

What makes an effective ally to Aboriginal people in Australian higher education?

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As a growing number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students enter university, it is important that universities offer best-practice academic, pastoral and cultural support services to foster an inclusive, productive and empowering university experience for Aboriginal people. An often overlooked factor in this process is the role that non-Indigenous university staff play in enabling or inhibiting Indigenous student success. In the literature, there is a small number of auto-ethnographic and self-reflexive papers by non-Aboriginal authors, documenting their learning and growth working with Aboriginal students. However, a critical gap is the presence of Aboriginal voices in this space; particularly, those focused on defining the characteristics, actions and experiences that effective allies might possess. This project begins to address this gap. Framed as a collaborative auto-ethnography, five Aboriginal graduate students/university staff and one non-Aboriginal academic staff member participated in three phases of data generation and analysis over a six month period. Comprised of a combination of written reflections and real-time conversation, we applied thematic and reflective analysis to develop a collective response to the question: 'What makes an effective ally in Aboriginal higher education?' Four dominant themes emerged: Communication, Awareness, Relationships and Empowerment (CARE). Contradictions and nuances within each theme were intentionally been left open.

The final conclusions being that there is no one set of rules that govern how to be an effective ally to Aboriginal students – and this is the point! Our findings suggested that it is important to approach Aboriginal people as individuals not stereotypes, and to be flexible, responsive and open to diverse presentations of Aboriginality. Effective allies are constantly learning, without claiming expertise; and have knowledge, not only about the sociocultural and historical structures that impact Aboriginal staff and students' daily lives, but also of their own implicit and explicit biases.