, experiences, or demographics of individuals. We use "Indigenous Peoples" when referring to distinct, collective groups with unique cultures, identities, legal recognition, and rights. The term acknowledges the diversity of Indigenous nations or communities, especially in an international Indigenous context (United Nations (n.d.). United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples | Division for Inclusive Social Development (DISD)).

and do not profit financially from its use. The engagement and leadership of local Indigenous partners with the adaptation of the training resource is encouraged. For example, an Indigenous doctoral student (L.B.) adapted and extended the training resource to meet the needs of their community by developing a customized module that prospective researchers must complete before engaging with the community.¹³

DEVELOPMENT OF THE INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS TRAINING RESOURCE

The initiative for the training resource began with a group of like-minded individuals who shared concerns about the conduct of research with Indigenous communities (Appendix1). These concerns stemmed from personal experiences as Indigenous community members and research partners, critical engagement with research literature, conversations with Indigenous community leaders who expressed distrust in researchers, and witnessing extractive research that failed to benefit Indigenous communities. A team formed through a collaborative process of establishing common ground, identifying additional members, and defining shared principles for working together. Facilitation of group activities occurred as community-centered and driven processes throughout the planning and decision making. The team was extended across multiple organizations and research institutions to develop and support the training resource and its' principled approach to research.¹⁴

A Principled Approach to Research

Our team recognized that researchers often receive little to no training on how to operationalize institutional guidelines for research with Indigenous people in practice,^{4,15,16} or principles to uphold Indigenous self-determination and governance in research, such as the Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility, and Ethics Principles for Indigenous Data Governance.^{8,17} In Canada, the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans*, Chapter 9 (Research Involving the First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples of Canada) is the human research ethics policy document of federal research agencies that serves as a guideline for researchers but lacks concrete guidance on how to conduct ethical and equitable research relationships.¹⁶ There are few

resources for researchers who are trying to decolonize their work for transformative and impactful outcomes.

The training resource introduces a 'principled approach' defined as an approach to engaging those who may use or be impacted by the research in research processes. This approach prioritizes the partnerships in the research relationships and promotes reflection on principles agreed upon by all parties, including Indigenous people and/or communities and organizations, researchers, and others such as service providers and policy and decision makers.¹⁸ It promotes active reflection upon principles that participating groups agree are important in the research.¹⁹ For example, principles such as community relevance, participation, and mutual capacity-strengthening can be articulated in a formal research agreement to support a research governance model that advances Indigenous self-determination.²⁰ While research funders and academic and other research institutions encourage the conduct of research that benefits Indigenous people and communities, there is little guidance for researchers to engage in a principled approach to research.²¹ The training resource meets that need.

Intended Users, and How the Indigenous Community Research Partnerships Training Resource Works

The training resource (<https://researchpartnerships.ca/>) is an educational tool designed for learners such as researchers and researchers-in-training, research funders, and others working in academic and institutional research systems. Anyone can use it to enhance their understanding about the development and conduct of research by and with Indigenous partners. Ideally, the training resource will guide learners to engage in ethical and equitable, collaborative, and culturally supportive research partnerships.

The training resource is designed to be strengths-based, meaning that it promotes features that include "important strengths or protective factors, such as social cohesion, a sense of positive well-being and resilience and connection to the land, spirituality and ancestry."^{15,p.3} It supports learners to interrogate their own ethics and to engage with Indigenous partners' ethics throughout the research lifecycle to achieve the following.

- Operationalize Indigenous community-led research policy and research directives.

- Ensure Indigenous knowledges and protocols are respected and included in research systems.
- Privilege and give primacy to Indigenous ways of knowing and doing in all Indigenous-specific enquiry.

Structure of the Indigenous Community Research Partnerships Training Resource

The training resource includes five self-paced modules.

- Introductory Module: Overview of the training resource and its development.
- Module 1: Introduction to concepts related to research in relation to Indigenous people.
- Module 2: Examination of the link between societal strength and continuity, health and wellness, with introductions to guiding documents.
- Module 3: Overview and how to engage with principled research approaches.
- Module 4: Application of learning through interactive exercises and case studies.
- As well, there is contact information for feedback and a Slack channel with other methods under review for shared learning.

Founded on a Research Guideline That Describes Ethics in Research Processes

The training resource is founded on a guideline document that describes ethical and equitable processes in research, called the *Canadian Institutes of Health Research Guidelines for Health Research Involving Aboriginal People* (CIHR Guidelines) (<https://cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/29134.html>). The CIHR Guidelines were developed by and with Indigenous leadership and communities in Canada.²² It is a unique document that has been used internationally to guide collaborative research with Indigenous partners.^{22,23} In the training resource, we have provided examples of how to operationalize the principles described in the CIHR Guidelines.

Members of our team developed a peer-reviewed paper on a principled approach to research, inspired by the CIHR Guidelines, and that informed the content and structure of the training resource.²³ This paper provides the evidence base for the training resource and provides a list of principled research practices with case study examples. For example, in Module 4 under the principle of community control

and approval, there is the example of a study that involved researchers and community partners engaging in community-centered research processes to investigate respiratory health. The partners identified housing conditions as the underlying causes of poor respiratory health, leading to a research agenda that reflected the priorities of Indigenous partners and focused on housing design.²⁴ A full list of the principled study practices and examples is available elsewhere.²³

Learner Engagement With the Indigenous Community Research Partnerships Training Resource

The training resource includes a link to an optional survey of learner engagement developed by our team and screened for appropriateness by a university equity services team and university research ethics boards. The researchers applied to relevant research ethics boards and received confirmation that the use of feedback constituted evaluation and was exempt from ethics review in accordance with Article 2.5 of the TCPS-2.¹⁶ The survey consists of 11 questions to prompt people to report on information about who they are, their research experience, and their views about the training resource content and format. Since its launch in 2020, a total of more than 6,000 participants have accessed the training resource. Of those, 3% ($n = 196$) completed the optional survey (Table 1, Figure 1):

- User Demographics: Most respondents were researchers-in-training or researchers based at academic institutions.
- Research Experience: The majority were new to research (≤ 5 years), with no previous experience working with Indigenous people, communities, or data.
- Training Resource Impact:
 - Content: Almost all respondents found the training resource informative, useful, and engaging.
 - Format: Most agreed that the design and interactive features supported learning and maintained engagement.

Our team also obtained information on usage patterns from the websites and found module completion rates ranged from ~71% to 81%. Respondents spent between 38 minutes to one hour on each module. Overall, these findings highlight the strong interest and positive reception of the training resource particularly among early career researchers.

Table 1. Summary of User Experience Survey for the Training Resource (N = 196)

Question	%
Role(s)	
Researcher in training	43
Researcher	38
Research coordinator	17
Member of a research ethics board	10
Participant in research	13
Funder	1
Place they are based	
Academic institution	90
Community	10
Experience with research	
New to research	42
0–5 years	34
>6 years	24
Previous research experience with Indigenous people, communities, or data	
Experience	30
No experience	70
Experience with research that involves Indigenous people, communities, or data	
New to research	67
0–5 years	21
>6 years	12
Response to the training resource content, asked in three questions (Q)*:	
Agree the course is: Q1) informative and/or interesting, Q2) useful to academic, personal and professional life, and Q3) stimulated interest in equity, diversity and inclusion topics	97
Neutral or disagree course is: Q1) informative and/or interesting, Q2) useful to academic, personal and professional life, and Q3) stimulated interest in equity, diversity and inclusion topics	3
Response to the training resource format, asked in three questions (Q)*:	
Agree the format of the course supported them to: Q1) learn the material, Q2) the design (presentation of materials, interactive features) supported them to learn the material, and Q3) the course format and design kept them engaged in learning.	97
Neutral or disagree the format of the course supported them to: Q1) learn the material, Q2) the design (presentation of materials, interactive features) supported them to learn the material, and Q3) the course format and design kept them engaged in learning	3

*As responses were similar for each of the three questions they are reported in summary.



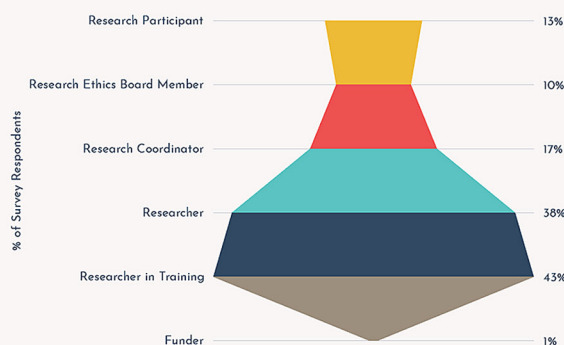
6,000+

Enrolments across
5 training modules

71-81%

Average module
completion rate

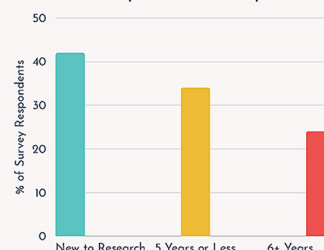
Participants' Role in Research



90%

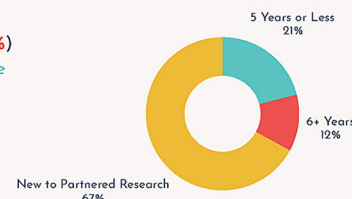
of participants were
based in an
academic institution,
compared to **10%**
based in the
community.

Participants' Research Experience



Previous Research Experience with Indigenous People, Communities, or Data

Some participants (**30%**)
had previous experience
in research.
Most (**70%**) did not.



Most participants (**97%**) agreed that the course was **informative and/or interesting**, **useful** to academic, personal and professional life, and **stimulated interest** in equity, diversity and inclusion topics.

Most participants (**97%**) agreed that the **format** and **design** of the course **supported them to learn** the material and **kept them engaged** in learning.

Figure 1. Indigenous Community Research Partnerships survey data.

SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS

Our team is committed to and shares a goal of supporting Indigenous self-determination and sovereignty in research. We aim to equip learners in academic and institutional settings with the knowledge needed to engage in ethical, equitable, and culturally responsive research partnerships. While early findings indicate a strong positive reception from learners, an Indigenous-led assessment is needed to ensure it fully aligns with community priorities and expectations.

LESSONS LEARNED AND FUTURE PLANS FOR THE INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS TRAINING RESOURCE

Through our work to develop the training resource, we have learned that academic and institutional research systems must be restructured to prepare researchers to engage as learners within partnerships. Creating space for dialogue on what Indigenous communities can and should expect from research relationships is essential to achieving community-centered and -driven research. The training resource prioritizes relationships and trust-building in Indigenous community-research partnerships. Existing initiatives, such as the 2020–2026 *Strategic Plan: Setting New Directions to Support Indigenous Research and Research Training in Canada*, co-developed by the federal research granting agencies and Indigenous partners emphasize building meaningful relationships with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples.⁴

Our experiences with the development of the training resource, its uptake by learners and institutions, and the survey of learner engagement, suggests that it has potential to promote learning about ethical and equitable research partnerships that respect and honor Indigenous priorities and benefits in research. Furthermore, we believe it can contribute to processes of restructuring in research systems, to challenge historically dominant norms and better reflect Indigenous priorities, knowledge systems, and leadership. A comprehensive evaluation is needed to determine how to best leverage the potential contributions of the training resource to advance Indigenous self-determination and research sovereignty.

Ongoing Engagement and Community Leadership

We conceptualized and developed the training resource in response to Indigenous community partners' requests that

researchers take initiative and educate their peers in ethical and equitable research partnerships. Our team engages in ongoing formal (e.g., public meetings, conferences) and informal (e.g., from within research relationships) discussions with research partners and learners to confirm its appropriateness and extend its use. For example, the training resource was initially hosted and is supported by a university Office of Indigenous Initiatives, which is tasked with building community, advancing reconciliation/conciliation and integrating Indigenous ways of knowing and being into university systems (see Indigenous Research Training from Queen's University). Our team recognizes that it is crucial to assess the impacts of the training resource in partnerships with those who are ultimately impacted by it, that is, with Indigenous partners.

Challenges to Engagement in Partnerships

A key challenge in research partnerships is the disparity in financial support for community participation. While salaried research team members can engage in the lifecycle of a research project, community partners are often excluded from these processes due to structural inequities and a lack of funding. For example, at one stage in our work we received funding and hosted an in-person gathering to discuss the training resource (Events Archive—Indigenous Community Research Partnerships). The funding supported Elders and Knowledge Guardians to lead ceremonies and teachings, connect through art and food, and engage in focused discussions about the training resource. It also enabled travel and honoraria for community members who are often uncompensated, a significant barrier to full participation. Even then, there were those unable to participate because they were needed by and in their community, which often lack in-community capacity to replace those who may engage in research. Until structural inequities have been eliminated, society ventures further on the journey of reconciliation, and Indigenous communities are adequately resourced, the challenges to engagement in research partnerships will continue.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS: A FOCUS ON INDIGENOUS PRIORITIES IN EVALUATION

We want to understand if and how those who use the training resource learn what Indigenous partners identify as

critical knowledge and skills. The necessary knowledge and skills can vary, according to the Indigenous partners and research contexts. To conduct a meaningful evaluation, we must ensure resources are allocated to Indigenous partners so they can fully participate in and lead an Indigenous-centered and -driven evaluation. This approach will allow for evaluation that reflects local knowledge systems, priorities, and community-defined measures of success.

CONCLUSIONS

The Indigenous Community Research Partnerships training resource provides guidance for conducting ethical and equitable, collaborative, and culturally supportive research with Indigenous communities. It is an open-access tool for learners seeking to build ethical and equitable research relationships. To strengthen the training resource, evaluation done by and with Indigenous partners is essential. We propose the training resource has potential to complement initiatives that advance Indigenous self-determination and research sovereignty.

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