LUMINA FOUNDATION

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Native excellence

Today's Indigenous students choose their own paths to college success

INSIDE

On the cover: Harley Interpreter, a member of the Navajo Nation from Forest Lake, Arizona, started college at a large state university. It didn't work for her. She's home now, living with her mother and grandparents and attending Diné College, the nation's oldest tribal institution. Interpreter, a psychology major, wants to "decolonize" her chosen field, employing Navajo principles to improve mental health among her people.

This issue of Focus was produced by an all-Native team of journalists led by Suzette Brewer, a member of the Cherokee Nation. More about her and the team on Page 37.

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

The nation's Indigenous peoples—infinitely varied in their cultures and scattered all across the continent—have at least one thing in common: Essentially, they're forgotten. Overlooked. Invisible. Whether they live on a faraway reservation, along a suburban street, or in the high-rise condo unit next door, we non-Natives don't see them. Not really.

First of all, they're not that numerous. Current Census figures show that Native Americans, including Alaska Natives, represent just 2 percent of the U.S. population. Their presence in American higher education is smaller still, with Native students representing just 1 percent of undergraduates and an even smaller percentage of graduate students.

Second, a troubling truth: Our view of Indigenous peoples is so distorted by selective history, so tinged with sepia-toned nostalgia, that we don't actually ***see*** Native Americans even when they're standing right in front of us.

A few facts can aid our understanding, of course. Today there are nearly 6.8 million Native Americans among the nation's total population of 332.9 million. Fifteen states have Native populations of at least 100,000, with California topping the list at around 760,000. Alaska has the highest concentration of Native Americans; its 146,000 Native residents represent nearly 20 percent of the state's population.

Overall, Native Americans face significant challenges. They have the highest poverty rate of any major racial group, with one in four living below the poverty line. Their shared history with white-dominant education has been troubling at best and, at worst, brutally tragic: forced relocation, boarding schools, "kill-the-Indian" programs of cultural extermination.

True, the dark days of the Indian school are in the past. But even today, Native students face economic and societal barriers, and those barriers take a toll. I saw that up close early in my career while working in Washington, D.C., as an advocate for Native students and tribal colleges. I learned a great deal in the 1990s and early 2000s, visiting more than a dozen tribal college campuses—including Diné College. Things have improved in some ways for Native students since then, but not nearly enough. Statistics show that just 25 percent of Native Americans have earned at least an associate degree—a rate well below the national average (44 percent) and even further below that of whites (48.5 percent).

And yet, even when armed with all of these facts and experience—and with our good intentions—we're ill-advised to make "overall" statements about Native people. As I said, these citizens are incredibly diverse and widely dispersed, with the federal government recognizing more than 570 tribes in 36 states. Lumping them all together is just one more way to distort the truth.

The fact is, there ***is*** no single truth, no one-size-fits-all approach to telling the Native story or ensuring the success of Native students. That's why individual stories matter.

And that's what this issue of Focus offers: specific stories about real-life Native students in today's America. In the pages that follow, you'll examine the lives and hear the voices of four Indigenous students from diverse tribes across the United States, all of whom are contributing to Native teaching and research in higher education.

You'll meet Triston Black and Harley Interpreter, both members of the Navajo Nation and both affiliated with Diné College, the tribal college on reservation land in Tsaile, Arizona. They arrived at Diné along separate paths, but each is committed to helping the Navajo people build a better life—Black as a high school teacher, and Interpreter by improving mental health treatment on the reservation by working to "decolonize" the field of psychology.

You'll also read about Jasmine Neosh, a member of the Menominee Nation of Wisconsin, who forsook a life of comfort and artistic pursuits in Chicago to answer the call of tribal environmentalism. She's pursuing a degree in natural resources and public administration at the College of Menominee Nation in Keshena, Wisconsin.

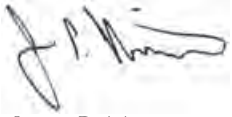
Finally, you'll meet Lisa Dirks, who grew up in the Unangaŝ (Aleut) community in the Western Aleutian Islands. Dirks, a doctoral candidate at the University of Washington in Seattle, has made it her personal and professional mission to find better, more collaborative ways to do research and collect data in Native communities.

In addition to the material in this printed version of Focus, there's a wealth of information on Lumina's website, www.luminafoundation.org. There, Focus offers several extra features, including related links and compelling videos of the students we feature.

Again, no single group of students can truly represent the variety of Native peoples, highlight the cultural strengths they embody, or personify the particular challenges they face. Still, these four promising scholars offer at least a glimpse into the lives of today's Native American students.

Just as important, this work comes from an informed perspective. Mindful of our own inexperience and wary of our own blind spots, Lumina took steps to ensure that this story was told from within—by those who know this territory and have lived it themselves. All of the stories and images in this issue were created by a team of experienced Native journalists, led by award-winning writer and video producer Suzette Brewer, a member of the Cherokee Nation.

My Lumina colleagues and I are deeply grateful for her team's work on this issue of Focus, and we commend it to you. We believe these stories make Native people far more "visible," and we hope they inspire you to join us in ensuring their success—in education, in their communities, and in life.



Jamie P. Merisotis
President and CEO
Lumina Foundation

Native students prove that broken

The story of Native Americans in higher education—like the larger story of Indigenous peoples—is a complex and often-troubling one, fraught with mistrust and steeped in injustice.

In many ways, it's a sordid history, littered with attempts to "kill the Indian, and save the man." It began with the Spanish colonial missions, whose main objective was to remake Native people into subjects of Spain and the Catholic church. Their seizure and forced assimilation of Native children was a prime tactic by which the colonial powers asserted their dominance in the New World.

After the British colonies became the United States, the government pursued a policy of relentless westward expansion. Native tribes, seen as a hindrance to progress, were systematically forced onto reservations, their lands sold to settlers.

As the federal government entered into treaties with Tribal nations, however, their leaders and elders demanded specific provisions in exchange for the loss of their lands, including the education of their children. In the 1800s, as white Americans pursued what newspaper editor John O'Sullivan called their "manifest destiny," the government established off-reservation Indian boarding schools. The goal was mass assimilation—and thus the eradication of Indian culture.

From the ages 5 to 18, hundreds of thousands of Native children from across the country were forcibly removed from their families and placed in these institutions. They lived under harsh conditions, were given white names, and were typically punished for speaking their languages or practicing traditional ways.

Many of these schools fell far short of their goals. At Carlisle Indian Industrial School, for example, which operated in Pennsylvania from 1879 to 1918, approximately 12,000 Native children passed through its doors—but only a few hundred ever graduated. Most were forced to work for local farmers and families as a source of cheap labor.

By and large, most of the children who went to the boarding schools were alienated from their home communities by language barriers and cultural isolation. Sadly, they were also ill-equipped for the mainstream world, where they were often denied employment and housing in white communities.

Largely because of their negative experiences with education, only a handful went on to enroll in college. Today, for example, the high school graduation rate among Native high school students is around 60

Indian boarding schools were often used as a source of cheap labor for local farmers and businesses. This photo, taken sometime between 1915 and 1920, shows Native workers on the reservation at Fort Peck in Montana, home to the Assiniboine and Sioux.

treaties could not break the people

percent, compared to 90 percent for white Americans and 79 percent among those who are Black.

According to the Postsecondary National Policy Institute, only 19 percent of Native students between ages 18 and 24 are enrolled in higher education. This compares to 41 percent of the overall U.S. population. Moreover, college-completion rates for Native students hover around 41 percent, compared to 62 percent overall.

But in the 1960s, as the civil rights movement percolated through Native communities, tribes began to consider building their own colleges to reflect and serve their own communities. In 1968, the Navajo Nation became the first tribe in the United States to charter and build its own college, one built entirely by and for Native Americans.

Soon after, tribes across the country began building colleges and universities to meet their own educational needs and priorities. Additionally, mainstream colleges and universities across the country began to look for ways to better serve Native students and improve their success rates. As the policies of "eradication and assimilation" gave way to a deeper understanding of the histories, needs, and goals of Native students, non-Tribal institutions established centers for Native American studies and created programs to support the success of Indigenous students.

Today, after enduring centuries of educational malpractice, Native students are rewriting the story. They're rebuilding and reframing narratives, correcting histories, decolonizing pedagogies, collecting data, and retrieving their languages. They're harnessing the academic brilliance and diversity that has bubbled up in Indigenous communities across the country.

Though comparatively few, these scholars and researchers are working in every conceivable field of intellectual and scientific pursuit. They are working to reclaim the educational legacy that their elders had intended during the treaty era.

Through their efforts, Native students prove that "Indian education" existed long before the arrival of the Europeans. They remind us that their languages, traditional ways, and ancient civilizations made enormous contributions to human knowledge.

What's more, these students and the colleges that serve them—including the young people and the institutions featured in the stories that follow—are paving the way for future generations.

This image (1900-1910) shows Native American students at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania. Between 1879 and 1918, some 12,000 Native children—most of them relocated involuntarily—attended the boarding school. Only a few hundred graduated.

Diné College:

Revamped higher education, without leaving home

TSAILE, Ariz.—Triston Black had the world at his feet. As a senior at Navajo Preparatory School in Farmington, New Mexico, scholarships and enrollment incentives were pouring in from across the country as colleges and universities were hoping to recruit him.

But Black, a member of the Navajo Nation from Tsaile, in the northeast corner of Arizona, didn't see himself in mainstream higher education. Like many Native students, he also was concerned about leaving his family—especially his grandparents, both in

As a high-achieving student at Navajo Prep, Triston Black had scholarship offers from any number of mainstream colleges. But for him, the choice was clear: Diné College, near his home on the reservation. "I came here straight out of high school because this is the higher education institution of the Navajo people," Black says.

their 80s, with whom he lives and helps out on their farm. "I haul the water and help take care of the cattle," he says matter-of-factly.

So the decision to attend Diné College here in Tsaile came down to a combination of Indigenous pride, the furtherance of his educational goals, and family obligations. (Diné, pronounced ***din-EH***, is the original Indigenous name of the tribe and translates as "The People.")

"I had a lot of offers, but I came here straight out of high school because this is the higher education institution of the Navajo people," Black said. "So when I was scrolling through the list of available degrees and certificates and saw that our college offers Diné Studies, I decided to learn more about who we are as Diné people and how I can use that to help in the future."

Having grown up speaking Navajo at home, the ability to incorporate his fluency and cultural values into his chosen degree and career path in education was crucial to his decision.

"That was really important to me, because I wanted to get an education but also remain grounded in who I am as a Navajo individual so I can come back and teach," said Black, who hopes one day to return to Navajo Prep as an instructor. "Diné College was a path that was set for me and all the younger generations here by our elders to have something to go towards, so it's open to us to get an education and have the resources we need to be successful."

Having an education grounded in his language and culture has given him the confidence and tools he needs to help future generations of Navajo students realize their own potential, Black said.

"I was always shy. I was always the one sitting way in the back of the classroom, quiet, didn't want to say anything," he said, "But the school really helped me out and really opened my shell. And that's why I started to get involved more and started to participate more and be outspoken. And so my plan is to go back to Navajo Prep because I really believe in our way of thinking around reciprocity. That is when you give something, you get back, and if you're given something, it's an obligation to give something back.

"I want to give back."

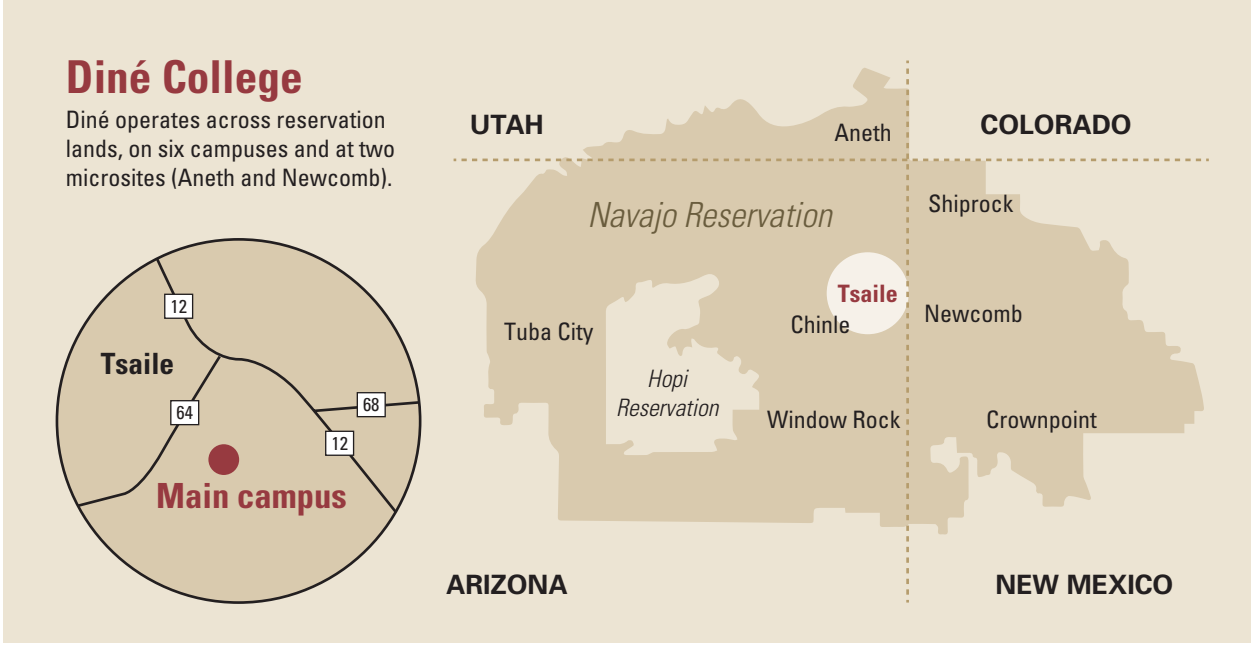
A different perspective

Harley Interpreter, a member of the Navajo Nation from Forest Lake, Arizona, is a classmate of Black's at Diné. She attended a large state university as a freshman, but she felt swallowed up by the enormity of the campus and the lack of support for Native students, most of whom had never been away from home.

In addition to culture shock and homesickness, many Native students also face financial difficulty. Lacking the financial resources to participate in activities and socialize with their non-Native peers, they're left feeling even more isolated. In her classes at the large university, Interpreter said, the domination of Western perspectives——particularly in history—minimized or even erased Native voices.

All of these factors informed Interpreter's choice to return home to attend Diné College, where she is learning more about her culture and pursuing an education that reflects her values as a Navajo woman.

A psychology major, she hopes to work toward "decolonizing" a field that, because of stereotypes, cultural biases, and a lack of resources, has been notoriously difficult for Native people seeking help. Many Native people reject Western views on psychology and mental health for what they see as ineffective, one-size-



Diné College psychology student Harley Interpreter spent her freshman year at a large state university, but she was put off by the dominance of white European perspectives on campus. "The Western world approaches everything as if theirs is the only way," she says. "But we have our own ways."

fits-all approaches to trauma and recovery. And, as Interpreter points out, many tribes have traditional methods and ways of healing that are often ignored by Western dogma.

"I started out in anthropology, but then I took courses in forensic psychology and criminology where we explored all the layers in the criminal justice system," Interpreter recalled. "And from the volunteer work we did with a local juvenile detention center, we got to know the youth and the circumstances under which they got there." She said all of these experiences helped her understand how the system disproportionately harms Native Americans and other people of color, particularly women and children.

Upon enrolling at Diné College, Interpreter continued her volunteer work with Amá Dóó Álchíní Bíghan (ADABI) Healing Shelter, which aids victims of domestic and family violence, sexual assault, and dating violence in the Chinle Agency of the Navajo Nation.

"There I got to know more about Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and the #MeToo movement, as well as getting to know more about the people who come for those resources and what is needed from us," Interpreter said. "For example, we had a lot of training on how to approach people coming for those services, because they are coming from a place of trauma. Their stories really resonated with me and furthered me into my major, and how it can be applied in both academia and work."

For Interpreter, who lives with her mother and grandparents, who are in their 80s, being able to apply Navajo principles to the field of psychology is critical—and personal.

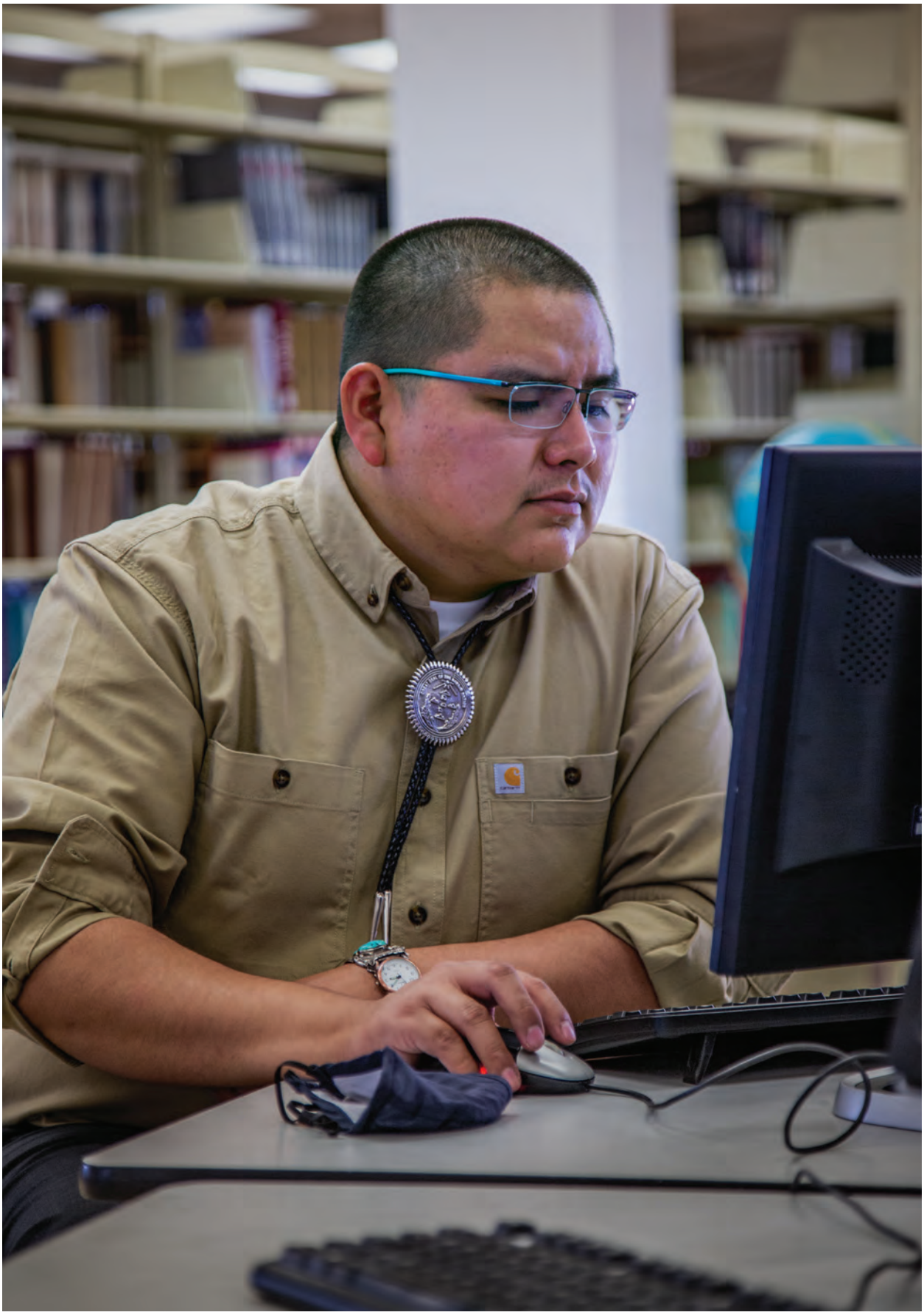
"The Western world approaches everything as if theirs is the only way, but we have our own ways," she said. "So decolonizing psychology, at its most basic, is breaking down what has already been created into smaller pieces to really look at what it means … and then building it back up with a more holistic view. We're not just looking at the person and their illness or circumstance. We're bringing our own Indigenous methods that include the four R's: respect, responsibility, reciprocity, and relations—all of which can be modified and applied to the specific needs of any Native community."

A flagship institution

Established by the Navajo Nation in 1968, Diné College was the first tribal college in the United States to provide postsecondary education created "by Natives, for Natives." After centuries of English-only communication, harsh discipline and curriculums designed to "kill the Indian" in the boarding schools, the tribe bucked the system. It built its own college, unapologetically embedding its own language, culture, and history in the curriculum.

An immediate success, Diné College revolutionized Indigenous higher education and launched a nationwide effort by other tribal nations to establish their own

Triston Black explains the Navajo origin story, as depicted by a mural on the Diné College campus in Tsaile. Diné, founded by the Navajo Nation in 1968, is the first tribal college in the United States, offering higher education "by Natives, for Natives."



Black uses a computer in the Diné College library to keep up with studies. During the pandemic, which has battered the Navajo reservation and its people, Black did much of his school work on a laptop from his pickup truck, parking on hilltops to find internet hotspots.

The pandemic hit Interpreter and her family hard in late 2020, when she and most of her relatives fell ill from COVID-19. Still, thanks to the college's help and her own dogged work ethic, she completed the semester. She's fully recovered now and on track to graduate in the spring of 2022.

colleges and universities. Today, there are 37 tribally owned colleges across the country, operating more than 75 campuses in 16 states, serving more than 26,000 Native students, according to the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC).

Diné College serves a total of 1,500 students. Its main campus is in Tsaile, and it operates six satellite campuses and two micro campuses. It also offers online classes across the tribe's reservation encompassing 27,000 square miles over Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah.

As the oldest and largest of the tribal colleges, Diné is an institution born out of frustration with the mainstream academy and exclusionary Western pedagogy, said Charles "Monty" Roessel, a member of the Navajo Nation and the college's president. Roessel, whose father served as the first president at Diné, recites the history:

"In 1967, then-Chairman Raymond Nakai decides to make a proclamation. He brings people from the Bureau of Indian Affairs and corporate leaders into Window Rock (the tribe's capital), and he tells them the Navajo Nation is going to start a college. And the people around the room started laughing. And this one executive said, 'Oh, my god, Mr. Chairman, you don't mean to tell me you Navajos think you can start a college.' And Raymond

stood up, looked around the room, and said, 'I'm not asking for your permission, I'm telling you what we're going to do.'"

A year later, Diné Community College was officially chartered and established by the tribe. Eight years later, in 1976, it became the first tribal college to be accredited as a two-year institution. Later, it became a four-year institution, changing its name to Diné College. Today, the college has certificate programs, grants associate and bachelor's degrees, and has begun its first master's program, accredited through the Higher Learning Commission.

"One of the things that we're so proud of here is that, yes, we are the first tribal college in the country," Roessel said. "But there are many others. And each one of those tribal colleges has a similar story of saying to the federal government, to doubters, to naysayers, 'We can do it.'"

Monty Roessel is the president of Diné College—as was his father before him. Though Navajo culture has always driven the college's mission, Roessel says at least one thing has changed. "When the college first started, it was very transactional. A student came, they learned a skill, they got a job. Now we've evolved as a tribal college," he says. "We're exploring the needs of the Navajo people and how to meet them."

As for the future, Roessel predicts Diné College will play an even greater role in the overall economic development and success of the Navajo Nation.

"When the college first started, it was very transactional," he admitted. "A student came, they learned a skill, they got a job. Now we've evolved as a tribal college. Now it's about: 'How do we grow an economy? How do we change the economy?' It's one of the reasons why we're looking at creating a law school. We're exploring the needs of the Navajo people and how to meet them. In the old days, you had a campus. Everyone came to the college. Now it's: 'How do we go to them?' The idea is to say, 'OK, what is needed in those communities?' So now we're looking at providing business incubators to help startups, and helping our farmers open their markets. We can help build this economy."

A sense of community

Black and Interpreter, who are friends, co-workers, and classmates, each made an individual decision to attend Diné, but the ultimate outcome was the same: a sense of community and the assurance that they can achieve their goals without leaving home or losing their identity to fit someone else's narrative. The Diné worldview is incorporated into every aspect of their education, including the architecture.

"If you look at our campus, it is a representation of a Navajo basket," Black said. "The doorways face towards the east, and the location of the cafeteria towards the north is typically Navajo. We eat in the north and sleep towards the west, which is where the dorms are. And for learning and work, that's the Ned Hatathli Cultural Center—so it's all a representation of our basket and our hogan."

"It's also a sense of community because there's not 200 students in a classroom—and we talk to each other in a genuine way, with our kinship terminology, which means a lot," Interpreter said. "We also go hiking in groups to the lake or the canyon and build a fire and just talk about our day and things that have happened on campus—and talk about it openly. We can be ourselves."

Black graduated from Diné during the pandemic with a bachelor's degree in Indigenous Education and Diné Studies and received a certificate in silversmithing. He's now pursuing his master's degree in Indigenous Education at Arizona State University, attending online so that he can continue taking care of his grandparents.

Interpreter, along with her entire family, including her mother and grandparents, contracted COVID-19 in December 2020. When her grandfather, who speaks little English, was airlifted to a hospital in Phoenix, she was responsible for speaking with the hospital staff and reporting back to her relatives on his care and progress. Sick herself, she was the only one in the household able to care for her family, cooking, cleaning, bathing, and helping them with their medicines—all the while continuing her studies at Diné College.

Black recently earned his bachelor's degree from Diné in Indigenous Education and Diné Studies, but he still spends plenty of time in the college library. He's pursuing a master's degree in Indigenous Education online from Arizona State University. Eventually, he plans to return to his high school, Navajo Prep, as a teacher.

"The school was very understanding, and I was able to get extensions for all my classes," said Interpreter, who has fully recovered. "People from campus would call me and ask me how we were doing. They offered counseling over the phone to talk about what we were going through, and my co-workers on my internship would also touch base. But I passed all my classes and was able to finish the semester."

Today, she's back on campus, attending classes and working part-time. She's on track to graduate in spring 2022, and then plans to attend graduate school.

"Triston and Harley both have different stories, but they're very similar in the sense that they had the temerity to say, 'I'm going to finish my education no matter what. Nothing is going to get in my way,'" Roessel said. "They have the resilience to overcome all these barriers with their families, with their friends, with their communities and keep going. It really has created an opportunity to see the true character of our students, of what it means to be Navajo. Triston and Harley are two people who are indicative of that, and we're just so proud to say they're part of the Warrior family." ◆

College of Menominee Nation:

An environmental warrior finds her training ground

KESHENA, Wis.—Jasmine Neosh had arrived at an inflection point. In the fall of 2016, the Menominee tribal member was waiting tables and tending bar at an upscale Chicago eatery as the protests over the Dakota Access Pipeline grew into a full-blown crisis in the northern Plains.

For months, she had watched as friends and relatives went to North Dakota to join the protests, enduring tear gas, rubber bullets, attacks by guard dogs, and blasts by water cannons in freezing temperatures.

While in her 20s, Jasmine Neosh immersed herself in Chicago's art and music scene, often jamming with friends on her uniquely crafted, fretless banjo. But when protests erupted in the northern Plains over the Dakota Access Pipeline, Neosh knew she had a duty—as a Native woman and an environmentalist. Now, at age 32, she's studying the Earth-friendly ways of her people on the Menominee Reservation in Wisconsin.

Hundreds were arrested, strip-searched, and jailed in small cages as they tried in vain to block construction of a massive pipeline under the Missouri River near the Standing Rock Indian Reservation. For years, the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe had been fighting the project over concerns about oil leaks contaminating the reservation's sole water supply.

As the conflict intensified, Neosh chafed at her inability to do anything beyond raising funds and amplifying the movement on social media.

"It was a weird, very frustrating moment—because I could tell right away that Standing Rock was going to be a big moment in Indigenous history, and I felt obligated to be a part of it. But I also didn't know what I could actually bring to the table," said Neosh, who was 27 at the time. "I was sitting there thinking: 'Well, I don't have a car. I can camp, but then what am I going to do once I get there? All these people are showing up who have skills and things to offer.'"

And then came the fateful question: "What do I actually have to offer?"

It was a singular moment in which Neosh, who had been identified as gifted and talented as a child, felt her untapped potential colliding with harsh reality. Having dropped out of college in 2008, she had immersed herself in the Chicago arts scene, spending her nights hosting poetry slams and hanging out with musicians, "playing music until the crack of dawn." By day, she made a comfortable living working in high-end restaurants and catering.

Now, confronted with a very real crisis in which thousands of tribal members from across the country were putting their lives on the line in the largest Native American uprising since the Occupation of Alcatraz Island in 1969, she felt helpless. She could only watch from afar as armed National Guardsmen and military tanks rolled in.

Then, one blustery day in November 2016, as Neosh sat eating lunch between shifts and fuming about what she saw as a fundamental betrayal of the Standing Rock Sioux and their Native allies, she realized there was only one solution: Finish her education and get to work.

"I decided that if I'm going to help, then what makes the most sense is to go back to college and try to learn something and try to get some credibility for myself," recalled Neosh, now 32. "I figured: 'I'll learn as much as I can about this system and how we got here, and how it manages so consistently to screw Native people over—and then I'm going to figure out a way to stop that.'"

For Neosh and hundreds of thousands of Native people who grew up against a backdrop of environmental devastation on their own lands—including deforestation, strip mining, radiation poisoning, polluted water, and earthquakes from fracking—watching the chaos unfold at Standing Rock was an alarm bell, a call to aid a sister tribe under attack.

It also was a grim reminder of the environmental policies that continue to harm America's Indian tribes, whose remote communities are often the most vulnerable to shifting priorities and laws over which they have little or no control.

Seizing the moment, she took out her cell phone, went to the website of the College of Menominee Nation in Wisconsin and registered for the following spring semester. At the end of her lunch break, she told her boss that she was quitting and going back to college. She then called her mother. "Mom, I'm coming home."

Jasmine Neosh is a student researcher at the college's Sustainable Development Institute, working to identify and document the edible plants that thrive throughout the reservation's remarkably unspoiled woodlands.

An American crucible

The Menominee Indian Reservation in northeastern Wisconsin is one of the only reservations in the country that constitutes its own county. Once one of the largest Algonquin-speaking tribes in North America, the Menominee are descended from the Old Copper Culture of the Great Lakes region. Archeological evidence points to their continual presence in the region for over 10,000 years. As such, the tribe refers to themselves as Kāēyas Mamāceqtawak, "The Ancient Ones."

At the time of their first contact with Europeans, the Menominee occupied over 10 million acres of ancestral lands, including large territories in Wisconsin and Michigan. But after a series of treaties with the United States, their land base continued to shrink as white settlers moved in from the east. Today, they occupy approximately 235,000 acres in tribal trust lands, according to Chris Caldwell, president of the College of Menominee Nation.

Chris Caldwell, president of the College of Menominee Nation since July 2021, spent seven years as director of the college's Sustainable Development Institute (SDI). He works to teach and preserve forestry practices developed over thousands of years—practices still used on the Menominee Nation's 235,000 acres of tribal trust lands.

Known for their indigenous forestry practices developed over thousands of years, the Menominee manage their woodlands so well that they are more biodiverse than any other forest in the region and can be clearly distinguished from non-tribal lands in satellite photos. In fact, Menominee County is the only area in Wisconsin that escaped decimation from commercial logging in the 1800s, thanks to the tribe's steadfast refusal to allow clear-cutting.

"What I've come to understand is that our forests are a representation of the different human values that impact the landscape, the natural world that we're a part of," said Caldwell, a Menominee tribal member who previously served as director of the college's Sustainable Development Institute.

"During the Civil War era, timber production was ramped up, and they just cut down the forests without considering the long-term impact," he said. "But once satellite technology came out, you could see that impact. Within 150 years, you could see the difference in the human values on the landscape."

But in the early 1900s, the U.S. Forest Service assumed management of the Menominee forests, and immediately proceeded to clear-cut the timber—against the tribe's wishes and counter to traditional Menominee forestry methods. This ultimately led to the loss of nearly 70 percent of the reservation's old-growth timber. The tribe eventually sued the Forest Service for mismanagement and, in 1952, was awarded $8.5 million as compensation.

In 1953, however, as federal Indian policy lurched from extermination, removal, and paternalism toward the "Termination era," Congress passed House Concurrent Resolution No. 108, which codified termination as official government policy. In short, it meant that tribes would no longer exist; it nullified the treaties, obligations, and promises made to them in exchange for their lands and resources.

As a direct consequence of the tribe's 1952 court victory, Congress went after the Menominee first. It passed the Menominee Termination Act in 1954, formally ending their legal status as a federally recognized tribe. This led to the complete loss of tribal lands to the state of Wisconsin, the liquidation of all the tribe's assets, closure of its hospital and several schools, and the elimination of public services, including law enforcement. Predictably, what followed was poverty, hardship, and social upheaval. In fact, the misery dragged on for two decades as the tribe struggled to survive while the combined rate of unemployment and underemployment rose to a staggering 70 percent.

In 1973, after years of protests and organizing led by Menominee activists Ada Deer and James White, Congress finally restored the tribe's federal status, ending another spectacular failure in government policy toward Native peoples. During the Termination era, over 100 tribes and bands were officially eliminated, their lands sold to private, non-Native owners. While many of the terminated tribes

Neosh walks the forest pathways with fellow student Lorenzo Warrington (left) and Jeff Grignon, a Menominee tribal member who works as a volunteer mentor. Grignon has spent decades preserving ancient archeological and agricultural sites on Menominee land. In fact, he's found more than 1,200 such sites.

were forced to spend millions in legal fees and years in court to restore their federal recognition, some have never regained their lands or legal status.

Since then, the plight of the Menominee—the tribe's survival against all odds and its dogged determination to protect its homeland from exploitation—remains both a cautionary tale and one of the most powerful stories of loss and restoration in American history.

North toward home

Jasmine Neosh is part of that story, too. She said her path toward environmental justice began on the Menominee Reservation, where she went to live with her mother after her parents split up when Jasmine was 8. Teased by classmates for her Chicago accent and advanced academic skills, she spent a lot of time alone, wandering along the Wolf River, climbing trees, and reading books well beyond her grade level.

After her parents' divorce, the reservation's dense forests gave Neosh a sense of constancy and comfort as she navigated her new reality. But it was the Menominee way of life that, from early childhood, ingrained in her the significance of forestry and the environment.

"Education at Menominee starts pretty young for a lot of people," Neosh said. "You grow up learning how to hunt and fish, and you grow up in the forest. That's your second home outside of the home that you live in with mom and dad. But it doesn't just stop there. It follows you into the school system," she added, smiling at the memory.

"In fifth grade, they had a forestry class for us, a thinned-out version of our tribe's actual forest-management plan. We learned all about sustainable yield and the technical aspects of Menominee forestry. So when you have to talk about sustained yield every day for hours at a time as a child—it sticks."

In fact, the tribe sees its forests and natural resources as such a high cultural priority that, when the College of Menominee Nation was chartered in 1993, the tribe concurrently established the Sustainable Development Institute (SDI) and made it part of the college's overall mission.

So when Neosh decided to complete her education, she knew that there was no better place for her than her own tribal college and its special institute.

"I mean, who knows more about the forests and natural resources than the Menominee Nation?" she reasoned. "We live and breathe this stuff, so the decision to come home and finish my degree here was easy."

It didn't hurt that SDI is widely recognized as a global leader in forestry, environmental stewardship, and sustainable development. As a student researcher at the institute, Neosh now works to identify and document the forest's edible plants for future generations.

"Because of our biodiversity, we have so much here that's edible that was cultivated by our ancestors," she said. "So I go to different plots to look for things like wild leeks, berries, apples, and other plants. We're

Warrington and Neosh examine one of the living specimens along the college's forest "learning path." Though Menominee is quite a departure from Neosh's earlier life in Chicago, she says her decision to return to the reservation for college was ultimately an easy one. "I mean, who knows more about the forests and natural resources than the Menominee Nation?" she asks. "We live and breathe this stuff."


Ayóciah nesákan

Warrington stops to single out a prized morel mushroom, one of the countless examples of edible plants that thrive in the forest. "Because of our biodiversity, we have so much here that's edible that was cultivated by our ancestors," Neosh points out. "We're creating a database to get people to start thinking about foraging and shaded agriculture as a food source."

Rebecca Edler, the college's sustainability coordinator since May 2013, is acting director of the SDI. She works with students on all types of projects that serve the college's environmental mission, including the quarter-acre garden plot on the Keshena campus.

creating a database to get people to start thinking about foraging and shaded agriculture as a food source."

Neosh and her team work closely with the tribe's archaeologists, including Jeff Grignon, a Menominee tribal member who has spent decades identifying, documenting, and protecting archeological and ancient agricultural sites on Menominee land. To date, he has identified over 1,200 sites on the reservation.

"When I first came in, 30-some years ago, we didn't really have anybody taking care of these sites, some of which are many thousands of years old," Grignon said. "But these sites have our stories imprinted on the land, and our elders spent a lot of time teaching us about the land and our responsibility to understand and protect what's here."

Grignon said it's now his responsibility to pass the knowledge gained from his elders and his own work to the next generation.

"I work with the students as a volunteer mentor to help them understand some of the ancient ways of maintaining these agricultural areas," Grignon said. "Once they've mastered the agricultural system established by the ancestors, we move out to the natural environment into the forests and the prairie areas to start identifying wild plants that were used as food and medicine. It kind of mirrors how my elders talked with us and the stories that they taught us."

For Caldwell, who directed SDI for seven years until he was appointed president of the college in July 2021,

Masked for protection against COVID-19, Andrea Vasquez focuses on her reading in the library at the College of Menominee Nation. The college, chartered in 1993, is committed to educating scholars who will continue the tribe's ancient traditions of environmental sustainability and forest preservation.

Jeff Grignon is committed to showing students the traditional ways of maintaining the tribe's agricultural areas. "Once they've mastered the agricultural system established by the ancestors, we move out to the natural environment—into the forests and the prairie areas to start identifying wild plants that were used as food and medicine," he explains. "It kind of mirrors how my elders talked with us and the stories that they taught us."

Neosh and her classmates represent the tribe's long-term efforts to develop homegrown scholars and experts who will continue the work of Indigenous sustainability and forest preservation.

"We provide College of Menominee Nation students with an opportunity to engage in projects at a level that challenges them, because I've always felt that if we treat students like our colleagues, they will eventually become our colleagues, and they will become the leaders who pick up this work and move it forward," he said.

"So our approach to working with students is that we expect a lot from them, but I think they get a lot in return. And students like Jasmine have set a high standard as a leader, scholar, and researcher."

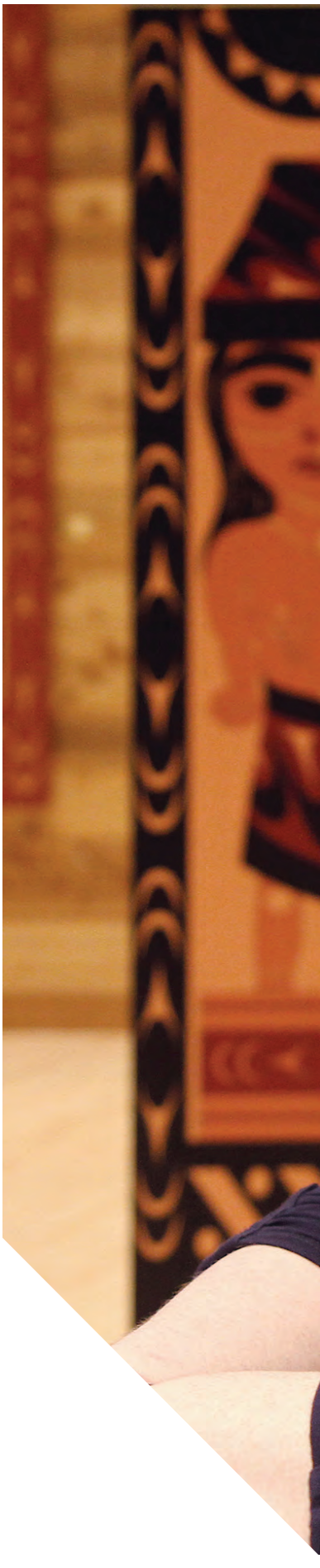
Today, Neosh has completed her associate degree in natural resources and will graduate in spring 2022 with a bachelor's degree in public administration. Afterward, she plans to pursue her master's in environmental science and a law degree. Eventually, she hopes to complete her educational journey with a Ph.D.

Ultimately, she says, her goal is to influence environmental laws and policies that affect all tribes.

"All of our cultures are not the same, but all tribes do have the shared experience of colonization and marginalization," she said. "With that experience comes the need to have people in the room, at the table, who can truly represent our interests and protect the things that are dear to us. There are non-Native allies out there with good intentions who are sympathetic to our stories. But ultimately, if we want to make sure our voices are heard, we have to do that work ourselves."

For now, though, Neosh is content to learn as much as she can from the same forest in which she played and read books as a child.

"The Menominee Forest is beautiful, incredible," she said. "It's a magical place. It's very special. But the lessons from it are replicable—that's the key thing. There's very little that's stopping all of the other forests in the world from looking like this. They just have to be cared for. They have to be managed and they have to be learned. They have to be loved. And you have to listen to the people who know them best: The Indigenous people who have lived there for 15,000 years or more." ◆



University of Washington:

‘Decolonizing’ research through collaboration and data sovereignty

SEATTLE—In the early 2010s, Lisa Dirks was visiting her relatives in Alaska when she noticed an article in the Aleut Corporation newsletter on their dining room table: an item that looked like a research article. As a scholar, researcher, and tribal member, she was curious about its contents, so she picked it up and began reading. She quickly realized that it was a DNA study in which Alaska Native people in the Aleutian Island chain—including Atka, where Dirks

Lisa Dirks, a member of the Unangax̂ community, grew up on the Alaskan island of Atka, in the Aleutian Island chain. Now a doctoral student at the University of Washington in Seattle, she is focused on reforming methods of scientific and academic research among Native populations. "Research in Native communities hasn't always been the most ethical, and there has been a lot of harm done," Dirks says.

grew up—had provided genetic samples for testing and inclusion in a large research database.

The report, written in complex, highly scientific jargon, troubled her immediately—on two levels. First, she wondered what researchers' ultimate purpose might be for collecting biospecimens and data on her relatives. Second, she was dismayed that the results had been published and disseminated in a way that its participants couldn't grasp.

"It used a lot of technical terms in the field of genetics, like 'allele,' 'haplogroup,' and 'genotype,'" said Dirks, who is a member of the Unangaŝ (Aleut) community in the Western Aleutian Islands. "So I asked my relatives, 'Do you know what this study means? What does it say? Does it make sense to you?' And basically, they said, 'We don't understand it.'"

For Dirks, who has dedicated her career to public health research in Native communities, it was a pivotal moment. It brought into sharp focus the notion of "decolonizing" academic and scientific research through meaningful collaboration with subjects—in her case, with tribes and their members.

This incident, she says, is only one of hundreds of examples in which researchers study Native communities without respecting their needs, concerns, history, cultural sensitivities, and points of view. Moreover, in recent decades, issues with research, medical testing, and data collection have prompted numerous complaints and lawsuits from tribes seeking to regain control over their information.

"It made me very motivated as a researcher to do a better job of sharing information back to the communities so that they can actually learn from it and implement that knowledge in their own ways," Dirks said. "It also got me excited about the possibilities of involving community members in determining how we share results and working directly with them in that process."

Now a doctoral candidate at the University of Washington's Information School in Seattle, Dirks has made it her mission to work with the tribes in culturally appropriate ways.

"Research in Native communities hasn't always been the most ethical, and there has been a lot of harm done," she said. "There have been a lot of issues, including with informed consent, or not being given consent at all, using biological specimens for reasons other than what the researchers were given permission for, and not getting permissions for sharing information. This has been a big problem in Native communities for years."

Uninformed consent

In the 1950s, for example, the U.S. Air Force had established the Arctic Aeromedical Laboratory in Fairbanks, Alaska, to conduct human research on medical problems related to climate. During a project to determine whether there were racial differences regarding the effects of a cold climate on the thyroid gland, 102 Alaska Natives from villages in northern and central Alaska were given a radioactive medical tracer, Iodine-131. The radioisotope allowed researchers to track the absorption of iodine in subjects' thyroid glands, as well as its expression in the production and secretion of thyroid hormones.

The Native test subjects ranged in age from 16 to 90, and included women of child-bearing age, lactating women, and at least one who was pregnant. The Air Force had no guidelines for written consent at the time, so they relied

In her research on public health among Native peoples, Dirks works to ensure that tribal leaders and community members are directly involved in all phases of the work, from the design of studies to publication of research findings.

on tribal elders, most of whom did not speak or read English, to recruit their subjects. Additionally, pieces of the documentation also went missing or were incomplete.

Some villagers reported that they weren't informed about potential risks or told that they could decline to participate. One villager reported that he believed the capsules were meant to "improve the villagers' health."

Ultimately, the study found no race-related differences and concluded that the thyroid played no significant role in human acclimatization in the Arctic. But 40 years later, in the 1990s, the study came under congressional scrutiny for its dubious methodologies. In short, the non-English-speaking villagers in these vulnerable communities felt exploited, endangered, and misled by the researchers. At public hearings in Alaska in the 1990s, Native communities voiced their anger that the research was performed "not to help the subjects or to help their general society, but to help the U.S. military and the general welfare of whites."

The villagers' concerns were validated in a 1996 report from the National Institutes for Health: *The Arctic Aeromedical Laboratory's Thyroid Function Study: A Radiological Risk and Ethical Analysis.*

The fact that the villagers were recruited unethically—without appropriate consent, documentation, or follow-up—only intensified the simmering mistrust among Native people regarding "research," Dirks said. Further, the vocabulary often used in studies about the communities has infuriated and alienated many tribes, leading them to avoid participation in these projects.

She points to a 1980 alcohol study in Barrow, Alaska, in which researchers examined alcohol abuse among community members.

"In that study, the researchers took the information they learned and published a press release that eventually made it to The New York Times," Dirks said. "The headline and article were pretty stigmatizing, but the piece went even farther, basically stating that those Inupiat communities would be gone within a decade. And the researchers shared that information without community insight, context, or approval."

Today, 41 years later, those communities still exist and are thriving, Dirks pointed out. But she says the power imbalance between the communities and the dominant culture influences public narratives that continue to perpetuate stereotypes and stigmatize Native Americans.

"For my research, I'm really hoping to get to the level of the power dynamics between community members and researchers so the community members will be more involved in all of the major processes—from conceptualization to dissemination," Dirks said. To that end, she said, she always works to establish advisory boards for her research projects that include community members and test subjects.

Iisaaksiichaa (e-SOK-see-cha) Ross Braine, a member of the Apsaalooke (Crow) Nation of Montana, is the tribal liaison for the University of Washington. He also directs a longhouse-style facility that serves as a learning and gathering space for Native students on campus.

Myths and legends

Since the time of Columbus, Native peoples have been the subject of thousands of narratives told from the point of view of their colonizers. For over 500 years, European writers, historians, scholars, linguists, health scientists, and other researchers poured into Indigenous communities—to paint, photograph, write, document, measure, test, and collect data about the tribes. But because of language barriers and lack of cultural competence, what they ultimately shared lacked nuance and context at best—and often was wholly incorrect.

Standing outside the longhouse-style center that Braine directs, Lisa Dirks (right) joins Miranda Belarde-Lewis, one of her faculty advisors. Belarde-Lewis, (Zuni/Tlingit), is an assistant professor of Native North American Indigenous Knowledge in the university's Information School.

And, because many scholars have relied on previous research and data to shape their own work, the problem has been compounded by centuries of regurgitated misinformation from inaccurate source materials. Nonetheless, careers and large sums of money were made from commercializing information that the tribes did not control—often including their own languages.

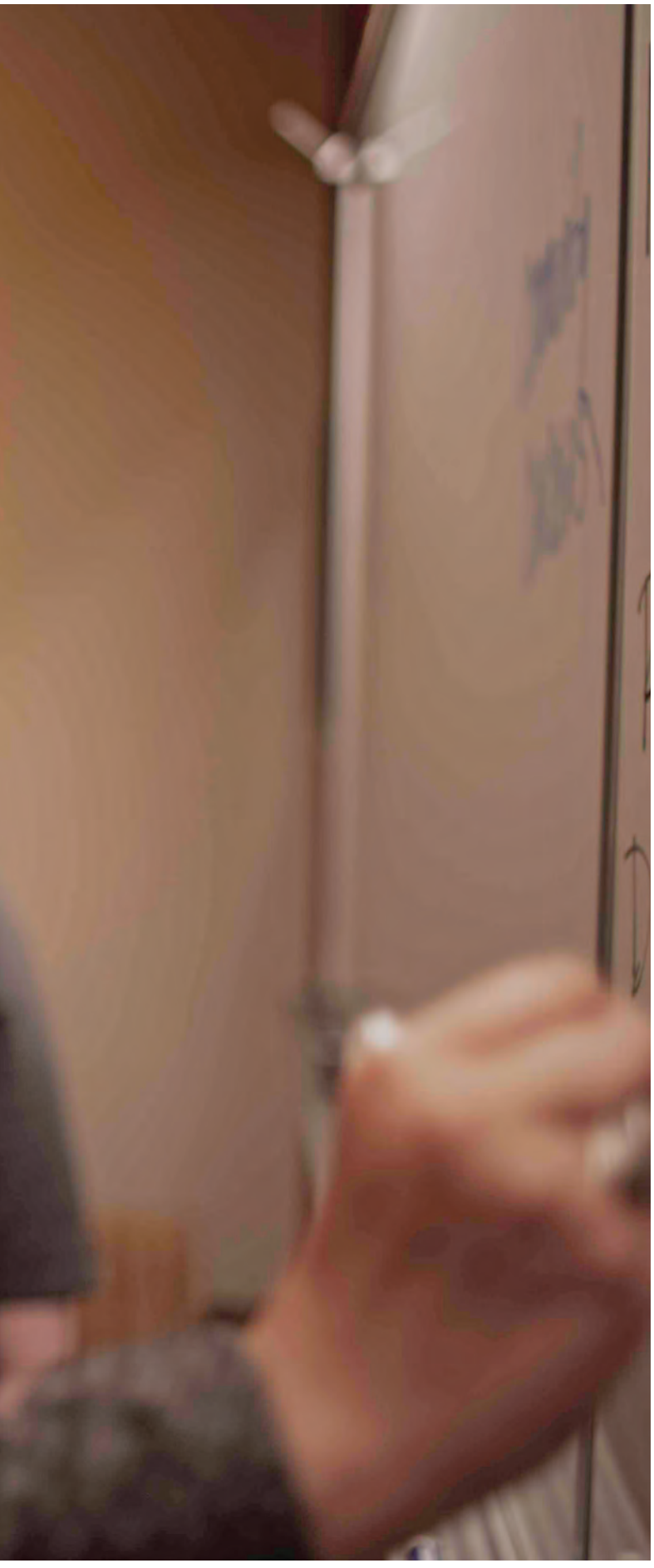
Miranda Belarde-Lewis (Zuni/Tlingit), an assistant professor of Native North American Indigenous Knowledge at the University of Washington Information School, is one of Dirks's faculty advisors. She says the emerging field of "research and data sovereignty" in Indian Country stems from the tribes' desire to reclaim their histories, their languages, their stories, their bodies, their data—in many cases, even their true Indigenous names.

"Native nations have been the subject of extractive and exploitative research practices where scholars and researchers come into our communities, gather what they want and take it away," Belarde-Lewis said. "Most of the time we don't have control over where it goes, how it's used, where or how it's stored. We don't have control over who is keeping it, how it is cataloged, or who has access to it. And so for us, we really need to be able to inform the practices of these recordkeeping systems."

Controlling the narrative is crucial for the purposes of accuracy and cultural relevance, she said.

"For the last several centuries—in academia, especially—Native peoples have been the subject of everyone else's narrative," Belarde-Lewis said. "And so it really has created a deficit model in which most academic research about historically excluded peoples has been interpreted through a Western lens. Researchers have a tendency to

Belarde-Lewis, like Dirks, is committed to culturally appropriate research practices, including making sure that Native communities control their own data. "Tribal information is part of our sovereignty," Belarde-Lewis says.



look at Native communities based on what they've learned from these skewed narratives."

For example, she said, most researchers come into the communities with biases about trauma, alcoholism, poverty, and disadvantage—what many in Native communities sardonically call "poverty porn."

"The lens that you bring to research really dictates the outcomes that you're going to get," she said. "So the questions that you ask determine the answers, and starting with negative questions is going to beget negative answers. This perpetuates the deficit model that unemployment is at an all-time high, for example, or that the graduation rates are down the drain; addiction, intergenerational historical trauma is running rampant through our communities."

And though many communities do struggle with these issues, socioeconomic problems are only part of a much larger picture in which progress and successes have been minimized or ignored.

"You could look instead at the stories that have carried us through thousands of generations on this land that have ensured our survival up until today," Belarde-Lewis said. "We can look at so many different aspects of our communities to really see what is working, to help us retain our cultural, linguistic, spiritual, ecological, and political strength in all of those areas. So when Native peoples ask the questions, because we come from these communities, we control the narrative."

To address the issues around research and data in Indian Country, the Information School at the University of Washington established the Native North American Indigenous Knowledge Initiative (NNAIK). After hiring three Native faculty, the iNative Research Group was formed with a mission to "analyze the institutions, community practices, philosophies and policies around knowledge, information, and technology in support of tribal sovereignty and Indigenous empowerment," according to the university's website.

As degree candidates in the first doctoral program of its kind in the world, American Indian/Alaska Native scholars and researchers are examining and reframing how research is conducted and shared back to the communities. The goal is to provide a clearer, more accurate picture of the information and data collected. The first cohort of five doctoral candidates had a 100 percent graduation rate, with a second cohort of five scholars—including Lisa Dirks—on the way.

"One of the motivations for having a group like iNative is because tribal information is part of our sovereignty," Belarde-Lewis said. "We are asserting our treaty rights and ability to self-determine how we handle our own information—and also the data that's been gathered about us." The group works with faculty and staff from departments across the university—in the sciences and the humanities. "It really is an interdisciplinary cross-section of the best that the university has to offer to Native peoples," she said. "It can really give us a massive toolkit to be able to fight for the rights of tribes to be in control of our own data, information, and knowledge."

Even before enrolling in the iNative doctoral program, Dirks had earned impressive academic credentials. She holds a bachelor's degree in anthropology from the University of New Mexico and three master's degrees: one in health science administration from Northern Arizona University and two in library or information sciences—one from San Jose State University and another from the University of Washington.

Stories are strong medicine

Much of her work in public health has been done in conjunction with the Southcentral Foundation, an Anchorage, Alaska-based nonprofit that provides Indigenous-led health care. She worked there as a researcher before entering the Ph.D. program.

"One of the projects that I worked on was a project looking at perceptions of alcohol misuse and sobriety among Native people in Anchorage," Dirks recalled. "I got to collect a lot of interview data, and it was through listening to those stories people shared about their experiences of both alcohol misuse and sobriety, where I started feeling, 'Yes, this is the right place for me.' And it also got me thinking more about how I might be able to share back the information in a way that was meaningful to them—a way that's respectful, understandable, and provides enough context so that the beautiful stories they share have meaning."

Ileen Sylvester is a vice president at the Southcentral Foundation, an Alaska-based nonprofit that has supported Dirks's research. The foundation provides Native-led health care to more than 65,000 Alaska Natives and American Indians in its region, including those in dozens of rural villages.

Established in 1982, the Southcentral Foundation is a state-of-the-art facility that provides Native-based health care to approximately 65,000 Alaska Natives and American Indians living in Anchorage, Matanuska-Susitna Borough, and 55 rural villages in the region.

Ileen Sylvester is the foundation's vice president of executive and tribal services, working in a variety of capacities with the board of directors, communications, grant writing, tribal leadership, and community relations. Sylvester says Southcentral's mission emerged directly from what Native communities identified as their most urgent health care needs based on their previous experiences with researchers and Western medicine.

"My parents were around when the isotope study was happening in the 1950s," said Sylvester, who is of Yup'ik, Athabascan and Aleut descent and is an enrolled member of the Native Village of Ekwok. "And there are a lot of things that have happened to Native people being used as guinea pigs. … I mean, there are horror stories. So our tribal leadership said, 'No, we are taking this on. We are going to be the gatekeepers of our information.'"

Sylvester, who has been with the foundation for 25 years, says the executive committee of the SCF board is responsible for approving all research proposals and manuscripts.

"Any project that would touch our people, our resources, and our spaces—(their job is) to hold the researchers accountable, to ensure what they're doing will enhance and benefit the Alaska Native people," she said. The foundation also has a specimen bank, which is operated by Centers for Disease Control but, as Sylvester puts it: "very much in partnership with tribal leadership here in Alaska. We get to say who has access to the specimens, what they're used for, and how we follow up. There is a research agreement that is required, and all data is owned by the tribe."

The future of research

Dirks has concluded her coursework for her doctorate and will soon complete her dissertation. She hopes that her work ultimately will help provide better care—and healthier people—through research that is conducted ethically, with the respect, cultural sensitivity, and high standards that Indian tribes deserve.

She also says it's important to work directly with members of Native communities on health-related projects because they know their communities best.

"We have ways of wellness and traditional medicines that could be helpful—and traditional ways of thinking and talking about health that a Western medical practitioner or health researcher may not be privy to,"

Dirks insists that Native people need to be directly involved in health-related projects because they know their communities best. "We have ways of wellness and traditional medicines that could be helpful—and traditional ways of thinking and talking about health that a Western medical practitioner or health researcher may not be privy to," she says.

Dirks said. "When the colonizers took information from Indigenous people, the way it may have been written down or archived could be different from the original intended meaning," she added. "It's very important to connect with community members around health—because you get the true story."

In the meantime, Dirks, Belarde-Lewis, and their colleagues will continue their mission to help reframe and reshape the research being done in Indigenous communities. Because, according to Belarde-Lewis, producing Native graduates and scholars represents a vital contribution to higher education and to the scientific community.

"Indigenous data sovereignty is a global movement, and there are standards that are now being implemented in which researchers are being made aware that Native peoples are in control of the information that is extracted from our bodies and from our communities," Belarde-Lewis said. "And it will continue to strengthen as these international networks of scholars grow." ◆

Honoring a sacred trust for those who came before us

By Suzette Brewer

In 1906, my grandfather, John Brewer, was hauled off to the Chilocco Indian Agricultural School in Newkirk, Indian Territory, in what is now Oklahoma. A boy who had never been away from his family, he lived in the deeply traditional Cherokee community of Bell, where my great-grandparents had settled on their Indian allotment in the late 1800s, after the Dawes Act carved up tribal lands.

To put it mildly, grandfather's time at Chilocco did not go well. J.B., as he was known, immediately rebelled, mocking his white teachers to their faces—in Cherokee, which was forbidden. He took his beatings, I'm told, without fanfare or tears. He defended and helped his fellow students where he could, fighting the cruelty of a system he saw as a pointless exercise in "trying to turn a dog into a cat."

He also resented Chilocco's status as an "agricultural school." After all, his ancestors had been farming for thousands of years; to J.B., the school's so-called "modern" farming methods were backward and unsustainable.

"We see this project as a rare gift, a chance to tell our own stories—in a way that honors those who came before us and sacrificed so much."

"What were the yonegs (white people) going to teach me that I don't already know?" he later told my father. Indeed, during the Dust Bowl, he was proven right, as 850 million tons of over-farmed topsoil tore away from the southern plains and flew east in vast dust storms—one of the worst man-made environmental catastrophes in history.

Family members say J.B. ran away from Chilocco eight times. Seven times, the authorities sent mounted trackers down to Bell to retrieve him. Seven times they dragged him back to an institution that he knew—and despised—as a government-sanctioned work camp for Native children as young as 5.

After the eighth escape, however, Chilocco finally gave up and he stayed with his parents. When my father came along in the 1920s, the memory of Chilocco was still so toxic that J.B. and my grandmother refused to allow my father to go to school past the fourth grade. They believed he'd be better off without an education than being sent to a boarding school.

Their belief was well-founded, given the boarding schools' record of poor educational outcomes, forced labor, sexual and physical abuse—even mysterious deaths. These horrors, quietly shunted away from investigation or oversight, were already an open secret among many Native people, who were powerless to stop them.

J.B.'s story is very common among elders in Indian Country. But it's unusual in one respect: He was able to escape and stay with his family. Not without scars, though. The trauma of Chilocco shaped my grandfather's life in ways that still reverberate in our family.

In fact, the trauma reverberates far wider than that. Any discussion about modern "Native higher education" must begin there, with sober reflection on that trauma. To understand today's reality, we must first confront the brutal, lingering legacy of colonial mission schools and government boarding schools. That is the starting point for how most Indian people view education and its value in their communities.

That's why this project is so important to me personally—and, I believe, to the team of Native American photojournalists who worked with me. Most of the contributors and participants had parents or grandparents in the boarding school system—and a shared understanding of what that means.

We see this project as a rare gift, a chance to tell our own stories—in a way that honors those who came before us and sacrificed so much.

Today, thousands of Native students across the country are turning the tide of centuries of educational malpractice and abuse. They're forging their own destinies in the world of learning by proudly embracing their languages, cultures, and histories. They see their forebears as an integral part of who they are as tribal members, and they're bringing that unique point of view into the classroom. It's been our privilege to highlight even a few such students in this work.

That said, there is still a long way to go.

These stories of today's Native students can't repair the damage done over centuries. They can't mend scores of broken treaties or make good on the promises of education made in exchange for Indian lands. Those wounds can never fully heal. Still, we consider this project a sacred trust, a chance to at least promote the healing through the power of storytelling.

And so, is it to our parents and grandparents, and to the enduring spirits of hundreds of thousands of Indigenous children, that we dedicate this project. May their stories live on so that we can continue healing our communities and create a better life for our own children and future generations.

Editor's note: *For this issue of Focus, Lumina relied on an experienced team of Native American journalists led by award-winning writer and producer Suzette Brewer, a member of the Cherokee Nation. This is her take on the project: its challenges, its potential, and her motivation for pursuing it.*

Outrunning a plague

We began this project over a year ago as the pandemic was beginning to ramp up—especially in Native communities, which were hit particularly hard by COVID-19. More than once, we had to push pause when our videographer became ill with the virus. A month later, one of the students and her entire family became sick at the same time, infected by a relative who had visited from Phoenix.

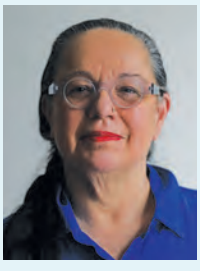
Each member of the project team endured stress, logistical challenges, and the uncertainty of traveling during a global pandemic—not to mention the loss of many friends, relatives, and members of our communities. It is a testament to their courage and resilience that we completed this work as intended: in a way that reflects Native intellectual and creative excellence unfiltered by outside narratives.

We also give our profound thanks and gratitude to the students, who were so generous to allow us to tell their stories, and to the many people at these institutions and in the Native communities who worked with us throughout the pandemic. They went above and beyond to help ensure that we could finish our work while keeping everyone safe. Finally, deep thanks also goes to Lumina Foundation for the time, space, and support of Native intellectual freedom.

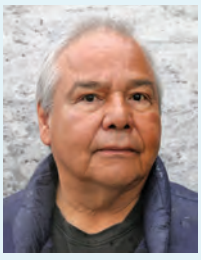
In our languages, we say: Wa do, Miigwetch, Ahee hee, Pinamaya, Yaw^ko – Thank you.

The reporting team

Suzette Brewer, who led this extraordinary team of Native journalists on Lumina's behalf, is a writer specializing in federal Indian law and social justice. She's written extensively on the Indian Child Welfare Act, the Supreme Court, Native voting rights, environmental issues on Indian reservations, the opioid crisis, and violence against Native women and children. Her work has appeared in Indian Country Today, Rewire, The Dallas Morning News, The Denver Post, and many others. Her published books include "Real Indians: Portraits of Contemporary Native Americans and America's Tribal Colleges" and "Sovereign: An Oral History of Indian Gaming in America." Her broadcast work includes "A Broken Trust: Sexual Assault and Justice on Tribal Lands" (2019) for Scripps News Service in Washington, D.C., which won the Robert F. Kennedy Journalism grand prize for reporting on human rights and social Justice. Brewer is the 2015 recipient of the Richard LaCourse-Gannett Foundation Al Neuharth Investigative Journalism Award for her work on the Indian Child Welfare Act, and a 2018 John Jay/Tow Juvenile Justice Reporting Fellow. She is a member of the Cherokee Nation and is from Stilwell, Oklahoma.



Mary Annette Pember, citizen of the Red Cliff Band of Ojibwe, is national correspondent for Indian Country Today. She has worked as an independent journalist focusing on Native American issues since 2000. Her work has appeared in other venues including The Atlantic, The Guardian, The Washington Post, Al Jazeera, The New York Times, Rewire News, The Columbia Journalism Review, Yes Magazine, In These Times and many others. Pember worked as a staff photojournalist and photo editor for mainstream daily newspapers for several years before beginning her writing career. She has covered subjects including the high rates of sexual assault among Native women, sex trafficking, missing and murdered Indigenous women, health, impact of historical trauma on Native communities and environmental challenges on Native lands, federal policy issues as well as cultural and spiritual topics. Pember is a past president of the Native American Journalists Association and is the recipient of many media industry awards and fellowships.



Ken Blackbird, whose lineage is Gros Ventre/Assiniboine, is an enrolled member of the Fort Belknap Indian Community of Montana. A photojournalist and freelance photographer in a career that spans more than 30 years, his work on modern life in Cuba was recommended for a Pulitzer Prize in 2003. To date, he remains the only Native American photographer nominated for this prestigious award. A graduate of the University of Montana's School of Journalism, he has lived in the Cody, Wyoming, area for many years.

Hondo Louis is a member of the Navajo Nation from Crystal, New Mexico. He owns Wayfinder Media, a digital cinema production company operating in the Four Corners and the Southwest, specializing in short- and long-form narratives, commercial, educational, and corporate production. A still photographer, he specializes in black and white portraiture. He is a marketing strategy consultant, assisting federal, state, tribal, educational corporate and nonprofit clients. He's also an adjunct professor of business at Navajo Technical University and Diné College. Louis holds a master's degree in business administration from the BYU Marriott School of Management and a master's in cinematography from the Academy of Art in San Francisco.

Patrick Metoxen Jr. is an enrolled member of the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin from Green Bay, where he lives with his wife. He graduated from the New York Film Academy in 2012, where he studied filmmaking, directing, and acting. He has worked on numerous independent projects, music videos, and interviews. Metoxen runs and operates PM Productions in Green Bay with his father, Patrick Sr., where he works closely with his tribe.

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