TRIBE ARTIST SOCIETY:

Indigenous sovereignty and community-building despite systemic barriers

Cultural Policy Hub
Case Study
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CULTURAL POLICY HUB

Key facts about Tribe Artist Society

Type: Registered charity | Hip-hop and arts education

Location: Calgary, Alberta

Budget: $190K to $260K

Staff: 1 full-time employee, 1 part-time, 7 core volunteers

Community served: ~150 people every week

In 2019, hip-hop artist and arts facilitator Dwight Good Eagle Farahat was running rap workshops with youth incarcerated at the Calgary Young Offenders Centre. Those youths asked Farahat to make a new kind of cultural space for them, one where they could continue to learn and belong to after they were released. That was the seed for Tribe Artist Society, a grassroot collective that became a registered charity with support from Calgary Arts Development in 2021.

Since then, Tribe Artist Society has distinguished itself through its programs and community building with Calgarians of all ages. According to Farahat, Tribe Artist Society is a unique example of an Indigenous-led organization serving both Indigenous and non-Indigenous community members. Despite its successes, the organization continues to contend with structural inequities and the deeply rooted barriers of a colonial cultural funding ecosystem.

In this case study, the Cultural Policy Hub explores the premise of Indigenous ownership at the core of Tribe Artist Society, its work of community-building and healing through arts, and the financial precarity the organization is still facing. This study is based on an interview with Dwight Good Eagle Farahat, Tribe Artist Society's Executive Director and Founder. It concludes with insights from Tribe Artist Society for art leaders and also for government policymakers and funders.

The need for Indigenous ownership

Throughout his artistic career, Dwight Good Eagle Farahat of Siksika Nation faced repeated racism and classism when trying to access creative spaces, including spaces that he had been invited into.[1]

In our discussion, Farahat described facilitating many programs for "mainstream agencies" and institutions that wanted to develop programs for Indigenous and racialized youth, but were uncomfortable with or unprepared for the reality of hosting them in their space. "We would be invited into communities or into spaces—'Oh, we'd love you to run a dance class for the kids around here, the Brown and Native kids around here.' (...)—and then you show up with 20 youth, who are excited to do a dance program or to do a rap program or to record music. And all of a sudden, nobody's youth friendly. You have security coming in the door. You have front desk people telling us to shut up," he recalls. On more than one occasion, Farahat was invited to smudge in non-Indigenous spaces, but was later asked to sign a $1,000,000 insurance liability.

[1] According to Hill Strategies' analysis of the 2021 Census, Indigenous people make up for 5% of the population and 4.2% of all cultural workers, but only 2.7% of art leaders. Only 2% of arts, culture and heritage facilities owned by federal, provincial and municipal governments were Indigenous culture facilities in 2022 according to study by Statistics Canada.

Being treated as a threat, or as a liability, meant that neither Farahat nor the children he taught felt welcome to create in these spaces.

The discrimination Farahat and other Indigenous community members that he collaborated with in colonial institutions pushed them to "dream and wonder" what running such programs could look like if Canada were different. What if Indigenous-owned organizations were the norm? What if community members did not need to go to "a mainstream Canadian place" any time they needed help or wanted access culture and fun? What if funding agencies did not simply have grants for Indigenous organizations—what if they were Indigenous-led?

"We needed our own ownership. We needed our own representation. What if, you know, all of these [institutions] were Indigenous-owned and led? How would that change the way others see us? And the way we see ourselves? That was one of the most powerful things [to dream about]." – Dwight Good Eagle Farahat

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Taking assessment of the lack of Indigenous-owned and led arts organizations in Calgary, Farahat wanted to create his own collective with trusted community members and empower Indigenous people in his city to take up the space they needed to create.

Creating belonging and community through art and care

In 2019-2020, Farahat received a $90,000 Creating, Knowing and Sharing grant from the Canada Council for the Arts (CCA) to create safe spaces focused on teaching hip-hop and rap for youth incarcerated at the Calgary Young Offenders Centre. When the COVID-19 pandemic started and programs were disrupted, Farahat asked the young people he was serving what they wanted or could use from him, and they told him they needed a space where they could go to and feel welcome after their release. Farahat negotiated with the CCA for an extension to the grant, and with help from his friends, he used the rest of the money to create a Monday Rap Night program that would provide the kind of space for which the kids had asked.

"Most Indigenous funding is made only for Indigenous people to help themselves or for white people to help us. It hasn't even been thought of that the Indigenous community is healthy enough to help others outside of their race. And that's where we started." – Dwight Good Eagle Farahat

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Tribe Artist Society started in 2020 as a grassroot movement, a loosely organized collective of artists and community members that were focused on running the Monday Rap Night program and supporting Indigenous people as well as anyone else who wanted to come through the door. And as the youth-focused project funded by their first CCA grant wrapped up, Farahat saw the opportunity to adapt Tribe Artist Society to the needs he was observing in aspiring artists of all ages. Monday Rap Night became an 18+ program "the week after the funding ended" and Farahat describes "we had 20 people in the room as soon as I pivoted," which he viewed

at the time as a great turnout, given how much time programs like this one can take to find their audience.

Tribe primarily supported aspiring and emerging artists and had difficulties finding grants that supported community arts without expecting "excellence." That notion of evaluating artistic excellence carries its own issues (those of establishing what standards are being used to evaluate artistic or cultural excellence, who has authority on determining these standards and according to which cultural tradition/norms), alongside the barriers it places on organizations that are still in the process of establishing themselves. As Farahat put it: "They want to pay for the flowers; they don't want to pay for the germination for the seeds."

This need for funding pushed Tribe Artist Society to become a registered charity in 2021 with support from Calgary Arts Development (more on this later) and developed its new official mission: "to make all artists their most powerful selves through coaching, education, and mentorship."

But Farahat shared that he and his board members had another mission that they cared about more deeply: "use hip hop, art, and Indigenous culture to bring people together in the spirit of reconciliation and play." They wanted Tribe to be a space that served a social, community-building purpose alongside a cultural purpose. "We're not really about making the best artists," confessed Farahat, "to me, it's about [making sure] that people have somebody to call."

One program where Tribe feels they're consistently delivering on that mission is its weekly Drum Circle. In late 2023, some Tribe Artist Society members expressed sadness upon hearing that a Drum Circle organized by Indigenous-led Sober Crew was going to stop running. The Drum Circle's leaders had been exhausted, bearing the weight of trying to create a sober space and provide community space twice a week for over 150 Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, many of whom were in recovery and some of whom were unhoused. After three years of challenging and emotionally taxing volunteer work, Sober Crew's leaders needed support, and Tribe Artist Society stepped in to help. With its status as a registered charity, Tribe Artist Society was in a better position to solicit grants and was able to raise funding for the Sober Crew, keeping the program afloat. Farahat explains that while it is now described as "Tribe & Sober Crew Drum Circle", Tribe Artist Society positions itself as a supporter: "we're lucky that they let us be a part of it."[2]

Tribe Artist Society has become a resource to the community at large, supporting its Indigenous and non-Indigenous members facing addiction, mental health issues and loneliness through art, prioritizing cultural care and human connection over artistic excellence. But this approach, as well as Tribe's very nature as a young Indigenous-owned and -led organization, has meant that the organization has faced many barriers in accessing funding.

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[2] This situation can be compared and contrasted with the merger examined in the Hub's case study on Arts Ottawa as two examples of mergers which benefitted the community and were led from a human centred perspective: in one case, two financially healthy organizations came together to better fill community needs; in the other, one organization facing precarity came to support another one in a more dire situation to enable to survive and keep serving its community. In both cases, the trust between staff of both organizations and the respect for everyone's unique skills were key to the success of the merger.

Fighting to exist in the face of structural inequities and funding barriers

"Starting Tribe Artist Society... The best way to explain it is running in a maze that's pitch black as fast as you can and running into corners and walls. And every now and then someone will just flick a lighter for you. And it's like, oh, I just missed that wall." – Dwight Good Eagle Farahat

When the Canada Council for the Arts grant ended in 2020, Farahat's search for funding to continue Tribe's work led him to consider registering the organization as a charity. "At first, I was pretty naïve," he admits, "I was like, 'sweet. I'll open up a charity and then we can just apply for money, (...) once we get the charity status, we're good'." Farahat gathered trusted friends and community members to advise him and formed a board of directors. He also asked for support from Calgary Arts Development (CADA), whose staff helped steer the organization as it formalized its structure.[3]

The collective became a federally registered charity in 2021, but Farahat quickly realized a paradox: in order to be eligible for operating grants, a small, new, Indigenous-led organization like this one needs to demonstrate stability, which Tribe had a hard time doing without the support of an operating grant.

Since 2021, Tribe Artist Society has been functioning solely on projects grants: funding uncertainty has been a defining characteristic of its first few years of operations. The organization has experienced the strain of trying to deliver new programs when project grants are confirmed only days before the program is supposed to start, and it has also struggled to continue existing programs when project grants favor new initiatives.

Tribe's staff is limited to 1.5 employees for this reason, and their one part-time staff member consistently works overtime hours. Programs are built around a contractor/volunteer model: a core group of seven people works for the organization, hired on as contractors when grants allow it and providing help as volunteers the rest of the time. Despite having a committed team and drawing audiences and participants across all of their programs, the unpredictable cadence of project grants and deliverables linked to those grants has meant that Tribe Arts Society, like many projects funded organizations, has struggled to prove it is stable enough to receive core operational funding. And despite Tribe's best efforts, it is their staff and volunteers who have to deal with the type of labour precarity that is a staple of arts work in Canada.

The struggles Tribe's staff and volunteers face are compounded by those the organization faces as a result of structural inequities embedded in Canada's arts and culture funding model. According to Farahat, Tribe experiences a gap between the artistic and cultural value it brings to its community, and how that value is perceived by non-Indigenous funders and organizations. To his mind, long-established, non-Indigenous-led organizations continue to receive the largest

[3] Calgary Arts Development is the City of Calgary's arms' length arts development authority, which Tribe Artist Society credits alongside the Calgary Foundation as a major supporter from the beginning.

operating funds and receive major infrastructure investments (despite some of them relying on a limited audience base with little diversity, according to him), leaving too little for emerging BIPOC-led organizations that are ostensibly at the core of funders program delivery and community building objectives.

> *"[White organizations] get boosts because of implicit bias. I feel like most people in [funding bodies] see these organizations as kin, and they don't see Indigenous-focused organizations kin. And so there's an underlying extra amount of trust, of belief, of faith, of 'I believe in you, I want you to win.' You know, there's mainstream Canadian and then there's being an Indigenous Canadian. It's a different world." – Dwight Good Eagle Farahat*

Farahat shared that he and Tribe's board members have been invited to meetings about cultural projects in Calgary and noticed that there is no Indigenous ownership in these projects, but that there is often funding "after the fact" to try and bring Indigenous people into these spaces. They view this is a symptom of the larger issue: institutions remember to invite Indigenous people into spaces but do not involve them from the beginning as interest holders. Because Indigenous people didn't feel included from the onset in the planning for a space, they don't feel a sense of ownership nor of connection to it, so their participation will remain low.

The problem of Indigenous people not having ownership in programs that concern them is still widespread. Farahat comments that even when Indigenous people lead a program, they are often part of a non-Indigenous institution through which they receive public or private program instead of being independent and funded as a separate Indigenous-owned entity.

> *"If you're funding non-Indigenous [organizations] and giving them lots of money because they control an Indigenous program, you need to ask them about their plan for reconciliation and sovereignty. What's the plan, the 10-year plan for this program to go on its own outside of your control?" – Dwight Good Eagle Farahat*

Whether they're part of an Indigenous-owned organization or a non-Indigenous institution, Indigenous program workers are also underpaid compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts and are often asked to deliver art programs for lower wages, which Tribe Artist Society has experienced first-hand.[4]

Looking back on Tribe Artist Society's persisting financial precarity and on his journey as its founder and Executive Director, Farahat sometimes wonders if the organization should have kept the youth-only focus of its early days to have easier access to stable funding. Tribe has

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[4] According to Hill Strategies' analysis of the 2021 Census, the median income of Indigenous men artists is 20% lower than the median income of non-Indigenous men artist, and the median income of Indigenous women artist is 6% lower than the median income of non-Indigenous women artist. The median income of Indigenous men in arts leadership position is 11% lower than non-Indigenous men, and for Indigenous women in arts leadership position it is 25% lower than non-Indigenous women.

also had to learn where the value of their programs lie for funders, how to explain what distinctive contribution their activities bring to the wellbeing of the community: as an example, Farahat describes missing a grant opportunity on Indigenous youth suicide prevention back in 2022 because he did not understand that, through their artistic and cultural programs, Tribe Artist Society was already contributing to suicide prevention.[5]

In 2026, Tribe's financial stability is still precarious. Several recent grant rejections have left the organization uncertain of what new programs they will be able to deliver, but Farahat shares that his board and team feel confident in their ability to be resourceful and resilient thanks to the support of the hip-hop and rap community. Despite systemic hurdles and funding challenges, Tribe Artist Society continues to create Indigenous-led arts spaces that foster safety, belonging, and empowerment for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Calgarians, and is committed to looking for ways to bolster its financial sustainability and to continue to support its community.

Tribe Artist Society's Insights for Arts Leaders

- **Retain ownership and protect your organization by having a small and trusted board:** Farahat credits a large part of the successful development of Tribe Artist Society to keeping the board limited to people who had deep trust in each other and in him, rather than trying to create "the perfect board matrix of professionals." A board that is supportive and protective of the organization can protect founders from losing their organizations to other entities, which is especially important for Indigenous-led organizations.
- **Do not overextend yourself and lean on other arts leaders in your community:** Being an arts leader can be emotionally taxing, especially when working with marginalized population. Growing a mutual support network with your peers can not only help you, but it can also save your organization.
- **Start as a federally registered charity:** While some organizations may prefer to start as a provincially registered charity, Tribe Artist Society benefitted from the added flexibility in its activities and in its search for funding to be a federally registered charity, and recommends hiring a specialized lawyer to help you in this process.
- **Stress-test new programs and experiment to find your audience:** Trying out different target populations for your programs can help you figure out where you have the most added value and what works best for your organization.
- **Support your Indigenous programs in gaining independence and ownership:** if you're a non-Indigenous organization operating an Indigenous program, reflect and discuss with the team plans so the Indigenous program can achieve sovereignty in the long term, and ensure that Indigenous program workers are appropriately compensated.

[5] Honouring Life was an Alberta Health Services' youth life promotion and suicide prevention program developed to support First Nation and Métis communities for the 2022/2023 fiscal year. Tribe Artist Society was invited to apply and could have received up to $200,000 but did not apply due to misunderstanding the framing of the grant as focused on mental health outreach specifically, instead of it actually including cultural activities that connect Indigenous youth with a support network in a broader sense.

Tribe Artist Society's Insights for Policymakers & Funders

- **Create operation funding streams that are accessible to newer Indigenous-led organizations:** while funding is trending towards more equity-serving programs, it is still hard for new Indigenous-led organizations to access funding beyond project grants. This uncertainty makes it harder for them to reach their goals and to be effective in their activities, while reducing the number of years in activity in the eligibility requirements for operation funding could allow for earlier stabilization.
- **Assess funding based on impact and engagement, not on age and familiarity:** As the new generation of Indigenous people grows and hopefully feels more empowered in tomorrow's Canada, more and more Indigenous-led organizations might emerge and compete for the same grants. They may reach and bring to the arts and culture different populations than the traditional audience of "legacy" institutions and should be rewarded for this.
- **Require transparency and plans for sovereignty for Indigenous programs in non-Indigenous organizations:** Make funding for Indigenous programs operated by non-Indigenous organizations dependent on the proof of serious efforts to give as much sovereignty to the Indigenous program and its Indigenous leaders as they desire.
- **Nurture Indigenous leadership:** Recognize the emotional labour and unique community expectations placed on Indigenous leaders and facilitate training for Indigenous leaders, through funding for coaching like Farahat received from Calgary Arts Development, or through support for community mentorship programs. Fund Indigenous programs to the measure of wages that reflect the cost of living.
- **Fund community arts because they create belonging, not excellence:** For Farahat, "if we want vibrant cities that are full of music and arts and paintings, we need to fund the places of germination, the places of play." Community arts can create real social change, foster belonging, connection, reconciliation, and fulfill larger policy goals regardless of artistic excellence.