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# **Tribal Nation Building and the Role of Faculty: Paying the Debt on Indigenous Well-Being in Higher Education**

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DYLAN R. HEDDEN-NICELY, AND CHRIS A. HAMILTON

This article situates the experiences of faculty members, as tribal nation builders, within the academy of higher education. As creators of a 2020 convening on nation building in higher education, we ascertain the logic for interdisciplinary faculty collaboration as essential for performing and centering tribal nation-building efforts in higher education. We argue that the academy cannot honor its relationship with Indigenous lands and peoples without equitable investment in Indigenous faculty and curricular programs that engage deeply with Indigenous lifeways and lead restorative relationships with Indigenous communities and their citizens. As junior scholars using personal narrative to illuminate the complexities of advancing Indigenous programming, we propose investment in interdisciplinary work as a reflection of Indigenous knowledge. We conclude by highlighting ways for institutions to invest in Indigenous faculty and the co-conceptualization of nation building as a vital cornerstone of public education.

## **Introduction**

Nearly every public speech given by leadership at all levels of the University of Idaho begins by acknowledging two things. First, acknowledgment is made, to some degree, that the lands where the university now sits are the homelands of the people Indigenous<sup>1</sup> to this region. Second, leaders and administrators invariably acknowledge, in celebratory language, the fact that the University of Idaho is the state's land-grant university. Passed in 1862, the federal Morrill Act provided states with lands to be sold for the purpose of creating or supporting an institution of higher education. Considered the flagships of American public higher education (Key, 1996), this federal involvement aimed

to democratize access to higher education, particularly among the rural West and the newly settled agricultural lands associated with the Homestead Act of 1862. The Morrill Act is credited with contributing to U.S. economic growth over the past 150 years (Nash, 2019). Within the standard acknowledgement that begins speeches at the University of Idaho, rarely do leaders and administrators acknowledge the *interrelationship* between the history of the institution's location on Indigenous lands and the role of the Morrill Act in creating the institution.

Words, both spoken and written, are statements “enacted within a social context, which are determined by that social context and which contribute to the way that social context continues its existence” (Mills, 1997, p. 10). Language provides ways for people to establish the social meaning of a place and for the social and aspirational needs of the individuals and groups of that place to become recognized and evaluated (Freedman & Ball, 2004). As faculty members at a land-grant university, the relationships constructed and erased through the standard university greeting have implications for the development, maintenance, and circulation of the institution's mission and current relationship with Native nations. Undoubtedly, the absence of relational acknowledgement between land removal and land appropriation impacts administrator and faculty relationships with tribal nations and their citizens. How do university faculty interrupt the ways land-grant institutions of higher education manage to “forget, erase, ignore, dishonor, and disrespect” (Lipe, 2018, p. 163) the truth that our institution reaps the resources from the Indigenous homelands with little reciprocation? This question, and the ripple effect of its response, are central to Indigenous self-determination and sovereignty in higher education.

In this article, we take up the concept of tribal nation building in higher education from the point of view of tenure-track, junior faculty at a land-grant university, both Native and non-Native. Our examination is underscored by a recognition that institutions of higher education are part of a settler-colonial relationship between Indigenous lands and institutions (Patel, 2015). A rhetorical process of re-territorializing space, the master narrative of U.S. history is a self-serving history “of discovery, conquest, and settlement that wipe out any references to the original relations between Indigenous peoples and Europeans” (Alfred, 2006, p. 34). Erase-to-replace normalizes Eurocentric epistemologies into higher-education pedagogy and research (Patel, 2015). We join Indigenous-studies scholars in stating that higher education must reckon with the “colonial project” of the academy (Leonard & Mercier,

2016; Smith, 2012). Reckoning not only involves honoring the Indigenous lands, people, and knowledge systems of the place (Lipe, 2018), but, most critically, also involves support for Indigenous and allied faculty to engage in intention and equitable work with tribal nations to co-construct the process, content, methodologies, and outcomes of higher-education institutions (Mihe-suah & Wilson, 2004). To illuminate this call, we unpack our own experiences as faculty members from different disciplines working in service to Native nations and lifeways—some of which are our own Native nations or those whose lands our institution displaced. We use our struggles as untenured faculty<sup>2</sup> to develop a shared space to advocate for Native nations and lifeways in the academy and to examine cross-cutting settler-colonial patterns, which commonly deny faculty the support and infrastructure to remember and restore relationships between institutions of higher education and diverse Indigenous Peoples. Involved in our reflection is the background which led to the planning and piloting of the Tribal Nation Building in Higher Education Convening<sup>3</sup> held on the University of Idaho campus in February 2020. Taken from both our personal experiences and our reflections on the convening, we collectively envision the ways in which higher education can prioritize support for Indigenous faculty, Indigenous-centered curriculum, and cross-disciplinary research as central to its mission.

### **Indigenous Lands and the Land “Grant” Institution**

The legal record goes this way: In 1863, under incredible duress and coercion, members of the Nez Perce tribe entered into a treaty whereby the tribe allegedly ceded approximately 6.75 million acres to the United States in exchange for \$262,500, an amount that averaged approximately four cents per acre (Treaty with the Nez Perce, 1863). That agreement came on the heels of a treaty between the same parties in 1855, wherein the tribe ceded approximately 9.5 million acres in exchange for, once again, around \$262,500—under three cents per acre (Treaty with the Nez Perce, 1855). The Nez Perce were paid more than their neighbors to the south, the Shoshone-Bannock tribes, which entered into a treaty that paved the way for over 50 million acres of its land to be settled by non-Indians without payment (Treaty of Fort Bridger, 1868). In 1891, just to the north of the University of Idaho, Congress ratified an agreement it had entered into with the Coeur d’Alene tribe in 1873, wherein the tribe ceded approximately 4.5 million acres in

exchange for \$500,000, approximately 11 cents per acre (Act Ratifying Agreement with the Coeur d'Alene, 1891).

The University of Idaho was among the primary beneficiaries of this dispossession (Goodluck et al., 2020). According to recent studies, the state of Idaho has sold approximately 87,445 acres of land granted to it by the United States, raising around \$452,113 for the university and its operations (Goodluck et al., 2020). Assuming all those lands were sold in 1889—the year the university was founded—that amounts to almost \$13 million in 2020 dollars. The United States acquired those lands from the Nez Perce, Shoshone-Bannock, Te-Moak Tribe of Western Shoshone, and Coeur d'Alene tribes, paying approximately \$1,200 total (\$34,000 today), which amounts to a roughly 37,000 percent profit. Further, because the Morrill Act required that the capital raised through the sale of lands granted “remain forever undiminished,” these funds should continue to exist in the endowment of every land-grant institution in the United States (Morrill Act, 1862). In other words, land-grant institutions continue to profit from and reinvest money that is directly linked to the Indigenous dispossession of the 19th century, as a process of erasure of American Indian rights and history from the official landscape (Nash, 2019). Importantly, this brief narrative of legal documentation does not reflect the tribes' perspectives on these land exchanges.

The origins of the University of Idaho, one of 52 land-grant institutions in the U.S., are part of a settler-colonial process of violence that continues a Western academic tradition of naming, or re-naming, Indigenous lands as a function of power, control, and attempts toward ideological dominance (Smith, 2012). The repetitive performance of the ritual welcome speech mentioned in the opening of this article—without material action to back up those words—can now be seen as one among the many ways land-grant institutions of higher education manage to forget, erase, ignore, dishonor, and disrespect the truth that our institution reaps the resources from the Indigenous homelands with little reciprocation (Lipe, 2018). Not limited to land transactions, processes of discursive and legal erasure-to-replace, in addition to the slew of other federal Indian policies forcing assimilation and indoctrination of Indigenous children through Western schooling (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006), are central to invisibilizing Indigenous Peoples and their experiences, knowledge, and histories in higher education. Institutions must do better to provide opportunities and resources that develop and implement curriculum and programming that respects, values, and supports Indigenous students and communities so that they may flourish. We see investment in Indigenous faculty as central to such change.

## **The Debt on Indigenous Well-Being: Indigenous Students and Faculty in Higher Education**

Within the last two decades, documentation of the experiences, desires, and innovations of Native peoples in higher education has flourished through Indigenous-led research, writing, and programming (see Mint-horn & Shotton, 2018; Sumida Huaman & Brayboy, 2017, for recent edited volumes). This research, at all levels (undergraduate, graduate, faculty, and administrative), calls attention to the sophisticated ways Indigenous Peoples innovate, subvert, persist, and build coalitions despite the colonial hostility in institutions of higher education (Waterman et al., 2018). We honor the many skills and unique processes embodied through these examples of persistence—three of the four authors of this article are among them. Yet, when analyzing how physical and discursive erasure impacts Indigenous People in higher education, we do not want to downplay the urgent disparities faced by Indigenous People. We insist educational disparities be framed appropriately, as a reflection of the colonial violence embedded in the schooling of American Indian people at all levels of education. Brayboy and Lomawaima (2018) write that education, from preschool to higher education, should be seen as “a battleground of sovereigns, in which knowledge systems, knowledge production, cultural values, and children’s lives are on the line” (p. 83). Interrupting a legacy of more than 100 years of violence and the contemporary damage-centered discourses about Native people in institutions, facilitated by colonial ideologies of White supremacy (Tuck, 2009), are central to what has drawn us to the academy and what continues to drive our current work. Synthesizing research on Native peoples in higher education, with a focus on Native faculty, amplifies the urgency to rethink how we support Indigenous well-being and self-determination through support of Indigenous-driven programming in higher education.

### **Indigenous Peoples in Higher Education**

Indigenous student enrollment and retention in post-secondary education, both at the undergraduate and graduate level, is lower than any other racialized group in the U.S. (Brayboy et al., 2012; Shotton et al., 2013). Research detailing the experiences of Native students, undergraduate and graduate, consistently find that Native peoples experience high rates of racism, isolation, financial strain, lack of mentorship, and lack of pedagogical and professional congruency with their goals and values (Gillourey & Wolverton, 2008; Nelson, 2015; Page-Reeves et al., 2019;

Shotton, 2018; Tippeconnic & McKinney, 2003). The well-documented obstacles to success in higher education are common factors associated with leaving school (at any level) among Native populations (Johnston-Goodstar & VeLure Roholt, 2017). American Indian and Alaska Native peoples accounted for only 0.2 percent of all doctorates granted in 2016 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2016), making Native peoples the most underrepresented group in higher education. The pathway that proceeds achieving a terminal degree (such as a PhD), a common prerequisite to faculty hiring, severely exhausts the pool of Native people eligible for faculty roles. Those who arrive at the ranks of faculty have persevered in the face of racist and colonial-based ideologies throughout their academic journey from elementary through the graduate school pipelines (Walters et al., 2019).

### **Indigenous Faculty**

Most land-grant universities are four-year, doctoral-granting institutions, and classified as high-research productivity on the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (RI or II). Faculty are central to the work of teaching, research, and service of land grants. Faculty are responsible for curriculum, program development, research agendas, and university governance, including direct influence on processes of tenure and promotion (Adams, 2002). Most research extensive universities are predominantly (or historically) White institutions (PWIs), where nearly 80 percent of the full-time instructional faculty identify as White (NCES, 2018). While faculty of color, including Indigenous faculty, play an “integral role in advancing new knowledge and fostering pluralistic perspectives among students who will advance equity in a diverse and global society” (Zambrana et al., 2015, p. 41), high turnover and attrition of faculty of color in research-extensive institutions severely limits the actualization of pluralistic systems and structures in universities, despite the articulated importance of diversity in higher education (Diggs et al., 2009).

Indigenous faculty members at four-year institutions make up less than 1 percent of all full-time faculty (NCES, 2018), the smallest segment of any racialized group in American higher education (Turner et al., 2008).<sup>4</sup> With less than 0.07 percent of Indigenous faculty promoted to full professor (NCES, 2018), nearly two thirds of the current cadre of Indigenous faculty are either untenured assistant professors or non-tenure track faculty and are the least likely to be tenured of any minoritized group (Tippeconnic & McKinney, 2003; Walters

et al., 2019). The small body of research on Indigenous faculty experiences at research universities highlights patterns of hostile institutional climates and settings ill-equipped to value Indigenous epistemologies and worldviews (Walters et al., 2019). Native faculty express feeling tokenized as a minority hire or positioned as “Indian experts” on all issues of Native peoples (Tippeconnic & McKinney, 2003). Many report experiencing inequitable scrutiny toward their work, sending the message that Indigenous scholars need to work harder than their White colleagues to be recognized as experts or contributors to their field(s) (Bass & Faircloth, 2011). Consistently, evidence indicates Indigenous faculty at research intensive universities are under-represented and overstretched, and lack relevant mentorship (Brayboy et al., 2012; Lopez, 2020; Minthorn & Shotton, 2018).

Native faculty play a significant role in mentoring and supporting student success in higher education (Faircloth & Tippeconnic, 2013; Lopez, 2018; Tippeconnic Fox, 2005), despite systemic inequities. Indigenous faculty shoulder the weight of educating outsiders to the diverse and dynamic realities of Native lifeways, as well as create space to teach and research in a way that sustains their own culture and Native sense of self (Jaime & Rios, 2006). The significant amount of time Indigenous faculty spend advising Native students, engaging in university service in support of Indigenous concerns, creating Indigenous programming, and networking with local tribal communities is often described as “shadow work” (Tippeconnic Fox, 2005). While this work is vital for university functions, inclusive of helping universities meet diversity and inclusion mandates, it is frequently unrecognized and unrewarded in the tenure and promotion process (Brayboy et al., 2012; Walters et al., 2019). Indigenous faculty frequently navigate many roles simultaneously, such as being nation builders for their own tribal nations and using the power of their institutions to advocate for and serve as collaborators for the desires of other tribal nations (Lopez, 2020; Shotton, 2018), often done while using both Western and Indigenous knowledge in addressing complex issues. The work of Native faculty has to be analyzed within constant institutional messaging that overwhelmingly treats what is useful for Native people in higher education as outside the boundaries of the institution.

### **Transforming Futures: Paying Debts**

Maintaining the status quo in higher education continues a pattern of underserving Native peoples at all levels of education (Faircloth &

Tippeconnic, 2015). The accumulation of disparities, what Ladson-Billings calls an educational debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006) caused by settler colonialism and structural racism in higher education, requires universities to recognize that short-term conversations are unlikely to address the underlying problems of marginalization, fragmentation, and erasure. To alter this pattern, we echo the call that “rebuilding the relationship between Indigenous students, communities, and education should be a social justice priority in higher education” (Sumida Huaman & Abeita, 2018, p. 202). Prioritizing social justice for Indigenous Peoples in higher education is a call to action. We reflect on our own pathway to the academy, our efforts to amplify the need for systematic change (as Indigenous faculty and allies), and the need to elevate the urgency of investing in Indigenous faculty as central to the transformative potential of tribal nation building through higher education.

### **Tribal Nation Building**

We examine the role of faculty in institutions of higher education through the holistic lens of tribal nation building. According to Brayboy et al. (2012), nation building in higher education involves a conscious and focused application of Indigenous People’s collective resources, energies, and knowledge toward liberating and developing the physical and intellectual space for Indigenous communities to drive conversations of legal, political, cultural, economic, health and nutritional, spiritual, and educational needs of Native nations (pp. 12–13). Nation building is fundamentally about tribal citizens accessing and developing the skills and knowledge they deem necessary for strengthening tribal sovereignty and self-determination. Tribal nation building centers and prioritizes the health and well-being of tribal nations and communities (Coffey & Tsosie, 2001), instead of elevating individual achievements as is common in Western educational metrics of achievement (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005). A nation-building model in higher education acknowledges the need to blend community knowledge and knowledge gained from institutions through diverse curricular and research accommodations that are flexible and adaptive, rather than assimilatory and one-size-fits all (Brayboy et al., 2014).

Approaching the role of faculty through a nation-building framework sees faculty as partners in finding solutions to issues confronted by Indigenous Peoples in equitable collaboration with Indigenous Peoples and Native nations. As Indigenous faculty and allies, the tribal nation-building lens asks us to identify where resources and energies

exist in our institutions to serve Native nations. Further, it guides faculty efforts to the task of building capacity to meet the immediate and long-term needs of tribal citizens and their nations, as defined by tribal citizens and their nations, and on the timescales required of relational knowledge production. Put simply, nation building is a framework for faculty to participate in rebuilding Indigenous nationhood (Brayboy, 2005), *through* partnerships with tribal nations and *with* institutional resources that support and strengthen Indigenous futures.

### **Foregrounding Tribal Nation Building: Why Hold a Convening?**

As junior faculty from different disciplines (law, education, anthropology, and biology), all of whom were hired between 2015 and 2019, our conversations about nation building in higher education emerged from experiences navigating higher education as Indigenous scholars (Philip, Dylan, and Chris) and from our daily struggles to advocate for and further academic research and programming that centers Indigenous students, communities, and nations (all authors). Rather than dismissing these recurrences as “part of the job,” we were drawn to think about how higher education should and can contribute to rebuilding Indigenous nationhood. Our institution’s physical location between two federally recognized tribal nations (Nez Perce and Coeur d’Alene tribal nations) and our university’s Memorandum of Understanding with 11 signatory tribes, presented an immediate space to elevate the urgency of the conversation.

The tribal advocacy and consultation systems put in place by the our university’s Office of Tribal Relations established a new infrastructure for research protocols with tribal nations. Yet, advocacy for Native students and partnership with tribal nations were frequently siloed and placed on the shoulders of the few Indigenous staff hired to specialize in Native student recruitment and retention. As critiqued by Indigenous scholars of higher education, institutions as a whole must participate in the work of serving Indigenous students and communities; hence, the practice of placing tribal engagement on Native personnel external to academic units grossly overlooks the responsibility of the institution (Stewart-Ambo, 2021).

As faculty responsible for making choices about curriculum, directly interacting with students in the classroom, designing and leading research, and holding a vote in all levels of university governance, we observed our efforts to serve Native nations to be treated as “voluntary,” extra, or novel. Our faculty colleagues were rarely, if ever, asked

to deeply engage the needs of Native nations and their citizens in their teaching, research, or service. The focus of our institution has remained consistently on assimilating Native peoples to the institution rather than envisioning change in the structures themselves. Because of this, we saw considerable need to engage faculty, department administrators, and college deans in the deeper work of conceptualizing, ideologically and materially, the university as a partner to Native nations.

Our stories, and the relational webs in which they live, are part of how we come to the academy and how we operate within the world of academia (Shotton et al., 2018). Our stories are not merely behind-the-scenes events in our work as educators and researchers. Narrative is an important source of knowledge and is an appropriate mode for examining the nuances of human experiences (Archibald, 2008; Brayboy, 2005; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Narrative also serves as a way of knowing and informs the ways in which we theorize and practice our roles as faculty (Brayboy, 2005). Here we share details from the experiences that led our logics in the form of reflective vignettes. These experiences and many others provided the context for how we approached expanded conversation on our campus regarding tribal nation building in higher education.

### **Disrupting the Safe Indian (Philip Stevens)**

Shi Philip Stevens gonsee. Tudithiñshlii. I believe that Apaches are intelligent, curious, innovative, caring, exceedingly funny, and resilient. I know this not just out of cultural pride, but from my experience. In particular, growing up in a rural place within a blue-collar family, I was and am continually surprised that people see my educational accomplishments as happening in spite of my upbringing, whereas I know them to be because of my upbringing. I have seen cowboys bring life-giving water to tops of dry mesas with little else than some PVC pipe, rubber cement, and old bicycle tubes. I have seen firefighters battle blazes that other companies choose to let burn because of the harshness of terrain. I have seen 100-pound little children move 800-pound bull elk over 3 miles. I have seen grandmothers tell jokes that would make professional comedians blush. All of this is to say that I know Apaches to contain multitudes, as any Boston Brahmin, New Yorker or Parisian les Apaches. It is with this mindset that I understood the transdisciplinary nature of American Indian Studies (AIS) to be much more than a “safe” depiction of art, literature, or spirituality (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006).

When I agreed to the role of director of the American Indian Studies (AIS) program at my university, concurrently as a newly minted PhD joining the tenure track, I believed that I would already be incorporating Apache epistemologies and pedagogy into all aspects of the curriculum. However, as a visitor in the region, to be a respectful guest meant I would need to make myself and my skills within the university available to tribal nations to ensure AIS was reflective of local tribal interests and perspectives. In my first few years as a new professor, I visited many of the local tribal communities to inquire directly with tribal community members how they believed AIS could be of service to their community. Overwhelmingly, the response was that tribal communities wanted their children's and non-tribal children's education to contain multitudes; that is, to be as expansive as their own lives are in contemporary times. In particular, tribal community members cited disciplines such as education, natural resources, and law as containing significant institutional tools to better their own communities.

One of my first actions as AIS director was to expand the program curriculum and recruit affiliate faculty to reflect these stated tribal communities' desires. I also recognized the exclusionary effects of Western education on all students as creating misperception of tribes. In other words, I saw AIS as a space of dialog between and among people centered around Indigenous worldviews, not a space for non-Native students to learn *about* Indigenous People. I addressed these misperceptions by developing a tribal elder's class where I would invite a tribal elder from a neighboring community to come and teach at the University of Idaho as a visiting professor. I asked the elder to address anything that Eurocentric epistemology and pedagogy misunderstood, misapplied, mistook, or even just missed about their tribe. I invited the elder to share what their tribe would consider important to be a fully functioning community member (to the extent appropriate to a non-community member audience), while I served as their teaching assistant to ensure fluid interaction between university teaching systems and the elders skill set—a role I voluntarily undertook in addition to my required teaching load.

The recognition that tribal elder knowledge, verified and identified by their own community, is equitable to a PhD, allowed me to pursue their employment at the same salary rate as a visiting professor. This monetary recognition of the tribal elder created an intersection and definition of cultural values and worth. Tribal elders from neighboring communities were identified when I approached both official tribal departments (language, elder committees, education, and cultural

offices) and public community interactions (celebrations, powwows, sports tournaments, and cultural events) and asked for names of elders who are valued for their knowledge. I made it a point to include elders who may have never “taught” within a classroom. This was my review of “curricula vitae and letters of reference.” Soon I compiled a list of names that were suggested multiple times. Then I visited these elders and described the responsibilities and particulars regarding the class. Once an elder decided that they would be willing to share their knowledge within the confines of one of the colonial tools of assimilation and cultural erasure, I would begin the university paperwork.

Hiring paperwork requires the governing body that bestows the title and rank of an individual to provide evidence of the individual’s qualifications. For example, the University of Arizona bestowed the rank of Doctor of Philosophy to me because I “satisfactorily completed the Studies prescribed there for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy with all the Rights, Privileges, and Honors thereunto appertaining.” When I hired the tribal elder, I had to contend with a discordant reality about knowledge. These differences in understanding of knowledge represent how hegemonic knowledges become reified and operational. In each of these instances, I had to marshal the elder’s application through this process as it came to a halt. My point here is that there is a need to recognize that knowledge and credentials come in many forms that may not be recognized by university systems.

### **Challenging Curriculum and Structures in Education (Vanessa Anthony-Stevens)**

As a self-described “accidental professor,” my experiences prior to accepting a tenure-track position included immersive collaborations with youth and teachers in communities throughout North and South America—Indigenous communities frequently characterized through a litany of deficit and damage-centered (Tuck, 2009) educational and social-service discourses (the *most* poor, the *most* at risk, the *least* performing in school, etc.). In the spring of 2015, I was hired as an assistant professor in Curriculum and Instruction and asked to increase diversity initiatives in teacher education, including collaboration and outreach with regional tribal nations. These activities were to be performed while also serving the department’s needs through instruction of teacher education courses, advising undergraduate and graduate students, and engaging in university service and outreach. As a White, Euro-settler-American, mother, and scholar-educator whose teaching

and research engages Indigenous and decolonial stances in schooling, I was likely a safe choice for such a “feel good” position—there are many White, female academics in the academy, especially in fields like education. On paper, my position appeared to be a traditional tenure-track position (40 percent research, 45 percent teaching/advising, 10 percent outreach, and 5 percent service) with no mention of the diversity emphasis in my actual position description. Although I enjoyed “insider” status as a White person in the academy, joining a predominantly White, mainstream institution in a college where I teach predominantly White audiences, with no Indigenous faculty, very few faculty of color, and few colleagues focused on issues of culture, language, and power, I found myself overwhelmed with being asked to shoulder attention to diversity and tribal communities with little infrastructural support to do so.

To address these gaps, I plunged into service despite well-intentioned collegial advice to “focus on research” and “keep my head down until I am tenured.” I became an affiliate faculty in American Indian Studies, spent time with Native student-services programs, and invested afternoons, weekends, and summers working on applied projects led by regional tribal departments of education and state Indian education initiatives. In 2016, just 18 months into my faculty appointment, I was asked to lead an external funding effort to launch an Indigenous teacher–education initiative. I initially responded to the idea with extreme apprehension. My experience in Indigenous education taught me the centrality of Indigenous leadership, the need for community-based advising, and the importance of integrating relational pedagogies and Indigenous epistemologies into educational coursework. My college had few if any of these features. Even so, in partnership with the university’s Office of Tribal Relations I committed to serve as principal investigator and director of Indigenous Knowledge for Effective Education Program (IKEEP), now supported by three grants from the U.S. Department of Education. In five years, the program has increased the Native enrollment in teacher education from one to 14 teacher candidates, built a network of Indigenous mentor teachers across the region, and established close partnerships with tribal departments of education and our state’s Office of Indian Education.

In the humbling process of elevating Indigenous epistemologies and sovereignty in the college, I observed that even as I carried out the charge of my position’s “desired qualifications,” the work of building space to support Indigenous education was isolating, misunderstood, and sometimes tokenized—all embodiments of minimal

change. Supporting our Indigenous students and teachers required, at minimum, curricular changes to include a history of American Indian education and understanding of Indigenous epistemologies. With no Indigenous faculty colleagues in education and limited departmental expertise in social justice pedagogies<sup>5</sup>, changes to teacher-education curriculum meant increasing my teaching load, teaching around breaks, learning to navigate internal systems to create course substitutions, and convincing faculty and chairs that such substitutions and alternative options were valid. Resources from external funding enabled me to contract Indigenous scholars and mentors (mentorship noted as immensely powerful by IKEEP students), yet the daily work of requiring Indigenous teacher—education students to engage in parallel conversations to the mainstream—to both decolonize *and* become proficient in colonial schooling logics for professional certification—was also exhausting to students. It required double- and triple-work from all of us.

This arduous work is certainly rewarding and richly comes to life through the vision and educational changes brought about by our Native graduates. However, I also see that the status quo of higher education is designed to allow individuals willing to work very hard to labor in isolation at no cost to the institution. The IKEEP program still has no consistent internal funding support from the department, college, or university. Questions such as: “How can I engage my department colleagues in elevating the importance of hiring Indigenous faculty?” and “What do my colleagues need to know about Indigenous communities, and from whom should they learn it, to better support the recruitment, retention, and professional induction services for Native students?” crowd my brain. While I know my college and colleagues celebrate IKEEP’s existence, on both moral and accreditation levels, the stories of persistence, innovation, and success among IKEEP scholars are rendered superficial by the lack of central investment and the duplicate (and triplicate) work required of all involved to justify the existence of such programs.

### **Educating a New Generation of Legal Advocates (Dylan R. Hedden-Nicely)**

My road to becoming a law professor was somewhat circuitous. I belong to the Cherokee Nation, and since law school, I have been representing American Indian tribes in water-rights litigation. It is my honor to be a part of the effort to defend the rights our ancestors fought so hard to protect for future generations. However, over time I became increasingly convinced that the key to realizing true tribal self-determination

lay not in what I could accomplish on my own but in educating a whole new generation of legal advocates. It was that epiphany that caused me to join the academy. Whether I would be welcome was another story.

My story is a common one among aspiring legal academics from diverse backgrounds. Like most Native students, I did not graduate from one of the select institutions that are the traditional pipelines to the legal academy (Deo, 2019; Katz et al., 2011). Instead, I graduated from the University of Idaho. Although teaching interested me early on, I did not see a clear path to a professorship. Instead, I focused on developing a legal practice, expertise, and relationships within Indian Country. I never would have applied for the position I now hold but for being recruited by some mentors who were on the hiring committee. Even then, I thought I was a long shot. But the people whom I now call my colleagues saw potential in me that I doubt any other faculty would have noticed. I am very grateful for the friendships I have forged in my short time on the University of Idaho's law faculty; there is nowhere else I would rather work, teach, and study.

I am tasked with administering the Native American Law Program in the university's College of Law. That means that in addition to a full teaching and scholarship load, I am solely responsible, with a limited budget, for recruiting, supporting, mentoring, and networking our Indigenous law students. For some of our Native students, law school marks the first time they have left their reservations. For most, the culture of law school is unlike anything they have ever experienced, and they struggle to cope. These factors are often coupled with excessive pressure from relatives, as well as ongoing trouble back home. Over the past three years, I have helped a student through the death of a friend and three close relatives in a single semester, a student who had to foster a niece and nephew while simultaneously going to school full time, several students attempting to help family through drug-related issues, and at one point, I even had a student living in my home during the middle of a semester. Although not easily quantified, I spend hours on a nearly daily basis helping our Native students work through the unique issues they face that are associated with leaving their family and homelands and coming to a place culturally unfamiliar to undertake rigorous study of abstract concepts. This work is culturally complex, time consuming, and stressful. However, it is the most rewarding part of my job.

After three years of close collaboration regarding myriad institutional concerns, I am confident my colleagues believe in the *idea* of tribal nation building and indeed, I know they believe in the idea of fostering

a diverse, inclusive, and equitable law school. However, these matters are complex and, too often, they are balanced against other values— income, rankings, external politics, and so on—that have the unintended consequence of undercutting the role we are capable of playing in tribal nation building.

### **Building Space for Native Biologists (Chris A. Hamilton)**

As a new professor, I recently embarked on what is easily considered my “dream job.” In my faculty role, I am able to carry out research that fulfills my core desire to better understand the “hows” and “whys” of the evolution of biological diversity. While this constitutes the majority of my faculty appointment, it is the other portion of that appointment that brings both joy and incredible stress and uncertainty—STEM outreach and education with the tribes of Idaho. The reasons for this stress lie in my own questioning of how a Native scientist moves forward when in a new land, has no contacts with the tribes, and is not a “familiar” face. My simple answer: Not easily.

My hire was not a “diversity” hire, but because of my identity and background working with my own tribe (Chickasaw Nation of Oklahoma), an opportunity was seen and taken by administrators to add to the Native faculty of the university, as well as to add a tribal liaison in the college and my department. This is certainly deserving of praise, yet there have been significant hurdles in place. For example, my position description with respect to my outreach component was very vague, and there was no specific funding to start my outreach with the tribes. These types of issues are not uncommon for Natives—or any faculty of color in academia—and arise through a general lack of understanding of Native peoples and communities by our non-Native faculty, administrators, and students.

As a Native professor at the state’s land-grant institution, one occupying the Aboriginal territory of the Nez Perce, Coeur d’Alene, and Shoshone-Bannock peoples, I had hoped there would be more Native faculty at the university. As naïve as this thinking seems to be now, it was a disturbing reality when there was not a larger Native presence or community on campus, where my office literally sits on land stolen from the Nez Perce. What this meant was that no other Native at the university, nor anyone with the local tribes, was told of my hire or the outreach aspect of my job; an important point considering the “shadow work” mentioned above.

Granted, I was trying to start my research lab, the main focus of my position, but it took roughly six months to finally meet other Native faculty—a serendipitous event that occurred at and due to the university’s annual Tutxinmepu Powwow, which I personally attended with my family. This incredible group (my co-authors) immediately accepted me into the family and began helping me build contacts, as well as a better understanding of “how things worked” here (i.e., at the university and with the tribes). As a Native person in academia, I want to be effective in my roles—as a mentor, as a holder of knowledge, and as an educator. It became very evident that this is not something that can be done alone.

But feeling alone can be overwhelming as a Native, or for any other person of color in the academy. While I see that advances have been made within other historically underserved minorities, our Indigenous communities have not seen the same successes. For example, Native representation in the STEM workforce was only 0.2 percent in 2015 (the same as it was in 1993), and the share of bachelor’s degrees earned by Indigenous students dropped from 0.7 percent in 2000 to 0.5 percent in 2015 (National Science Board, 2018). With regards to postgraduate education, a National Science Foundation survey of earned doctorates from 1999–2009 (National Science Foundation, 2009) reveals just how underrepresented Natives are in the life sciences; out of 481,556 PhD awards during that time period, only 1,684 were Indigenous (0.35 percent). During the surveyed years of 1989, 1994, 1999, 2004, and 2009, only 115 Indigenous students received a PhD in the life sciences out of 30,415 awarded. The inclusion of underrepresented groups in biology is essential to enhancing and expanding scientific literacy (both Western and Indigenous knowledge) in the United States.

Driven by a passion to tell stories of our planet, my journey to biology came through photojournalism. My experiences documenting the stories of diverse cultures and contexts complement my love of understanding the biological world around us. For me, biology is a tool to continue telling stories about ourselves and our planet. As an Indigenous scholar, I am in the process of discovering ways to tell stories in both traditional ecological knowledges (TEK) approaches and Western science. Blending cultural and physical worlds was a natural transition, as our people are the original “natural historians.” We understood the land, its flora and fauna, and the interactions of these organisms, long before Western science “discovered” them. It is time we provide more opportunities for tribal citizens to access and develop the skills and knowledge they deem necessary for strengthening tribal sovereignty and self-determination.

## **A Nation-Building Convening**

When hired into tenure-track positions, the mainstream climate that faculty enter continues to ignore or be ignorant of a critical consciousness that sees the benefits of Indigenous intellectual traditions (Absolon, 2011). Our reflections of coming into academia add rich detail to the common phenomena experienced by “diversity” hires (Zambrana et al., 2015), and more specifically the experiences of Indigenous faculty (Brayboy et al., 2012; Lopez, 2020; Walters et al., 2019). Parallel to our experiences, most colleges and universities do not institutionalize programs specifically to support Native students, nor do they make them integral parts of the core mission of the institution (Faircloth & Minthorn, 2018). Frequently, Indigenous and decolonial programming relies on soft funding (Anthony-Stevens, for example), little or no central budgets (Stevens and Hedden-Nicely, for example), and a lack of guidance and or relevant mentorship for those who engage in such work (all). Reciprocity and relationships with Native students and tribal communities is paramount in native nation-centered work, yet it is undersupported. This responsibility is twofold for Native faculty who also participate in nation building within their own tribes and communities. The micro and macro tensions narrated in our vignettes reflect the perpetuation of academic contexts in which faculty members who work to challenge the status quo find their efforts akin to swimming upstream against ever-present settler-colonial forces (Denzin et al., 2008), causing early burnout and pushout (Walters et al., 2019).

Our experiences in four different colleges at the same institution evidence the imposition of disciplinary silos and its implication in the forms of academic fragmentation that frame Indigenous worldviews as special interest agendas (Sumida Huaman & Mataira, 2019), rather than central to holistic knowledge relationships across peoples, land, and cultures (Patel, 2016). Telling our stories of everyday life in the academy is important as our experiences appear most in line with public institutional norms. These normative experiences should be taken seriously even as we are collectively inspired by the select cadre of exceptional and well-funded university programs that become celebrated as examples of success. Our everyday experiences, especially as early career scholars, also point out the land mines, visible and invisible, that Indigenous and allied faculty have to navigate to bring to the foreground Indigenous worldviews and reject the isolation of Indigenous needs and desires in higher education.

Our shared concerns led to the 2020 Tribal Nation Building in Higher Education Convening. Informed by the conceptualization that

a nation-building framework opens a pathway for faculty to actively participate in rebuilding Indigenous nationhood, *through* and *with* institutional resources and tribal partnerships, we wanted to gather with other Indigenous professors, administrators, community advocates, and allied collaborators to engage in deep discussion of space making in higher education, in the material and pedagogical sense (Davidson et al., 2018). Too often, non-Indigenous academics, administrators, and deans are unaware of the contentious history of American Indian education (Lopez, 2020), as seen in our vignettes. Ignorance prevents the conversation of nation building from advancing and keeps leadership from recognizing the needs and desires of Indigenous Peoples in higher education. With funding from the Spencer Foundation, we dreamed out an experience that brought together the perspectives and expertise to “flip the script” and normalize nation building as central to higher education through interconnected conversations with peers.

We drafted a list of diverse Indigenous scholars and innovators from each of our fields (education, biology, law, and anthropology) and a list of local collaborators (tribal education directors, university tribal liaisons, our local department colleagues, chairs, and deans). While sitting around tables in between classes, committee meetings and lab work we imagined that if we gather many smart people in a single room to share different approaches and solutions to similar problems we will learn, find our ideas legitimized or extended, and be challenged and inspired to continue the work. Nation building is cross-cutting, and we wanted to contemplate its significance with those deeply embedded in different spheres of higher education—administration, research, teaching, and outreach. The interdisciplinary nature of invited attendees was to be an anecdote to the narrowness of settler-colonial logics of that compartmentalize a whole into disparate parts in higher education (Battiste, 2013).

Lastly, Stevens’ and Anthony-Stevens’ background in sociocultural learning theory influenced our conversational approach to the convening. We believed that shifting institutional cultures required social participation, shared discourses, and, importantly, proximal models of faculty and administrators discussing everyday practices to extend the knowledge in each participant’s repertoire of practice (Wenger, 1999). Faculty frequently share an identity with other faculty, for example, and learning occurs through relational interactions, not in isolation. Too often we observed higher education task outside trainers to lead brief, isolated workshops, asking individuals to develop intercultural competencies in isolation of systematic change (Getha-Taylor et al.,

2020), an approach insufficient to reckon with colonial logics that negatively affect students and nations in the academy (Stewart-Ambo, 2021).

In conversation with Indigenous and allied faculty engaging in similar work, we aimed to call in our own colleagues and administrators to listen and share in the work of redressing systemic inequities. Our campus's established Office of Tribal Relations, Native American Student Center, and its staff, in addition to our university's Memorandum of Understanding with 11 signatory tribes, represented foundational resources to deepen understanding of the unique relationship of the university with Native nations.

Invitations to colleagues from other institutions, many of whom we had never met, were received with enthusiasm. The multi-day, conversational-style convening centered around four interrelated questions. Each question was introduced with a keynote speaker,<sup>6</sup> an experienced and respected scholar in one of each our disciplinary fields—education, biology, law, and anthropology—and followed by small-table and whole-group conversations around the question. The four central questions guiding the convening were:

1. How can robust partnerships between tribal nations, Indigenous communities, faculty, and institutions of higher education contribute to healthy and inclusive university environments and research agendas?
2. In what ways have institutions of higher education supported or neglected Indigenous epistemologies and methodologies in programming, research, and infrastructural allocations?
3. In what ways can or do institutions of higher education address administrative barriers that limit equitable opportunities for success with Indigenous students, faculty, and collaborative research in higher education?
4. What innovations in higher education partnerships, policies, and programs have contributed to tribal nation building, and how might they be strengthened?

Additionally, attendees were asked to sit with colleagues they did not know and/or colleagues from different fields. Two-and-a-half days of discussions highlighted the everyday realities, constraints, and spaces of transformation led by Indigenous scholars and allied collaborators.<sup>7</sup> For us, as early-career faculty, the convening created a space where Indigenous knowledge could be recognized as vast and it momentarily interrupted the “Whitewashing” of Native epistemologies, ontologies, and axiologies in academia.

## **Implications: Relational Solutions as a Call to Action**

By mapping the contexts of our own experiences as junior faculty committed to Indigenous and decolonial curriculum in higher education, we return to the statement of land acknowledgement that opened this paper. Acknowledgement of Indigenous lands in fragmented statements is not enough to substantively contribute to Indigenous lifeways and well-being in higher education. Borrowing the words of Anishinaabe scholar and writer Hayden King, we ask university colleagues: If we acknowledge that we are on stolen Indigenous lands, a theft from which our institutions continue to reap benefits, what are we “going to do to breathe life into our obligations to those communities and those treaties?” (Tennant, 2019). Taken from our experiences as faculty and our reflections of the Tribal Nation Building in Higher Education Convening, we end this article with recommendations for paying the debt on Native well-being through purposeful and intentional investment in faculty as central to tribal nation building in higher education.

## **Enact Faculty Hiring Preference: Hire Indigenous**

Indigenous faculty play a central role in the process of higher education and institutions need to think deeply about policies and practices that will facilitate increased participation by Indigenous scholars in universities (Brayboy et al., 2012). Purposeful and intentional hiring of Indigenous faculty is essential. Over the past 40 years, institutions of public education have been conditioned to proceed with extreme caution when using race as a preference in hiring or decisions related to our students (*Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, 1978). As a result, well-meaning but risk-adverse administrators are often paralyzed by the misperception that fulfilling our obligation to members of regional tribes could run afoul of federal law by applying a “racial preference.” The U.S. Supreme Court has made clear that setting tribal members apart for special treatment “does not constitute ‘racial discrimination.’ Indeed, it is not even a ‘racial’ preference. [ . . . ] The preference, as applied, is granted to Indians not as a discrete racial group, but, rather, as *members of quasi-sovereign tribal entities* [emphasis added]” (*Morton v. Mancari*, 1974, pp. 553–554). In other words, so long as a preference is “not directed towards a ‘racial’ group consisting of ‘Indians,’” (p. 553) but instead applies to members of federally recognized tribes, the preference is “political rather than racial in nature” (p. 553). Applying the tribal membership “preference” in hiring is but

one facet of tribal nation building; however, unquestionably for tribal members, it is a vehicle through which institutions of higher education have the potential to fulfill the innumerable treaty promises made by the federal government to provide education in perpetuity. In a reciprocal way, increasing the number of Indigenous faculty hires lends deeper attention to the needs and desires of Native students and their communities; equally important to tribal nation building is the perspective Native people within the academy provide their non-Indigenous colleagues.

### **Tribal Nation Building Cuts Across Coursework and Disciplines**

Any institution committed to holistic tribal nation building must make Indigenous presence a part of its core curriculum. All students, particularly at a land-grant institution, need to know and understand the history of the tribes on whose lands they live and go to school. The significance of living on Indigenous lands should not be limited to learning *about* Indigenous Peoples but must involve learning *with* Indigenous Peoples. The diversity of Indigenous knowledges, epistemologies, and community-driven priorities, past and present, can be engaged with rigor in Indigenous or American Indian Studies programs. Yet, tribal nation building also implies disciplinary knowledge be engaged in its relational connection with context—geographic, historical, political, environmental, cultural, etc.—and should be expanded beyond the social sciences or isolated programs.

Institutions must also work with faculty to conceptualize Indigenous knowledge as interdisciplinary, relational, and even transnational. Such work demands institutional support for collaboration with community members, Indigenous colleagues of different disciplines, and allies, to “create space where Indigenous knowledges and epistemologies can be cultivated—including those where they have not been seen as valid or welcomed” (Sumida Huaman & Brayboy, 2017, p. 4). Investment in collaborative Indigenous scholarship to develop curriculum and research that reflects the interdisciplinary nature of contemporary Indigenous realities strengthens an institution’s ability to navigate contemporary issues with the guidance of complex traditional cultural teachings.

### **Value Tribal Nation Building Explicitly in Position Descriptions**

The time and energy spent in reciprocal relationship with tribal communities is central to the health of an institution. Faculty should not

be tasked with a job that has no financial or structural support or is invisible (shadow work) on their performance assessment, especially in promotion and tenure metrics. Intentional and purposeful discussion must address the revision of position descriptions reflection how a faculty member's role will involve collaborations with tribal nations and to include that such collaboration meets the aspirations of the department, college, and university. Performance assessments need to reflect equitable recognition of time spent in relationship with tribal initiatives and Native programming. Position descriptions additionally need to include recognition of whether the faculty member has been provided with the financial resources needed to initiate or expand Native programming. By providing these types of specifics, administrators will have tools at their disposal to articulate the contributions of faculty beyond the "publish or perish" metric. Such shifts in position descriptions can alleviate the stress on faculty and can have significant impact on improving the retention, promotion, long-term contributions of Native faculty and allied advocates.

**Support and Protect Authentic Indigenous Spaces:  
Doing the Local Work *and* Talking to Power**

Departments and colleges must contemplate change as more than individual hires and think in terms of clustered work, where Indigenous faculty are supported through collegial relationships and able to develop synergy with faculty of different expertise but crosscutting interests in nation building. Indigenous scholars need space to develop their own theories (Smith, 2012). Indigenous scholars seeking Indigenous space in the academy must be supported to reject Eurocentric colonist systems as the only means toward faculty success (McKinley, 2020). The deeply substantive work required of Indigenous faculty, who engage in articulating and revitalizing Indigenous knowledge as well as maintaining a high command of Western knowledge, needs conscientious support from administration and institutions. Cluster hires and investing in a critical mass of faculty who can advocate for and co-participate in applying nation-building approaches to teaching and research is essential for institutional transformation.

Creating space for authentic Indigenous scholarship means institutions must do more to ensure Indigenous faculty are not made to shoulder the responsibility of interrupting, addressing, and educating mainstream institutions about all forms of coloniality in higher education. Cluster hiring and cross-disciplinary collaborations disrupt the "guest

relationship” construct—what Aboriginal Australian scholar Bob Morgan (2019) describes as a relationship where non-Indigenous People “create and administer the terms and conditions that regulate [Indigenous] involvement and participation in education systems” (p. 121). To change the academy, the presence of diverse Indigenous faculty, diverse Indigenous centered programs, and diverse Indigenous students must be present, supported, and sustained.

### **Conclusions (or Just the Beginning)**

Scholars Sumida Huaman and Mataira (2019) challenge the academy by asking, “How aware are all institutional stakeholders—from administrators to students—of what their presence on Indigenous land signifies” (p. 284)? The academy cannot honor its relationship with Indigenous lands and peoples without equitable material investment in faculty who can engage deeply with Indigenous lifeways and lead restorative relationships for Indigenous students, their communities. Faculty are the central investment within a university’s systems. Faculty lead research and oversee curriculum. When carried out with commitment to Indigenous research, such efforts re-center Indigenous communities, interrupt the narrowness of settler-colonial logics, and create space to enact processes that support reciprocity, respect, relationality, and responsibility between intuitions and tribal nations and citizens. How universities embody the significance of their existence on Indigenous lands, in collaboration with Indigenous communities, is the task at hand. At the University of Idaho, located on homelands of the Nez Perce and Coeur d’Alene and benefiting from the sale of trust land from the Nez Perce, Coeur d’Alene, Te-Moak Tribe of Western Shoshone, and Shoshone-Bannock nations, the institution has a unique obligation to the region’s Indigenous Peoples<sup>8</sup>—one that we need to honor as though our existence depended on it.

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#### NOTES

1. We use the words Indigenous, Native, American Indian, and Indian interchangeably to refer to individuals and communities identifying as originating in the Americas prior to European colonization. Additionally, we capitalize all these terms, to signify a "nationality parallel" as legitimate as other national identities treated as proper nouns, such as "American," "Irish," or "Mexican."

2. During the writing of this article and the 2020 Tribal Nation Building in Higher Education Convening, all four authors were untenured. Three of the four authors were eligible for tenure review during the 2020-2021 academic year and were awarded tenure, with promotion, in May 2021.

3. The Tribal Nation Building in Higher Education Convening (February 10-12, 2020) was funded by the Spencer Foundation of Chicago, Illinois.

4. There is a significant body of research on tribal colleges and universities (TCUs). See Tippeconnic and McKinney (2003), or more recently, Faircloth & Tippeconnic (2010).

5. Since writing this manuscript, a new IKEEP grant made it possible to hire a post-doctoral fellow who is Indigenous and specializes in culturally responsive professional development.

6. Four keynote speakers participated in the convening. Two of four keynote speakers shared their talks as manuscripts in this Special Issue: Dr. Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy and Professor Rebecca A. Tsosie.

7. Data collected from the convening, including pre-convening surveys and table conversations, is being analyzed for forthcoming publication.

8. Since the writing of this manuscript, guided by Dylan Hedden-Nicely, the University of Idaho's College of Law created a Tribal Homelands Scholarship for "all enrolled members of federally recognized Indian tribes," providing \$10,000 annually to recipients.

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