




# **ACCESSIBILITY SERVICES (ST. GEORGE CAMPUS) RESPONSE TO THE UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO CALLS TO ACTION ON TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION**



An aerial photograph of a large, calm lake surrounded by a dense forest of evergreen and deciduous trees. The sky is overcast with soft, grey clouds. In the foreground, a white line enters from the top left, curves diagonally across the upper portion of the image, and then loops back down towards the bottom left corner, creating a stylized, abstract graphic element.

Accessibility Services wishes to acknowledge the considerable efforts of the many individuals who contributed to the development and implementation of our office's response to the UofT Calls to Action and Truth and (Re)conciliation.

First, we are grateful of the support and contributions of Michael White (Director, Indigenous Student Services - First Nations House), Bonnie Jane Maracle (Traditional Teacher, First Nations House) and Heather Kelly (Executive Director, Student Life Programs and Services).

Second, we would like to acknowledge the entire Accessibility Services EDIA Committee as well as Erin Marin (Indigenous Student Liaison), Elizabeth Jeffrey (Indigenous Accessibility Advisor), Jennifer Stewart, Irene Sullivan, Mira Ali, Morghan Brett, Reshma Dhrodia, Reginald Oey, Suzette McLarty, Adina Burden, Sarah Kloke, Hannah Jackson and Michael Mercer.

# INTRODUCTION

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For those of us who are settlers on turtle island, we would all agree that the disability/accessibility service profession has a critical role and responsibility in the journey towards Truth and (Re)conciliation with Indigenous peoples. With cultural humility as a guiding principle, Accessibility Services at the University of Toronto has been making critical efforts to begin this journey. This report outlines the steps taken.

One of the first steps we took as a service was to gather data and context to better understand the students we serve and support. For the first time, in the 2019-2020 Accessibility Services student survey, students registered with the office were asked to identify their racial and cultural identity. The survey suggests between 2.5% to 3.5% of students registered with Accessibility Services reported having an Indigenous identity (100 to 150 students). Quantitative and qualitative feedback revealed that while most Indigenous students tended to view their relationship and interactions with their Accessibility Advisor as being positive, these students also reported that they utilized their advisor more frequently than other registered students. This suggests

that unique systemic, cultural and other barriers exist for Indigenous students that need to be understood and addressed in ongoing efforts toward Truth and (Re)conciliation and that cultural safety and Indigenous perspectives of Health and Wellness need to be at the forefront of our work.<sup>1</sup>


A second step was to explore and better understand the intersection of Indigeneity and 'disability' with an effort toward decolonization of the service. Through a framework of cultural humility<sup>2</sup>, Accessibility Services has begun the process of acknowledging and addressing the reality that racist and colonial mindsets remain entrenched in the 'disability' accommodation support process, in ways that are obvious and in ways that are subtle and unquestioned.

<sup>1</sup> Cultural safety includes an understanding of what health and wellness means to First Nations. The First Nations Perspective on Health and Wellness articulates a holistic vision of wellness. First Nations recognize that good health and wellness starts with every human being and extends outward to include broader social, economic, cultural and environmental determinants of health and wellness." Cultural safety includes an understanding of what health and wellness means to First Nations. The First Nations Perspective on Health and Wellness articulates a holistic vision of wellness. First Nations recognize that good health and wellness starts with every human being and extends outward to include broader social, economic, cultural and environmental determinants of health and wellness.

<sup>2</sup> Cultural humility is a process of self-reflection to understand personal and systemic biases and to develop and maintain respectful processes and relationships based on mutual trust. Cultural humility involves humbly acknowledging oneself as a learner when it comes to understanding another's experience.



Jen Deerinwater, a Bisexual, Two Spirit, Disabled, and mixed race Tsalagi-a citizen of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, with ‘several degrees from overpriced Universities’ [outlines this in an essay from March 2019:](#)


 *I'll admit though that I'm angry and deeply saddened by how many of you repeatedly ignore the disability and healthcare justice needs for Indigenous people. On January 13, 2019 I tweeted a thread holding each of you accountable to Native disability justice. The U.S. was in the middle of its longest shutdown ever and many Native people, myself included, were going without full healthcare yet I didn't see much in the way of support from the disability community.*

*It's not uncommon for Indigenous people to be overlooked in movement work and life. I never cease to be amazed at how ignorant people are about those whose land they occupy. It hurts to not be seen or valued. I know many of you can relate in some way, but it's especially problematic that you're choosing to ignore the needs of those whose lands you occupy. I understand the multitude of reasons that brought you to [Turtle Island](#), and that not all of you are here of your choosing, but the fact remains that this land has been the home of Indigenous people since time immemorial and as guests you need to honor this."*

While we often focus on the accomplishments and the positive change to lives our work as a profession brings on a daily basis, at the same time we have to engage in the uncomfortable realities that voices such as Jen Deerinwater bring forward about our failures and the

damages our actions and inactions cause; these voices compel us toward introspection, learning/unlearning and proactive change.

A third step in this journey toward meaningful change is an acknowledgement of ‘disability’ as a western medical-legal concept that deeply infuses the work of accessibility accommodation and support profession worldwide. This paradigm focuses on the perceived limitations an individual has in comparison to others and uses these so called ‘deficits’ to identify and define the person (and by extension defines the support or ‘work’ we are to do with a student). This paradigm can be antithetical to Indigenous values, teachings and worldviews that focus on the value and benefit an individual brings to their community. As Dr. Rheanna Robinson from the Department of First Nations Studies at the [University of Northern BC](#) notes:

 *It's essential to acknowledge that Indigenous people have traditionally held different perspectives about persons living with disability. I have learned that there are traditional [Indigenous] languages that do not have a word for ‘disability’ or ‘disabled’. ‘Disability’ did not define someone's identity. Within traditional Indigenous views of physical, sensory, psychiatric, cognitive, neurological, or intellectual impairments, differentiation from able-bodied individuals did not exist. The attributes and gifts one brought to the world did not include a disability identity and one's relational role in the community always prevailed."*

As the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) noted:



*For over a century, the central goals of Canada's Aboriginal policy were to eliminate Aboriginal governments; ignore Aboriginal rights; terminate the Treaties; and, through a process of assimilation, cause Aboriginal peoples to cease to exist as distinct legal, social, cultural, religious, and racial entities in Canada.<sup>2</sup>*

With all of the above in mind, Accessibility Services began our own journey in 2019 toward Truth and Reconciliation. Two fundamental UofT documents have guided our work:

- [“Answering the Call Wecheehetowin: Final Report of the Steering Committee for the University of Toronto Response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada \(2017\)”](#)
- [Call to Action: Truth and Reconciliation, University of Toronto \(2020\)](#)

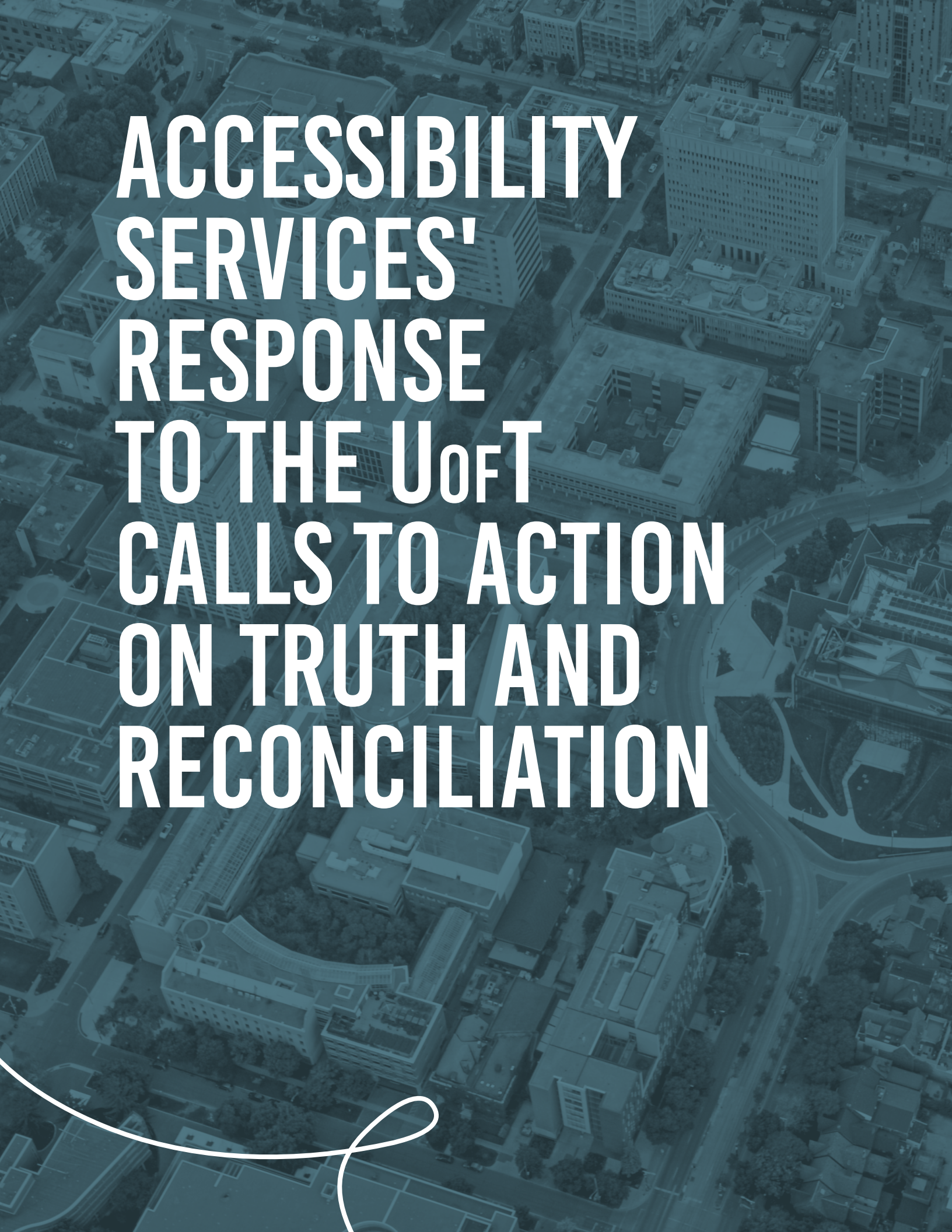
The following report frames the efforts of Accessibility Services within the UofT's 34 'Calls to Action' to the community. It is important to note that this report does not represent the end of our efforts, but rather it is the end of the beginning of our efforts. There is still much, much work and change that needs to be accomplished, and we look forward to continuing this journey as a service.

#### Miigwetch


- Composed by Michael Nicholson (Director of Accessibility Services, St. George Campus), a cis gender male, white settler originally from the Kawartha Lakes Region, which is situated on Mississauga lands and the traditional territory covered by the [Williams Treaties](#).

<sup>3</sup> pg. 9 [rsi.ubc.ca/sites/default/files/inline-files/Executive\\_Summary\\_English\\_Web.pdf](https://rsi.ubc.ca/sites/default/files/inline-files/Executive_Summary_English_Web.pdf) A fourth step is to celebrate the resilience, culture and history of the Indigenous people of Canada and to honour the achievements and contributions of Indigenous people to our University and our work as an office and a service.



An aerial photograph of a city, likely Toronto, with a blue overlay. The text is centered and reads: 

# ACCESSIBILITY SERVICES' RESPONSE TO THE UoFT CALLS TO ACTION ON TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION

A white decorative line, resembling a stylized 'e' or a swirl, is located in the bottom left corner of the image.

# CALLS TO ACTION #1–5: INDIGENOUS SPACES

1. The University should actively explore the creation of significant dedicated Indigenous space on the St. George campus.
2. A strategy for the funding and placement of more Indigenous public art across all three campuses should be developed, in close consultation with local Indigenous communities.
3. The University should begin planning immediately for the creation of dedicated, appropriate Indigenous spaces on the UTM and UTSC campuses.
4. The University should launch a process to identify and name appropriate spaces on the three campuses using Indigenous languages.
5. All renovation and new construction on campus should take smudging into consideration in the design process.

Accessibility Services recognizes and affirms the importance of Indigenous Students seeing themselves visibly represented and welcomed into our space as a critical effort In Truth and Reconciliation. The following are the efforts that have taken place in this critical area.

## Gift of the Stars

In 202-23, Accessibility Services identified the Indigenization of space as one of our top priorities. Indigenous staff, in consultation with Indigenous students registered with the service, set about to identify an artist who could create an artistic piece to be placed at the main entrance into the office. The artist

was asked to work from a theme that took into account the intersection of disability and Indigeneity.

After extensive discussion and consultation, Accessibility Services commissioned Wiishkoonseh Miigizi'enh (Nyle Miigizi Johnston) to create an artistic piece. The result was *Gift of the Stars* which was unveiled in 2023. The artwork tells the Anishinaabeg story of a grandmother and grandson watching the stars and learning that everyone is born perfect, with a very special gift to offer the community. The piece focusses on Indigenous values and culture, particularly as it relates to the dignity and



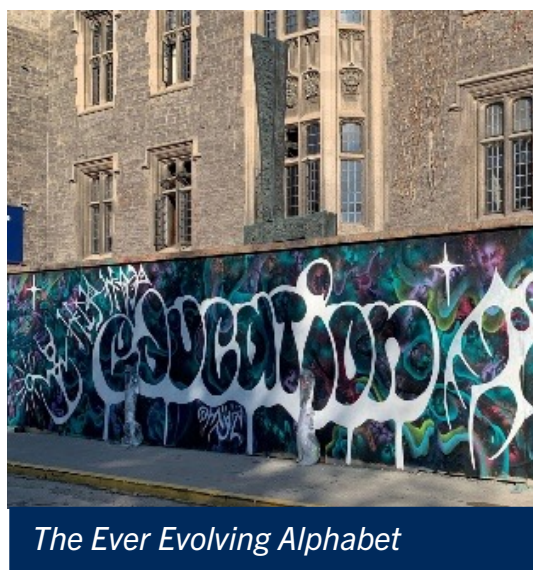


value of all persons and the celebration of our natural human diversity in all its forms.

## nanda-gikendan Programming Space

In 2022, Accessibility Services was fortunate enough to expand its office footprint, which allowed the service for the first time ever to be able to offer in person programming within the Accessibility Services space.

The expansion provided a valuable opportunity to name our new programming area, and consistent with our Indigenization of space initiative, it was decided that the space would be called the 'nanda-gikendan room'. This draws on an Anishinaabemowin word meaning 'seek to know it, seek to learn it' and opened for use in Spring of 2023. In our efforts toward learning (and unlearning) in this space we hope to honour the principles and values that the name holds.



## Stories of Creation

In 2022, panelling was placed outside Hart House as part of a renovation project occurring at the building. The panelling featured artwork by Nyle Miigizi Johnston called *The Ever Evolving Alphabet*.

The following is a description by the artist:

*This mural is a visual representation of hip hop using graffiti as the medium. It's a modern contemporary celebration that mixes artistic concepts with visual cues. Imagery has a long history of portraying messages and narratives for Black and Indigenous people across the globe, and hip hop is a beautiful way for these communities to present new genres of art and stay connected to each other. Thousands of*



*years ago, carving on rocks as pictographs and hieroglyphics acted as their own form of graffiti; I want to honour this continuing legacy of storytelling.*

Upon completion of the project, several panels were repurposed into an art installation called *Stories of Creation* – a series of 8 panels placed around the nanda-gikendan programming space at Accessibility Services. The panels cut from the original plywood mural feature drawings of medicinal plants and animals, inspired by Indigenous teachings. Each CNC-cut circle embodies Johnston's commitment to love and healing, reflecting the continuum at the heart of his practice: evolving knowledge, art and community. This work celebrates the intersection of cultures and traditions, creating a dialogue between past and present storytelling.



*Stories of Creation*

## Smudging

In 2023, Accessibility Services created an area in the main reception area, immediately in front of the *Gift of the Stars* installation, where smudging is available. Students are invited to smudge upon entry into the space.

### About Wiishkoonseh Miigizi-enh (Nyle Miigizi Johnson):

"My spirit name Wiishkoonseh Miigizi'enh means Whistling White Headed Eagle. I grew up in Chippewas of Nawash Unceded First Nation and I have apprenticed with Storytellers since I was young. I have a responsibility to continue this legacy for the healing of my own people while connecting to the broader world. Sources of my artistic inspiration include woodland painters, Story Tellers, and the traditions of my culture. In a time of reconciliation, it is important for all people to know that we exist and have such a strong, beautiful legacy of stories and teachings from the Anishinaabe Nation that are grounded in my experience and identity."

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO  
STUDENT LIFE | Accessibility Services

## NOTICE OF SMUDGING

We wish to acknowledge this land on which the University of Toronto operates. For thousands of years it has been the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and the Mississaugas of the Credit. Today, this land is still the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work on this land.

Smudging is an Indigenous ceremony passed down through generations and engaged in by many First Nations people. It involves the burning of sweet grass, sage, and/or cedar. The burning of sacred medicines creates a small plume of smoke and aroma that is used to purify the body, mind and personal or ceremonial space and to release any negative thoughts, energy and emotions.

Under Section 13 of the Ontario Smoke Free Act smudging, the use of tobacco, the smoking of tobacco or holding, lighting tobacco by First Nations and Métis persons for traditional First Nations and Métis cultural or spiritual purposes are permitted. [www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/13/25f8/EN/25f8\\_017](http://www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/13/25f8/EN/25f8_017)

For more information on smudging, please email: [indigenous.accessibility@utoronto.ca](mailto:indigenous.accessibility@utoronto.ca) or call (416) 978-0774.

# CALLS TO ACTION #10: CULTURAL AWARENESS TRAINING

10. The Vice-President, Human Resources and Equity should assess existing Indigenous cultural awareness training programs at the University, and launch a discussion across the divisions as to how best to ensure equity and cultural sensitivity amongst faculty, staff, and students.

## Indigenous Cultural Competency Training

Accessibility Services staff engaged in a full day Indigenous Cultural Competency session in 2018 led by John Crouch, from the Office of Indigenous Initiatives. Indigenous cultural competency refers to an effort to recognize, comprehend and appreciate the values, traditions and belief systems of Indigenous peoples that may be markedly different from one's own. Ongoing training of new staff members will continue as our team changes and grows.

A "Blanket Exercise" training is planned for Spring 2025 where staff can renew and further enrich their learning and unlearning.

## Land Acknowledgements and Indigenous Openings

Accessibility Services has committed to ensuring that its meetings and programming begin with meaningful land acknowledgements and have included

Indigenous Openings into our public facing work, including our annual Strengthening Accessibility and Inclusion in Professional Programs Conference and our Open Mic Nights for the community.

## Psychoeducational testing requirements from a lens of Indigenous Students

Accessibility Services organized and facilitated a presentation in February 2021 to the Inter-University Disability Issues Association, Ontario (IDIA) by an Indigenous Psychologist (Melanie Nelson, UBC) who discussed systemic bias and barriers in testing for students with learning disabilities. We continue to work on the teaching and feedback from this session to critically look at bias and systemic barriers for Indigenous students in psychoeducational testing, as well as barriers in our own approaches and systems that stand in the way of genuine accessibility and inclusion for all students.



# CALLS TO ACTION #14: INDIGENOUS STAFF MEMBERS

14. The University should work actively to increase the number of Indigenous staff members who support important programs, especially those designed to revitalize and strengthen Aboriginal languages, and those that support Indigenous students.

As part of its efforts towards answering this Call, Accessibility Services has created two new roles within the service, with funding assistance provided by the Provost and Vice-Provost Students, University of Toronto. Through these new roles, Accessibility Services aims to provide a safe, caring, respectful and culturally supportive environment for Indigenous students with disabilities. [studentlife.utoronto.ca/service/accessibility-services-supports-for-indigenous-students](https://studentlife.utoronto.ca/service/accessibility-services-supports-for-indigenous-students)

## Indigenous Student Liaison Role

In 2020, Accessibility Services created the “Indigenous Student Liaison Role.” Erin Martin is the first individual holding this role, and works as part of the front line team at Accessibility Services. Her main role is to provide a culturally appropriate pathway for Indigenous students interested in registering and accessing services. She works at the main office at 455 Spadina Ave. Erin is a

Mohawk woman and member of the wolf clan whose family hails from Six Nations. Erin was raised in Tkaronto on Dish with One Spoon Territory and has over 11 years of experience assisting individuals from the First Nations community, primarily working on the front lines within First Nations mental health and addictions centres.

## Indigenous Accessibility Advisor Role

This role provides students with the opportunity to work one on one with an Indigenous advisor who can provide culturally appropriate and relevant support with significant knowledge of Indigenous communities and lived experiences. Elizabeth Jeffrey is our first Indigenous Accessibility Advisor, working ‘on location’ at First Nations House, University of Toronto. Liz is of Ojibway and French ancestry and is a member of Fort Albany First Nation. Elizabeth grew up off reserve in Kenora, Ontario in the Treaty 3 area. Elizabeth

completed her Master of Science in Occupational Therapy at McMaster University in 2003. Elizabeth brings to the team over 10 years of experience as a community-based Occupational Therapist as well as 5+ years in accessibility advising.

In introducing this new advisor role, Accessibility Services has been careful to recognize that many students have strong relationships built on trust and mutual respect with their current advisors, and that shifting over to another advisor may be disruptive and unwanted by Indigenous students. As such decisions have been left to students themselves as to how they would like to proceed. For this reason, the Indigenous Accessibility Advisor role often supports other advisors in understanding funding considerations & letters of supports (i.e. IDC-SISLP, RCL letters for Band Funded students) and recommends connections Indigenous students can make within First Nations House (FNH).

Accessibility Services has also recognized the importance of this role participating fully and actively in the UofT Indigenous Community, including the following events:

**Wandering Spirit School Pow Wow**

**FNH Student Orientation**

**Supporting FNH staff with Indigenous Education Week events**

**Attendance at full moon fires**

**FNH staff retreats**

**Buffalo Skull Presentation - Gift from Toronto Metropolitan University**

**Indigenous Graduation Event**

**Collaboration with First Nations House Indigenous Peer Mentorship Program**



# CALLS TO ACTION #25: BARRIERS FOR INDIGENOUS STUDENTS

25. The Provost should strike a working group to investigate barriers to access for Indigenous students, examining undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs.

Accessibility Services as part of its efforts toward truth and reconciliation acknowledges that we are working with students in our institutions that are experiencing intergenerational trauma from residential schools, the 60's scoop and what the [Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#) has called a 'cultural genocide against Indigenous peoples' that has taken place over hundreds of years. And yet, the first step in registering with a postsecondary Accessibility Services office is the provision of medical documentation from a "qualified" and licensed health professional working in the western medical model of disability.


While we affirm our support for Indigenous students reconnecting with their culture, their language and their traditions in theory, the reality is we often perpetuate and reinforce a process that is biased toward non-Indigenous persons, minimizes or discredits Indigenous lived experiences

and discourages connection and access to traditional Healers and Elders. A new approach is needed. [The First Nations Health Authority of British Columbia](#) (the only such provincial organization of its kind) notes that *"the traditional wellness vision is to improve the mental, emotional, spiritual and physical wellbeing of First Nations, while strengthening the traditional health care system through a partnership between traditional healer practitioners and the Western medical system."*

In other words western health practices can play a critical role, but in balance and with respect for traditional healing and treatment practices. As such we have to ensure we support and encourage Indigenous students to continue working within the communities and their healing traditions.

## Documentation for Elders, Healers:

In 2022 Accessibility Services began reviewing documentation requirements with a goal of identifying a pathway for registration with the service that welcomes context from Indigenous Elders, Healers and others recognized within the Indigenous Community as providing critical health related supports. Consultation took place with local Indigenous leaders and elders, resulting in an entirely new documentation form designed for and with these community healers in mind.

 <b>UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO</b>		<b>Accessibility Services (AS) Functional Challenges/Limitations Form</b>	
<b>SECTION 6: OSHKAABEWIS INFORMATION (If applicable)</b>			
To be completed by the Oshkaabewis who aided a Traditional Healer, Elder, or Medicine Person in the preparation of this form and/or transcribed additional notes for the purpose of identifying the student's current functional challenges/limitations.			
<input type="checkbox"/> Additional transcribed notes attached.			
<input type="checkbox"/> No additional notes were transcribed.			
Name of Oshkaabewis (please PRINT):			
Territory/Nation:			
Signature of Provider (Ink or Digital signature accepted):			

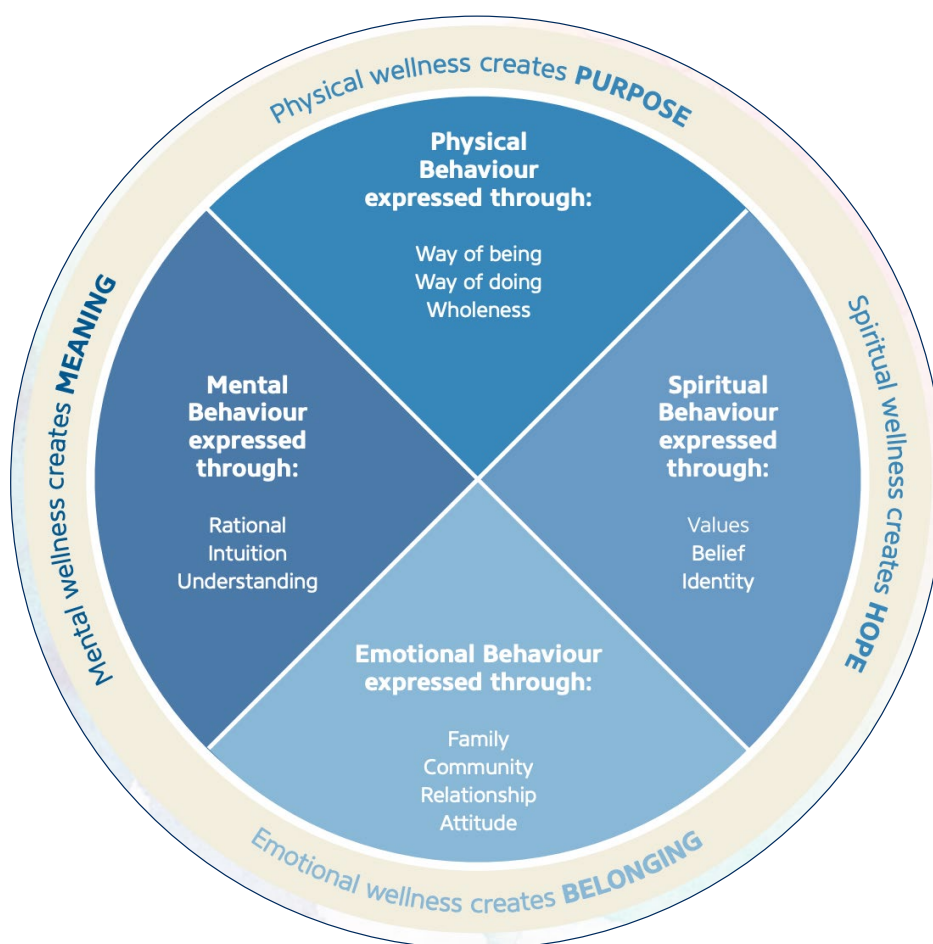


Diagram from the "Indigenous Wellness Framework Reference Guide"  
by Thunderbird Partnership Foundation



## Voluntary Self-Identification to Access Indigenous Services and Support

In January 2023, Accessibility Services added an option within its registration package that allowed Indigenous students to self-identify if they wished to do so. This now provides Indigenous students an opportunity to directly access culturally appropriate and specific pathways for registration and ongoing support. Since providing this option, over 100 students have opted to self-identify and receive support through our Indigenous Student Liaison, Indigenous Accessibility Advisor, and Indigenous Peer Guide supports.

# CALLS TO ACTION #30: MENTORING FOR INDIGENOUS STUDENTS

30. The Vice-Provost, Students should establish a working group to design a sustainable mentoring program for Indigenous students, drawing on volunteer Indigenous faculty, staff, and students to serve as mentors for first-year undergraduate Indigenous students. The program might be expanded to upper-year students as resources allow.

## Indigenous Peer Guide (Peer Mentor/Advisor Role)

This work-study position aims to expand the networking and mentoring opportunities available for Indigenous students registered with Accessibility Services. Indigenous Students will be working specifically with other Indigenous Students registered with Accessibility Services in a supportive, culturally appropriate approach.

