



## *Commentary*

### *Being an Indigenous CRC in the era of the TRC #Notallitscrackeduptobe*

Chelsea Gabel

*McMaster University*

*aboriginal policy studies* Vol. 7, no. 2, 2019, pp. 88-98

This article can be found at:

<http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/aps/article/view/28314>

ISSN: 1923-3299

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5663/aps.v7i2.29356>

---

*aboriginal policy studies* is an online, peer-reviewed and multidisciplinary journal that publishes original, scholarly, and policy-relevant research on issues relevant to Métis, non-status Indians and urban Aboriginal people in Canada. For more information, please contact us at [apsjournal@ualberta.ca](mailto:apsjournal@ualberta.ca) or visit our website at [www.nativestudies.ualberta.ca/research/aboriginal-policy-studies-aps](http://www.nativestudies.ualberta.ca/research/aboriginal-policy-studies-aps).

# Being an Indigenous CRC in the era of the TRC #Notallitscrackeduptobe

Chelsea Gabel  
*McMaster University*

The Canada Research Chairs (CRC) program is one of the federal government's most distinguished scholarly programs for attracting and retaining top research leaders in Canada. The program is divided into Tier 1 and 2 levels. Tier 2 chairs are awarded to emerging scholars, whose institutions each receive \$100,000 annually on five-year terms that may be renewed once. Tier 1 chairs, by comparison, go to established scholars whose institutions each receive \$200,000 annually for seven-year terms that can be renewed indefinitely. In November 2017, the government announced that it wanted to see more diversity among the research chairs, and demanded equity and diversity plans from all universities. Science minister Kirsty Duncan noted, "We must make every effort to give more people—women, Indigenous peoples, visible minorities and persons with disabilities—the chance to make their greatest contribution to research" (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada 2017). Currently, universities are required to meet equity targets established by the granting agency. My university exceeded<sup>1</sup> its equity target in 2017 when the Canada Research Chairs program awarded a prestigious Tier 2 CRC to me, making me the first Métis CRC in Canada.

It has been just over one year since I was awarded a CRC in Indigenous Well-Being, Community-Engagement, and Innovation, and "the chance to make [my] greatest contribution to research" has been a challenge. While this goal is well-intentioned, what Minister Duncan and many others fail to understand is that as universities and institutions work toward Indigenization and decolonization, and attempt to respond to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 calls to action, much of this work falls on Indigenous faculty, staff, and students, and thus doing research becomes a luxury with a real cost for Indigenous scholars. As a non-tenured Red River Métis woman from Rivers, Manitoba, I have found my first year as a CRC rewarding but challenging. In 2016, I became the first director of the newly established [McMaster Indigenous Research Institute \(MIRI\)](#), and continue to serve in this role. I served five years on my university's Research Ethics Board as the Indigenous representative, and sit on the Canadian Institutes for Health Research (CIHR) Standing Committee on Ethics as the Indigenous member; this committee provides high-level strategic advice on the ethical, legal and socio-cultural dimensions of CIHR's mandate. I am the former academic co-chair of the Indigenous Education Council, the primary body responsible for promoting and advocating for the advancement of Indigenous education at McMaster. Finally, I teach and supervise a large number of undergraduate

---

<sup>1</sup> McMaster has exceeded their target because several of McMaster's CRCs have identified as Indigenous as determined by a survey administered by McMaster to its chairholders. However, I am the only CRC at McMaster to publicly identify as Indigenous.

and graduate students. Reconciliation efforts in Canada have resulted in more funding opportunities that focus on and prioritize Indigenous research, and thus there has been an increase in the number of non-Indigenous scholars who are interested in doing Indigenous research (Dion, Gabel, Diaz Rios, and Leonard 2017). I am regularly asked by scholars to participate on their grants and co-author articles in scholarly journals, often as a way to legitimize their own research.

I also sit on various committees that provide leadership and advice to senior administrators on how their institutions might respond to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's calls to action. Most recently, I was appointed one of six Indigenous members to the Indigenous Advisory Circle (IAC), whose purpose is to advise the Canadian Federation of the Humanities and Social Sciences and to inform its efforts to advance reconciliation in the post-secondary education sector in general, and in the humanities and social sciences in particular. The Federation made a commitment to reconciliation in 2015 and has advanced work in this direction. The IAC is an expression of a decision made at the board level, spearheaded by Dr. Cindy Blackstock, the former Director of Equity and Diversity for the Federation, to have a small body of Indigenous scholars advise the organization on a range of activities.

Despite these efforts, Canada has yet truly to begin the process of reconciliation. Reconciliation is often associated with large government overtures, but the hard truth is that reconciliation is something that is reflected by the institutions that affect our everyday lives. On February 9th, 2018, Gerald Stanley was found not guilty in the murder of 22-year-old Cree man Colten Boushie. Less than two weeks later, on February 22nd, 2018, Raymond Cormier was found not guilty in the death of 15-year-old Anishinaabe girl Tina Fontaine. In July 2018, Greyhound Canada announced that it was planning to end its passenger bus and freight services in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba; I remember fondly making such trips as a young girl and teenager. The elimination of bus services will have severe impacts on safety and access to health services for First Nations and Métis peoples in the prairies. Most recently, ambulatory services at the Grandview Hospital, located in a rural community located 45 km west of Dauphin, Manitoba, shut down. Because many of my family members rely on these services and the ambulance closure will most certainly result in prolonged recovery, additional suffering, and higher health costs, I have been working with my family, the hospital and the surrounding communities to restore this important service. These events are a clear backsliding on reconciliation efforts in Canada.

As Indigenous scholars, we have an ethical responsibility and obligation toward our people, our cultures, our communities and our nations. Yet, by engaging in this type of advocacy work, we risk appearing less productive by traditional standards, often by having these aspects of our work regarded as "citizenship," or "service" or "community contributions" when this is perhaps the most important work that we do as Indigenous scholars. Community engagement is not a choice for Indigenous students and faculty the way it is for most non-Indigenous students and faculty. Institutional adaptation to support this type of scholarship has been slow. As universities seek to diversify faculty and hire more Indigenous faculty, the need to recognize, support, and reward this type of work has become more urgent.

I am grateful for the opportunities I've experienced and have. This commentary is not intended to take away from that, but rather to examine the challenges and reality of what it means to be a non-tenured, community-engaged Indigenous scholar as well as the particular pressures of holding a Canada Research Chair in an era of "reconciliation." In the following pages, I describe my research journey, my previous and current projects, and the advantages and disadvantages of undertaking community-engaged research. Finally, I offer my perspective to Indigenous students, post-doctoral fellows, junior Indigenous faculty, and others who are being pulled in multiple directions while universities are rushing to Indigenize and decolonize their institutions.

### **My Research Trajectory**

In 2005, I began working for a national Indigenous organization under the Aboriginal Federal Student Work Experience Program, a program that provides Indigenous students with opportunities to work for government and non-government organizations and learn about Indigenous policy in Canada. I went on to work as a policy analyst for the Health Systems Development Division of Health Canada's First Nations and Inuit Health Branch, and it was there I noticed a big problem: there were no Indigenous people working on health policy for Indigenous communities. In fact, most of the people I worked with had never set foot in an Indigenous community. Far from being a simple oversight, that gap had serious consequences for Indigenous communities across Canada.

Many of the policies emanating from this situation, which continue to be in place today, are dated. They were intended to make communities healthier and were supposed to improve mental health—yet we still have the highest suicide rate in the country, widespread mental-health challenges, and issues with chronic conditions like diabetes. For Métis people, there are no specific health policies, programs or services provided by the federal government. In 2007, I decided to look more closely at these issues head-on by pursuing a PhD focusing on Indigenous health policies and their impact on communities. I completed my degree in Comparative Public Policy in the Department of Political Science at McMaster University in 2013, comparing health programs and policies in Manitoba and Ontario for First Nations and Métis peoples—assessing how communities felt about the programs, whether policies actually improved health outcomes, and what needed to change. I did two years of community-engaged fieldwork, working with six communities across two provinces (Gabel, DeMaio, and Powell 2017). It was during my fieldwork that I was asked to help analyze and respond to government policy statements. I worked with communities to support meetings and forums designed to gather further information from community members about improving and enhancing the delivery of community-based health care. I was later hired as the lead consultant to help write six community health plans, a process mandated by the federal government. While doing my PhD, I gave birth to my daughter, Audrey (now five years old), who is unquestionably the love of my life, but adds a level of complexity to my already busy schedule, as children often do. To minimize

my time away from her, particularly in the first two years of her life, I brought her along on many of my research projects, and she has thus travelled to every province and territory with the exception of Prince Edward Island and the Yukon.

It was during my PhD that I discovered the Network Environments for Aboriginal Health Research (NEAHR). In an earlier commentary for *aboriginal policy studies*, my colleague Chantelle Richmond discussed the fact that the NEAHR program provided an important sense of belonging for Indigenous health trainees, but more importantly, it “facilitated access to the social, financial, and cultural resources and flexibility required to systematically engage in research with [our] own communities—that is, to do applied community research” (2018, 184). While funding for the NEAHR program was terminated in 2014, my long-term involvement as a trainee with the NEAHR program has forever changed my life and has helped me forge important and meaningful relationships with Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars across the country, including allowing me to meet other Métis researchers involved in community-engaged research. As I was then the only Indigenous graduate student in McMaster’s Department of Political Science, which had no Indigenous faculty members (McMaster had only two full-time Indigenous faculty members across campus at the time), the NEAHR provided me with much-needed mentorship and support and helped shape my commitment to community-engaged research.

In June 2017, the federal government announced an \$8 million initiative over five years to establish an Indigenous Mentorship Network Program (IMNP), a network for First Nations, Métis and Inuit health researchers. The funding followed a recommendation by the TRC that all levels of government endeavour to increase the number of Indigenous people working in health care. The IMNP is the successor to NEAHR, with an overarching goal of supporting and growing the next generation of Indigenous health scholars. IMNP-Ontario is one of eight mentorship networks across the country and provides Indigenous scholars and trainees with high-quality mentorship, training, and opportunities to participate in Indigenous health research. As of January 11, 2018, the Ontario research network comprised 13 research institutions, with a team of 70 researchers and community collaborators. Western University is the provincial network’s central mentorship hub, with Chantelle Richmond as the Nominated Principal Investigator. I am currently a co-applicant on the IMNP and the network lead at McMaster. It is imperative that we continue to support Indigenous health scholars and students in order to serve the research needs and capacities of Indigenous communities in Canada. By doing this, we can truly begin to advance Indigenous health equity in the country.

### **My Program of Research**

Indigenous communities are innovating in important ways, and some are turning to digital technology as a way to resist encroachment by industry, government, and other forces. Digital technologies (e.g., social media, digital cameras, digital storytelling and other technological tools) can be used as an effective means by which to overcome disadvantage

by improving community capacity, affirming Indigenous identity, and providing culturally relevant information to northern and isolated communities in areas such as health. Digital technologies can play an important role in maintaining and reinvigorating cultural practices. They can also enable broad intergenerational engagement for Indigenous communities by empowering Elders who want important knowledge to be available to youth, and empowering young people as agents in the preservation of this knowledge. My program of research focuses on building relationships and partnerships with Indigenous communities across Canada and internationally to design and implement programs for health and well-being, promoting interventions as a way to address inequities. My research concentrates on two main lines of inquiry:

- 1) The identification of issues faced by Indigenous peoples, particularly elders and youth, that are influenced by changes to Indigenous knowledge and other interconnected health, social, economic, and political processes; and
- 2) An evaluation of the role of digital technology and whether it benefits community health and well-being, and supports and strengthens community capacity.

I recently completed three Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) projects that focus on these two aspects. The first project examines the nature of contact and communication between elders and youth using photovoice, an arts-based method that puts cameras in the hands of research participants and allows them to identify strengths and concerns in their community (Gabel and Pace 2016; Pace and Gabel 2018). The second project examines the impact of digital technology on Indigenous participation and governance (Gabel, Bird, Goodman, and Budd 2017; Gabel, Goodman, Bird, and Budd 2016), and is entitled [First Nations Digital Democracy Project](#). Most recently, I completed a project that I co-led on Indigenous research methodology and community participation, entitled [Indigenous Futures](#). Funds for these projects came from a SSHRC Insight Development Grant (2014–17), a SSHRC Partnership Development Grant (2014–18), and a SSHRC Knowledge Synthesis Grant (2017–18).

In March 2014, I also undertook a contract with the government of Nunavut aimed at understanding the health, social, cultural, and political-economic pressures facing a small Arctic community as it prepares for major resource development. The project involved many months of research in the community, and culminated in a 133-page technical report, including detailed recommendations for preparing the community for impending resource development (Gabel and Cameron 2016). Finally, in 2017, I was commissioned by the government of Canada to produce a report, co-created with Indigenous community partners across Canada, that outlines actionable policy recommendations for the use of digital technology, e.g., online voting at the community level. These projects involved building rapport with communities, developing meaningful relationships with research partners over many years, and translating academic findings so that they would be useful to various audiences.

## My Current Projects

For over a decade, I have worked as an applied Indigenous scholar with a commitment to substantial engagement and collaboration with community members. Community engagement integrates research, teaching and service to inform both academic and community citizens. I have focused on developing my program of research while integrating innovative research methodologies that connect student experiences with real-world contexts. I have also situated myself in diverse practice settings (including administrative committees and community boards) to ensure that my research informs the Indigenous communities with whom I work, and vice-versa.

My current projects build on my earlier research, and focus on the importance of Indigenous Elder-youth relationships and their impact on health and well-being. My previous work answers questions about the importance of intergenerational relationships and the integral role that they play in maintaining cultural continuity through the process of storytelling and knowledge transmission. These processes also have positive implications for the health and well-being of Indigenous Elders and youth by promoting social inclusion, identity and belonging, empowerment, and self-rated well-being.

Currently, there is a severe underrepresentation of Métis peoples in academic research, and a lack of adequate, accurate and accessible data and information on Métis health and well-being that is community-engaged, participatory, and applied. Thus, there is a strong need for research in Métis communities from a Métis perspective. I have two projects that are Métis-led and focus on the importance of Métis health and well-being.

The first project uses a community-based participatory research approach and the digital storytelling methodology, e.g., three-to-five-minute visual narratives, to explore the nature of contact and communication among Métis Elders, adults, and youth living in Manitoba and Saskatchewan. Little is known about how different Métis generations perceive one another and their respective roles in a contemporary context. This project addresses this gap in knowledge by engaging elders, adults, and youth in discussion of their experiences, and addresses barriers and enablers that influence their ability to communicate, understand, and engage with each other. The project is novel because it recognizes that the health and well-being of these three groups are closely interlinked, and that the process of bringing them together using digital storytelling to address the challenges they face is mutually beneficial. This project also shows the potential for digital technology to support teaching and learning from Indigenous perspectives.

The second project examines maternal and perinatal health outcomes among Métis women in Alberta and the influence of proximal, intermediate, and distal determinants of health. There have been no scholarly articles informing maternal and perinatal health outcomes in Métis populations. This is particularly critical as pan-Indigenous data cannot provide an accurate representation of the health and well-being of Métis mothers and their newborns. There is a critical need to understand *our* unique challenges, care needs, and historical and contemporary circumstances.

### **The Need to Recognize Indigenous Engaged Research in the Academy**

Research of this nature involves an enormous amount of time and effort spent working with communities and various partners in the field, gathering as many sides of a story as possible, provoking constructive dialogue, and generating new practices and meanings. It also takes a great deal of trust and relationship-building, both of which are at the heart of community-engaged research. For many of us, this involves lengthy and ongoing community engagement processes that extend over many years. Additional layers of ethics review processes beyond the university level, participation in advisory boards, and training and capacity building in the community are necessary. Knowledge mobilization activities at the community level are a requirement, as we have to be accountable to the communities with which we work. These can include, but are not limited to, community presentations, participation in community meetings, and writing policy position papers, newsletters, or reports tailored to respond to communities' direct needs. For those of us who engage in arts-based methods, dissemination can include community photo exhibits, film screenings, and photo books that are co-created with our community partners.

This work is not awarded the same value as traditional scholarly publication and citation metrics. We do this work, most of us still early in our careers, while juggling other institutional commitments. This pressure can be felt most strongly among non-tenured Indigenous faculty, Indigenous graduate students and post-doctoral fellows for whom there is a clear expectation of regular scholarly publications to secure merit, academic appointments, and tenure. There is an inherent push to take a traditional approach to research in order to fulfill these expectations and be perceived as a "productive" scholar.

Hiring, tenure, and promotion committees, as well as merit review processes, focus overwhelmingly on our record of peer-reviewed publications and grants, and apply well-established metrics, including citation indices and journal rankings, in evaluating the quality of scholarship output (Goodman, Bird, and Gabel 2017). By comparison, metrics for measuring many of the outputs associated with Indigenous research remain underdeveloped. In a "publish or perish" environment, many Indigenous scholars are additionally faced with other dynamics, such as "engage or expire," and "community or collapse," e.g., community-engaged research and "community" itself both strengthen and motivate scholarly outputs, yet the challenges of such dynamics are not fully appreciated in an academic setting (McMaster Policy Statement on Community-Engaged Research 2017). The production of publications versus the time needed to develop meaningful research relationships within communities presents a career-impacting dilemma for Indigenous scholars and those practicing community-engaged approaches to research. Until the institutional structures of universities recognize the value of such approaches as part of structures of hiring, promotion, and merit, adoption of engaged research will remain underutilized.

### **Conclusion**

Since I began my faculty appointment at McMaster University in the Department of Health, Aging and Society and the Indigenous Studies Program in 2014, I have watched many of my

Indigenous colleagues across the country endure similar challenges: becoming academic directors of programs and research centres prior to completing their PhDs and taking on roles and responsibilities that would otherwise be filled by more senior scholars. We do all of this while trying to maintain active programs of research and fulfill our teaching duties. The reality is that no other program at a university would tolerate or agree to a directorship or other senior administrative positions being filled by individuals who are ABD or at the tenure-track level and who do not have much administrative experience at the university. Traditionally, a person embarking on roles of this profile would have tenure, and would have some administrative experience in lesser roles. In other words, ***no other program or department at a university would have a junior-level Indigenous scholar take on these types of responsibilities, and Indigenous Studies should not be an exception here.*** However, we continue to do this work while supporting our families and communities, and also striving to maintain a rigorous program of research.

While it has been an honour to receive a Canada Research Chair, I have been met with challenges that I did not foresee. To reiterate, community-engaged research is taxing enough; however, with the added pressure of a CRC title, I feel additional pressures and obligations to exceed what I was previously doing, and there is no shortage of opportunity given the current climate of “reconciliation.” Finding a reasonable life balance among my family, my community, my colleagues, my students, my institution, and my responsibilities as a CRC has proven difficult. My expectation was that my CRC would alleviate many of my external time vacuums and would allow for an increased focus on research about which I am passionate. The opposite is proving to be true.

Since being named as a CRC, my profile has been elevated significantly, to the point where I am much more accessible to many more people, e.g., I receive more requests from universities, communities, government, and scholars (primarily non-Indigenous) seeking legitimacy and a rubber stamp of approval from a CRC. My ability to say no is limited at the best of times; thus, I end up committed to a variety of endeavours to which I have only a tertiary connection. In the last three months, I have made weekly trips across Canada and attended conferences internationally. This type of travel has become routine for me, and although it is intrinsic to my program of research and what I want to be doing, it has taken a tremendous toll on the relationships that I have with my students, my colleagues, and my friends and family.

My story should not be interpreted as a tale of “woe is me.” I love my job and have a wonderful support system around me that helps me navigate the world of academia. I have opportunities that my family did not. What I believe is important to highlight is the fact that an Indigenous CRC, especially a CRC that is encompassed by community-engaged work, carries with it burdens that non-Indigenous researchers and CRCs do not encounter. With this in mind, it is imperative that non-Indigenous scholars and others understand the full scope and experience of an Indigenous scholar and CRC, so that when they ask for my (our) help ... well, my hope is that they will think twice.

#halftruthbyahalfbreed #truthshurt



## References

- Dion, Michelle, Chelsea Gabel, Claudia Milena Diaz Rios, and Kelsey Leonard. 2017. "Indigenous Futures: Research Sovereignty in a Changing Social Science Landscape." Report prepared for the SSHRC Knowledge Synthesis Imaging Canada's Future Workshop Series. [https://indigenousfutures.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/20170926-IndigenousFutures\\_small.pdf](https://indigenousfutures.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/20170926-IndigenousFutures_small.pdf)
- Gabel, Chelsea, Karen Bird, Nicole Goodman, and Brian Budd. 2017. "The Impact of Digital Technology on Indigenous Participation, Self-Determination and Governance." *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* XXXVI, no. 2: 107–127.
- Gabel, Chelsea, and Emilie Cameron. 2016. "The Community Readiness Initiative in Kugluktuk, Nunavut: The Challenge of Adapting an Inuit Community-Based Participatory Framework to a Multi-Stakeholder, Government-Designed Project Environment." *Engaged Scholar: Community-Engaged Research, Teaching and Learning*, Special Thematic Issue of *Engaging Indigenous Communities* 2, no. 1: 89–108.
- Gabel, Chelsea, Peter DeMaio, and Alicia Powell. 2017. "Towards Healthier Indigenous Health Policies? Navigating the Labyrinth for Answers." *Journal of Indigenous Wellbeing: Te Mauri-Pimatisiwin* 2, no. 1: 47–59.
- Gabel, Chelsea, Nicole Goodman, Karen Bird, and Brian Budd. 2016. "Indigenous Adoption of Internet Voting: A Case Study of Whitefish River First Nation." *International Indigenous Policy Journal* 7, no. 4: 1–20.
- Gabel, Chelsea, Jessica Pace, and Chaneesa Ryan. 2016. "Using Photovoice to Understand Intergenerational Influences on Health and Well-Being in a Labrador Inuit community." *Special Thematic Issue of the International Journal of Indigenous Health: "Wellness-Based Indigenous Health Promising Practices"* 11, no. 1: 75–90. Published in Collaboration with the First Nations Health Authority.
- Goodman, Nicole, Karen Bird and Chelsea Gabel. 2017. "Towards a More Collaborative Political Science: A Partnership Approach." *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue canadienne de science politique* 50, no. 1: 201–18.
- McMaster University Policy Statement on Community-Engaged Research. 2017. "The Particular Pressures Facing Indigenous Faculty with Respect to Community Engagement."
- Pace, Jessica, and Chelsea Gabel. 2018. "Using Photovoice to Understand Barriers and Enablers to Southern Labrador Inuit Senior and Youth Interaction in Labrador, Canada." *Journal of Intergenerational Relationships* 16, no. 4: 351–73.

Richmond, Chantelle. 2018. "Try Bravery for a Change: Supporting Indigenous Health Training and Development in Canadian Universities." *aboriginal policy studies* 7, no. 1: 180–18.

Social Sciences and Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). "Government of Canada takes Action to Increase Equity, Diversity in Research". November 2, 2017. [https:// www.newswire.ca/news-releases/government-of-canada-takes-action-to-increase-equity-diversity-in-research-654695323.html](https://www.newswire.ca/news-releases/government-of-canada-takes-action-to-increase-equity-diversity-in-research-654695323.html)