

Indigenous Youth Research and Development Center

Wopasi: Youth Participatory Action Research



The opportunity

*Until recently, studies of Indigenous youth have focused on their many risks, challenges, negative outcomes, and disparities. Most of this research has only emphasized the importance of Indigenous cultural identity, values, and practices to the extent that it serves as a protective factor or buffer against substance abuse, suicide, violence, and other negative outcomes. **Traditional Indigenous knowledge has not typically been framed by non-Indigenous researchers as a vital and honored way of life and path of wellness** (Burnette & Figley, 2016; Chewning et al., 2001; Fisher, Storck, & Bacon, 1999; Harris & McFarland, 2000; Mohatt, Fok, Burket, Henry, & Allen, 2011; Pu et al., 2013).*

In a newer vein of work, several national and international organizations that involve Indigenous youth in their own development extol the value of their culturally focused and strengths-based programs and activities. Examples include Lakota Youth Development (<https://www.lakotayouthdevelopment.org>), Aspen Institute's Center for Native American Youth (www.cnay.org), and The United Nations, through its Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples projects. Research on strengths-based and culturally focused development of Indigenous youth resilience and positive social, physical, and mental health is a growing area of focus (Henson, Sabo, Trujillo, & Teufel-Shone, 2017; MacDonald, Ford, Willox, & Ross, 2013; Stumblingbear-Riddle & Romans, 2012).

Indigenous-led, community-centered water protection is a place of opportunity for environmental breakthroughs using Indigenous knowledge. In fact, “the importance of Indigenous knowledge systems for environmental decision-making is now widely recognized” (Von der Porten, De Loë, & McGregor, 2016, p. 214). In some cases, Indigenous peoples have made international advancements in defining and claiming their human rights with regard to informing decisions concerning water policy and research (Stefanelli et al., 2017). **“The substance of Indigenous peoples’ understanding of ecosystem dynamics offers tremendous potential to advance the environmental policy goals of sustainability, resilience, and biological diversity”** (Moffa, 2016, p. 109).

The Indigenous Youth Research and Development Center

The Indigenous Youth Research and Development Center (IYRDC) is part of a growing effort to bring Indigenous knowledge and culture into the forefront of dialogue and decisions that affect Indigenous peoples locally, nationally, and internationally, starting with a focus around water and the environment. The IYRDC will sponsor Indigenous-initiated Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) using the Lakota traditional research approach called Wopasi. The IYRDC will help to demonstrate the importance of Indigenous knowledge and culture for the health and well-being of Indigenous youth. It will also facilitate a process of youth engagement, learning, sharing, and taking action to enhance quality of life and opportunities for Indigenous youth and their communities.

YPAR promotes a proactive and intimate partnership between youth from a particular community and researchers as they co-design each phase in constructing knowledge necessary for social transformation. YPAR acknowledges youth as experts on their own experiences and develops a sincere working relationship from these foundational understandings. The key tenets of YPAR are reflection and action. “Reflection without action is sheer verbalism or armchair revolution and action without reflection is pure activism, or action for action’s sake” (Freire, 1970, p. 149). We believe YPAR will increase the legitimacy of Indigenous knowledge (reflection) and the acceptance of Indigenous solutions (action) in mainstream policy and programming.

This center will be grounded in data sovereignty. Historically, Indigenous peoples have been researched using conventional methodologies that have dissected and stolen their knowledge without free, informed, and prior consent and consultation, as required by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007). A culturally appropriate YPAR approach is crucial for respecting the inherent, universal, and fundamental rights of sovereign and self-determining Indigenous peoples for full, equal, and effective participation in research about them. **“In the Lakota language, the term ‘Wopasi’ means to pursue inquiry, to push the limitations of one’s knowledge, and to seek greater understanding by looking for meaning and wisdom above, beneath, and all around”** (LeMoine LaPointe, personal communication, July 26, 2018).

Although we have identified a few possible initial projects for the IYRDC, the IYRDC’s Wopasi YPAR approach will be tailored to address issues as they arise, as well as to make room for strengths-based innovations and creativity that Indigenous youth and communities hold. This will generate social transformation in how society responds to water and other environmental issues and opportunities. Through the IYRDC, we will model and document Wopasi YPAR methods, and assess the extent to which this approach results in positive changes to decision-making, initiatives, and public policy. We will help others learn how to conduct culturally appropriate research with and for Indigenous youth that is centered on the values and principles of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Wopasi will help us to center and respect Indigenous protocols when doing research with and for Indigenous communities; the IYRDC will allow us to document these practices.

IYRDC will be housed at Wilder Research for incubation

The Indigenous Youth Research and Development Center (IYRDC) will build on previous efforts, including a strategic planning process funded by the Bush Foundation and engagement from a variety of stakeholders through the Native Youth Alliance that was initially sponsored by White Earth Nation.

The IYRDC will initially be housed in Wilder Research to provide organizational infrastructure and applied research expertise. Dr. Nicole MartinRogers, a senior research manager at Wilder Research who has expertise in mainstream applied social science methods as well as American Indian culturally based research and evaluation, will provide overall project leadership. Research Associate Sheila Bellwill staff the project.

The IYRDC project co-coordinators, Wakinyan LaPointe and Thorne Bordeaux-LaPointe, will manage the day-to-day work for the IYRDC.

Dr. Richard Chase and LeMoine LaPointe will serve as IYRDC advisors.

Engaging Indigenous youth

We plan to work with (and compensate) 10-12 Indigenous youth to participate in each Wopasi YPAR cohort/project. We recognize the challenges we may face in recruiting and retaining Indigenous youth. We will work with our extensive network of youth-serving Indigenous-led organizations to identify a larger group of Indigenous youth who have some interest in working with the IYRDC. We will host a half-day information and learning session that youth can participate in to learn about YPAR and the IYRDC to determine if it is a good fit for them. We will use a high-touch approach to ensuring youth attend all sessions, including providing transportation and reminders, offering food and other fun activities to engage them, etc. We will work with youth to find ways to ensure they are receiving academic credit for their participation and/or that they can use their IYRDC project work to demonstrate their skills for future employers and postsecondary program admissions.

Initial project ideas for the IYRDC

The following is a list of research projects that the IYRDC would like to initiate. We are actively seeking funding to support this work. The summaries below include cost estimates that include compensation for participating youth.

Evaluate the Mni Ki Wakan: World Indigenous Peoples Decade of Water Summit

The Mni Ki Wakan: World Indigenous Peoples Decade of Water Summit is an Indigenous-led, youth-centered initiative that is being led by the LaPointes. It is dedicated to the protection of water and human rights. The first priority of the IYRDC will be to support the Water Summit by using Wopasi YPAR to evaluate the impact of Mni Ki Wakan on the individuals from around the world who have participated in

one or more of the annual summits, as well as the impact on their Indigenous communities and the water issues they care about. The evaluation will enrich the broader community understanding of Indigenous perspective and knowledge to address environmental issues.

The research questions could include:

- What is the cultural relationship with water, and the impact that this relationship has for any particular Indigenous community? How does water shape the identity of Indigenous people?
- How does Indigenous language and the cultural relationship to water inform decision-making, policies, and initiatives related to water? How could or does Indigenous knowledge inform non-Indigenous government policies and practices?
- How has water (or lack of water, water quality issues, etc.) affected Indigenous youth in the past, how does it affect the present, and how will it affect the future?

Cost to evaluate one year of the Summit: \$20,000-\$30,000

Cost to complete a comprehensive evaluation of the Decade of Water Summit: \$75,000-\$100,000

Research to support Indigenous community-led initiatives

The IYRDC could also support and document policies, programs, and initiatives that incorporate Indigenous knowledge to address community-identified issues. The particular projects will be identified by Mni Ki Wakan participants and other interested Indigenous community members. Projects could involve having youth researchers conduct interviews or talking circles, review historical documents and receive elder teachings about their culture, conduct policy analysis, and interview policymakers about their awareness of and attitudes toward the topic(s) of interest.

The research questions could include:

- What is the word for and meaning of *research* in participating Indigenous communities?
- What initiatives is the participating Indigenous community involved in, leading, and/or dreaming of doing? What are proactive initiatives that Indigenous youth can and do participate in? What is the impact of these initiatives?
- For example, if a community is interested in Indigenous water conservation topics: What traditional knowledge informs or could inform current efforts to protect this community's water supply? What solutions and approaches to water conservation were used by this community and other Indigenous communities pre-colonization as well as after colonization and in direct resistance or defense of water in opposition to the negative effects of colonization?

Cost to complete one Wopasi YPAR project that is requested by an Indigenous community: \$10,000-\$100,000+ depending on scope

Impact of the IYRDC

We expect the IYRDC to have four primary outcomes in the early stages:

- 1) Evaluate the impacts of the Mni Ki Wakan Water Summit plus complete 1-2 other youth- or community-initiated Wopasi YPAR projects.
- 2) Build relationships with and the research capacity of Wakinyan LaPointe and Thorne Bordeaux-LaPointe, the IYRDC co-coordinators, as well as Indigenous youth who will participate in YPAR projects. Also, increase understanding of sovereignty and decision-making models.
- 3) Increase the capacity of Dr. Nicole MartinRogers, Sheila Bell, and other Wilder Research staff (and other applied researchers) to work with Indigenous youth on Wopasi YPAR projects.
- 4) Document the Wopasi YPAR approach (and other Indigenous research approaches) and continue to model and refine these approaches through reflective practice.

The ultimate goal is to establish the IYRDC as an independent entity that can lead and support Wopasi YPAR projects on Indigenous water issues and related topics.



References

- Burnette, C., & Figley, C. (2016). Risk and protective factors related to the wellness of American Indian and Alaska Native youth: A systematic review. *International Public Health Journal*, 8(2), 137–154.
- Chewning, B., Douglas, J., Kokotailo, P. K., LaCourt, J., Clair, D. S., & Wilson, D. (2001). Protective factors associated with American Indian adolescents' safer sexual patterns. *Maternal and Child Health Journal*, 5(4), 273–280.
- Fisher, P. A., Storck, M., & Bacon, J. G. (1999). In the eye of the beholder: Risk and protective factors in rural American Indian and Caucasian adolescents. *The American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 69(3), 294–304.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Continuum Press.
- Harris, E., & McFarland, J. (2000). *The assessment of culture as a protective factor among Native Americans: The survey of Nez Perce Culture*. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED449941>
- Henson, M., Sabo, S., Trujillo, A., & Teufel-Shone, N. (2017). Identifying protective factors to promote health in American Indian and Alaska Native adolescents: A literature review. *The Journal of Primary Prevention*, 38(1–2), 5–26. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10935-016-0455-2>
- MacDonald, J. P., Ford, J. D., Willox, A. C., & Ross, N. A. (2013). A review of protective factors and causal mechanisms that enhance the mental health of Indigenous Circumpolar youth. *International Journal of Circumpolar Health*, 72(1), 21775. <https://doi.org/10.3402/ijch.v72i0.21775>
- Moffa, A. (2016). Traditional ecological rulemaking. *Stanford Environmental Law Journal*, 35(2). Retrieved from <https://law.stanford.edu/publications/traditional-ecological-rulemaking/>
- Mohatt, N. V., Fok, C. C. T., Burket, R., Henry, D., & Allen, J. (2011). Assessment of awareness of connectedness as a culturally-based protective factor for Alaska Native youth. *Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 17(4), 444–455. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0025456>
- Pu, J., Chewning, B., St. Clair, I. D., Kokotailo, P. K., Lacourt, J., & Wilson, D. (2013). Protective factors in American Indian communities and adolescent violence. *Maternal and Child Health Journal*, 17(7), 1199–1207. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10995-012-1111-y>
- Stefanelli, R. D., Castleden, H., Harper, S. L., Martin, D., Cunsolo, A., & Hart, C. (2017). Experiences with integrative Indigenous and Western knowledge in water research and management: A systematic realist review of literature from Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States. *Environmental Reviews*, 25(3), 323–333. <https://doi.org/10.1139/er-2016-0114>

Stumblingbear-Riddle, G., & Romans, J. S. C. (2012). Resilience among urban American Indian adolescents: Exploration into the role of culture, self-esteem, subjective well-being, and social support. *American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health Research: The Journal of the National Center*, 19(2), 1–19.

Von Der Porten, S., De Loë, R. C., & McGregor, D. (2016). Incorporating indigenous knowledge systems into collaborative governance for water: Challenges and opportunities. *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 50(1), 214–243.

Wilder Research®

Information. Insight. Impact.

451 Lexington Parkway North
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55104
651-280-2700
www.wilderresearch.org

For more information

For more information about the Indigenous Youth Research and Development Center, contact:
Nicole MartinRogers at Wilder Research, 651-280-2682 | nicole.martinrogers@wilder.org
Wakinyan LaPointe, 612-442-5399 | wakinyan.lapointe@gmail.com.

April 2019