

Decolonizing our Counselling Services: Study Group and Colonial Audit Framework



Amy Kheong + Johnny Liu
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LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT



Emily Carr University of Art + Design

- Student population of 1900 students
- With such a small student population, incidents on campus reverberate throughout the campus and have a big impact on the student body



Impetus for decolonizing our Counselling Services

- Covid lockdown
- Heightened awareness of ongoing incidents of systemic racism and violence against Indigenous Peoples
- Murder of George Floyd in May 2020
- An anti-racist petition was launched at the university in August 2020 spearheaded by faculty and students; 27-page document with over 100 demands
- For counselling + wellness, the petition demand was to hire BIPOC Counselling staff “who have specific training and tools to assess racial trauma, and trauma that occurs by institutional and systemic violence”.

Impetus for decolonizing our Counselling Services

- Sharp increase in students being traumatized or retraumatized and in increase in the number of students coming forward to the Counselling office experiencing intergenerational trauma and racialized and systemic violence against them.
- The Counselling + Wellness team consisted of 1 Inuit staff member, 5 POC staff, and 2 white staff. Many of us came with some knowledge, background and lived experience in systemic violence, racism and trauma; however, we also realized that there was so much that we didn't know and needed to learn.

Books we studied

- *So You Want to Talk About Race* – Ijeoma Oluo
- *First Nations 101* – Lynda Gray
- *White Fragility* - Robin Diangelo
- *Indigenous Writes* – Chelsea Vowel
- *I Hope We Choose Love* – Kai Cheng Thom
- *The Inconvenient Indian* – Thomas King
- *21 Things You May Not Know About the Indian Act* – Bob Joseph
- *Seven Fallen Feathers* – Tanya Talaga

Books we studied

- *A Mind Spread Out on the Ground* – Alicia Elliott
- *The Skin We're in* – Desmond Cole
- *White Tears/Brown Scars* – Ruby Hamad
- *Hood Feminism* – Mikki Kendall
- *Policing Black Lives* – Robyn Maynard
- *We Will Not Cancel Us* – Adrienne Maree Brown
- *Braiding Sweetgrass* – Robin Wall Kimmerer
- *How To Be an Anti-racist* – Ibram X Kendi

BRAVE SPACE AGREEMENT

The following has been adapted by Counselling, Wellness and Accessibility Services from the presentation by Bunny McKensie Mack (they/them) 2020

1. We agree to struggle against racism, sexism, classism, ableism, transphobia, sizeism, ageism, and linguistic discrimination, and the ways we internalize myths and misinformation about our own identities and identities of other people.
2. We agree that we are coming into this space as learners. We are all learners and have something to learn. No one person is the single expert. And there is no one single answer. We come into this space at different points along a learning continuum.
3. We strive to ensure the safety of all those present in the space. However, we acknowledge that absolute safety is not possible and can take time to foster. Therefore, we agree to work together towards harm reduction, centering those most affected by injustice in the room even if it means de/centering ourselves.

BRAVE SPACE AGREEMENT

4. We assume good intention. If we say something that is offensive, racist, sexist, privileged, etc., we are not trying to harm anyone, it is because we don't know. Instead of shaming and blaming (that we ought to know better), that becomes a point of education – to educate ourselves and each other. It is okay to say we don't know – and then to educate ourselves about that point.
 - It is only through doing this work together and educating ourselves for change to occur.
5. We agree to sit with the discomfort that comes with having conversations like this. We agree to try our best not to shame ourselves for the vulnerability that these kinds of conversations require.
6. We agree to consider the viewpoints of other people as long as they do not constitute violence, discrimination and dehumanization of oppressed people.
7. We agree that it's okay to have feelings. It's okay to feel uncomfortable when we're discussing complex topics about relationships, and care – so long as it does not traumatize or re-traumatize.

The Beauty of the Study Group

- Decolonizing our counselling services started with decolonizing our minds and hearts and challenged the automatic and habitual ways we have constructed situations in the past.
- Justice Murry Sinclair wrote, “the legacy of residential schools can be seen in the myths and misunderstandings, and the lack of empathy many Canadians openly display about Indigenous people, their history, and their place in society. Canadians have been educated to believe in the inferiority of Indigenous peoples and the superiority of European nations. This history and it’s aftermath, therefore, should be not seen as an Aboriginal problem; it’s a Canadian one.”

Beyond the Study Group: Colonial Audit Framework

Indigenous leader and external consultant Rena Soutar developed a Colonial Audit Framework for the university (February 2021).



Colonial Audit Framework: Step 1

Education

The Colonial Audit Framework starts with the need for people to educate and re-educate themselves.

Rena Soutar states in the opening introduction to the Framework...

“In-House vs. Outsourcing”

“ It is important that much of the work for the audit be done internally by staff and faculty. The act of self-reflection ensures an effective and authentic approach to the audit and subsequent decolonization efforts. Outsourcing the audit to a third party, especially an Indigenous person, is counter to the spirit of decolonizing.”



Colonial Audit Framework: Step 1 Education

Rena Soutar goes on to say:

“Unlike a financial audit, a colonial audit is more like institutional therapy. A therapist does not “fix” your problems but provides a framework to understand your situation and provides insights to help you do the work to identify your problems. This colonial audit framework is functioning as the therapist.”

“Many Indigenous people have stated their willingness to work together with others in their lands. Have non-Indigenous people done the work to understand the history Indigenous people already know? Are non-Indigenous people prepared to enter into the conversation with the background knowledge needed for real understanding and communication.”

Colonial Audit Framework: Carry out education with safety and support

Rena Soutar states:

“Despite best intentions, the process of unearthing colonial roots and practices is sometimes not a neutral, dispassionate process. Discomfort and conflict can arise as people react to the unearthing of uncomfortable truths. It is critical that a plan be laid out to support staff and others during the colonial audit work and subsequent analysis and review.”

Colonial Audit Framework: Carry out education with safety and support

Rena Soutar goes on to say:

“Creating guidelines for all participants to act with care and kindness can help counteract the foundational issue: we all operate within a colonial system resistant to challenges to its own authority. Undertaking decolonial work means that supports don’t automatically exist and [may need to be developed].”

Colonial Audit Framework: Step 2

Question your services

1. Identify the range of issues addressed by the counselling/wellness services
2. Identify the institutional and social contributors to those issues and stressors
3. Reflect on the creation of the area of service, and whether it was addressing longstanding, original conditions, and/or emerging issues
4. Identify whether the existing services are sufficiently resourced to meet demand



Colonial Audit Framework: Step 2

Question your services

5. Reflect on culture of counselling/wellness and whether the social culture both locally and socially support counselling /wellness practice
6. Examine whether counselling/wellness services offered are rooted in other cultures: specifically Indigenous cultures
7. How would we adapt the service to better connect with/ be in relationship with our Indigenous, Black and poc student clientele



What We Have Learned

- Our study group is now a model for EDI training at the university and is called a Learning Habitat
- Through our study and the Colonial Audit Framework, we continue to review all of our counselling + wellness practices through a continuously informed lens of decolonizing and racial and social justice
- We regularly cite the Brave Space Agreement when we enter discussions or conversations that may be sensitive, highly charged, or conflictual



Questions?

