

Indigenizing The Process Of Funding Indigenous-Led Initiatives

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Funding to advance and support Indigenous Knowledge is needed by Elders, traditional healers, traditional food and medicinal Knowledge keepers, Indigenous graduate students at mainstream universities using Indigenous research methods in their dissertations, and many other Indigenous individuals and groups. In 2019, Tapestry Institute founded the [IKhana Fund](#) program to seed a new foundation whose entire grant process -- from agenda and goals to evaluation and reporting-out -- would be framed within Indigenous worldview. A core of three Indigenous scholars (Wilson, Cram, Adams) has worked through the conceptual issues of funding Indigenous Knowledge research through *Indigenized* grant protocols and processes, and we are now ready to collaborate with Indigenous colleagues to actualize these concepts into documents we can share with the larger community.

At the same time, our work has gained new significance. Several major foundations have recently established new initiatives to support Indigenous-led environmental projects. This welcome response to [urgent Indigenous calls to let our people lead environmental projects](#) might seem to suggest the problem of funding Indigenous-led initiatives has been solved. But in fact there is little indication that the conceptual problems that arise in the interface between Western funders and Indigenous awardees have been recognized, much less addressed. Indigenous colleagues already report a tell-tale sense of themselves and foundation representatives "talking past" one another, with the more troubling observation that foundation personnel don't even seem to perceive any problems. People are already voicing the fear that foundations will wind up concluding, "We tried to fund Indigenous-led initiatives once, and it didn't work." This is essentially what happened with US federal science foundation initiatives to fund research based in Indigenous Science research methods 40 years ago, so it's a valid concern. It means the work we're doing and the documentation we're ready to produce are resources we need to share with Indigenous colleagues, to help them establish talking points with foundations across a range of Western-based funding initiatives.

The problem is rooted in Western culture's restricted view that only intellectual ways of knowing are valid. Tapestry Institute is an Indigenous-led nonprofit research and education organization working to advance Indigenous knowledge (IK), and we focus on Indigenous epistemic systems (ways of knowing) because Western culture's epistemic system is so frequently the engine of colonization. In this case, marginalization of Knowledge acquired through ceremony, experience, story, intuition, dream, and interaction with living relations and the Land limits Indigenous peoples' ability to acquire grant support for Indigenous Knowledge work that uses and integrates the whole spectrum of epistemic processes. Western funding agendas and goals, criteria, and evaluation procedures are based solely in intellectual ways of knowing, so they generate funding strategies that emphasize biodiversity or climate change, for example. Such agendas express a reductionist, compartmentalized approach to environmental issues that's too narrow to accommodate IK, and that also feeds the historically destructive Western paradigm that humans can and should control nature (intentionally modifying species distribution or methane levels). Indigenous persons tend to frame environmental actions within a broader Indigenous Knowledge framework, seeking to perceive and understand the Knowledge moving in a particular time and Place and how humans can appropriately respond to that Knowledge.

This means funding for Indigenous-led initiatives needs to support projects that engage many different ways of knowing. Ceremony, art, story, and dream are as much a part of Indigenous-led initiatives as is knowledge of a forest or reef ecosystem. The challenge is to develop protocols for how this can be done. For instance, young people who've had Dreams in which their forest homeland asks them to remove a specific invasive plant to protect its health, and a professor integrating research on the Land's agency into the field of environmental jurisprudence, must have the same opportunity to apply for and receive funding under a single set of internal funding protocols that are clear, fair, and transparent to people with very different educational, spiritual, cultural, and Place-based experiences.

So Indigenizing grant practices isn't simply a matter of removing Western culture's epistemic barrier to the range of Indigenous Knowledge. It's generating internal protocols that permit clear communication between the Indigenous people on both sides of the grant process equation.

Indigenous funding protocols must establish grant program agendas and goals within Indigenous worldview and values, outline the criteria that satisfy these goals, establish the ways funding criteria can be clearly communicated in calls for proposals, and explore the ways applicants may submit proposals (narrative, story, video, art) that address the award criteria. Funding protocols must also address the ways reviewers use grant criteria to appropriately evaluate submitted proposals and make awards, how grant recipients report results by telling the story of what happened when they carried out their IK project, and how the funder receives and responds to reporting-out stories in appropriate ways.

The reporting-out process is particularly challenging because it's the place where a Western funder's worldview typically rises to the surface in non-negotiable assumptions about the relationship between reality and assessable outcomes. Even when funds are awarded with the proviso of no strings attached, the unspoken assumption that assessable outcomes provide a measure of accountability frequently still exists. This is why Indigenous evaluation is such an essential part of developing appropriate protocols for funding Indigenous-led initiatives. As [Fiona Cram](#) points out, "Western evaluation is just one way of finding out whether something is good for a community, for the people, for other Nations, and for the Land. The value system to be applied in reporting-out processes, regardless of the format, are to be determined by the Indigenous people involved, who will engage the Land as part of establishing appropriate outcomes and criteria for evaluating them." Protocols that negotiate differences between the expectations of Western funders and Indigenous grant recipients are a type of *external* grant protocol, rather than internal, because they cross a cultural divide.

External protocols that mediate conflicting cultural expectations about the reporting-out process must also address the important flashpoint about who "owns" and controls Knowledge, how universal Knowledge is or isn't, and whether or not the intellectual part of Knowledge may be decontextualized for dissemination. It is very common for people in Western culture to have the value system that Knowledge is universal and should be widely disseminated in a "universal" (decontextualized) form for the greater good. Indigenous people, however, tend to see Knowledge as local and particular and as having agency of its own but being given into the hands of a particular community in trust, with strict conditions about how, with whom, and when it may be disseminated, if at all. A funder from Western culture who has been able to otherwise accept the practices of Indigenous worldview may feel deeply challenged when they realize IK research they supported has produced Knowledge that seems of great value, but are told they cannot share it. One of the more important external protocol documents we're developing is therefore a *written agreement* between funders and recipients that addresses differing cultural expectations up-front. This documentation includes mediation guidelines based on principles of restorative justice so that any breach of the agreement can be rapidly resolved, and the important cross-cultural relationships between everyone involved can be preserved and even nourished.

This idea for a written formal agreement is based on guidelines for Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) research conducted with Western scientists. Differing cultural value systems of knowledge "ownership" created so much conflict between Indigenous people and Western scientists that [in the early 1990s several Indigenous communities](#) developed protocols to establish Indigenous Knowledge sovereignty. [The continuing processes](#) of developing TEK documentation that spells out Indigenous and IK rights to the research community is one of the seeds that eventually blossomed into larger and more wide-reaching Indigenous rights documents such as UNDRIP (adopted 2007). We are expanding these principles to Indigenous relationships with Western *funders* because the rights of Indigenous people "to promote, develop and maintain their institutional structures and their distinctive customs, spirituality, procedures, and practices" (Article 34) depend on our ability to acquire and respond to Indigenous Knowledge. Financial support for such work that does not colonize it requires a funding process that is, itself, in an Indigenous rather than Western framework.

The full suite of internal and external protocols we are developing for IKhana Fund, then sharing with the larger community, connect and weave people with people, with the Land, and with non-human others. We plan to develop these protocols in early summer of 2022, and to produce documentation we'll disseminate in publications and media by the end of the calendar year. The team members doing this work are tasked with applying relationship-based Indigenous Knowledge to development of specifically Indigenous funding protocols, so the team selection process prioritizes strong collaborative relationships with other team members, the Land, and Indigenous Knowledge. Each person is also a scholar in the fields of Indigenous epistemology and values, Indigenous evaluation and assessment, Indigenous research methods, Indigenous Knowledge, Land-based learning, and Western grant application and award processes. The nine team members (more detailed bios [online](#)) are:

Shawn Wilson, Ph.D. (Opaskwayak Cree) is Associate Professor of Indigenous Studies at the University of British Columbia and author of the seminal 2008 book, *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*. One of the core group of three who carried out conceptual planning for IKhana, Shawn brings prominent professional expertise in the fields of Indigenous Knowledge, epistemology, and Research Methods to this work.

Fiona Cram, Ph.D. (Māori, Ngāti Pahauwera) is an internationally recognized Indigenous evaluator and scholar, founder of the assessment and evaluation firm Katoa Ltd. One of the three IKhana conceptual planners, Fiona's research interests include Māori health, justice, and education, with Kaupapa Māori (by Māori, for Māori) the over-riding theme. She is a Clinical Associate at University of Otago and has lectured and done research through University of Auckland.

Dawn Hill Adams, Ph.D. (Choctaw Nation) is Tapestry's Co-President and Founder and one of the three conceptual developers for IKhana, having called for its establishment in a 2016 [publication](#). She brings that vision to our work, as well as scholarship in Indigenous ways of knowing and prior professional experience in scientific research and the processes of federal science grant administration.

Alex Wilson, Ph.D. (Opaskwayak Cree) is Associate Professor and Academic Director of the Aboriginal Education Research Centre at the University of Saskatchewan. An Idle No More organizer and coordinator of an Indigenous land-based Master's program, Alex brings Land-based Knowledge of the Saskatchewan River delta and experiences in queering education systems to our project.

Julius Wassenas (Cree) is a University of Alberta undergraduate bilingual in English and Digital. He understands the issues facing younger generations, brings the rich potential held by our youth to the table, and integrates that potential with the wisdom that emerges from his deep engagement with the Land and Indigenous Knowledge.

Jessica Venable, Ph.D. (Pamunkey and Mattaponi descent) brings over 20 years of experience in sponsored research and research development to our work. She is Partner in the government affairs firm Thorn Run Partners. She was an executive director at McAllister & Quinn, and before that coordinated the Research Development program at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Beverly Te Huia (Māori, Ngāti Mihiroa) is a midwife and researcher who brings expertise from the Indigenous healing community. She has contributed significantly to Kahungunu (tribal) Māori Health, and designed strategic pathways for Māori primary and community care that are widely acknowledged by Iwi (tribal) leaders, district health boards and Ministry of Health.

John T. Njovu (Tande-Nsenga ethnic group of Zambia) brings expertise and prominence in Indigenous Evaluation to our work. He also has extensive experience in advocating for the participation of Indigenous African evaluation professionals, and the use of Indigenous research and evaluation methods, in local projects funded by major foreign donors and run by foreign consultants.

Joanne (Jo) L. Belasco, Esq., Co-President of Tapestry Institute and a senior staff member for nearly 25 years, is an attorney and ally who brings a professional understanding of Indigenous rights and sovereignty to the project, as well as knowledge of critically relevant issues in environmental law. She has been helping to conceptualize IKhana Fund since 2019.