BIRM Annual Report

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Tawaw, Tawaw.

In nêhiyawêwin (Cree language), when we say “tawaw” what we are saying is “there is room for you here”. I am a proud member of the Onion Lake Cree Nation, graduate of the University of Saskatchewan, long time educator with Saskatoon Public Schools, and the new BIRM Program Coordinator.

The Building Intercultural Resilience Mentorship (BIRM) program is a mentorship program for Indigenous youth. Our mission is to improve the long-term academic, personal, and career outcomes for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit youth living in Saskatoon.

The intention of this report is to provide interested and invested parties with a thorough reflection of the intentions, successes, and challenges of developing the BIRM program in its pilot years. The report will provide an anecdotal overview as well as analytical data collected through surveys of students, mentors, and families. This report also aims to help determine the future direction of BIRM and to elaborate on our goal to further expand the BIRM program to other schools in the hopes of impacting the lives of more Indigenous students. We also aim to broadcast the programs impact to a broad audience both nationally and internationally.

What we hope this report will also communicate, is the deep and meaningful impact that the program has had on all the staff and participants involved. We are fundamentally reciprocal in our learning and growth, and even in our pilot year with the challenges of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, we were able to build a community of support and connection that benefited all parties.

We are thrilled to be entering into the new year with our lessons learned and dreams for future growth in hand. Thank you for your interest and support. Or, as we like to say in our BIRM sessions- infinite hiy hiys!
The Building Intercultural Resilience Mentorship (BIRM) program was born through a partnership between the University of Saskatchewan Indigenous Engagement Office, and Saskatoon Public Schools. The program was modeled after the Lakehead Aboriginal Mentorship Program in Thunder Bay Ontario, aimed at Indigenous student engagement, and demystifying post-secondary options after high school.

Saskatoon Public Schools is proud to be a partner with the University of Saskatchewan. The tenets of BIRM align with our division’s strategic plan in building strong, supportive relationships that focus on Indigenous student success, and work toward successful transition to post-secondary education.

BIRM provides students with continuous support from volunteer mentors who understand the negative impacts of colonial policy on education. Through this relationship, high school students build the skills and attitude necessary for successful transition to post-secondary schooling.

Saskatoon Public Schools is excited to see the BIRM program grow to other division collegiates in support of our students and families.

Brent Hills, Deputy Director of Education
Saskatoon Public Schools

The Building Intercultural Resilience Mentorship (BIRM) program is about affirmation, support, love and experiential learning for Indigenous students in Saskatoon. The University of Saskatchewan, Office of the Vice Provost Indigenous Engagement, in partnership with the Saskatoon Public Schools, is so proud to support the work of the BIRM team led by Nahanni Olson. Students participating in the project are affirmed by the inclusion of culture and Indigenous Ways of Knowing through events and educational experiences.

Support and love are part of the programing delivered by the individuals organizing the project. Not only are the students participating in BIRM seeing Indigenous leaders in the project, but also exposed to elders, knowledge keepers, and community members mentoring and caring for them through engagement and education.

The BIRM project provides Indigenous students with opportunities to explore the world of post-secondary education and make informed decisions about their educational future through networking and exposure to our institutions. The Building Intercultural Resilience Mentorship Project is creating space for Indigenous youth to embrace culture, education and community.

Dr. Angela Jaime, Interim Vice Provost, Indigenous Engagement
BACKGROUND

BIRM is modeled after two successful programs: "Niijii" Aboriginal Mentorship Program out of Lakehead University in Thunder Bay, Ontario and the Ganbina JOBS4U2 Program in Australia. Both of these programs have proven over years of successful implementation, that by providing meaningful and community based supports to Indigenous students you can improve their long-term socio-economic outcomes. (See appendix for more information about these programs).

BIRM was developed out of a partnership with the Saskatoon Public Schools (SPS) and University of Saskatchewan (USask) in 2021. This relationship allows for the program to be connected and supported by both institutions, with the overarching goal of improving the success rates of Indigenous students from high school through post-secondary. Funding for the pilot year was generously provided by the Suncor Energy Foundation.

During the pilot year of the program, BIRM was developed in two high schools: Mount Royal and Bedford Road Collegiates. These high schools were selected due to the high percentage of self-declared First Nations, Inuit, and Métis students registered.

The program began in these schools in the fall of 2021 with the intention of connecting Indigenous high school students with "mentors": students from the University of Saskatchewan who come from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds, a spectrum of identities and interests, and who were studying in different colleges across campus. These relationships were developed with the intention of providing a safe network of support for Indigenous students to explore leadership, culture, identity, goals, and self-improvement.

"BIRM opened up a whole bunch of opportunities for me and it's helping me get a job" - Britney (student)

"BIRM is an opportunity for Indigenous people to take part in a program to help you with your career in the future. BIRM does a lot for you to be successful in your life" - Joe'L (student)
During the spring and summer of 2021, students from USask applied and were interviewed to become mentors. Once mentors were chosen, they completed several hours of online training as well as two full days of in-person training, which aimed to provide them with a thorough understanding of the volunteer requirements for the program as well as to deepen their understanding of the cultural practices and context of the Indigenous people of this area. This was done through smudging, sharing circles, listening to elders and knowledge keepers (Tim Eashappie, Judy Greyeyes, and Linda Young), spending time connecting with the land at the Brightwater Science and Eco centre, and participation in the Blanket exercise. These training days were important because they taught the Indigenous and non-Indigenous mentors the importance of being an ethical and trusting mentor, while gaining a deeper understanding of Canada's history and the effects that colonialism had and still has on Indigenous peoples and youth.

We then developed four cohorts at the two schools, in order to keep the groupings small as a precautionary response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We followed all the school protocols and administrative procedures, and were able to spent 2-3 hours per week at each school from September to April. At the end of the program year we took 34 students, mentors, and staff to the Rocky Mountains in Alberta for a four day trip to celebrate our year together and deepen bonds. After the program year, we also provided BIRM schools with an opportunity to learn traditional nehiyaw (Cree) hide tanning practices during a multi-week workshop in May 2022, and a special work experience program "atosketan" during the month of July. (See appendix for the "atosketan" report).

“Our main goal has been to inspire and motivate Indigenous students to consider post-secondary education: to have them dream of the possibilities, build confidence in and develop their leadership and intellectual/academic abilities, and to create clear pathways to post-secondary education by identifying and eliminating entry, process, and systemic barriers. This is done through the fundamental practice of connection and knowing who you are.”

- Shero (Mentor)
Mentorship, like many forms of teaching and support, is “wholistic” (Mertins, n.d.). It integrates teaching with guidance, support, and interconnection (Alberta Children's Services & Alberta International, Intergovernmental and Aboriginal Relations, 2007; Merriam-Webster, 2022). For Indigenous youth, group mentorship is especially important, for kinship and togetherness is essential to many Indigenous communities. This kind of mentorship allows individuals to learn from each other, collectively and collaboratively, to nurture, teach, and support one another (Alberta Children’s Services & Alberta International, Intergovernmental and Aboriginal Relations, 2007).
**BIRM STRUCTURE**

- Mentor / mentee (student) connections developed in a group setting
- Design sessions based on what students want to get out of the program
- Weekly sessions for one hour programming
- Provide as many opportunities and new experiences as possible
- Cultural connections with
- Field trips/special workshops
- Ongoing mentor training
- Year-end trip
- 60 students from both schools accessed BIRM programming
- 20 students were regular attendees and completed a full year of program
- 16 USask students completed a full year of mentorship

**BIRM participants attend a field trip to Wanuskewin Heritage Park, December 2021**

*BIRM Mentors and Bedford Road students, October 2021.*

*Mentors visit classrooms to introduce the students to the BIRM program, September 2021.*
CULTURAL IDENTITY

BIRM participants deepened their understanding of their individual cultural identity through classroom and experiential activities throughout the year. Activities included walking the Saskatoon Forestry Farm Park and Zoo with Cree language instructor Randy Morin, touring Wanuskewin heritage park and participating in the traditional games and tipi teaching programs there, connecting with knowledge keepers Bob Badger and Linda Young, and completing family tree research assignments. BIRM collaborated with the Indigenous Student Council at Bedford Road Collegiate to conduct the winter festival where students were able to try dogsledding, fire building, winter storytelling, and bannock and tea making over the fire. Throughout the year students and mentors participated in regular smudge and sharing circles and at the year-end celebration, mentors were invited to share foods from their cultural backgrounds with students. Students were able to join a hide tanning workshop in the spring that allowed them to learn traditional nehiyaw (Cree) methods.

Mentors and Mentees participate in cultural tipi teachings at Wanuskewin Heritage Park, December 2021.
CULTURAL
IDENTITY, cont'd

“\textquote{I learned how to reconnect with my indigenous roots [and] Nahanni was able to guide us into Indigenous teachings and knowledge such as working with moose hide, language, and much more}\textquote{”} 
- \textit{Kori (Mentor)}
PROFESSIONAL PLANNING

The winter months were busy with professional planning, such as having the mentees create personal vision boards with the help of their mentors, and having the mentors share their stories on how they became USask students. Mentors also tutored mentees, assisting in their schoolwork and on their "dream job research assignment", while also giving insights and tips for academic success.

While gaining life-skills and working towards their independence, students were welcomed to USask during their tour of the USask Campus. Touring the USask campus with their USask mentors was a perfect way for the mentees to envision themselves being students at USask.

Professional planning means thinking about the future, dreaming about the different pathway we may take, and also making concrete plans and applications.

BIRM students received hands on assistance applying for post-secondary institutions as well as financial assistance to pay for admission fees.

We were also able to connect with artist, activist, and community leader, Zoey Roy, over zoom, to hear her story of academic success and perseverance through to her Ph.D.

BIRM students at their tour of the USask Campus, March 2022.
PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

BIRM programming is focused on student interests and goals. We want our participants to be able to develop and refine the skills and tools that they need to achieve these goals, with the safety and support of a caring mentor.

Regular goal setting is embedded into the program. We want students and mentors to set and share their SMART goals, as well as dreams for the future. This year we connected with **contact360** for resume building workshops, and students worked with mentors to improve their documents.

We also provided support for students to apply for health cards, SGI ID, birth certificates, social insurance numbers, and Indian status cards. Any fees associated with these applications were paid through BIRM.

Students who participate in BIRM programming also develop leadership and communication skills through group activities and shared learning experiences.

*see appendix for information

"My daughter has goals of being a mentor when she attends the U of S! Thank you so much!" - Parent

BIRM students showing off a gingerbread house they made together, December 2021

Students developing work skills through the atosketan summer work program, July 2022.

An intense game of UNO being debated, Sept. 2021
RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Everything that we do starts with relationships. There are multiple levels of mentorship and connection happening during our program sessions: BIRM staff guide the mentors, the mentors work together, mentors support students, and we all learn from each other.

The greatest success of the year was finding connection through these relationships, especially after managing life through the pandemic.

“My favourite thing about BIRM was seeing the Indigenous students reactions to the different activities that we did, especially field trips where they got to learn things outside of school and go to places that they haven’t been before. It was really rewarding to see how happy they were” - Jocelyne (Mentor)

Relationships were formed through playing games, sharing food, telling stories, trying new experiences, learning new skills, going on field trips, and traveling together during the year-end trip to Alberta’s Rocky Mountains.
RELATIONSHIP BUILDING: Year End Trip

We were thrilled to be able to finish the year with a group trip to Alberta, where 8 mentors and 23 students spent four days exploring the Rocky Mountains. Many students had never been out of the province before and gasps of amazement could be heard throughout the bus as the mountains first climbed into view.

We visited the Banff Centre for the Arts, where we heard from acting Director, Indigenous Arts, Janine Windolph, and toured the campus, climbed mountains with the Buffalo Stone Woman Indigescapes company, and camped overnight at the Painted Warriors Ranch.
"ROLL CALL 1, 2, 3..."

34 friends made
50 000 steps walked,
1500km on the bus
1 gondola conquered,
and too many memories
to count
KEY INSIGHTS

In discovering where BIRM would lead, we believed that the program had to center around the needs of the students and mentors. The students shared their worries and concerns about the transition from high school to post-secondary, employment, and identity. We tried to help them grow, through kinship relationships, to overcome these concerns and to make the transitions smoother. The program was intentionally student-led, and in doing so, we were able to create a successful program that helped both students and mentors to thrive in their futures.

We also discovered the magic piece of this program that makes it unique is the "intercultural" environment we create. The mentors in the program bring their new and unique perspectives, worldviews, languages, and experiences to the students, who in turn provide them with an empathetic experience to understanding Indigenous ways of knowing, cultures, and excellence. In order for the Indigenous youth of today to be successful tomorrow, they must be able to be able to work with the diverse population of Canadian citizens, but they must also learn that these "others" are safe people to work with. The students see non-Indigenous mentors showing care, concern, interest, and excitement in who we are as Indigenous peoples, which in itself provides healing and strength. Then, they witness our Indigenous mentors being models of success and leadership. In this way, our program nurtures this growth and embodies the true spirit of reconciliation.
CHALLENGES

**Pandemic:** Beginning a new program during the COVID-19 pandemic brought a unique set of challenges. There were health and safety protocols in place that limited the numbers we could gather in, transportation to off-site locations, and access to public sites requiring vaccination. Further, regular attendance for all participants and BIRM staff was impacted by COVID-19 exposures, close contacts, and contracted illness. Mandatory isolation periods and waves of positive cases made it very difficult at times to have regular meeting times with the same participants.

**Attendance:** As mentioned with the pandemic limitations, attendance was an issue due to a variety of issues. Additionally, we found that attendance was often impacted by changing schedules and locations. In the future, it is recommended to have a standard location and meeting time once per week at each school so that students always know what day BIRM is there.

**Communication:** Ensuring that students and families knew what was happening each week presented its own challenge as there is no one method of communication that works for every person. We utilized email, REMIND app, school announcements, and a paper newsletter but still found that our messages were not being received by all participants.

**Delivery:** The programming is intentionally delivered in the schools during class time. This is done to eliminate any barriers to attendance that may be present due to travel or extracurricular commitments. Students may also view this as a "carrot" to attend the program as well. Difficulties can arise when teachers feel their students are "missing out" on the important content being covering during their class time. It is important that both the students and school staff receive regular communication around program planning and intention. We made every effort to let staff know that the time students spend with BIRM should not be seen as taking away, but rather adding to the students' ability to be engaged and active learners. It is also regularly communicated that students who are not fulfilling their school commitments may not be able to participate in BIRM activities, and that major class events take precedence (exams, field trips, etc).

**Burn out:** There were many pressures put on the program to be successful during the pandemic, provide support to all participants, create new and engaging programming, and abide by all the health and safety regulations enforced by both institutions. We would advise that more time be spent in the development, preparation, and assessment phases to avoid staff burnout. Moving forward, we will be expanding the number of program staff to relieve administrative pressure as well.
Throughout the 2021-2022 BIRM year, surveys and interviews were conducted with the mentors, students, and parents, based on their personal development, experiences, as well as their views on the development and progress of the BIRM program. Due to the length of the surveys conducted, only significant and relevant questions will be used for analysis in the report.

**Mentor Data Collection**

The USask student (mentor) pre-program survey data is illustrated by a self-assessment/survey that was completed by 17 mentors at the start of the program. The questions were based on their general well-being, personal development, and cultural awareness. Following this, 16 of the mentors completed a similar post-program survey, measuring their development in those same areas. Additionally, mentors had also completed a mid-year interview that assessed their involvement in the program, and their thoughts, challenges, and rewards from the program.

**Mentee Data Collection**

The high-school student (mentee) pre-program survey data is illustrated by a pre-program survey that was completed by 41 mentees. This survey measured their general well-being, personal development, and their cultural awareness. There were 17 mentees which completed a similar post-program survey measuring their development in those same areas.

**Mentee Parent Data Collection**

The parents of the mentees had also completed a post-program survey that measured their perception of their child's involvement and development since they began in the BIRM program.

The statistics that follow only account for a small portion of the stakeholders assessment. Further data collected will be in a qualitative/media form following the statistics presented in the next section.
MENTOR STATISTICS

Mentors were given surveys at the beginning of the program and at the end of the program. The statistics below measure the mentors general health, self-perception, and views on their relationships with others.

Pre-Program Survey

In general, how would you rate your overall health?

Answered: 17  Skipped: 0

Post-Program Survey

Compared to the beginning of BIRM, do you feel a difference in your overall health (ex: physical and/or emotional)

Answered: 16  Skipped: 0

Do you view yourself as being useful?

Answered: 17  Skipped: 0

Do you view yourself as being useful?

Answered: 16  Skipped: 0

You feel close to other people

Answered: 17  Skipped: 0

Do you feel close to other people?

Answered: 16  Skipped: 0
Surveys were given to mentees at the beginning of the program and at the end of the program. Statistics below measure life satisfaction, personal development, and skill attainment.

**Pre-Program Survey**

How satisfied are you with your life right now?

**Post-Program Survey**

How satisfied are you with your life right now?

How often do you set personal goals?

Do you believe you have the skills to achieve your long term goals for the future?
MENTEE STATISTICS CONTINUED

The surveys below measure both personal cultural awareness and cultural awareness of others.

**Pre-Program Survey**

**Post-Program Survey**

Do you have a clear sense of your own ethnic, cultural, and racial identity?

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- **Answered:** 33
- **Skipped:** 2

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Are you aware of the assumptions you may hold about people who’s culture/race is different from yours?

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- **Answered:** 40
- **Skipped:** 1

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Do you try to put yourself in other places where you can learn about differences in other people’s cultures and make connections with them?

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- **Answered:** 40
- **Skipped:** 1
OUTCOMES FOR BIRM STUDENTS

Benefits of being a BIRM mentee:

- Building close relationships with USask students and faculty
- Building close relationships and friendships with other students
- Access to special programming
- High school credit and formal recognition
- Resume building
- Cultural teachings and gaining further cultural awareness
- Assistance in getting personal documents to help you with your future
- Help with finding employment

"BIRM helped me create an understanding of how I can create certain goals for myself and how I can be socially involved with my culture" - Mentee

"As a learner, I feel like I’ve definitely improved from my past self. Socially as of late, I find myself navigating through social interactions with ease ... Long term educational goals were never something I worried about, but recently I've been giving it more thought" - Mentee
OUTCOMES FOR BIRM STUDENTS

Negative stigmas surrounding Indigenous people due to colonialism can leave many youth feeling like they are not able to fully and freely express who they are without feeling the negative effects of these stigmas. BIRM provides a safe space where mentors and mentees could express and be proud of their cultural identities.

"I’ve learned [not to] be afraid of [who] you are and what your culture is"
- Mentee

"I really enjoyed that my child had a safe place to discuss her culture and her future. She enjoyed meeting everyone and participating"
- Parent
OUTCOMES FOR BIRM MENTORS

“BIRM has definitely impacted my life, it’s really interesting to work with Indigenous high school students who are in the exact same place that I was once in, I went to high school at Bedford and Mount Royal it’s been a really beneficial experience giving back to the students in these schools and also the teachers”
- Jocelyne (Mentor)

Benefits of being a Mentor:
- Access to training (First Aid, Cultural sensitivity, Mentor training)
- Leadership skills
- Public speaking skills
- Be apart of supporting, inspiring, and learning from/with the next generation of Indigenous youth in achieving their highest aspirations
- Deepen your understanding of Indigenous languages and cultures
- Meaningful volunteer hours and a personal reference from the Program Coordinator (available upon request)

USask Mentors receive a formal entry on their USask Co-Curricular Record

BIRM mentors on the year-end trip to Banff, May 2022.
OUTCOMES FOR BIRM MENTORS

“I have been regularly coming and this year’s been pretty hard. I’m in my eighth year of PhD and it's usually not easy to be this late into the PhD and still be motivated to continue, and coming to BIRM every week, especially during these COVID times it has been really helpful. It’s keeping me disciplined, it’s keeping me engaged with education, and thinking about the future because I am working with young people who are also working for their own future, so it’s been very helpful keeping me on track”
- Sheheryar "Shero" (Mentor)

"The kids, biggest highlight of the program. Without the kids, we wouldn't have BIRM. It's fun to meet them and learn about their inspirations"
- Raven (Mentor)
A Post-Program survey was given to parents of the mentees to assess their views on their child's involvement within BIRM. The outcomes are as follows:

Do you feel that your child has gained the appropriate skills needed to achieve their long-term goals for the future?

Do you feel that your child has gained more independence when making choices based on their own wants and interests?

Do you feel your child has a better understanding of their cultural identity?

Do you feel that this program has helped make a difference in your child’s excitement about going to school?

Do you feel that your child continues to look forward to learning more about their culture?

Since being placed with the mentors from USask, do you feel that your child has more confidence in becoming a post-secondary student?
**BIRM STORIES**

What is something that you have discovered about yourself since the beginning of the program?

“I really like to be here, I really like to help other people ... being here and helping specifically indigenous students actually changed my concentration in the field that I want to go into because ... I love it so much here that I really want to impact other peoples lives outside of [BIRM]”

- Raven (Mentor)

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Do you have any advice or words for the future mentors or mentees of BIRM?

“For the university students, I would say get engaged and talk with the students that you will be working with because some of them are shy but they are all incredibly outgoing once you get them out of their shell. For the high school students, I would say do not be intimidated by the university students. They are just as terrified of what's going on, just as you are, but they really do wanna connect with you and they are also very friendly and engaged”

- Brenan (Mentor)
WHERE TO NEXT?

A sense of belonging in high school and in post-secondary contexts motivates Indigenous students to opt-in to the experiences of learning to program completion. This has and will continue to be an integral aspect of BIRM as we plan to expand our program to further Saskatoon Public high schools starting with Tommy Douglas in the fall of 2022.

BIRM is also pleased to offer a scholarship fund to BIRM students for each year they participate in the program, with a value of up to $350. This scholarship fund will be available to students after graduation.

Funding for the BIRM pilot year was generously provided through the Suncor Energy Foundation (SEF). Future funding will be provided by the Oyateki partnership between USask, Gabriel Dumont Institute (GDI), and Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technology (SIIT) sponsored by Mastercard Foundation. We look forward to building a relationship with these partnering institutions as BIRM continues to grow.

We would like to thank the staff and faculty of Mount Royal Collegiate and Bedford Road Collegiate, the USask Office of the Vice Provost Indigenous Engagement team, the USask Mentors, SEF, and all of the students who have helped shape BIRM's first year into the great success it has become.

BIRM students on the year-end trip to Banff, May 2022.
APPENDIX

atosketan: final report

Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, Indigenous Arts: https://www.banffcentre.ca/indigenous-arts

Buffalo Stone Woman- Indigescapes Tours: https://buffalostonewoman.ca/

contact360 employment skills for youth: https://contact360.ca/

Ganbina work to school transition program: https://www.ganbina.com.au/

Janine Windolph, Acting Director Indigenous Arts at Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity: https://www.nfb.ca/directors/janine-windolph/

Niijii Indigenous Mentorship at Lakehead University: https://www.lakeheadu.ca/indigenous/niijii-indigenous-mentorship

Painted Warriors Ranch: https://www.paintedwarriors.ca/about-us/

Zoey Roy: https://zoeyroy.com/about
