

# PROGRESS REPORT:

# Supporting Indigenous Students At Public & Land-Grant Institutions

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ASSOCIATION OF  
PUBLIC &  
LAND-GRANT  
UNIVERSITIES



Cornell University



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# BACKGROUND

At the November 2022, Association of Public & Land-grant Universities (APLU) Annual Meeting in Denver, Colorado, APLU and Cornell University partnered to host a three-hour pre-conference workshop titled: ***Engaging with the Past to Embrace the Future: Supporting Indigenous Students at Public & Land-grant Institutions.***

The impetus for the workshop began in early 2022 with conversations between APLU and Cornell University regarding the role public and land-grant institutions have played in higher education in the United States. As public and land-grant institutions across the country work to meet their missions to serve the populations of their states, including the recruitment and retention of Indigenous students from North America, many, such as Cornell, have been grappling with the historical impact of the Morrill Act and other federal policies (e.g., Homestead Act, Railroads Act) that resulted in the federal government dispossessing Indigenous people and then transferring their homelands into the U.S. public domain. And in the instance of the Morrill Act, they distributed the lands or land scripts to states to establish the financial foundation of land-grant universities in those states.

Institutions (and state systems) have begun to acknowledge this difficult history in different ways, such as the adoption of Indigenous land acknowledgements, increased tuition support, expanded recruitment and retention programs for Indigenous students, and strengthened community partnerships with Indigenous communities. While this work is often regionally specific, there are many innovative programs and support systems being developed that could be used as models for others.

While many institutions have long-standing programs and initiatives supporting Indigenous students, there has been an increased focus since the 2020 “Land-Grab Universities” project, which identified and connected nearly 10.7 million acres of previously Indigenous homeland to each of the 52 universities that benefitted through the Morrill Act, via the endowments that resulted from their sale (Lee, Ahtone, Pearce, Goodluck, McGhee, Leff, Lanpher, Salinas). Following the launch of the “Land-Grab Universities” project, the Journal of Native American and Indigenous Studies published a special issue in Spring 2021 where scholars provided responses to the “Land-Grab Universities” study. Several of the articles in the issue called for action.

Meredith McCoy, Roopika Risam, and Jennifer Guiliano highlight in their article, The Future of Land-Grab Universities, that “now is the time for us to engage in such conversations on our campuses” (p.171). In “Reckoning with the Original Sin of Land-Grant Universities: Remaining Land-Grant Fierce While Insisting on Contrition and Repentance” author, Stephen Gavazzi, questions whether land-grants will commit resources while also pointing out that APLU’s response to the Land-Grab article becomes a “starting point” (p. 159). And finally, in “The Future Is in the Past: How Land-Grab Universities Can Shape the Future of Higher Education,” Theresa Stewart-Ambo outlines three practical next steps where institutions need to:

1. Understand their historical role in dispossession of Indigenous people and the continued contemporary impact;
2. Move beyond acknowledgement and atonement for histories to actual commitments, resources, and change for Indigenous peoples; and,
3. Build relationships with Native nations and address capacity building, support, and goals that center the Indigenous communities and people (p. 165-167).

Grounded in the work that Cornell was undertaking and the partnership with APLU, a small planning team submitted a conference proposal that was awarded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. The award helped to provide convening, organizational, and travel support funds for a workshop aligned with APLU's Annual Meeting.

The planning team, comprised of Robin Parent, APLU; Kathleen McCommas, Cornell; Kelly Cunningham, Cornell; and Avery August, Cornell, identified three overarching workshop goals based upon Cornell's internal work and the current conversations surrounding the "Land-Grab Universities" project and the Native American Studies special issue.

1. Increase scholarly understanding of land dispossession history and its relationship to contemporary Indigenous people;
2. Support institutional learning by having campuses share their experiences and actions that they have taken to support Indigenous students and learning; and
3. Provide opportunities for campuses to collaborate and generate resources that could be shared more widely with APLU member institutions engaging with this topic.

With these goals in mind, the workshop began to take shape with three iterative components: a keynote and panel of experts, round-table discussions, followed by a networking reception. As none of the team members identified as Indigenous, it was critical that the keynote and panel include representation of the Indigenous populations impacted by the content of the workshop. Through a process of engaging with peers and what was learned in the literature, the team reached out to the following:

**Karen Diver**, Senior Advisor to the President for Native American Affairs, University of Minnesota. Karen is an accomplished leader that has broad experience with federal and state governments and with the Tribal Nations of Minnesota. In addition to her work as a university academic and administrator, Diver was appointed by President Barack Obama to be a Special Assistant to the President on Native American Affairs, a job she held from November 2015 to January 2017. Prior to that she served as Chairwoman of the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa. As Chair, she expanded the land base of the Fond du Lac Band, grew the employment base from 1,600 to 2,200 and led the investment of more than \$13 million in Duluth's Center for American Indian Resources.

**Barry Dunn**, President, South Dakota State University. Dunn is an enrolled tribal member of the Sicangu Lakota and lived on the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota for many years. He is believed to be the first enrolled member of a federally recognized tribe to serve as a president or chancellor of an 1862 land-grant university. Throughout his time as president, Dunn has been instrumental in a number of key initiatives including the Wokini Initiative, which is a program aimed to create greater access to higher education for Native Americans in South Dakota.

**Christopher Caldwell**, President College of Menominee Nation. Caldwell is an enrolled member of the Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin. He has led the College since February 2020, serving first as Interim President, and was officially elected by the Board of Directors in June 2021.

**Michelle Villegas-Frazier**, Director, Strategic Native American Retention Initiatives, University of California Davis. As the inaugural Director, Michelle has provided strategic leadership to identify opportunities for enhancing the persistence, achievement and graduation rates for Native American students. She continues to lead efforts to expand partnerships across the university and implement data-informed, culturally specific research-guided strategies for retaining marginalized students in efforts for the benefit of these student communities that we serve.

**Walter Fleming**, Department Chair, Native American Studies, Montana State University. Fleming earned a PhD in American Studies from the University of Kansas. His dissertation is titled American Indians and Federal Land Leasing Policies, 1885 – 1917: “That Beauty of Cultivation and Thrift Which Always Grows Out of American Energy.” He has taught Native culture and history for over 40 years. He is the author of three books (A History and Foundation of American Indian Education Policy, Visions of an Enduring People and The Complete Idiot’s guide to Native American History), eleven book chapters and numerous articles.

**John Phillips**, Director of VISTA & Land-grant Programs, American Indian Higher Education Consortium (Currently Interim President). During his 23 years with AIHEC, Phillips has served as the tribal colleges’ liaison with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, where he was responsible for representing the interests of the 1994 Land-Grant Institutions throughout USDA and the public. He also served as executive director of FALCON, a non-profit association of TCU Land-Grant administrators, directors, faculty, and staff.

# APLU ANNUAL MEETING WORKSHOP

The workshop was advertised to senior leaders (president/chancellor, provost, chief diversity officer, student affairs, university communications) and university staff people who facilitate/lead student support initiatives and who engages directly with Indigenous/ Native American students. We encouraged institutional teams if possible. Through outreach to APLU membership, the workshop convened over 60 participants from more than 40 institutions.

The workshop began with a land acknowledgement which included the place-based acknowledgement of being in Denver, Colorado as well as an extended recognition of impact on Native and Indigenous communities due to the Morrill Act and Land-grants.



After the opening remarks, Karen Diver provided a lively overview, through her keynote address, of the ways that she supports conversations and activities on the University of Minnesota campus, where she serves as senior advisor to the university's president on Native American Affairs. Her talk acknowledged the sensitivities associated with land acknowledgements and the Morrill Act and encouraged universities to think about reparations as more than dollar figures, free tuition, or "giving land back" and rather as increasing

access for Indigenous students through scholarships and supporting students and faculty in other ways. She also spoke about ways to include Indigenous faculty in recruitment efforts.

Following the keynote presentation, Katherine McComas moderated an incredible panel discussion featuring Karen Diver, Christopher Caldwell, Barry Dunn, Michelle Villegas-Frazier, and Walter Fleming. The panelists represented a variety of perspectives on the topic, including that responses should not be prescriptive, and a focus should be on supporting Indigenous students.

They spoke about the importance of partnerships with Tribal Colleges to support Indigenous students and engaging in research and scholarly activities. They shared effective strategies for recruiting and retaining Indigenous students, and also raised awareness that some Indigenous students may thrive more at Tribal Colleges than other public universities. In so doing, they stressed the importance for universities to focus not solely on recruitment from Tribal Colleges without considering what may be best for the students.



**Chris Caldwell**  
President  
College of  
Menominee  
Nation (CMN)



**Karen Diver**  
Senior Advisor to  
the President for  
Native American  
Affairs  
University of  
Minnesota



**Barry Dunn**  
President  
South Dakota  
State University



**Walter Fleming**  
Department Head  
and Professor for  
Native American  
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**Katherine  
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Professor of  
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**Michelle Villegas-  
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Director of Native  
American Retention  
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Native American  
Academic Student  
Success Center  
U of California, Davis

Panelists also spoke about the importance of reimagining the “land grant”, teaching Indigenous knowledge in the curriculum and including non-degree classes or opportunities for students to engage with Indigenous topics and scholarship. Panelists also broached the topic of the Morrill Act and acknowledged that on some campuses, “some healing needs to take place.” In turn, some panelists offered specific examples of activities they had supported on their campuses to provide greater access to and support for Indigenous students.

At the conclusion of the panel, speakers joined the audience – one at each table – to engage in dialogue with participants. The table discussion portion of the workshop was divided into three, 20-minute segments. At the end of each segment, the speakers rotated tables to provide attendees the opportunity to dig deeper into the topics the speakers raised during the panel. At the end of the 60-minute table discussion attendees retired to more informal conversation during the reception. Throughout the table discussions, notetakers made notes of and suggestions from the conversations. The qualitative notes were later analyzed for common themes, ongoing questions, and recommendations.



## COMMON THEMES:

- **Community and Support:** Throughout the discussions, the importance of a supportive community emerged as a recurring theme. Community support was seen as crucial for student success, especially for those returning to institutions like Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs).
- **Financial Challenges:** High student debt was identified as a significant obstacle to education and student return. Participants emphasized the need for clear pathways and resources to address financial barriers.
- **Faculty Representation:** The need for faculty with similar experiences, including Indigenous faculty representation, was highlighted. Collaborations between institutions were suggested to facilitate resource sharing and improve faculty diversity.
- **Cultural Integration:** The integration of Indigenous culture into the curriculum was discussed as a means of promoting inclusivity. Challenges in preparing TCUs for online education were acknowledged, with training programs initiated by the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC).
- **Diversifying the Curriculum:** The complexity and emotional nature of curriculum “decolonization” efforts was discussed along with the importance to re-envision teaching, learning, and research. The session emphasized the need to include more Indigenous examples, experiences, and opportunities as well as the incorporation of non-Western knowledge systems, particularly in the sciences, such as Indigenous knowledge and practices around land use and climate change, inclusion of Indigenous speakers and their scholarship from industry, and supporting more Indigenous principle investigators in funded scientific research.
- **Partnerships and Community Engagement:** Collaborations with Native tribes for community and economic development, as well as culturally responsive pedagogy and content, were highlighted as important for transformative change.
- **Innovation and Self-Reflection:** Institutions were encouraged to be self-reflective in their pursuit of innovation and change. Engagement with diverse stakeholders, data sovereignty, and addressing power dynamics were also mentioned as important considerations.

## ONGOING QUESTIONS:

- **Measuring Success:** Participants raised questions about how to measure the success of initiatives, especially those related to diversity and inclusion, and how resources should be allocated based on these measurements.
- **Financial Barriers:** How to effectively address the issue of high student debt and create sustainable financial support systems for students was an ongoing question.
- **Cultural Integration Challenges:** The challenges of integrating Indigenous culture into curricula, particularly in online education settings, and ensuring faculty are prepared for this integration remained open questions.
- **Data Sovereignty:** The question of how to address data sovereignty, especially when engaging with Indigenous communities, was discussed but not fully answered.
- **Inclusive Western Knowledge:** How to ensure that Western knowledge becomes more inclusive of other cultures and communities remained a topic of discussion.



## RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **Collaboration:** Participants recommended continued collaboration among institutions, tribal communities, and organizations like AIHEC to share resources, knowledge, and best practices in Indigenous education.
- **Resource Allocation:** Institutions were encouraged to allocate resources to measure the success of diversity and inclusion initiatives effectively.
- **Faculty Development:** Promoting faculty development in areas of cultural competence and decolonization should be a priority for institutions.
- **Community Engagement:** Strengthening partnerships with Native tribes and communities, involving them in decision-making, and respecting data sovereignty should be central to transformative change efforts.
- **Curricular Integration:** Institutions should prioritize the integration of Indigenous culture and non-Western knowledge into curricula.
- **Support Systems:** Building effective support systems for students, including addressing financial barriers, should be a key focus.



The workshop session provided valuable insights into higher education challenges and opportunities, emphasizing the need for collaboration, cultural responsiveness, and equity. The ongoing questions and recommendations offer a roadmap for institutions and organizations to foster an inclusive and effective learning environment for all students, especially Indigenous and underrepresented populations.

## WORKSHOP OUTCOMES

Spurred by the recommendations and positive feedback from attendees, APLU has developed a [website](#) to continue to collect and share institutional examples of Native and Indigenous student support efforts. Institutions can submit photos, a brief description and a link (if applicable) for the program they wish to highlight. This site, supported by APLU, will continue to celebrate programs and provide resources.

Another action developed from the recommendations was to continue the conversation of supporting and Native American and Indigenous topics, peoples, and communities through APLU's Council and Commission structure. APLU convenes senior leaders by institutional role through a variety of Councils as well as across roles by topic through Commissions. Six of APLU's Councils and Commissions included programming in response to the workshop their summer meetings.



The [Commission on Economic and Community Engagement](#) invited **Karen Diver**, Senior Advisor to the President for Native American Affairs at the University of Minnesota as a plenary speaker for their summer meeting in Duluth, Minnesota. Karen framed her plenary to reflect the history of her tribe and the role she has played as an advocate for them both federally and locally. She spoke on how public universities can better engage with indigenous communities as part of their community and economic engagement efforts. Diver reinforced the message of the importance of these efforts and the greater purpose and benefits that come with them.

APLU's [Council on Research](#) and [Commission on International Initiatives](#) co-convened their summer meetings at Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia. The Councils invited the following two individuals to speak on a panel titled "Engaging Indigenous Students and First Nations in Research": **Dawn Wallin**, Associate Vice-President Research (Engagement) at the University of Saskatchewan, Canada; and **Emmanuel Hernández Aguilar**, Academic Chief Officer, University of Guadalajara (University Center of the North), Mexico

The session addressed how:

- Engagement in research by indigenous students and faculty can stimulate broader consequences such as engagement in local Indigenous communities, partnership with Indigenous industry and as part of larger internationalization efforts.
- Indigenous perspectives and approaches to research might vary from Western norms, perhaps helping to broaden/improve research particularly in environmental and natural resources, and in addressing the UN Sustainable Development Goals.
- Strategic and operational considerations of institutional model programs and infrastructure at major universities, and governmental programs that might offer support for research partnerships with Indigenous institutions and communities.

The Councils on [Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion](#) and [Student Affairs](#) invited **Pamela Agoyo** (Cochiti, Ohkay Owingeh, Kewa Pueblos), the Director of American Indian Student Services and Special Assistant to the President for American Indian Affairs at The University of New Mexico to deliver a keynote and set the stage for the Council's excursion to the Pueblo Cultural Center. Agoyo spoke about the importance of the Indigenous community within Albuquerque and New Mexico and how the intersections of identities help to strengthen a sense of belonging and how that sense of belonging is tied to the land and ecosystem. She then joined the Council members at the Pueblo Cultural Center, which her father had helped launch, and continued to speak with members and lead them through the museum.

The [Council on Strategic Communications](#) met in Salt Lake City, Utah where they supported a session titled: Applying the Experience and Voices of Indigenous People to Create Best Practices in Communication at Public Universities. The Council invited the following individuals to serve as panelists for this session:

**Marilyn Cuch** is a Húnkpahpa (hunk papa) Lakota from the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe of North and South Dakota. She is a Senior Lecturer and Director of the Undergraduate Secondary Teacher Education Program for the School of Teacher Education and Leadership at Utah State University. Marilyn is active in the USU Statewide Campus system, where she helps meet rural education needs through teacher preparation. She is based at USU's Uintah Basin campus.

**Patrese Atine** is a citizen of the Navajo Nation with diverse experience in education and tribal policy. As Assistant Vice President for Indigenous and Native American Affairs at Colorado State University, she leads CSU's outreach to Tribal communities, works with the CSU community on Indigenous and Native American issues on campus, and fosters partnerships with Tribal leadership to increase student recruitment and retention.

**Darren Parry** is the former Chairman and a current Councilman for the Northwestern Band of the Shoshone Nation. He is the author of [The Bear River Massacre: A Shoshone History](#) and teaches Native American History at Utah State University. He also frequently lectures on Native American issues surrounding history and Indigenous views related to sustainability. Most recently, Parry was a practitioner in residence at the University of Utah.

**Samantha Eldridge** is an enrolled member of the Navajo Nation and has over 10 years of experience in local, state, and tribal government and academia. She currently serves as the Director of the American Indian Resource Center at the University of Utah. Her research focuses on the historical and institutional structures that create inequitable policies, practices, and barriers that impede the success of Indigenous communities.

The session was attended by about 100 senior communications professionals from public universities across the U.S. The moderated panel included questions around institutional marketing and communications and how to leverage messaging to indigenous communities and be more inclusive; how to move beyond land acknowledgements; and how to be better collaborators and partners with Native American students, staff and communities in institutional communications. Key takeaways included:

- Tribal leaders are leaders of nations and should be approached with respect. University members should make an effort to go to them.
- When communicating about projects or campaigns for Native American students, university communicators should be cautious with language – use specific language accurately and run messaging past someone in the know to check for tone. New

announcements regarding partnerships or programs should be communicated with relevant tribes and nations first, before announcing to the media or public.

- Prospective Native and Indigenous students and their parents look for information about programs and support services specifically aimed at them. Intentionally create marketing materials: printed flyers for parents and families, webpages for students.
- Native and Indigenous students are often not told about support programs, resources, or grants until much later. Connect prospects immediately with financial and support resources. Don't bury information.

In conclusion, what initially started as a conversation between APLU and Cornell grew into a national workshop, a website, and a year-long deeper engagement initiative into how to better serve Native American and Indigenous students at public and land-grant institutions including increasing engagement with Native American and Indigenous communities.

## NEXT STEPS

In the next year, APLU will launch a call for proposals to support the creation of programs or support for programs that increase the engagement and support for Native American and Indigenous students. There will be two awards of up to \$10,000 each in support of the proposed activities. Recipients will be encouraged to share progress on their projects through a session at the 2024 APLU Annual Meeting as well as submit examples for the APLU Native American Student Supports website.

For further questions about the report or about the status of this project, contact [Robin Parent](#), APLU Associate Vice President, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) & STEM Education.

## CITATIONS

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