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# COMMUNITY UNIVERSITY RESEARCH AGREEMENT

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## Abstract

This paper describes the process of engaging the extended Indigenous community within Saskatoon and the surrounding First Nations communities in what would be a first major research project between Indigenous communities and the University of Saskatchewan. A management committee was established comprised of all the major Saskatoon/Saskatchewan Indigenous organisations, such as the Federation of Saskatchewan Indians, Saskatoon Tribal Council, First Nations University of Canada and other community-based groups to ensure that research reflected First Nations and Metis needs. The project called "Bridges and Foundations" awarded some 35 projects close to two million dollars in research funds. The money was awarded through graduate student research bursaries, and community-based projects which highlighted the needs of Indigenous women, youth, students, elders and urban populations. The three research themes included respectful protocol, knowledge creation, and policy development. The research projects, which were largely Indigenous designed and driven, created one of the most extensive research collections over a period of four years and included major data collection on community-based research, Indigenous peoples and Indigenous knowledge systems and protocols. The paper relates the development of the project and speaks about the need for Indigenous peoples to lead their own research as well as the benefits of collaboration. It also highlights several of the research projects including a conference on Indigenous knowledge (2004), a video project describing the community mobilisation process behind Quint Urban Housing Co-operatives,

## Introduction

This paper describes experience with research involving one of Canada's major research funding bodies, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). We have identified some of the barriers as well as some of the benefits to accessing major research funding from mainstream sources. The second half of the paper summarises one research project report which received funding. The research report describes the methodology, ethics and questions that were used in the research.

## Early organisation for bridges and foundations projects

In 2001-02 two colleagues (non-Indigenous) and I were awarded a significant SSHRC and Community University Research Agreement grant to do research on Aboriginal housing needs in Saskatoon. The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) is one of three major funding bodies within the Canadian Government. The project was named "Bridges and Foundations Project on Urban Aboriginal Housing", and was an undertaking of the Community-University Research Alliance (CURA). CURA was created in 1999 by the SSHRC as an effort to build links between universities and the extended community. Bridges and Foundations began in February 2001 with a grant from SSHRC and Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC). Mobilising support from the Aboriginal community to take part in a SSHRC proposal seemed like a fairly straightforward event. We could not have predicted the type of preparation which was to follow which ideally should have been done far in advance. Unlike other communities who hold suspicions about research (Mihesuah, 2004), the major Aboriginal organisations wrote letters of support, but that support was a polite gesture at best and an empty verbalism at worst. We were fortunate to get support from all of the major Indigenous organisations including the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations (FSIN), First Nations University of Canada (FNUC), Metis Nation of Saskatchewan (MNS) and Central Urban Metis Federation Inc. (CUMFI), Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies (SIIT), and Saskatoon and Saskatoon Tribal Council (STC). The project also enjoyed support from housing related organisations in Saskatoon including the Quint Development Corporation, Regional Home Builders' Association

(SRHBA), Saskatoon Housing Initiatives Partnership (SHIP), Social Housing Advisory Committee (SHAC), Affordable New Home Development Foundation (ANHDF), Apprenticeship and Trade Certification Commission, City of Saskatoon and the University of Saskatchewan. In my opinion, the really difficult work was to follow and we were not expecting the amount of work which was needed to make our Indigenous community true research partners.

It took a year to prepare our communities to take an active interest in our research to produce written proposals. In other words, I believe that our collective community had not been properly prepared to knowingly enter into meaningful research partnerships. Initially, we were remiss in not inviting community partners to the original drafting of the letter of intent. This has been evidenced by the fact that after we received funding, a major part of our work was spent in building interest and some research capacity within the Aboriginal community. This capacity-building meant meeting with people, helping to formulate research ideas and helping to write proposals that were respectful of the rights, attitudes, beliefs, culture and needs from an Aboriginal perspective, as well as explaining why communities need more housing research (in light of the critical state of Aboriginal housing and Aboriginal experiences and attitudes towards research). This latter issue reflects some contradictions in how funding priorities are established. In short, getting Indigenous people interested and involved in the role of research is a key component of capacity-building. The basics of this capacity-building reflect good community organising practice and are reflected in Article 10.0 of the *Guidelines for health research involving Aboriginal peoples empowerment and research capacity development* (Canadian Institute of Health Research, 2005).

Whether in the context of a research partnership or not, academic research should work to foster financial and policy support for capacity-building and governance mechanisms of Indigenous peoples to enhance their participation in research projects and improve the overall interactions between Indigenous governance mechanisms and public educational institutions at the local and national levels. Practical methods that researchers can undertake to assist in community capacity development in research skills include hiring local people and providing training as part of the research plan.

It seems simple enough to articulate. Community must understand the nature of research, appreciate its socio-economic merits and identify what research is to be undertaken. Researchers need to be collaborative when undertaking research and the research needs to be communicated back to and returned to community. As Smith notes,

In all community approaches process – that is, methodology and method – is highly important. In many projects the process is far more important than the outcome. Processes are expected to be respectful, to enable people, to heal and to educate. They are expected to lead one small step further towards self-determination (1999, p. 128).

Another challenge we faced on our SSHRC project was the time between the announcement of the research funding and the date that the proposal had to be in. There was no time to factor in adequate community consultation. This makes the case for establishing ongoing working relationships with the extended non-academic community. I am aware of how most Indigenous communities view research in general. However, the SSHRC experience reinforced my belief that the communities in greatest need of research were the ones that required thoughtful and respectful mobilisation, capacity-building and the development of respectful partnerships. Capacity-building has been clearly identified by some Indigenous peoples as a liberating event. Capacity-building first of all means recognising paternalistic attitudes and practices and identifying the vastness of information which exist within Indigenous communities. In other words, it requires working with community and strengthening the capacities and knowledge which exist within Indigenous communities. In the words of Paulo Freire (1970), we are not beginning with a blank slate. Another part of addressing paternalism is analysing and diversifying the indicators of development, which development agencies utilise. In the area of resource development within Aboriginal communities, Indigenous experts who are directly related to use of natural resources must be involved in the development of those indicators and have access to vital information regarding their communities, particularly in the area of research and development. Even though money was received, and the proposal had been accepted, the group was in a position of working on the foundation of research in the communities including relationship development and interest. In most Western research paradigms, this would have been already established and account as only a stage within the research process. Within Indigenous research, this act of relationship development which ultimately leads to trust and ownership of data and action, is foundational (fundamental) and continual throughout all stages of research.

#### ■ Community research advisors

A first step in our SHRRC project was to establish a committee of experts made up of key people in the Aboriginal community. The committee met regularly

and represented many key First Nations and Métis organisations. Initially, we used this group to request research projects. During our regular meetings, we updated committee members on the research project developments and some of the challenges that we faced. Many good research projects and new information developed because of face-to-face meetings, respectful environments and relationships. There were many steep learning curves for all involved. However, having community endorse the research was essential to community participation.

### ■ The politics of research

The politics of research is seldom broached. In order for Indigenous peoples to survive and create a nurturing environment in academia and research, one is often required to question the status quo of mainstream academia. A medical doctor colleague states “we need a new ethics of how we use or do medicine within our communities”. It is also an issue of demanding our rightful place and the resources to exist within the academy. However, challenging the culture of the academy can be a very isolating experience. When Indigenous academics challenge the way of the academy, we can run the risk of being denied promotion and can suffer from being treated dismissively. Oftentimes, the goals of higher learning do not meet the needs of Indigenous communities. Indigenous academics often feel the need to challenge status quo research or research development and processes of the dominant academic culture. I had to launch an appeal when I was denied promotion during my early tenure at my university. When the case was put before the appeal committee, they were perplexed by the fact that I was denied promotion. The committee recommended promotion. Sometimes the denial for promotion is often a case where one’s work, which should include a major component of professional and community practice, does not fit into the square boxes of university requirements such as promotion criteria. As Indigenous people, our work is often judged by peers who have no understanding of the value or type of work which we choose to pursue. The people who constitute the committees which assess our work often do not have an understanding or appreciation of the nature of work which is being assessed. This is also the case when we are peer reviewed for journal articles or our project proposals are assessed for research grants. More often than not, these committees have no Indigenous members partly because Indigenous scholars on campus are few in number and highly sought after for committee work. Whether the committee work leads to institutional change or whether it is window dressing is a question that remains. Devon Mihesuah (2003, p. 22) explains:

Most minority women scholars know that (1) the academic playing field is not always level when it comes to race and gender; (2) politics of identity and power are major factors in publishing, course approval, hiring, merit, and promotion decisions; (3) identity and power politics exist among Natives within the realm of American Indigenous studies; and (4) when we complain about racism in the curriculum and in promotion processes – no matter how legitimate the claim – we often are labeled the problem.

Since making our way into the halls of academia, my colleagues and I have experienced the slow road to indigenisation of curricula and workplace. Often we have been accused by other members of the Aboriginal community of being brown people doing the white peoples’ work. If academia is to be one of our chosen paths, how do we use it to prepare our students and which materials do we use? Curriculum production is a slow and isolating job, which requires resources, time and institutional support. The trends at most mainstream universities do not support Indigenous research. Many Aboriginal academics are expected to sit on university equity committees to advise peers only to have their advice fall on deaf ears. Most of the “spadework” research needs of Indigenous communities are overshadowed by research agendas of the corporate sector who are driving the agenda at Canadian universities. Community workshops on needs identification, research and proposal writing need to be prioritised. Communities need to know what research funds exist and where to look for them. Researchers who are not from our community need to work respectfully as equals, not directing but listening and following. If we desire to do community research then we have to be prepared for a process that is more complex, time-consuming and may not always be what we, the researchers, want. Within Indigenous scholarship, the quest for Indigenous knowledge systems has become a rallying cry for all things Indigenous. Indigenous scholars have begun focusing their research on child-rearing, traditional governance, the environment, midwifery and more. It has been described as unshackling our selves from colonialism and a strong call for sovereignty and self-determination. Kovach (2005, p. 31) elaborates:

Indigenous researchers are equally subjected to this systems, but we can only get so far before we see a face-our Elder cleaning fish, our sister living on the edge in East Vancouver, our brother hunting elk for the feast, our little ones in foster care-and hear a voice whispering, “are you helping us?” This is where Indigenous methodology must meet the criteria of collective responsibility and accountability. In protocols for Indigenous research, this is a central theme. As Indigenous



research enters the academy, this principle needs to stay up close and personal.

Many Canadian universities do not have a critical mass of Aboriginal scholars, which makes the academic experience very isolating and very demanding. But it is more than just having the numbers within the academy. Shifts within thinking have to include not just Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing but must include how knowledge is produced and transmitted. Indigenous peoples need to be present on committees that identify research goals and make decisions on who will receive funding, thereby driving knowledge production. As Bogdan & Biklen (1998, p. 212) highlights, community participation in research is one of the central tenets of participatory research:

In participatory action research, the research is done on a program or policy, like a literacy program for rural farm workers, with the researchers and the literacy workers or the program staff collaborating on the design and process of research. People in the program, regardless of their status, participate in the different aspects of the research effort. The purpose is to improve the program or policy.

### ■ Project sample

The Bridges and Foundations Project was the first Indigenous-led research project which benefited predominantly Indigenous researchers and their communities. Throughout the life of the Bridges and Foundations Project, some 35 projects received funding, including 10 internships and six scholarships. What follows is a summary of the report of one of the research projects called *Shelter needs of Aboriginal women fleeing violence in Saskatoon, looking for a safe place for my family*.

The report reflected the voices of 25 Aboriginal women fleeing violence in Saskatoon, two non-Aboriginal women fleeing violence, 14 agencies and organisations that work with or refer Aboriginal women fleeing violence in Saskatoon, and three Aboriginal elders. These participants comprised of extended family, mothers, grandmothers, and friends. Our main objective in the research study was to find out more about the current capacity of Saskatoon to shelter Aboriginal women fleeing violence and the specific shelter needs of Aboriginal women fleeing. In our initial literature search, we found that there was limited research indicating the current capacity of Saskatoon to house Aboriginal women fleeing violence. There was also limited information on specific shelter needs for Aboriginal women. What we were able to find was an abundance of people interested in discussing the capacity of Saskatoon to meet the needs

of Aboriginal women fleeing violence and discuss the physical and programme components needed in a shelter for Aboriginal women fleeing violence. The report addressed the voices, opinions, concerns and recommendations on a shelter for Aboriginal women fleeing violence in Saskatoon. What the report does not speak to is why women entered the shelter and what women thought of each shelter. As researchers we felt that with the limited timelines and a complicated and sensitive issue, it could not have been addressed appropriately or respectfully. Therefore, we limited our research to specifics dealing with capacity and components of a shelter. As researchers, we did not have the time within the project to exhaust all the important organisations, agencies and people who are working very hard to meet the needs of Aboriginal women fleeing violence. However, the report hopes to give the reader a broad view of the current capacity of Saskatoon to shelter Aboriginal women fleeing violence and the shelter needs of Aboriginal women fleeing violence.

This report is written for those who contributed to the project and those organisations, agencies, and service providers who currently provide services to Aboriginal women fleeing violence, and agencies and organisations who plan to provide services to Aboriginal women. The report utilises the voices of the women, organisations and agency personnel with whom the researchers held interviews and conducted focus groups. We highlighted the voices of the participants by placing the text in italics. This information makes up the bulk of the report. As researchers, we have strived to ensure the voice of the people affected by service or lack of service is paramount in this document. Their voice is integral for further development in the area of shelters for Aboriginal women. Also, in keeping with our methodology of community-based research and our teachings from First Nations, we listened to the people who are talking to us, they are the ones who have the experience, knowledge and vision for what they need. As several women said, "Our stories matter, our voices are heard". Throughout the report we do not use specific names of people or organisations. The two main researchers were both employees of the First Nations University of Canada and both endorse community-based methodologies that build capacity in the community and encourage each individual to speak for themselves in the research process in the community. All research assistants hired for the project were First Nations and are students of First Nations University of Canada.

### ■ Methodology

This research project was based on the principles of community-based research which include the community being involved in the development, implementation, and analysis of the project. Therefore,

throughout this project many efforts were made to include participants in the research process and activities that sought their input in a non-judgmental and welcoming way. Focus groups and personal interviews were conducted to gather a majority of information for this report.

### ■ Ethics

After a brief literature review, the researchers sought ethical approval from the University of Regina Ethics Board, December 2004. After approval, the researchers embarked on a month of interviews and focus groups. The ethics that guided the project included TIPI teaching and the ethical guidelines outlined by University of Regina Research Ethics Board. Consent forms were used for personal interviews and focus groups. This consent form allowed for participants to have choice in the research process. The participants can decide to partake or not and can choose to exit the research at any time. This is an important aspect in respectful research that educates the participants of their rights as a participant and the right to make a choice, without penalty from those conducting research. Particularly in focus groups, group consent was signed to encourage confidentiality within the group.

### ■ Questions guiding the research

Questions for the research were developed with the Bridges and Foundations mission in mind to research Aboriginal housing in Saskatoon. Given this mission our goal was to develop questions that would help us find out the current capacity of Saskatoon to meet the shelter needs of Aboriginal women fleeing violence and also find out what physical and programming components Aboriginal women feel they need to make a shelter comfortable. With two main stakeholders, agency and Aboriginal women, we asked very similar questions to allow for consistency in analysis and we developed open-ended questions that fostered the vision of participants answering the question. Qualitative methods of focus group and personal interviews were used to encourage and nurture the voices of Aboriginal women fleeing violence and encourage organisations and agencies who work with Aboriginal women fleeing violence.

### ■ Who was involved in the research?

The researchers gathered information from those who had a vested interest in discussing Aboriginal women fleeing violence and Saskatoon's shelter capacity to meet the needs of Aboriginal women fleeing violence. The researchers contacted agencies and organisations that specifically dealt with Aboriginal women fleeing violence and Aboriginal women fleeing violence who

were already housed in a shelter, were thinking of going to a shelter, had moved away from a shelter or were the extended family of those who had been in a shelter.

### ■ How was the data collected?

#### *Focus groups*

Four focus groups were conducted in total. Three focus groups were done with Aboriginal women fleeing violence and one focus group with agencies working with Aboriginal women fleeing violence. To engage organisations to take part in the focus groups, letters were sent out, followed by personal phone calls assessing their interest and inviting them to discuss the current capacity of Saskatoon to meet the shelter needs of Aboriginal women fleeing violence and the components that would make Aboriginal women comfortable in a shelter. For Aboriginal women in the focus groups, we spoke with people within the shelters and put up posters encouraging them to attend a focus group discussing the needs of Aboriginal women in a shelter. The data collected throughout these meetings were analysed using a constant comparative analysis. This allowed for several themes to emerge from the responses. It should be noted that the community relationships that the researchers already had were paramount to the success and willingness of the community. Working within the helping field allowed the researchers to utilise their experience and connections in reducing the time required for the project. Most community-based projects will spend as much time creating relationships to begin the research process as they do implementing the instrument.

Opening and closing prayers guided each of the focus groups. Meals and snacks were provided in each focus group. To encourage responses, questions were asked in a circle encouraging participants to answer without judgment or criticism, as well the UNICEF method was used, where we asked each participant to write down three suggestions on a small piece of paper for a shelter that would make them comfortable. Then the suggestions are pasted on a flipchart paper. This process allows for equitable responses from all participants and supports more discussion and brainstorming on their suggestions.

#### *Interviews*

Personal interviews were conducted with agencies, Aboriginal women fleeing violence, and elders. The interviews were one-on-one and took approximately 1–1.5 hours. The researchers were accommodating, ensuring that all interviews took place in a location agreed upon by the participant. Each participant was

required to sign a consent form before beginning. Interviews were based upon the opinions and recommendations of a shelter for Aboriginal women fleeing violence. Confidentiality and anonymity was stressed.

### ■ Literature review

A literature review was conducted by the researchers before and during the research study. This involved developing a search strategy that included some key terms such as Aboriginal women, violence, family violence, shelters, programmes for Aboriginal women in violence, First Nations women and violence, and many organisations that provide services for women fleeing violence. There was an abundance of literature on women fleeing violence, however, limited literature was found that specifically dealt with shelter needs and specifically with Aboriginal women.

### ■ Methodological strengths

A majority of the research took place in face-to-face interviews and focus groups where the most spontaneous perceptive information was gathered. The research team consistently utilised the community-based approach for the research project. As stated earlier, the research strategy was mostly qualitative and participatory to engage individuals in a process that allowed feedback on their perceptions of Aboriginal women fleeing violence in Saskatoon. The advantage to the focus groups was the open response format, which provided an opportunity to obtain large amounts of data in the respondent's words. In addition, it also provided opportunities for respondents to react to, and build upon, the responses of others. This format allowed for deeper meanings and deeper connections.

### ■ Findings

The results of the research indicated that although there are specific services in Saskatoon for Aboriginal women, there still remain many Aboriginal women who are not able to access the shelters because they are full or the shelters are not meeting their programming needs or are not large enough to accommodate their family size. The research also indicated considerable support for an Aboriginal men's shelter that lends itself to a holistic approach that many Aboriginal people use to treat the family; to also treat the man. This philosophy resonated throughout the research as women were working towards healing for themselves, children and partners.

How should the shelter look? The responses leaned towards a very inclusive and harmonious physical structure that nurtures growth, privacy, large rooms to accommodate the large families, visitor's space,

and importantly, a prayer room where women can have quiet time or smudge, and women can practice their culture in a comfortable space. Programmes were plentiful and projected a holism for the clients that included programming for the women in physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual domains as well as making this programming available to the children and men.

The researchers received very good cooperation from community members in providing their input and suggestions. Our intention as researchers was to share the information to those who contributed, requesting feedback and clarification. Dissemination meetings were held for all those who participated in the research process. An important part of community-based research and respectful research was ensuring those who participated were aware of the information collected and the analysis of information. More paramount was the way the main researchers were presenting the information; in a respectful manner and through the voice of the participants and their recommendations. After this point the report was released to the Saskatoon community inviting all those who contributed and who have an interest in service for Aboriginal women fleeing violence.

Overall, the research project collected an abundance of useful data, experiences, and stories that supported another shelter and very specific components that are reflective of the needs of Aboriginal women accessing a shelter. We regret that not all data is presented in this document but it will be very useful in further research and discussions around Aboriginal women's needs in a shelter and the capacity of Saskatoon to meet the needs of Aboriginal women fleeing violence.

### ■ Conclusion

The Bridges and Foundations Project faced many challenges. Research protocols and methodologies that are respectful of Indigenous communities are a prerequisite. Though there is a need for partnerships, there is also a need for Aboriginal scholars and community people to direct their own research. As an Aboriginal academic and a director for the Bridges and Foundations Project, I felt an allegiance more to the community than to the private sector or to the academy. To address the marginalisation that I believe many Aboriginal community-based researchers experience, there is an urgent need for opportunities for First Nations and Aboriginal communities to acquire research and development funds autonomously. Some would call this research sovereignty. The Bridges and Foundations Project did not identify an adequate gender perspective and therefore inadequately addressed the needs of Aboriginal women, many of whom represent sole support of families with children. At a local level and similar to a sister project the University of

Saskatchewan's Community University Institute for Social Research (CUISR), the Aboriginal community might have been invited to participate in the selection of research projects. This would have assured more accountability to and been more inclusive of community and would have meant a broader range of applications.

Culturally, Aboriginal people live more collective realities than individualistic ones. This fact has to be considered when research topics are decided. Theoretically, research is intended to benefit communities. However, more often than not, individuals with established research history are chosen. They do not represent marginalised communities where the greatest need for development is felt. Good research can lead to important public policy development within the governmental context. Currently most public policies disregard the Aboriginal communities, and escalating Aboriginal poverty is testimony to this fact. An example of this is that Aboriginal communities, particularly in the north continue to provide raw materials through the mining and forestry sector, while Aboriginal poverty continues.

Despite the shortcomings of the Bridges and Foundations Project, we believe some valuable research was produced and valuable lessons were learned. Vital links and relationships were developed between members of the community that were not possible before this project. The sharing of information, initially the primary goal of the project, was to build relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organisations that would foster communities that were both culturally accommodating and affordable. But like all scholarship, the journey can take twists and turns before the final product is arrived at.

Working as three very different partners was at times difficult and stressful. The three partners had very different ideas of how the project should proceed and who should enjoy the benefits of research dollars. We overcame many hurdles, and in the end, the research was a compromise by all partners. Most importantly, the Bridges and Foundations Project made great strides in building trust and relationships between the Aboriginal communities, the universities, the city, local community organisations and the homebuilders. Ultimately, comprehensive cooperation characterised by this project was innovative, perhaps not only in Saskatoon but also other Canadian cities. Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organisations and people eventually recognised the merits of such collaboration. Another important outcome has been to empower Aboriginal people to gain more control over their destiny through participation in decision-making and by being heard. It is important that this project should not be seen as yet another research project using Aboriginal people as subjects without involving them in original decisions. We believe that the project helped to develop research capacity especially among

the Aboriginal community. The quantity and quality of research projects attests to the success of this unique project. The project proved that there is room for partnerships in the research and development world between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. We are somewhat interdependent, and true partnerships can build healthy communities and a form of education for both communities. While this process takes more time and is more labour intensive, I believe that it will accomplish more in the area of Indigenous research sovereignty and community development.

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