

Dean's Advisory Committee on Indigenous Research Teaching and Learning  
Faculty of Arts & Science, University of Toronto

# Sharing Circles Report:

Impacts of Covid-19 on Indigenous Undergraduate and Graduate Students  
"Creating a Softer Path"

**December 2023**

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Grandmother Dorothy Peters

And the “Covid-19 Impacts on Indigenous Students Working Group”:

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## Background: About the Dean’s Advisory Committee on Indigenous Research Teaching and Learning

The Dean’s Advisory Committee on Indigenous Research Teaching and Learning (IRTLC) is entrusted with providing advice to the Dean of Arts & Science (A&S) on the fulfillment of 20 Calls to Action detailed in the *Indigenous Teaching and Learning Report* (ITL Report; Working Group on Indigenous Teaching and Learning: 2018). The ITL Report addresses a range of issues, including Indigenous student recruitment, capital infrastructure, experiential learning, Indigenous language revitalization, curriculum, and student experience. As part of its advisory function, the IRTLC reports annually on these matters to the Dean of Arts & Science and identifies emerging issues that may impact their fulfillment. One such issue is the Covid-19 pandemic, downgraded in May 2023 from a *Global Emergency* to a *Global Threat* by the World Health Organization (The Associated Press, 2023). The psychological, social, financial, and technological impacts of Covid-19, however, are still unfolding (Evans, 2022; StatsCan, 2022). Knowing this, the IRTLC decided to “check-in” with Indigenous undergraduate and graduate students at A&S about their pandemic-related experiences. With the support of Dean Melanie Woodin, the IRTLC struck the “Covid-19 Impacts on Indigenous Students Working Group” that met from March until November 2022 to determine the scope of its work and to create a work plan. The Working Group hosted Sharing Circles with Indigenous undergraduate students in February 2023 and graduate students in October 2023 to learn more about their experiences.

This report summarizes the findings from the Indigenous undergraduate and graduate Sharing Circles, so that the voices of Indigenous students may continue to closely inform divisional priorities and action with respect to Reconciliation at the Faculty of Arts & Science. The Committee recommends that these findings be considered alongside the original *20 Calls to Action* and has also provided complimentary recommendations to support the improvement of Indigenous students’ experiences at U of T.

### Reading Notes

- Where this report indicates, “students”, its full intended meaning is, “Indigenous graduate and/or undergraduate students who participated in the Sharing Circles”.
- The term “graduate students” is used throughout this paper for clarity and ease of terminology. Many of these students are also early-career academics in their own right.
- As most students do not readily differentiate between Units and Divisions in the U of T decentralized model, feedback directed by a student towards “U of T” may have more direct implications for A&S, First Nations House, Centre for Indigenous Studies, or other sites where students spend time, access services, and meet their peers. This is delineated where possible.

## What We Know: Indigenous Students in the Context of Covid-19

The recruitment, enrollment, wellbeing, graduation, and academic progression of Indigenous students is central to the fulfillment of nearly every *Call to Action* identified in the ITL report. This is especially true where recruitment, mentorship, and curriculum are concerned as these issues shape both the student body and their experiences of academia. Though all post-secondary students faced disruption in their lives and academic pursuits due to the COVID-19 pandemic, these disruptions were not equally distributed. The pandemic has disproportionately impacted Indigenous Peoples globally and in Canada (Lane, 2020; StatsCan, 2020) both on reserve and in urban Indigenous communities (Howard-Bobiwash, Joe, & Lobo, 2021; Mashford-Pringle, Skura, Stutz & Yohathasan, 2021).

At A&S, the impacts of the pandemic on Indigenous students are not widely understood at an aggregate level. While working group members have been both creative and diligent in fulfilling their responsibilities to connect with and support Indigenous students, they agree that fostering a sense of community and belonging, a significant dimension of wellbeing for many Indigenous students (Maracle, 2021), has been negatively impacted by the pandemic. A key feature of this feedback relates to the lack of physical space due to much needed renovations at the North Borden Building, where First Nations House (FNH) and the Centre for Indigenous Studies (CIS) are co-located. While these renovations were largely complete by September 2022, both CIS and FNH continue to outgrow their space (IRTLC, 2022).

The Covid-19 pandemic placed further restrictions on cultural gatherings and in-person support even at off-site locations due to necessary physical distancing measures. Although North Borden is now open, and both staff and faculty are on-site, it takes time to rebuild a sense of community and connection in a physical space for graduate and undergraduate students.

These experiences are affirmed by research from Indspire, a national charity that supports Indigenous post-secondary achievement. Indspire found that amongst the learners it supports, 89 per cent reported experiencing mental health strain, loneliness, anxiety, and depression. Indspire further found that Indigenous students faced:

- Pessimism about the future (61%)
- Lack of access to a comfortable workspace (51%)
- Delays in receiving grades or other correspondence forms (45%)
- Splitting time with childcare and studies (27%)
- Lack of access to adequate internet (27%)
- Delayed course registration (24%)
- Lack of access to a computer (16%)

(Indspire, 2021)

Significant uncertainty remains for Indigenous students wishing to begin or continue their studies at A&S. For some, it has re-shaped their academic trajectory, course selection, and has brought clarity to important life and academic decisions. Participants also conveyed that while the uncertainty has created hardships, it has also contributed to personal growth.

## The Working Group, Ethics, and Sharing Circle Methodology

Beyond creating a record of the experiences of Indigenous students during the Covid-19 pandemic, the Covid-19 Impacts on Indigenous Students Working Group discussed how the information collected might be put to good use, framing this as, “creating a softer path” upon which future Indigenous students would be able to walk “in their own moccasins”. This is consistent with Indigenous epistemologies that tell us that with knowledge comes responsibility, “for the enhancement of humanity and it’s infinite capacities” (Battiste, 2013, p. 104). In our case, this meant thinking about the wider, diverse, Indigenous student community at A&S, past, present, and future.

In deciding upon our research approach, the working group considered e-surveys, focus groups, and Sharing Circles. Given the relatively small Indigenous student population at A&S, the sensitive nature of the topic itself, and the importance of grounding our work in culturally relevant approaches, the working group decided on a Sharing Circles methodology.

Sharing Circles may be understood as “open-structured, conversational style methodology that respects story sharing within a Tribal cultural protocol context” (Tachine, 2016: Pp. 278). In this sense, “sharing” is both a matter of survival and cultural continuity that recognizes and affirms our interdependence and interconnectedness, the possibility of Indigenous students thriving at university, and the capacity of the university to perceive Indigenous excellence and self-determination. In University terms, our work was considered, “research for the purpose of service improvement” and as such, was formally exempt from requiring Research Ethics Board approval (see Appendix I).

As Indigenous and non-Indigenous U of T employees with responsibilities towards Indigenous Peoples and communities, we nevertheless participated in an informal “ethics review” in collaboration with the IRTLC. Our ethics review process included:

- Regular “check-ins” with the IRTLC.
- Seeking the informed consent of participants (see Appendix II).
- Presence and participation of an Elder during the Sharing Circles.
- Seeking participant feedback and approval of written notes from the Sharing Circles.
- Seeking participant feedback and input on any draft reports.

## Scope

Per our remit, we focused on students enrolled in, or recently graduated from, A&S programs, though the results will likely resonate with the experiences of Indigenous students in other divisions. We considered including undergraduate and graduate students together in the Sharing Circles, however, there are some key differences between these groups, one of which is the way their education is financed. Undergraduate student education is financed largely by the student, via savings, student loans, scholarships, bursaries, and awards. Graduate students generally receive baseline funding when they are accepted into departments, although these funding packages vary depending on the program and the student, and often must be supplemented through additional research and teaching assistantships, grants, scholarships, loans, and/or employment outside of the University.

*For additional information on methodology, see Appendix III.*

## Student Data

Sources of identity-based data at U of T include the Ontario University Application Centre (OUAC; undergraduate), Student Equity Census (undergraduate and undergraduate), and Slate (graduate). Access to disaggregated data from these sources is subject to *the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act, 1990* as well as U of T institutional policies that govern access and usage. Since 2022, the IRTLC has worked with the Office of the Faculty Registrar (OFR) and the Director of Equity Diversity and Inclusion at A&S to responsibly leverage available data to measure our progress. Though we do not yet have a complete dataset, with data comparable over several years, we are working towards this end.

## Undergraduate Profile

According to data accessible to University Registrars through the OUAC, there are 120 self-identified Indigenous undergraduate students currently enrolled with the Faculty of Arts & Science. Of the 13 who registered for a Sharing Circle nine (9) attended. There were some notable trends in the student data that was collected as part of the registration form:

- Of those who registered 69% were either taking a major or minor in Indigenous studies.
- Approximately 30% of those who registered were taking Indigenous Studies and Political Science as a double major.
- The College with the highest number of affiliated participants was Woodsworth College (3/13).
- In terms of “year of study,” no (0) students were in first year, three (3) were in their second year, five (5) were in their third year, three (3) were in their fourth year, and two (2) were in their fifth year.
- Five (5) participants convocated in Spring 2023.
- Students in years two and three of their studies began their studies during the pandemic.

## Graduate Profile

Of the eight (8) graduate students who registered for the Sharing Circles, seven (7) attended. According to event registration data, two (2) participants were completing MAs, four (4) were enrolled in PhD programs, and one (1) participant graduated from their program earlier in 2023.

In terms of sample size, in 2023, the IRTLC heard that 19 Indigenous graduate students were admitted to A&S in the 2023/2024 academic term. This was seen as typical, though rates of Indigenous graduate admittance have not been closely monitored on a year-to-year basis. The complement of Indigenous graduate students at A&S being relatively small, a “turnout” of seven students is a good result.



## Key Findings – Undergraduate

### The Importance of Indigenous Spaces

Over about two years, Covid-19 drastically impacted students' ability to meet each other. Students who participated in the Sharing Circles are only now connecting or re-connecting with one another in classes and on campus, at FNH, through membership with associations and committees, in their departments, and at their colleges. Students in years four and five of their undergraduate degrees have the benefit of at least one year of “normal” university-life, whereas students in years two and three are only now experiencing what campus life has to offer. For some, the Sharing Circles were their first opportunity to meet and connect with their Indigenous peers. The Circles fostered new connections and made visible the unique and shared identities of participants, including those who identified as 2SLGBTQ+. The undergraduate participants indicated a strong desire to become more involved in events taking place at CIS and FNH.

According to participants, one of the reasons the Sharing Circles provided a sense of safety and connection is because they were exclusive to Indigenous students. One student noted, “I like how this is Indigenous-only space. CIS is open to everybody, which is great, but it’s not so great when non-Indigenous people try to insert themselves into spaces in a disruptive way.” Although Indigenous students at A&S are diverse, by virtue of being Indigenous they also share similar experiences of intergenerational conflict and resistance towards colonial systems and institutions, including the child welfare system, residential schools, Indian day schools, legislated and unlegislated dispossession, the pass system, and others. One student described this by saying, “I am not from the rez but grew up in a big Indigenous population. I grew up around uncles, aunties, and cousins... Even though we [those gathered] come from different nations we can talk with one another. We get each other”. Students expressed that they cannot always find such spaces on campus. This finding suggests that Indigenous-specific programming, open exclusively to Indigenous students is crucial to Indigenous students’ wellbeing and university experience. One student commented, “I don’t know where I heard this before, sometimes to be inclusive you have to be exclusive.”

For approximately 70% of Sharing Circle participants, FNH has been a vital space of connection. The following are some of their comments about FNH:

FNH is a huge thing, this is my first year of in-person classes. Thanks to Indigenous Student Association (ISA)<sup>1</sup> that’s the main place I met a lot of people. During Covid you were used to not talking to others in online classes. My good friend now, we realized we had all our classes together online, now that it’s ok to meet people.

I loved to come to FNH before the pandemic... Now I come to FNH every day. I like it here, it’s easier to get work done here, it’s comfortable here and I always run into people I know. It’s nice to get into a routine, it’s a place like home. but it’s not. It’s nice to see people I recognize since I’m used to being surrounded by Family.

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<sup>1</sup> The ISA is an Indigenous-focused student group open to students from any division.

It's enlightening. I grew up only ever involved with my culture, learning language, our creator and coming here and learning about other Indigenous people, learn their diets, the way they talk, things they can relate to even though you grew up 7000 kilometers away from each other. There's always something different to talk about. I always learn something... Especially being in courses with big workloads, it's nice to have sense of community, you don't struggle as much.

I was getting involved with FNH in my first year in January. Then the pandemic hit in March, and I only had my foot in the door, meeting people, in those first two-and-a-half months, and it felt taken away from me. If the pandemic didn't happen, I would have been more involved with FNH. It's important to build those connections. Since I'm not in Indigenous studies, I felt robbed of those connections of not being in those spaces. Even right here, I just met you guys (other Indigenous Students), I feel that familiarity even though we are from different places.

First Nations House provides an invaluable service to Indigenous A&S undergraduate students that helps them thrive in their programs of study. There is no formalized relationship or memoranda between A&S and FNH, despite our many intersections and shared commitments. While it is important to consult FNH on Indigenous programming and divisional initiatives, they are not necessarily resourced for the volume of engagements they are asked to support. As such, it is equally important for all A&S units to consider, on an ongoing basis, how they might contribute to the relationship materially and in terms of human resources where appropriate.

### Accessing University Supports

Undergraduate students who begin their academic journey at A&S are unlikely to arrive knowing how to navigate university systems. This was especially true for students who began university in a virtual environment. Lower-year students who participated in the Sharing Circles perceived that academic and student services were not readily available, or at least not visible, during the pandemic. One student spoke about receiving a brochure on the history of U of T and remarked that other kinds of information, including how to access mental health and/or academic advising support, would have been more useful.

It needs to be acknowledged that U of T staff and faculty worked tirelessly during the pandemic to ensure students experienced as little educational disruption as possible. This was a monumental challenge that tested institutional capacity, especially in emergency management, human resources, and technology. Staff themselves were impacted by the crisis, and their availability for personal and financial support was stretched thin. Due to lack of awareness and lack of timely access, some students missed important financial and administrative deadlines thereby triggering additional administrative protocols, exacerbating related stress.

Students in upper years and mature students, more familiar with the institution itself, reported having an easier time accessing academic and student services. Though once connected, these students still found it difficult to navigate administrative processes, especially where accessibility accommodations were concerned, describing these as burdensome. At least two students (one a mature student, the other from a rural community) reported that they were disadvantaged by the demands and specific

skills required for virtual learning. They reported finding little support or training when it came to accessing virtual learning programs and platforms.

Grandmother Dorothy Peters also had difficulty adjusting to the expectations of virtual modalities. She was hired as an “Elder in Residence” at FNH when lockdown started. In her role, Grandmother Dorothy was expected to see students for one-to-one sessions but did not have the technology at home to be able to do this virtually. Instead, she connected by telephone with students, most of whom she already knew. Grandmother Dorothy reported that most students preferred to meet in person, which was not available. It impacted her on an emotional level, not being able to provide the kinds of connection and support that she wanted to.

Echoing Grandmother Dorothy’s experience, most students reported that they were unable or chose not to access virtual mental health services for a variety of reasons. One student commented, “I think I would have to admit something was wrong in the first place, but instead, I denied every feeling I had”. Similarly, another student remarked, “I realize how lonely I was, my grades weren’t showing it. It was more academically demanding, and I didn’t admit to feelings that I had. It continues today.” Another student noted, “I didn’t even look or consider those options [mental health supports]. It became harder to talk. I was in my first year living in a one-bedroom apartment. I would FaceTime my mom every night. It [mental health supports] didn’t seem like an option.” On the preference between in-person and virtual support, one student commented, “Even being able to talk like this is easier. In person you can see how people move.”

### Physical and Emotional Impacts

Students reported that the Covid-19 pandemic had significant impacts on their physical wellbeing above and beyond contracting the virus itself. One student commented that, “being an introvert made not being in the classroom not such a big issue, but it was the lack of ability to go out and do physical things [that] was hard”. Several participants experienced physical distress caused by sitting for long periods of time and remarked that they needed longer breaks between classes to attend to other necessities, such as eating, moving their bodies, or working on assignments. No one reported having an adequate ergonomic set-up at home to study and learn. This might include a proper desk chair, foot and leg support, or a sit-stand desk. One student commented that they could not afford this kind of office equipment, and for another student, this contributed to a back injury and a short-term disability that required intervention and support from accessibility services. Given that many doctors would not see patients in person, they had difficulty with obtaining a doctor’s note to secure formal accommodation.

Students also experienced a profound sense of isolation. For some, this state of isolation and disconnection from family, community, culture, and ceremony triggered existing physical health and mental health conditions. One student shared that their eating disorder flared up during lockdown to such a degree that their life became at risk. This student, who lived off-campus at the time, expressed that the isolation made it next-to-impossible for them to get support and that they were dismissed by the medical system. The student further elaborated that in general, there is a lack of understanding of how bad eating disorders can become and of how to consider the emotional components of wellness. This student shared their experiences with the group for the first time and is now finding ways to thrive and connect with their Indigeneity, but it has not been an easy journey.

The isolation experienced by students also contributed to changes in living arrangements. During the pandemic, some students stayed on campus, others moved back home, and some lived elsewhere in Toronto or the GTA. For about half of participants their living arrangements were not what they had originally envisioned when they imagined coming to U of T. This had both benefits and drawbacks. One student who moved home during the pandemic said that living at home meant connecting with her parents and sister and being able to access outdoor space. She described how her relationship flourished with her mother because they spent so much time together and that this was deeply meaningful. This student commented that when they did come back to Toronto, they felt disconnected and had a hard time adjusting— a feeling that has been alleviated since being able to attend FNH and CIS.

Another student who moved home when classes went online, said that this helped them realize that the city is not where they want to be. Housing instability and the high cost of living makes it hard to consider a future in Toronto. As a first-year student, not knowing anything about student housing, the process of trying to secure a spot created a lot of stress. Ultimately, they decided they were better off living at home and commuting.

Lastly, for a student who came from a rural community, living in Toronto alone for the first time was a big adjustment. They were accustomed to regularly being “out on the land” and found it difficult to access green space especially during the pandemic. Because this student deferred for a year to care for an acute health condition, their housing placement was not guaranteed, but was nevertheless expected by the student and their family. Unfortunately, at the very last minute in late August 2021 as rental costs were increasing, the student was told there was no on-campus housing available for them. This student had to scramble to find accommodation, which was very expensive and created a huge financial strain on her and her family. They described the fear created by this uncertainty, saying “not having a place to live is a horrible feeling”.

## Grief and Loss

The subject of relationships brought up strong emotions for participants. Some had lost touch with friends, whereas others struggled to make new friends under quarantine conditions. Students found themselves “out-of-step” with friends they had known for years, disconnected and unable to understand one another’s situations or decisions. Some missed important family events, lost loved ones, or lost several loved ones. Others struggled with the expectation that socializing could move easily into a virtual space, dealing with unfamiliar technologies and modes of communication. Everyone had relationships that were impacted or ended in one form or another. These experiences left participants with feelings of grief and loss, and sometimes regret or guilt. As described by a couple of participants, though difficult, these experiences also provided opportunities for personal growth and reflection, though many are still processing their grief.

When pandemic restrictions were lifted to an extent that FNH was able to welcome students back in September 2022, one of the first topics they addressed during Indigenous Education Week was grief and loss. Given that Indigenous communities were disproportionately impacted by Covid-19, and have specific cultural protocols around grief and loss, this was an important moment of both attunement and recognition for Indigenous staff, students, and faculty who attended.

## Weathering Change and Changing Course

Students described the experience of “coming out of the pandemic”, of seeing people in person for the first time, sometimes in year three, and of “dusting off” their social skills. One student described the differences in how outgoing they used to be before the pandemic, saying,

I am shy, I wait to be invited to talk, I don't take the initiative. That's the huge thing [change]. in high school, I was more vocal in oral presentations, I spoke well in front of public. I was always designated speaker, now I get shaky even in classes and I don't know how to talk in front of a lot of people. It is the total opposite of how I was before the pandemic. Now it's a struggle to talk in front of people. I met everyone in third year, thanks to joining the ISA.

Another student has found it challenging to be in classes with students who identify strongly with Canadian nationalism and are unfamiliar with Indigenous resistance to colonialism and the legitimacy of the Canadian state. One student recalled questioning deficit-based narratives about Indigenous peoples presented in course materials and having their concerns dismissed by the instructor. The student described this as “gaslighting” and later decided to change their major to Indigenous studies. These experiences highlight the importance of *Call to Action #11* of the ITL report that recommends “faculty within all A&S units to review their curriculum and learning materials with the goal of ensuring that course content concerning Indigenous peoples reflects best practices and contemporary scholarship” (ITL Working Group: 2018, p.8). The fulfillment of this *Call to Action* is essential to improving the experiences of Indigenous students in classrooms.

Indigenous undergraduate participants expressed a desire to cultivate a greater sense of academic-life balance. This was expressed especially strongly by students with caregiving responsibilities and those with very long commutes (1.5h+). At least three participants are changing or are considering changing their major to Indigenous Studies. Though their reasons vary, they would all like more opportunities to engage critically with Indigenous knowledge and contemporary Indigenous scholarship in their course material, instruction, and seminars. As one student put it:

I want to change from a Political Science major but keep it as minor. I don't want to “throw out” those credits but Indigenous Studies is closer, inclusive, and community based. Political Science is isolated, closed off, and cold to me. I want to go into Indigenous Studies. Especially after joining the ISA. It was [my] best semester marks-wise, [with] Indigenous marks higher than Political Science.

Another student described having no intention of coming to university before the pandemic, but that during the pandemic, with not much to do, they decided to apply to the Transition Year Program. Though they started off not wanting to take Indigenous Studies, thinking it would not be enough of a challenge, when they started their undergraduate degree and began to develop a sense of community, it became clear to them that they wanted to major in Indigenous Studies.

Graduation timelines have been lengthened for at least two participants. One student reduced their course load and is taking an extra year to complete their studies and maintain more of an academic–life balance. Another student who delayed graduating by a year, found that the extended timeframe allowed them to focus on specific areas of study within their degree that they would not have been able to pursue otherwise. This also served to reduce their stress in applying for Graduate School.

### Personal Growth and Perseverance

The stories students shared with us were often difficult and also inspiring. In different ways, all the students have been on a journey, whereby they were able to realize their own strengths and gain insight into their own needs and priorities as Indigenous students navigating settler-colonial institutions. Students described being able to face new challenges and feeling more confident in class. One student described how depressed they were before the pandemic, saying they looked and felt unhealthy. The pandemic provided an opportunity to focus on their health. They stated, “Online [learning] was hard but I was able to maintain school and have better eating habits than before. Now I eat three meals a day. Before I struggled. I was never hungry. It [the pandemic] made me happier about food.”

A mature student spoke about beginning therapy during the pandemic in the face of intense grief and loss. They started connecting more often with family members online, a practice they have continued to this day. They reflected that while Indigenous Peoples may be at different points of healing, there needs to be more spaces to come together to be heard, seen, and supported. They said, “I am a person, not just a number. I am fighting to be seen.” They also noted that lateral violence can be a barrier to accessing services and support.

Finding spaces to heal has been critical. Students access healing and ceremonial spaces in different ways based on their own cultures, teachings, and needs. One student described the support they felt from their community participating in a sweat lodge for the first time. Another described being more spiritually connected and “knowing what my heartwork is”. They also described cultivating a deeper understanding of the importance of spending time with loved ones. The student who disclosed personal information about their eating disorder, realized that they have some control over their own situation and could reclaim their power to help heal themselves. They are becoming more comfortable with themselves and described how, for the first time in their life, they really want to be alive. Some students were able to slow down during the pandemic. Others found ways to prioritize what fun could be had, whether it was puzzles, video games, cooking, etc. In short, all the students learned something about themselves that will serve them well in their futures.

Indigenous students engage in many different strategies in settler-colonial institutions to protect and nurture their wellbeing. As students described, these include creating space for connection and ceremony with Indigenous kin, questioning and advocating for curricular change, prioritizing family and loved ones, and sometimes walking away – refusing to accept the status quo. These students are stronger, in part because of the confronting conditions of the pandemic, but primarily because of who they are as people, knowing that within connection is their very manner of survival, and their ability to thrive as distinct Indigenous Peoples.

## Key Findings – Graduate

### Time to completion and Supervision

The demands of graduate education on Indigenous students during the pandemic were, and continue to be, tremendous. Of the seven (7) Indigenous students that participated in the graduate Sharing Circles, six (6) were unable to complete their degrees within the expected timeframe and required up to four additional years to complete their Masters or PhDs. There were myriad reasons, although a few interrelated themes emerged:

- Disruptions to research: Inability to complete research as proposed due to pandemic-related restrictions that required significant revisions. Changes in supervisory relationships.
- New family members: Students gave birth, had partners who gave birth, and adopted children during the pandemic.
- Caregiving: Students provided care and support to ailing parents and extended family members.
- Grief and loss: Multiple deaths in families and communities compounded the complexity and depth of grief.

The graduate students who participated in the Sharing Circles were on average eleven (11) years older than the undergraduate group (21/32). More than half (4/7) were parents and/or grandparents and at least three (3) provided care to elderly parents. This care work is both a feature of the age group, the “sandwich generation”, caught between caring for children and aging parents, and a feature of Indigeneity in terms of culturally understood kinship responsibilities. Beyond immediate family members, several participants referenced their responsibilities towards extended family, kin, and community. All participants made major life decisions during the pandemic, and in some cases, major sacrifices, to be able to balance, continue with, and fulfill their personal, teaching, and research obligations.

To maintain enrollment, the students we spoke to, as well as many of their supervisors, performed significant advocacy to be granted extensions. One student described “facing heat from my department for being so behind” while simultaneously being unable to fill their thesis review committee because of the lack of Indigenous faculty. Another student described how they enumerated their losses to receive an extension after missing some key administrative deadlines. While the student did not expect any kind of special treatment, they were also grieving, and overwhelmed by university administration in general:

I received an extension but then, under advisement, I had to list out the people in my family that passed away because of COVID and there's a different weight to just seeing that kind of list.

More than one student described the discomfort of revealing their personal circumstances to non-Indigenous supervisors. One student noted that explaining their personal circumstances to primarily white faculty, as part of requesting an extension, contributed to feelings of shame and isolation. Though individual circumstances vary, Indigenous students’ personal, familial, and community-related experiences need to be understood as part of what it means to be an Indigenous academic:

It's important to acknowledge that Indigenous students are impacted by family *and* community issues. My mom was two years sober, so we were concerned about her. In BC my cousin, who has struggled with homelessness and addictions, walked out barefoot and we never found his body. That was in Victoria, and I couldn't be there to help with the search because I had already taken a leave of courses to support my mom's intervention. These are the reasons I fell behind. Most of my department is white, and I felt like I couldn't tell my department chair, a white man, about these struggles.

Another student put it this way:

The way my community functions is that even if you weren't close to someone, but they're from your community and they pass away, it still leaves a mark. And I had a lot of close people pass away, but then there was still a disproportionate number of people who were dying, that were just part of the community. And then you know, me being me, I'm putting together the pieces that this is because we have weakened immune systems because we live next to the constant toxicity of the region. When you think too much, it becomes too much. So, I just had to kind of shut off a little bit just to get through.

Three participants also recognized the significant advocacy performed by Indigenous supervisors and committee members on their behalf. One student commented that having an Indigenous PhD on their review committee was extremely helpful as both a resource and a buffer in advocating for an extension. Some non-Indigenous faculty members also supported various administrative and departmental interventions. The intervening non-Indigenous faculty are known by reputation as having their own ties to Indigenous communities vis-à-vis research relationships and have also supported the identification and fulfillment of divisional TRC commitments. This characteristic of the Sharing Circle research indicates that Indigenous and allied faculty are critical in helping to ensure that Indigenous students graduate and unfortunately, there are fewer than 20 Indigenous faculty across A&S. One student reflected:

Faculty advisors, they're the reason I'm still here. But administratively, they took some hits for me I think, so that I could still be here. But it was very interpersonal for me, and I just wasn't able to do the kind of admin side of it. I dropped that ball completely.

They went on to explain:

I really don't expect administrative bodies to have that kind of give if you missed a really harsh deadline because you didn't read any email. And that's happened. But because of the relationships that I had built prior to that, they looked out for me and I'm thankful that I'm able to feel this because I know some people that go through these moments - they just stay turned off. And so, it's like that kind of catch-22 thing, where I don't want to be hard, I'd rather be soft and it's not an easy path. I think that's some of the hardest work that collectively we tried to do.



This participant heavily credited their supervisor for helping them to continue in their PhD program. Another student, despite feeling well-supported, decided that after completing their MA, they likely will not pursue further education because of the heavy burden it places on them and their family.

Not all participants, however, experienced a supportive relationship with their supervisors. Non-Indigenous supervisors may not feel equipped to support Indigenous students, evaluate Indigenous research methodologies, and/or knowledge:

Going into the pandemic my supervisor decided that she was not the right supervisor for me because my project was through an Indigenous lens, she suggested that I move out of the Department to Indigenous studies<sup>2</sup> but that happened in January, before march lockdown happened. I had a moment in January that I didn't even know if I was going to continue because my supervisor said, "I can't do this". I came to Centre for Indigenous Studies as my supervisor was giving up. I had to find a new supervisor.

This student was going to drop-out of their program but was able to find a new supervisor just in time in order to complete their dissertation. The student described the way in which this new supervisor encouraged them to, "trust in the process" and was thereby able to complete their dissertation and graduate with their PhD in Spring, 2023.

The pandemic also impacted student's research plans in both negative and positive ways, creating, and sometimes compelling, opportunities to re-evaluate research topics and agendas with renewed clarity. Participants conducting primarily qualitative research, in the humanities and social sciences, generally had to make more revisions to their research plans than those working in more quantitative research domains. In the early days of lockdown, one student was told to "keep writing as if things were going back to normal". Months later, when it was apparent that things would not be going back to normal, the same student was told to pivot to quantitative research. Four iterations later, with two years lost, the student defended their proposal in year 4-5 and is gathering data in their 8<sup>th</sup> year. While this is a cause of some frustration, their research is now more in-line with their commitments and passions.

### Care and Grief

In addition to navigating changes to research agendas, administrative expectations, challenging institutional relationships, and having to reveal personal pain to secure extensions, the majority of graduate participants had children in their care at home (4/7). Some had babies between 2020 – 2022, some had school-aged children, and one participant unexpectedly adopted their grandchild during the pandemic. Their academic work was put on hold while they went through the adoption process and attended to the care and wellbeing of their grandchild. For this participant, adopting their grandchild was the only obvious choice.

At least three (3/7) participants also cared for their own parents during this time, while others cared for extended family members, friends, and community members beyond immediate relations. These

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<sup>2</sup> The Centre for Indigenous Studies did not have a graduate program at the time this referral was made.

responsibilities were sometimes at odds with the students' programs. One participant described their experience of this tension:

For me, the PhD program was hyper individual. It's a struggle because a lot of what I have endured has been collective and it's hard to articulate that to bodies that really do not understand that when one of us is grieving, we're all grieving. I don't even have the energy to explain that. And so, I'm just like, I'm just not going to respond. And so now, I have to go back and do some of that restorative work and I will, but you take on the labour individually and I think that has been part of the problem.

For the same participant, their care-work included being vigilant for signs of domestic and intimate partner violence in their community. They described how their knowledge and study of history, and the impacts of colonialization, made them acutely aware of the increased risk of gender-based and family violence in Indigenous communities - risk that only increased with the acute isolation of pandemic-related safety measures. While being supportive of family and friends, they also experienced the heavy weight and grief of their own understanding, a sense of history repeating itself in relation to colonial gender-based violence and the vulnerability of Indigenous communities to novel diseases – a sense that many participants could relate to. Similar complicated feelings also arose for participants when experiencing the phenomena of “studying oneself” in classes where there is Indigenous content, often examined through a non-Indigenous lens.

With care and awareness, can also come grief, and the need to balance the giving of and receiving of care. A student described how ceremony helped them carry on with the daily life after tremendous loss:

In our way, the way that you would say that was like 'my mind was on the ground', and you need help to pick it back up. And so, you know, it took some time, but then it was like, after I did ceremony, then I was able to, you know, respond to your email and things like that, because last year I absolutely would not have responded, you know? I think when you're in that kind of struggle mode, you have to make choices. And so, I kept my nostrils above the water. But it's like, now that my eyes are out, I can look around.

Another participant reflected on the challenge of maintaining a sense of balance during this time for themselves and their school-aged children:

I had a full crisis because we had to teach our children from home, but they weren't into that, so it was nearly impossible to do any work. I don't believe I did any work from March until I began again in late May. One week we were in class, the next week we were online trying to accommodate students. We kept saying, “we are all fine, we are all here”. That made an impact but there was complete dis-equilibrium. I had to show up as someone who was able to maintain balance for their students and their children.

Finding it impossible to “do it all” parent-participants reported that they experienced feelings of frustration, guilt, inadequacy, and isolation on all fronts. Though some participants appreciated being able to teach in pajamas from home then go back to parenting, conducting research was much more

difficult, and impacted time to completion trajectories. After hearing some of these experiences with grief and care giving, Grandmother Dorothy remarked:

I admire you for all the work that you've done and all the things that you've been through and yet you're still here trying to just keep going, you know. But take that time to take care of yourself because you're important to us, and you're valued to our communities. Just remember that. Meegwetch.

### Lack of Indigenous Faculty and Mentors

Both graduate and undergraduate students experienced feelings of isolation during the pandemic. For graduate students, however, these feelings arose more from the low representation of Indigenous faculty and mentors, and less from being separated from family and friends, though this was also present. One student remarked that it is both difficult to access Indigenous staff and faculty in departments because of their low numbers, *and* that community building and feedback from Indigenous academics is essential to their academic work and outcomes. They perceive that building community is more valuable than a “piece of paper”. For one student, it was only by connecting with other Indigenous staff and faculty at the University, that they were able to gain access to the information they required to complete their research. Graduate students expressed a desire to be able to meet with one another more often, and to facilitate tri-campus connections with other Indigenous staff faculty and students in more informal settings.

### Graduate Student Supports

FNH was not readily accessed by most of the graduate students who participated in the Sharing Circles unless they were previously an undergraduate student at U of T. The sole participant who did reference FNH as a service they accessed reported that it had a significant positive impact on their wellbeing. It was through the FNH weekly newsletter that they found out about and signed up for a specialized form of trauma therapy made available to students free of charge. This therapy helped the student resolve longstanding trauma, find healing, and process a recent medical diagnosis. The student has since decided to take specialized training in this therapeutic modality and is excited about their new personal, academic, and professional trajectory.

As previously noted, however, no other participants reported connecting with FNH during, before, or after the pandemic. They readily perceived that FNH is more of an undergraduate hub, and that at U of T there is generally more of an emphasis on undergraduate student life and identity. One student remarked that being an academic, “is a skill, not a lifestyle” that they had to figure out on their own. Other students were not necessarily interested in being connected to Indigenous student services for their own reasons, even if there were to be more of an emphasis on graduate students.

Many of the students were interested to hear about the re-establishment of SAGE (Supporting Aboriginal Graduate Enhancement) at FNH. SAGE is a peer-led initiative for Indigenous graduate students with chapters in post-secondary institutions across Canada. While the initiative looks a little different everywhere it is found, its broad aims are to:

- Increase Indigenous enrollment and graduation in doctoral and master’s programs.

- Provide Indigenous graduate students with a forum and opportunity to share Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous research.

With these goals in mind, SAGE offers programming such as workshops, guest lectures, and writing retreats, adapted to the needs and interests of graduate students. Based on a recent environmental scan, SAGE initiatives can and do work with students and supervisors alike if adequately resourced. In instances where SAGE programs are working with departments and supervisors to increase capacity to effectively support Indigenous graduate students through education, capacity building, and other forms of advocacy, there are at least two staff employed through the program: one continuing FTE, and a PTE peer coordinator or facilitator (Stromberg, 2023, pp. 1-12). Right now, FNH is resourced to offer the SAGE program once a week, which is not sufficient to impact supervisory experiences in any sort of meaningful or lasting way.

### Grandmother Dorothy's Advice

Throughout the Sharing Circles, Grandmother Dorothy provided sage council to all participants. Here she is with the last word:

There should be more Indigenous instructors, programs, more Indigenous space, not just one gathering place. There should be an Indigenous students' office space in every program that's out there. Maybe Indigenous student-led to be there, sometimes you have students that are taking medicine or law they should have their own little spaces so that there's more reflection on Indigenous students that they see themselves in the whole university, not just at FNH for example, but all over. They [students] should be invited to some of the meetings that concern issues that come up in a university for example what's happening with the old pictures that are on the walls, the histories behind those old historians (old white men) stories of Indigenous students that came here and what happened to them, were there Indigenous instructors at that time? Why aren't their pictures on the wall so that it's more welcoming? Our medicines are to be used everywhere without having to accommodate because you still have to go ask and get the fire alarm off. We are in 2023 now and we should not have that, to be able to use our medicines.

## Conclusion:

There are certainly many implications of this work that relate to “service improvements.” Moreover, the Sharing Circles allowed us to support and foster a sense of community that was contradistinctive from the acute isolation experienced by students during the pandemic. It was the willingness of students to be vulnerable, in conjunction with support from Grandmother Dorothy, that created a safe space to disclose difficult personal truths and celebrate collectively the triumphs and perseverance of others. Students had their experiences validated and cared for in the circle as they connected with one another and made new connections that did not exist previously. It was clear that Indigenous-specific programming available exclusively to Indigenous students is critical to the wellbeing and sense of belonging of those who participated.

Although there remain gaps in our knowledge about these student populations, the Sharing Circles revealed or confirmed certain characteristics and common experiences of these groups that are worthy of our attention in the near and immediate term. That is to say that gaps in knowledge and data are not a justification to delay a meaningful response. Enough is known already, and some major trends have been identified that ought to compel us to respond. That said, we also need better and more consistent data collection, especially where Indigenous graduate students are concerned – how long are they taking to complete their degrees? How many of them are enrolled? And in which departments? These data points, tracked over time, are essential to measuring our progress and student success.

As previously mentioned, there were some key differences between the undergraduate and graduate groups. The undergraduate group’s experiences of isolation related more to being separated from family and friends whereas the graduate group experienced a sense of isolation due to a lack of access to Indigenous faculty and mentors at A&S. Indigenous undergraduate students were generally better connected to one another and to services through FNH and the ISA post-lockdowns than graduate students, who appear to be working largely in isolation from one another, dispersed across departments. Graduate students also reported having significantly greater caregiving responsibilities in several familial and kinship domains and of course there are very few Indigenous faculty members at A&S who can supervise or serve on review committees – something that was greatly desired by the majority of graduate participants.

The challenges faced by Indigenous graduate students cannot simply be deferred to SAGE or FNH alone, though these services are critical, the issues identified are also departmental and divisional matters. In terms of embedding a strategic focus on Indigenous recruitment, retention, graduation, and progression, Indigenous graduate students need a specific strategic focus in divisional plans and strategies. Further discussion, and the presentation of this report to the School of Graduate Studies (SGS), is likely needed as well. Retaining and eventually welcoming Indigenous graduates into departments as tenure track professors would have wide-ranging benefits for both Indigenous graduate and undergraduate students and would likely improve morale overall.

## Areas for Action:

<b>Item</b>	<b>Area for Action</b>	<b>Alignment with ITL Calls to Action</b>
<b>1.</b>	Advance findings of this report to IRTLC, Dean Melanie Woodin and the Faculty Management Table, and SGS	<i>N/A</i>
<b>2.</b>	Develop an Arts & Science strategy related to Indigenous graduate students, with the goals of improving their experiences of U of T and supporting them in their chosen careers and hiring more Indigenous faculty members.	#7 – Peer mentorship #8 – Student recruitment #14 – Faculty Recruitment #18 – Training for staff
<b>3.</b>	Work with the Principals and Deans of Colleges to advance a policy that will ensure Indigenous students have priority access to spaces in residence should they need them, even if they have deferred.	#1 – in lieu of founding a new college
<b>4.</b>	Collaborate with First Nations House, Colleges, and the OFR to help ensure that Indigenous undergraduate students are aware of financial, academic, registrarial, and mental health supports available to them through FNH, the OFR, and their colleges.	#6 – Developing awareness of “on-campus services” #8 – Student recruitment
<b>5.</b>	Ensure that Indigenous Elders are accounted for in emergency planning, even if they are working on a part-time or casual basis – their counsel is essential to our work.	#9 – Access to Elders & Support Networks
<b>6.</b>	Request a meeting with FNH and OFR to develop a resource list and a purchasing program for students that will help them access low-cost, ergonomic, office furniture.	#6 – Developing awareness of “on-campus services”

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## APPENDIX I: EXEMPTION FROM RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD REVIEW

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**From:** Dean Sharpe <[dean.sharpe@utoronto.ca](mailto:dean.sharpe@utoronto.ca)>  
**Sent:** October 12, 2022 1:05 PM  
**To:** Emily Gilbert <[emily.gilbert@utoronto.ca](mailto:emily.gilbert@utoronto.ca)>  
**Subject:** Re: Question about Focus Groups with Indigenous Students in FAS

Emily,

Thank you for your e-mail.

This activity constitutes program evaluation, quality assurance (QA), or quality improvement (QI) within the mandate of the University of Toronto Faculty of Arts and Science Dean's Advisory Committee on Indigenous Research Teaching and Learning, Covid-19 Impacts on Indigenous Students Working Group, and is exempt from research ethics review under the federal research ethics guidelines, the Tri-council policy statement: Ethical conduct for research involving humans, 2nd Edition (TCPS-2), Article 2.5 and UT's Principles to determine exemption from research ethics review:

[http://www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/eng/tcps2-eptc2\\_2018\\_chapter2-chapitre2.html#a](http://www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/eng/tcps2-eptc2_2018_chapter2-chapitre2.html#a)  
<https://research.utoronto.ca/ethics-human-research/activities-exempt-human-ethics-review>

This e-mail constitutes the official exemption determination.

Sincerely,

Dean

Dean Sharpe, Ph.D.  
Research Ethics Board Manager--Social Sciences and  
Humanities 416-978-5585

[@researchUofT](mailto:@researchUofT) | [research.utoronto.ca](http://research.utoronto.ca)

The University of Toronto is open, but due to COVID-19, staff in the Research Oversight and Compliance Office – Human Research Ethics Unit are working remotely to support operations as effectively as possible. Note that staff are not available to accept mail or courier deliveries. Please send items digitally or contact me to make alternative arrangements.

[U of T COVID-19 Information](#)

[Research and Innovation COVID-19 Information](#)

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## APPENDIX II: CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

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### CONSENT FORM

A subcommittee of the Indigenous Research, Teaching & Learning Committee (IRTL) within the Faculty of Arts & Science (A&S) is studying the impacts of COVID-19 on Indigenous students. We are hoping to learn more about how Indigenous students managed through the pandemic so that A&S can better understand how to serve Indigenous students in similar cases of serious disruption at the University in the future, or more generally.

To that end, we are holding two Sharing Circles with Indigenous students in A&S. If you agree to help us by being a part of the sharing circle, you will need to sign this consent form. This consent form is meant to let you know about key aspects of our study and what we are asking from your participation. This information will assist you in providing voluntary and informed consent if you choose to participate.

### WHY ARE WE LOOKING AT THE IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON INDIGENOUS STUDENTS IN A&S?

We are looking for answers to some questions, such as:

1. Were Indigenous students in A&S informed about support available from the Faculty of Arts & Science during the pandemic?
2. Did Indigenous students feel supported by the University/A&S/College during the pandemic?
3. Did Indigenous students in A&S feel a sense of belonging with the Faculty or their College during the pandemic?
4. Is there anything the Faculty or the Colleges could have done differently to help Indigenous students during the pandemic?

We know that Indigenous students faced significant challenges with respect to mental health and wellbeing, difficulty in accessing space to study, and diminished access to ceremony and community. But we know we do not have all the answers to our questions. That is why we want to hear from you.

When our study is finished, we will prepare a report that will be shared with the Dean and other leadership groups at A&S (i.e. Principals, Registrars, Deans of Students). We may also develop ideas for policies and programs that will help support Indigenous students facing challenging circumstances.

### WHAT IS YOUR INVOLVEMENT IN THE SHARING CIRCLE?

If you volunteer, you will participate in a focus group discussion in the form of a sharing circle. There will be about 10 people in the sharing circle, along with an Elder or traditional knowledge keeper who will open and close the circle and offer medicines (smudge) and support to participants. Staff from First Nations House and/or from the Office of Indigenous Initiatives at U of T will be in attendance and will take notes. The sharing circle will take place at First Nations House and will last approximately two hours.

### HOW WILL WE USE YOUR FEEDBACK?

The final report will include a summary of the sharing circle discussions and might also contain quotations from the feedback that is provided. But pseudonyms will be used. Your real name will not appear anywhere in the reports.

#### WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATING IN THE SHARING CIRCLE?

There are no direct benefits to you for participating in the sharing circle, although you will be reimbursed for your time. There are potential indirect benefits to you and the community in that the report will be shared with senior leadership in A&S and will help them better understand how to serve Indigenous students in similar cases of serious disruption at the University, or more generally. Copies of the final report will be available to you.

#### WHAT ARE POSSIBLE RISKS OF PARTICIPATING?

You might feel uncomfortable or upset during the sharing circle or when we share the final report because the information is sensitive. But if you do not want to talk during the Indigenous sharing circle, you do not have to. You can also leave the sharing circle at any time. If you are uncomfortable or upset, we can set you up with someone to talk to.

All the information you share with the subcommittee will be kept confidential. We will also ask that all participants respect each other's privacy. However, there is the possibility that participants taking part in the same sharing circle will inadvertently share information outside the sharing circle.

#### WILL YOU BE REIMBURSED FOR YOUR TIME?

If you participate in the sharing circle, we will provide you with an honorarium. Food will be provided. We can also help cover costs of expenses for travel or childcare.

#### WHAT DOES IT MEAN IF YOU SIGN THE CONSENT FORM FOR THIS SHARING CIRCLE?

If you sign the form, you will be volunteering to take part in the sharing circle as part of our committee's work. You can ask questions about the study at any point while we are doing our work. You may choose to withdraw from the sharing circle at any time. Removal from the study will not affect your reimbursement for your time.

#### CONSENT

If you sign this form, it means you understand:

- ✓ Why we are doing this work
- ✓ What we are asking you to do in the study
- ✓ How the information you give in the study will be used
- ✓ Your participation in the study is completely voluntary
- ✓ You can ask questions about the study at any time, and
- ✓ You may withdraw from the study up to a week after your participation in it.

By signing this form, you agree to take part in the sharing circle that is part of the work of the subcommittee of the Indigenous Research, Teaching and Learning Committee, a working group that is looking into impacts of COVID-19 on Indigenous undergraduate Arts & Science students at U of T.

Thank you,

Emma Stromberg  
Indigenous Partnership Advisor  
Faculty of Arts & Science

If you have any questions about the working group and its report, you may contact Emma Stromberg at [e.stromberg@utoronto.com](mailto:e.stromberg@utoronto.com) or 416 946 8986.

Name:

Signature:

Date:

I would like to receive a copy of the final report.

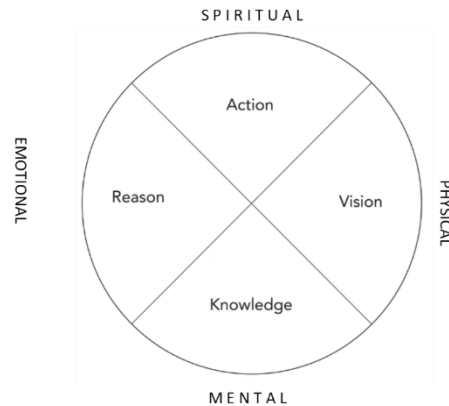
## APPENDIX III: MEDICINE WHEEL FRAMEWORK & INTERVIEW GUIDE

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### Sharing Circles: Process and Description

The working group developed an interview guide that was organized according to a medicine wheel framework. We organized questions into four directional quadrants, to reflect an understanding of and respect for the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of being (see Appendix III). When it came to the Sharing Circles themselves, questions were used as a guide and the conversation flowed as naturally as possible between participants, the facilitator, and the Elder. A notetaker was also present. Based on the advice of members in student-facing roles, we kept the circles relatively small. The Sharing Circles were promoted through the First Nations House e-newsletter, through the College Registrars' network, and IRTLC members were asked to distribute to their networks. Students registered via MS Forms and were screened via the form to ensure they met criteria (1) Indigenous; 2) undergraduate; 3) enrolled at A&S). Of 13 students who registered, 9 attended: 4 on February 7, 2023; and 5 on February 10, 2023. This allowed for in-depth discussions in a relatively short period of time. The small group format lent itself to a feeling of safety and community. That said, participation in the Sharing Circles may have been impacted as they were held during a busy time for students and delayed by illness. Each circle was opened by burning medicines and a prayer offered by Grandmother Dorothy Peters. Each circle was closed with a prayer offered by Grandmother Dorothy and followed by lunch. Grandmother Dorothy was invited to share her thoughts or reflections at any point during the Circle. She checked on participants who needed to step away due to strong emotions elicited by the interview questions. Participants were offered a \$300 honorarium for their participation over approximately two hours. Grandmother Dorothy was also provided with a \$500 honorarium per session. Meeting notes were distributed within two weeks of either circle. Participants were glad to receive them and reflect on the experiences they shared. No amendments were received, and no one withdrew their consent.

The working group has chosen to adopt a medicine wheel framework to organize focus group questions, its analysis, and report, as this approach applies a wholistic lens to the question of Indigenous student wellbeing. The four directions of the Medicine Wheel represent the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of creation. A fulsome teaching on the medicine wheel would not be appropriate, however, student wellness resources made available through First Nations House describe the Medicine Wheel as a tool of the Anishinaabek people used to maintain a balance within the self and with creation (O'Chiese, P., Anishnaabe, via First Nations House, 2022).



## Research Questions:

The Covid-19 Impacts on Indigenous Students Working Group wants to know more about the ways in which Indigenous students at A&S have experienced the pandemic and more specifically:

- Physical
  - Please describe any shifts in your financial situation as a result of the pandemic.
  - Were you able to access any additional pandemic-related financial support either through government programs or U of T?
  - Did you notice any differences in your own physical well-being related to the COVID-19 pandemic? This is not limited to anything experienced as a result of contracting COVID-19, but can include any shifts in your physical wellness as a result of change of schedule, sleep quality, access to fitness and wellness programs, etc.
- Mental
  - In what ways were you able to achieve a sense of balance during this time? And what felt out of balance? (i.e. family, work, school, social life, etc.) What helped? What didn't?
  - What has your experience with online learning been like? Was there anything that you felt helped, or made it more challenging?
  - Did your plans for future studies change? If so, how?
- Emotional
  - Were you able to access culturally safe mental health services if/when you wanted them?
  - Did you feel any changes in your relationships with peers during periods of lockdowns, as well as after
- Spiritual

- In what ways were you able to access ceremony or other spiritual supports if/when you wanted to/according to the natural cycle of ceremony? In what ways was this a challenge, or not possible?
- Closing
  - Are there any good memories you want to share with us from the past two years? Any skills you developed or lessons you want to share with the group from this time?