



Commentary

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Robert: Caroline, it's been a year since academics and the public first learnt about the problem of Indigenous identity fraud in Canadian universities. What role did you play?

Caroline: In 2021, I filed a complaint of research misconduct against Carrie Bourassa. The claim was filed at the University of Saskatchewan, where we both were faculty. The complaint was put together by a small group of academics, mostly Métis, who were given information about her genealogy by an individual who chooses to remain anonymous. We confirmed the information and included additional information in the drafting of our complaint. The complaint was filed under my name because I was a tenured professor, and our group felt it was best if those (in our group) without tenure or who were not full professors kept their names off the complaint. I knew filing the complaint under my name could be risky for my career advancement, but I also believed the University of Saskatchewan would see the complaint as my and others' efforts to address a serious problem.

The complaint was given to Dr. Preston Smith, Dean of Medicine. I was told the complaint was passed on to Carrie Bourassa so she could respond. Within a few weeks, the complaint was dismissed as falling outside of the scope of the University of Saskatchewan's research misconduct policy. The complaint never went to an academic committee for consideration. With my faculty association, I requested information about what the appropriate process would be to refile. We thought possibly academic misconduct. Senior administrators promised that someone would get back to us with an answer, but no one did. I think we waited about two months. Approximately two months after the complaint was dismissed, Geoff Leo, CBC, filed his story about Carrie Bourassa. Dr. Winona Wheeler, another University of Saskatchewan Indigenous faculty, and myself were interviewed for the story.

I do not want to dwell on Carrie Bourassa, but rather to highlight two important considerations for anyone thinking of filing a similar complaint at their university. First, be aware of the time and energy it takes to pull something like this together. Even with the information we received anonymously, which included a full genealogy, obituaries of grandparents, archival documents, and other newspaper articles, we collectively worked for three months confirming everything and gathering new information. For anyone thinking of filing a complaint, it is a significant commitment, especially if you are filing a complaint about an individual who has woven a complex narrative that is well-entrenched and supported in Indigenous and other circles of influence. Second, many universities and even many Indigenous leaders and institutions do not appear to want complaints like this to be brought forward. Many of those who have been deceitful about their Indigenous identity in the academy are often entrenched in their respective universities as well as within Indigenous circles of influence and power. Universities will not run towards the truth on this issue; rather, experience tells us they are more likely to set up roadblocks and deterrents to stop people voicing concerns about Indigenous identity fraud. It is clear through media reporting that universities have a stronger tendency to protect those pretending to be Indigenous rather than protecting and supporting the Indigenous individuals filing complaints.

Robert: When the complaint went forward and was dismissed, how did you feel? But, more importantly, what were your thoughts on the media narrative that was being constructed by the University of Saskatchewan and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research to support Carrie Bourassa?

Caroline: I was told in a meeting with the Dean of Medicine that the university had dismissed the complaint. Of course, we knew this was not decided only by the dean but also by U. of S. senior administrators. I don't believe they ever took the claim seriously and thought, by dismissing it, the issue would go away. It was the publication of Geoff Leo's articles that forced the U. of S. and CIHR to take the issue seriously. Up until the CBC report in October 2021, we could not convince anyone to take our concerns seriously—not the University of Saskatchewan, CIHR, other academics. Even some Indigenous academics and Indigenous leaders rallied behind her. Very few people believed us. When the complaint was dismissed, we were dumbfounded because the evidence was conclusive. I contacted senior U. of S. administrators to make them aware that, because the complaint was dismissed, myself and others would work with the media to bring the story to the public.

When Geoff Leo's report about Carrie Bourassa came out, it blew up across Canada and was reported on in different parts of the world. This was not something we expected. The U. of S. came out almost immediately with a press release in support of Carrie Bourassa. This was incredibly hurtful, and our group was demoralized and extremely concerned that there was nothing more we could do. At this point, we realized the truth did not matter. Our view was that the U. of S. wanted the public to believe Geoff Leo and the Indigenous faculty who came forward were wrong. The U. of S. press release quoted Provost Airini praising Carrie Bourassa. We felt at this point the Provost had thrown us under the bus.

I think it was the interview Carrie did with the *Saskatoon Star Phoenix* that pushed the issue over the edge. She was all over the place with her story about her Indigenous identity. It was after this article was published that Carrie was placed on leave by the U. of S. and dismissed from CIHR. To this day, neither institution has publicly stated any support for what we did. I personally feel I have experienced a typical whistle blower experience, and, as a result, I will be moving from the U. of S. in January 2023 for other employment. I have not felt safe in the College of Medicine or at the U. of S. for over a year.

Robert: It is interesting to consider why universities rush to support these individuals. We saw this happen at Queens University, University of Saskatchewan, and, most recently, University of British Columbia's support of Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond. When this support happens, what kind of message does it send to individuals or groups who want to raise concerns that someone is falsely claiming to be Indigenous? Do you think it is safe for academics or students to come forward and file a complaint?

Caroline: No, I don't think it is safe at all. The U. of S. Faculty Association was incredibly helpful, and, because I stood up in the past about Indigenous issues at the university, I felt I was already being punished and marginalized for having a voice. I was very naïve in believing the truth was the most important issue. I was naïve to think the U. of S. and CIHR would thank us and apologize to us. As the issue moves forward, I increasingly feel I am being singled out. An effective way for universities to deal with a whistle blower is to marginalize the person. Despite being Métis, a full professor, and having important insight into how non-Indigenous academics successfully get away with Indigenous identity fraud, I was marginalized from having any involvement in finding a solution. In fact, I am so marginalized that even the U. of S. internal investigation report on Indigenous identity fraud does not mention my name once, even though I was interviewed for six hours by the investigator. Basically, I

feel like I have been erased by the investigator and the U. of S. As my younger Indigenous colleagues watch what is happening to me, in my view, they are receiving a clear message that bringing a complaint forward is risky to your career and advancement.

As Indigenous People, we need to be mindful of institutions that harm us in these profound and deeply hurtful ways. Universities across Canada are shaping their response to Indigenous identity fraud as an “Indigenous problem” to be solved by Indigenous community people. No one, including Indigenous people, are asking, “Is it really an Indigenous problem?” What if the problem was strictly viewed as a problem of academic integrity and honesty? After all, it is non-Indigenous academics making false claims of Indigenous identity at universities. We know their claims are largely made to access resources such as employment, grants, career advancement, prestige, and power. Why should Indigenous communities be stuck with the problem, and why should Indigenous people at universities be spending our precious time trying to solve what essentially is a problem of non-Indigenous, “white” people? In what other context could an academic be caught fabricating information in public presentations, publications, and on their CV and not be held accountable as an academic? Why are our institutions making Indigenous People do all the heavy lifting on this issue? And, in doing so, why are Indigenous faculty and students the only ones who are coming under scrutiny?

As this issue unfolds in Canada, Indigenous faculty and students are increasingly vulnerable. For example, in a CBC article last week, Dr. Kim Tallbear estimated that upwards of 25% of Indigenous faculty in Canada are not Indigenous. Her estimate is not based on data but on anecdotal information. As a Métis person, I know claims such as this will come down hardest on Métis faculty and students, even when we hold Métis citizenship cards. Microaggression against Indigenous faculty, students, and staff in universities is common; all of us have our stories. If Indigenous identity fraud is treated as solely a problem of Indigenous Peoples, all of us will be under surveillance and suspicion despite being Indigenous. While I have no idea if Dr. Tallbear’s estimate is anywhere near accurate, I have significant concerns that, in the current environment, our rights and privacy as Indigenous People will be diminished, while universities remain ineffective in identifying and dealing with the fraudsters.

The University of Saskatchewan’s policy on Indigenous identity states that Indigenous communities are the only ones with a right to decide who is and is not a member of their community. This position implies Indigenous

communities have the time, energy, and resources to respond to universities and other institutions when they have a complaint against a faculty or student. From my point of view, this creates all kinds of problems. For example, what happens if a person claims multiple Indigenous identities and community affiliations? This is true of both Carrie Bourassa and Mary Ellen Turpel Lafond, who claimed more than one Indigenous community membership. Who is going to coordinate the different Indigenous communities who need to be involved to confirm or deny their claims? What if an Indigenous community does not want anything to do with the university's problem and process? Who then makes the determination? And what if a person who claims Indigenous ancestry does not claim a specific community affiliation? Who vets these individuals?

I believe universities have an obligation to their faculty and students to invest in determining if individuals suspected to be falsifying Indigenous identity are being academically dishonest. I do not believe it is the role of any university to determine who is and is not Indigenous. It is the role of universities to investigate complaints of research and academic dishonesty and misconduct, and to do so in a consistent and collegial fashion. Policies matter. What happens outside of the university to academics who falsely claim Indigenous identity is up to Indigenous communities and others who are involved with these individuals.

I further believe faculty and students should be required to produce documentation of Indigenous identity when they are receiving a job, scholarship, or award given to Indigenous people only. Indigenous people within the university are best positioned to vet Indigenous identity in ways that are supportive and not harmful. If we, however, use the current U. of S. policy on Indigenous identity, the confirmation process has already proven to be flawed for Indigenous people. For example, Mark Arcand, Chief of the Saskatoon Tribal Council, was a member of the U. of S. committee to set policy for Indigenous identity confirmation. When interviewed by Geoff Leo, CBC, Chief Arcand stated confirming Indigenous identity is straightforward for First Nations: You are either on the band list or you are not. He then stated in a later interview that he supported Mary Ellen Turpel Lafond's claims to be Indigenous and a member of Muskeg Lake First Nation, even though she is not on the band list and her Indigenous identity and treaty status have been proven false. Chief Arcand's statement exposes a vulnerability in the U. of S.'s policy. Despite clear evidence that Lafond had fabricated a Cree identity and treaty status over the years, support from Muskeg Lake, the Saskatoon Tribal Council, and the Union of BC Chiefs illustrated that Indigenous leaders will

support certain individuals who fabricate Indigenous ancestry. As a fellow academic, I have grave concerns about Mary Ellen Turpel Lafond's academic integrity and honesty. However, policies like the one being put forward by the U. of S tie the hands of everyone. How can a university state that it is Indigenous communities who will decide on a case-by-case basis whether someone is Indigenous or not when, in one of the first instances where the policy might apply, it fails miserably? How could an academic committee at UBC investigate Mary Ellen Turpel Lafond for academic dishonesty if they adopt a similar policy that gives Indigenous leaders the final say?

Universities have policies and processes in place where complaints can be filed by faculty or students that trigger appropriate investigations. Clearly, the U. of S.'s process failed when considering our complaint; however, I believe it failed because senior administrators were given discretion to dismiss the claim before it went to an academic committee. Until universities get a handle on the problem of Indigenous identity fraud, universities will need to invest resources to research claims filed against individuals. Having worked on such a claim, I can state that the process is labour-intensive and there are legal and ethical concerns. I do not suggest this will be easy or straightforward for any institution. I want to emphasize once again that this is a problem of non-Indigenous people pretending to be Indigenous. It is not an Indigenous problem. Indigenous faculty and students are doing nothing wrong, and I strongly believe the issue must be reexamined as a problem of misconduct, dishonesty, and fraud. If we do not deal with false claims of Indigenous identity using academic policies and processes, I believe we are undermining the very foundation of tenure and academic freedom that requires academics to be honest and truthful in their research, teaching, and public presentation.

As Indigenous identity fraud is being considered across Canada, we cannot ignore the divisions between Indigenous peoples that are occurring. This is another argument for why universities should conceive of the issues as an academic and not Indigenous problem. With the example of Mary Ellen Turpel Lafond, UBC continues to support her, largely because, in my view, not supporting her means coming out against the position taken by the BC Chiefs. If, however, UBC focused on academic integrity and honesty, there are clear examples where an investigation is warranted. I believe this approach would be less damaging for the university and for Indigenous faculty and students at UBC.

The role of the media is also a consideration that must be explored. Geoff Leo's reporting is excellent, and some very prominent Indigenous people

have come forward asking Lafond to provide evidence of her claims of Cree ancestry and Indian Status. However, we need to ask the question, “What happens in cases where there is no media and public attention?” This is what we need to plan for. Without Geoff Leo’s reporting, Carrie Bourassa would still be employed at the U. of S. and CIHR. Our complaint had zero impact at both institutions.

In the cases of Carrie Bourassa and Mary Ellen Turpel Lafond, there is ample evidence in the public domain to warrant institutional concern of academic dishonesty. Where the problem lies is that both Carrie Bourassa and Mary Ellen Turpel Lafond were and are valuable to their respective universities, much more valuable than the truth. Their deception is an inconvenient truth, and it is much easier for universities to dismiss and diminish those making the claims against these individuals. As a result, it is essential that the governing bodies of universities disallow senior administrators to have discretion to dismiss complaints. Universities need policies and collegial processes in which academic committees that include multiple Indigenous faculty consider the evidence and enforce policies for academic dishonesty. The person being accused also needs an opportunity to defend themselves. In the current context, I do not believe universities, including the U. of S., have policies in place to deal with someone who has falsely claimed Indigenous identity and benefited from it.

Further, I do not believe in the case of Carrie Bourassa anyone has asked, “Did the consequences fit the crime?” The circumstances under which Carrie Bourassa resigned are unknown to anyone except senior leaders at the U. of S. However, there is disagreement in Indigenous and university circles about what the consequence for Indigenous identity fraud should be. I believe Wilfrid Laurier University has a policy that states an individual will be terminated from their position if they are falsely claiming to have Indigenous ancestry. Whether this is too harsh or not harsh enough is yet to be determined. Maybe individuals should not be terminated but prevented from working with Indigenous students and communities. Or maybe these individuals should be fully investigated for academic dishonesty over their entire academic career and stripped of their degrees if they were dishonest in a thesis, other academic writing, or in public presentations. No matter what is decided, I think it is important that the consequences be consistent across the country. Possibly, legislation is the best way to proceed; however, how we proceed hinges on our collective understanding that this is not an Indigenous problem but a problem of non-Indigenous people pretending to be Indigenous.

Robert: I want to ask you about lateral violence. Do you feel that you and others who brought forward the case of Carrie Bourassa have experienced lateral violence? In the case of Mary Ellen Turpel Lafond, her supporters are accusing individuals who are speaking out against her claims [of] creating a hurtful situation that does not follow Indigenous cultural values. You are saying something quite different—that, in your experience, it is the people who bring forward concerns about false claims who are being targeted. You spoke earlier about universities wanting to protect individuals like Carrie because of the positions they hold. You also spoke about the power imbalances that exist and how this makes Indigenous faculty and students vulnerable. You mentioned that you were accused of lateral violence against Carrie by filing the complaint to the U. of S. We also know that it is primarily Indigenous women who are coming forward with concerns and who are speaking to the media. It is also mostly women who are being identified in academia as falsely making claims of Indigenous identity. How does gender fit into the way this issue is currently playing out?

Caroline: For universities, which essentially operate as colonial institutions, it is in their best interest to keep Indigenous People off-balance. And one of the best ways to keep us off-balance is to reinforce the idea that we are aggressive, violent, and not well-behaved. I certainly heard this sentiment being attributed to me in relation to Carrie Bourassa, both before and after the CBC story broke. The accusations were highly gendered in the sense that I was portrayed as being jealous and vindictive. After the dust settled, I had numerous people tell me I was being talked about in this way by senior administrators at U. of S. and CIHR.

It is not uncommon for women to be dismissed in academic contexts, and especially so for Indigenous women. It is easier to marginalize a whistleblower by creating a narrative that the person is untrustworthy and aggressive. This is a strategy used by universities and other institutions when they have a difficult Indigenous issue in front of them that they do not want to deal with. In the Carrie Bourassa example, the U. of S. engaged in a strategy to marginalize the Indigenous faculty, student, and community voices who spoke up against them, and, effectively, they created a self-vindicating narrative through the establishment of a committee to determine a policy on Indigenous identity. By engaging Indigenous political leaders and Elders, the University marginalized individuals like myself who were involved in bringing the issue to national attention. Unfortunately, the Indigenous political leaders and Elders involved did not question why we were excluded. Again, I believe this was a very effective strategy by the university to mar-

ginalize faculty who, if placed on the panel, would question the university about why they dismissed the complaint against Carrie and why they so quickly sent out a press release after the CBC story broke supporting Carrie. This is not the first time the U. of S. has used Elders and community leaders to marginalize the voice of Indigenous faculty and students. As faculty and students, we are caught between wanting to challenge the university on their decision making and knowing speaking up might harm our relationships with Indigenous leaders and Elders who the university engages with. So, I ask, is this not a successful colonial strategy of divide and conquer? If we place the future of this issue for universities in the hands of senior university administrators, I am certain Indigenous faculty and students will not fare well. It is important that Indigenous and non-Indigenous faculty, students, and the public demand better from senior university administrators. Indigenous faculty and students cannot afford to carry the burden alone; it is simply too easy for university leaders to dismiss and demonize us when we speak up. What we need is a stronger collective voice in which we demand that universities consider Indigenous identity fraud as academic dishonesty, and, in doing so, they have clear policies in place that outline processes for dealing with complaints and the consequences for faculty and students if academic dishonesty is confirmed.

Robert: Thank you for the interview.