

# Navigating Progression and Promotion in Academic Libraries An Insight by Early Career Indigenous Librarians

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## Article abstract

This paper explores tensions faced by Indigenous librarians in Canadian academic libraries and gives a voice to the newer generation of Indigenous librarians. Indigenous librarians deal with varying expectations while navigating academia, such as serving on Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) committees and pursuing promotion in a colonial structure that may not appreciate how their time is spent in non-quantifiable ways like relationship building. This leads to the implementation of various coping strategies such as community-seeking outside of the workplace.

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# Navigating Progression and Promotion in Academic Libraries: An Insight by Early Career Indigenous Librarians

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper explores tensions faced by Indigenous librarians in Canadian academic libraries and gives a voice to the newer generation of Indigenous librarians. Indigenous librarians deal with varying expectations while navigating academia, such as serving on Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) committees and pursuing promotion in a colonial structure that may not appreciate how their time is spent in non-quantifiable ways like relationship building. This leads to the implementation of various coping strategies such as community-seeking outside of the workplace.*

**Keywords:** *academic librarianship · academic promotion · Indigenous · librarianship · tenure*

## RÉSUMÉ

*Cet article explore les tensions confrontées par les bibliothécaires autochtones dans les bibliothèques universitaires canadiennes et donne la parole à la nouvelle génération de bibliothécaires autochtones. Les bibliothécaires autochtones doivent faire face à des attentes diverses lorsqu'elles naviguent dans le monde universitaire, notamment en siégeant dans des comités sur l'équité, la diversité et l'inclusion (EDI) et en cherchant à avancer professionnellement dans des structures coloniales qui n'apprécient pas toujours le temps qu'elles consacrent à des activités non quantifiables telles que le tissage de relations interpersonnelles. Cela conduit à la mise en œuvre de diverses stratégies d'adaptation telles que la recherche d'une communauté en dehors du lieu de travail.*

*Mots-clés : Autochtone · bibliothéconomie · bibliothéconomie universitaire · permanence · promotion académique*

**K**AI<sub>A</sub> MacLeod is a member of the James Smith Cree Nation and uses the pronouns she/her/hers. She has the unique experience of coming from a library family where she is the third master's degree-holding librarian in her family. Her nation is in Saskatchewan under Treaty 6, and she was born and raised in the province next door, Alberta. Her hometown of Edmonton is under Treaty 6 and now resides and works in Calgary, Alberta under Treaty 7, at the University of Calgary.

Bethany Paul is a member of the Manitoba Métis Nation and uses she/her/hers pronouns. She was born and raised in Manitoba and Treaty 1 territory, and currently resides in Coquitlam, British Columbia, the traditional, ancestral and unceded territory of the *kʷikwəʔəm*, the Kwikwetlem First Nation, whom she thanks as the Nation continues to live on the lands and care for them, along with the waters and all that is above and below (Kwikwetlem First Nation, n.d.). She works at Capilano University with campuses located on the territories of the *xʷməθkʷəy̓əm* (Musqueam), *shíshálh* (Sechelt), *Skwxwú7mesh* (Squamish) and *səl̓ílwətaʔ*/Selilwitulh (TsleilWaututh) Nations, and an educational partnership with the *Líʔwat* (Lil'wat) Nation.

Within this paper, we discuss the various paths that can be pursued in an academic library career. As early career professionals we have engaged with different forms of service, in part due to our Indigenous heritages because our voices are seen as an added value to any committee. We also explore various coping strategies that we have employed to keep potential burnout and fatigue at bay. We have observed that throughout the course of library school, tenure continues to be seen and promoted as the “best chosen path” of academic librarianship. Through our own personal experiences, we discuss how this is not always the case and that there are multiple different paths for an early career Indigenous librarian to pursue.

## Not All Roads Lead to Tenure

### *Kaia*

Since starting library school and deciding I wanted to have a future in academic librarianship, I have thought about the prospect of tenure. For me, tenure represented the ultimate stability for a job in academia. It seemed like a far-off mountain I would climb mid-career, but I managed to get hired for a tenure-track position right out of library school. I am an assistant tenure-track librarian at the University of Calgary. There are a few things that have helped me navigate academia and the

aspect of promotion and tenure. First and foremost, I am incredibly blessed to have an Indigenous boss in Heather D'Amour, as she is extremely protective of my time in this position. As one of the Indigenous faculty members, the institution expects me to be on a lot of committees, but that would lead to burnout. As I am the inaugural Indigenous Cataloguing librarian, there was no blueprint for me to follow on how to be an Indigenous librarian.

Being the first can offer a lot of wiggle room in duties. Most people do not expect a Cataloguing Librarian to do art tours for the public or read young adult books for service, yet I have done both. I worked with a curator on the implantation of Indigenous artwork in the main library and got to expand my skillset giving tours monthly. My work with Diverse BookFinder allowed me to spend work time reading children's books to help make them discoverable for educators. On the other hand, there are some problems with being first. The prospect of a tenure application comes with locating referees who will assess my package—this means people who understand my job. These referees need to have completed promotion if not tenure at their institution, and their institution needs to have a rigorous promotion application similar to my own. On top of that, finding applicable Indigenous referees can be tough, as having a personal relationship with a referee could be enough to get them disqualified from being selected. This leaves me in the position of splitting my hypothetical list between Cataloguing librarians and Indigenous librarians.

### *Bethany*

Admittedly, I have scrutinized the prospect of “tenure” as I have progressed through my academic career. During the completion of my MLIS, a common motif for students who were pursuing careers in academic librarianship was that a tenure-track position could be considered as the ultimate placement. Before I accepted my current role as the Indigenous Teaching, Learning & Initiatives Librarian at Capilano University, I served as an Indigenous librarian at the University of Calgary for a one-year contract. I accepted this contract seeing as I had just graduated with my MLIS and was eager to begin my career. It was a full-time academic librarian position and there was the possibility of renewal of the contract if I decided to remain with the institution until a tenure-track position became available. I engaged with the same Academic Success Program as my co-author, but the more I learned of the processes of compiling a portfolio and being scrutinized by the institution in earnest of being granted tenure, the more unsure I became. I found the thought of the entire endeavor rather daunting.

While I appreciated the support of the program and my colleagues, the strict regimented structure conflicted with my own personal thoughts on academia as a

whole. As a professional, I allow my passion and casualness to be reflected within my work, how I conduct myself, and through my instruction. The rigid and formulaic methods of the tenure-track process conflicted with my ideals as a professional. The notion of being pressured to produce scholarship with regularity, rather than being able to conduct research as I desired, worried me. I had heard of how the competitive nature of attaining tenure could wear down the passion in colleagues and cause burnout. Indigenous academic professionals typically can have a lot on their plate, like many other Black, Indigenous, or People of Colour (BIPOC) professionals, in comparison to their caucasian colleagues, such as the additional weight of emotional labour. Negating the process of tenure-track became more appealing to me, especially as I began to apply to other institutions in the hopes of securing a permanent position, because I began to better understand that type of Indigenous academic librarian that I wished to be. My colleagues at Capilano University Library are exponentially supportive of me as I continue to settle into the role and make it my own. As the Indigenous Librarian, I have been assured that my voice will be heard and considered in terms of library affairs and areas.

## Engaging in EDI and Race Work in Academic Organizations

### *Kaia*

As a tenure-track employee, I sit on a few committees. I represent the library at the University Wide Indigenous Strategic Implementation Committee. Part of my job is giving an Indigenous voice, although I cannot speak for all Indigenous people. The University-wide committee has seven sub-committees, and I sit on two of them: Student Engagement as well as Spaces and Places. These sub-committees have specific projects related to the university's Indigenous strategy. For instance, the Student Engagement committee is working on an Indigenous version of the campus map to highlight Indigenous art and spaces you can smudge in. The Spaces and Places committee wants to create a digital archive to maintain all the recordings and pictures from the Indigenous Strategy. These committees are composed of people from across campus and also includes non-Indigenous people.

In terms of library-related committees, I co-chair the Indigenous Working Group. This is a brand-new committee that is looking at the library specifically, so the vast majority of the work thus far has been planning and discussions on what we could accomplish. The Metadata Committee that I sit on consists of content services, digitization, archives, and the gallery/museum. The hot topic is Indigenous subject headings and decolonization, but we are all waiting for the Library of Congress (LOC) to do the bulk of the changes. This means we are stuck in this waiting period, as we

know LOC will be changing the Indians of North America sub-heading in the next few years (Bullard 2022). Outside of my institution I am a member of the Program of Cooperative Cataloguers (PCC) Task Group for Metadata related to Indigenous Peoples of the Americas, which will be working with LOC. I recently became my university's representative on the Council of Prairie and Pacific University Libraries (COPPUL) Indigenous Knowledge Standing Committee, a commitment I will serve for two years.

One of the tough parts of all this service and committee work is that even if the committee is not about race work or EDI, your identity as a representative will inevitably come up. As we have mentioned, everyone wants you to be on everything, but there also is not enough time in the day.

### *Bethany*

Upon joining the library team at my institution, the Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) committee was one of the first that I joined. As the only Indigenous librarian, I personally felt that it was necessary that I participate in such a committee as soon as I was able to. For context, the following are some of the values and purposes of the committee and why it is vital work for many BIPOC librarians: to provide a dedicated opportunity for units within the Library to work together and develop holistic responses to EDI issues while deepening preexisting EDI work already established within the Library; to make visible, recognize and celebrate the work that many marginalized students, staff, and faculty members already undertake alongside their regularly assigned duties; and lastly, the commitment to the continuous development of knowledge, skills, and capacities to engage in EDI work. These principles and ideals are some that I hold dear and aspire to not only as an Indigenous librarian, but as a professional.

Beyond the scope of Capilano University Library, I am also involved with the development of the Indigenous Education Framework, the formation of an Indigenous Studies Program, the development of respectful Elder communication protocols, the deliberation for a Decolonization, Reconciliation, and Indigenization Bargaining Proposal, and the formation of an Indigenous faculty discussion group. In addition, I offer my perspectives as an Indigenous professional for other committees, such as the Digital Learning Framework Advisory Group and the Academic Initiatives & Planning group. I try to maintain a relevant and accurate voice with ongoing developments across the institution, so as to better aid in my overall commitment to developing and supporting relations and rapport with Indigenous communities both on and off campus, but there are only so many committees and groups that I can agree to join. There is a definite, and noticeable, pressure from faculty and departments to join committees and groups in hopes of offering an Indigenous voice.

However, I am aware that in some cases my inclusion would simply be covering the token inclusion of an Indigenous faculty member.

As much as I wish to involve myself and ensure that there is an Indigenous presence across the institution, I have become better at setting boundaries and knowing my limits. I cannot be everywhere, nor can any other Indigenous professional. The truth of the matter is that within academia, there are simply not enough Indigenous voices to manage the great weight of commitments pressed upon us. Fortunately for the 2023-24 academic year, I am on a secondment where my focus will be on Indigenousization, specifically building curricula materials for faculty, and gaining rapport with representatives of the host nations.

### Coping Strategies

Like any other profession, academic librarianship is not without a degree of stress for its professionals, and being a member of a minority group does not alleviate this pressure. For this reason alone, it is invariably important for information professionals to maintain strong coping strategies. As Bews, MacLeod, and Paul discuss, the strategies that follow are repeatedly used by Indigenous Peoples to manage stress related to their work (2023).

Firstly, find personal communities. Just as stress can be multi-layered, so too are Indigenous professionals, who often contain multitudes, and in order to reflect that, there is a need for multiple communities. For some Indigenous librarians, this may be a connection to their heritage, culture and literal community. Whether these communities and personal aspects may be found within an academic institution or beyond, a supportive network can be imperative. It is common practice for many Indigenous people to seek out one another to share in their experiences and find support in one another as a form of community bonding. Unfortunately, it is also common for there to be only a few Indigenous staff members within a library. Or there may even be only a single Indigenous person on an entire team, even at larger research institutions.

Sometimes, in order to find a community, Indigenous librarians must rely on their wider BIPOC library community for support. One such community is the online group *We Here*, which includes a private Facebook group that provides a supportive collaboration and mentorship community for people who identify as BIPOC and who work in libraries. This is a group that maintains its BIPOC-only membership in order to create a space where people are free to discuss racism and microaggressions without having to deal with white fragility. In addition to those from libraries, there are also members from the galleries, archives, and museums (GLAM) community. This broad BIPOC membership allows for a widespread supportive network that



allows professionals to pose questions and expect a diverse array of answers. An online group such as *We Here* grants members support and presence with like-minded professionals. Such a community means that if an individual finds themselves to be the only BIPOC person at their library, they can remain in contact with a larger community as a means to combat feelings of isolation and emotional labour.

Another suggestion as a means to connect with people within an academic community is through conferences and forums, whether they be hosted within a professional home country or on an international stage. For instance, the International Indigenous Librarians Forum (IILF) is a conference that occurs every two years and allows Indigenous librarians from around the world to network and share best practices relating to Indigenous Knowledge in GLAM (International Indigenous Librarians Forum 2023). The countries in which the IILF arrange to host their forums are home to strong Indigenous populations, presences, and cultures. Within Canada, an attempt at creating an Indigenous library workers' space is sustained by the COPPUL Oskâpêwis Mentorship Group. However, it may be noted that this group is not Indigenous-only, as any member of the COPPUL Indigenous Knowledge Steering Committee can attend meetings. Since this is a group that falls under COPPUL's jurisdiction, it is largely focused on academic librarianship and "information-related employees and Indigenous students in MLIS, [Master's of Archival Studies] MAS, and Library Technician programs" (COPPUL, n.d.).

Finding trustworthy Indigenous-only spaces can be challenging for many Indigenous professionals, especially within academic realms. This sense of not being recognized can feed into the feeling of the psychological phenomenon known as "imposter syndrome," which is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2020) as: "the persistent inability to believe that one's success is deserved or has been legitimately achieved as a result of one's own effort or skills." BIPOC librarians experience pressure both externally and internally that can all contribute to signs of fatigue and burnout. Concerning librarians of colour, Lee and Morfitt (2020) offer insight into this type of burnout by examining the intersectionality of imposter syndrome, women in technology, and minority librarians. They conclude that library schools cannot prepare students for everything, but having real-world library experience and mentorship can help new librarians get through obstacles.

The last coping mechanism of note is the ability and capability of a professional to know how and when to say "no." It may sound juvenile, but considering the increased likelihood that Indigenous librarians are expected to offer an "Indigenous perspective" more often than their non-BIPOC colleagues, Indigenous librarians may find difficulty in knowing when to establish boundaries and decline offers. It is important to acknowledge personal bandwidth, even in light of trying to build a



portfolio for progression— sometimes an individual can take on too much and cannot tackle anything else which can lead to detrimental burnout.

## Conclusion

This paper has shared the personal stories of two Indigenous librarians from Canadian academic institutions and examined the challenges associated with career progression. In order to achieve the best possible outcome, the door must be held open and wider with more opportunities for the next generation of Indigenous librarians, because the comprehensive and cumulative work of Indigenous librarians will never be truly complete. Canada is a colonial institution, but there can be a better tomorrow for Indigenous Peoples.

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