

# Unsettling Engagements: Collaborations with Indigenous Nations, Communities, and Individuals

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## Abstract

*The presence of urban Indian communities and American Indian tribal nations in and near metropolitan areas creates tremendous potential for expanding campus-community collaborations regarding teaching, research, and service. However, many challenges must be addressed, including acknowledging the colonial context of relations between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples in general as well as the specific role that education has played in the ongoing marginalization of American Indians. Rather than simply serving American Indian communities, academic engagement must be premised on self-scrutiny and intercultural respect that will unsettle taken-for-granted academic perspectives, logics, and procedures. Such efforts can generate deeply rewarding and valuable outcomes.*

Unbeknownst to some, many urban colleges and universities are located in “Indian Country.” By this we don’t just mean that such institutions are on land that was dispossessed from the long-time indigenous inhabitants, but rather that there are often robust pan-tribal Indian communities in the respective metropolitan areas, often with American Indian tribal nations in close proximity. In some urban areas pan-tribal communities reflect regional tribal populations, whereas in other cases, the indigenous populations are from all around the United States or from elsewhere in North America or Central America. Some of these tribal nations are federally recognized, others are state-recognized, and others are not recognized. All of these communities and nations are engaged in various types of cultural, political, and economic resurgence, as part of a dynamic wave of indigenous decolonization unfolding over the last few decades. As we have found at Pitzer College in the Los Angeles basin, acknowledging and seeking to work with these communities and nations can function as a tremendous catalyst for growth, development, diversity, and expanding campus-community engagement.

The existence of these indigenous nations and communities confronting and grappling with the many dimensions of colonialism creates incredible first-hand learning opportunities for Pitzer students and for students from the other Claremont Colleges. (Pitzer College is part of the Claremont University Consortium, which also includes Pomona, Scripps, Claremont McKenna, and Harvey Mudd colleges, as well as Claremont Graduate University and the Keck Graduate Institute.) More than this, however, it also creates opportunities for students to directly engage in disrupting both the legacies of past colonialism and elements of colonial domination that actively continue today.

Toward those ends, since 2007 we and others at Pitzer have been working together to create various types of engagement between students and indigenous nations, communities, and individuals. These efforts and engagements have included working on community projects with Tongva and Costanoan Rumsen Ohlone peoples, creating and running a summer Native Pipeline to College program, volunteering at the Sherman Indian School in Riverside, participating in the Intertribal Educational Consortium of area tribes and colleges/universities, assisting the Tongva room and historical garden at the Upland Regional History Museum, bringing native high school students to the National Indian Educational Association annual conference, creating opportunities for students to assist and learn from elders, providing special hosting for native youth visiting campus, and other projects. A number of different classes that recognize indigenous knowledge systems and infuse this into our largely Western curriculum have been created and taught such as a media studies course titled, “Media Arts for Social Justice.” Perhaps most importantly, through these collaborations we have collectively been participating in and growing our individual and collective relationships with local indigenous peoples. As asserted elsewhere (Steinman 2011), we believe this is a huge value in and of itself; building bridges across deep divides both manifests new ways of relating across difference as well as creates opportunities for further dialogue, understanding, and community-directed collaboration.

A number of challenges and themes have continually reappeared in the course of these efforts. Many of the most complicated – but illuminating – challenges lead to, and indeed require, critical self-scrutiny and reflection by students, faculty, and staff. This is because education itself has long been an element of the colonial domination of indigenous peoples. American higher education, including the specific institution that we are part of, is, as with every other level of American education, deeply imbued by notions and practices that are *settler colonial* in nature. Settler colonialism is a type of colonialism that is less oriented toward subjugation and exploitation of indigenous labor in order to extract minerals and wealth, but rather involves the reproduction of ongoing home societies in the “new” territory. In order to do this, the displacement and elimination of indigenous peoples is necessary; these are the primary principles and modes of settler colonial societies.

While it has long been occluded by national narratives emphasizing the American Revolution and the break from England, growing scholarship has helped clarify that the United States is, in fact, a settler colonial society, as “the whole *internal* history of United States imperialism was one vast process of territorial seizure and occupation” (Jones 1972, 216–217; emphasis in original). While no longer a foreign colony, the whole existence of the United States is built upon the dispossession, killing, and denial of indigenous nations, hundreds of whom have nonetheless survived and avoided their assigned fate of the “vanishing Indian” fading into the past. Settler colonial societies generate education that denies the existence of prior civilized occupants of the land, denigrates the indigenous cultures as inferior and/or heathen, and asserts the universal applicability and supremacy of its educational goals and values. From abstract ideas to the nuts and bolts of institutional procedures, education has been an arena of tremendous cultural clash in the United States, a clash that historically has been

resolved through the unquestioned, disruptive imposition of Eurocentric criteria, knowledge, epistemologies, and policies onto indigenous peoples. Tensions involving culture, education, colonization, and decolonization have repeatedly emerged, and sometimes erupted, in the course of our community engagement with local indigenous peoples. Following, we discuss three of these tensions.

## **Tensions between the Idea of “Service” and Unsettling Settlers**

As noted in scholarship in the interdisciplinary field of *community-based service learning* (CBSL), the notion of service as a relationship in which members of a (assumedly healthy) community help members of another (assumedly needy and implicitly dysfunctional) community is based on, and may recreate, power inequalities and dependency. This field has embraced the broader notion of *community engagement* as one that is less linked to notions of paternalism and the implicit affirmation of hegemonic norms and hierarchies. Our collaborations with indigenous peoples consciously draw upon this broader conception; while we have engaged in what can be understood as service, we have attempted to continuously and critically interrogate the concept, our role, and our evolving relationships. In addition to working in support of tribal communities’ projects, however, we have found it necessary to reverse the focus of our efforts to a significant degree. That is, while we have directed energy and attention to specific projects in response to community requests and input, we have also found it essential to challenge the ignorance and misperceptions about American Indians that exists among faculty, staff, and students at Pitzer and the Claremont Colleges. Like the general population, members of the Claremont Colleges community know little about tribal sovereignty, the hundreds of distinct American Indian nations, the fact that tribal members are not simply racial-ethnic minorities, and other crucial information.

The existence of ignorance and misperceptions is not at all unique to Pitzer or Claremont, but it is nonetheless a huge obstacle to community partnerships and the learning and change that they can facilitate. Bluntly put, predominant beliefs about the United States are saturated with colonialist assumptions. Ideas of manifest destiny, the understanding that historical “progress” has (inevitably) and unidirectionally been led by Europeans, the idea that Indians are people of the past rather than the present or future, and the belief that Indians lacked (and still lack) their own science, technology, and epistemology are just some of the most prominent and inescapable ideas that inform students, staff, and faculty by virtue of being part of a settler colonial society built upon the denial of indigenous nationhood and civilization.

For these reasons, one of the first major steps we took was to generate opportunities for students not only to “serve” indigenous peoples, but to learn from them in ways that would initiate and aid the process of students’ own cognitive and emotional decolonization. An essential element of our overall project, in tandem with the support for community projects, is, thus, the ongoing “unsettling” of Pitzer community members, starting with the basic – yet complex and symbolically loaded – question of,

“Do you know whose land we are on (and if not, why not)?” Toward this end we have instituted an “Unsettling the Settler” first-year seminar and other courses engaging in decolonization, organized a Guest Elder speaking series allowing students to interact informally with elders, supported a mural representing Tongva history, aided visiting artist Edgar Heap of Birds’ creation of “Native Host” signs on the Pitzer campus depicting Tongva place names, and have exposed Pitzer students to numerous community events where they simply encounter the reality of vibrant indigenous nations and communities.

While many American Indian peoples are nearby, numerous forces have created a great divide between the Claremont Colleges and the local indigenous nations and communities. To try to begin overcoming these divides, we organized conferences promoting tribal community–university collaborations in 2009 and 2010, inviting a mix of tribal officials, community members, and academics. We organized American Indian film festivals in 2008 and 2009. To partially correct the settler colonial erasure of indigenous knowledge and to keep trying to build bridges and relationships, we organized a conference on “native science” in the spring of 2013. While all of these efforts have had significant success, each has had to overcome countless barriers rooted in distrust, ignorance, and Eurocentrism, which, in turn, can be traced to the hundreds of years of colonial domination that continues in various forms today. Throughout, we have been reminded that Pitzer is not simply the positive force for social change and justice that we often imagine it to be, but it is part of a field (education) that is the scene of impassioned, political, and personal decolonizing struggle.

## **Tensions between Community-Centered and Academic Values and Frameworks**

Many values and procedures that define academia are at odds with values and protocols that predominate among the indigenous peoples that we work with. For example, in the academy, knowledge is segmented and cultivated in distinct disciplines, knowledge and status are gained or demonstrated by formal certification (degrees), and rationalized (de-personalized) bureaucratic procedures are utilized to do everything from scheduling a van to requesting payment of an honorarium. These aspects of Western academia are routinely and deeply in tension with how things are valued and how things proceed among indigenous communities, and especially among those most identified with “traditional” culture. In such contexts knowledge is integrated rather than segmented, individuals become valued knowledge holders through a nonlinear process involving direct personal transmission of knowledge rather than through standardized or formal training, and participating in personal relationships is the appropriate way to respectfully and effectively take action. There are numerous such cultural tensions: strongly demarked academic time constructs (be it class time slots, semesters, or grant proposal cycles) differ from the continuity of community concerns and the important moments of time’s (not necessarily linear) unfolding; the profound indigenous respect for elders is a stark contrast to the youth-centric values carried by our students; and so on.

At various moments each and any one of these and additional incongruities can present significant challenges for us and other faculty, staff, and students interacting with local indigenous partners. Some challenges are more sensitive and complicated than others, however, in navigating these cross-cultural encounters. Perhaps more than any other issue, tensions regarding Western/academic individualism versus indigenous community orientations and accountability create strains that are manifested in countless ways. While Western academia overwhelmingly values individual accomplishment for both professors and students, indigenous frameworks include a foundational relationality in which individuals are always seen as part of varying circles of relationships, and to which they are accountable. Most simply put, the point of learning, teaching, and creating knowledge is not personal achievement (even legitimated by the idea of advancing scientific knowledge), and nor is the process an individual one. Rather, as eloquently conveyed by Shawn Wilson in *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*, these processes are about honoring relationships and being responsive to community needs (Wilson 2008).

Operating across this cultural divide is not simply a neutral encounter of “difference,” of course. The context is one in which Western/American individualism is continuously and coercively promoted, reflecting conscious and unconscious assimilationist beliefs and values. Part of how American individualism operates in the academy is that faculty, staff, and students are often not aware of how individualistic their cognitive frameworks and motivating concerns are. Nor are they aware that there are alternative approaches. When students and faculty are working dynamically with tribal members on projects and tasks, this can lead to the former feeling inappropriately empowered. One result is that in the fragile and sometimes fluid balance of following community guidance and direction while also exercising one’s own agency in a collaborative context, members of academic communities frequently feel individually sanctioned to make decisions that are, in fact, upsetting to community partners expecting more continuous consultation and accountability. Put differently, the idea that students and faculty cannot simply do what they want in community contexts is a very foreign notion, and assumptions of individual agency are unconscious and unquestioned (even when directly and explicitly challenged).

In contrast to the taken-for-granted individualism of academia, tribal and indigenous community leaders are frequently highly aware of, and critically concerned about, the gap between norms of community control and pervasive individualism. Every possible collaboration with academics, no matter what the stated intention and apparent good will, can turn out to be a vehicle for individual academic advancement with a corresponding diminishment of communal good or a loss of community input or control. As demonstrated in many shameful examples, the scientific advance of (Western) knowledge has been used to justify all kinds of deceitful, exploitive, and damaging activities by scholars. The possibility of faculty (or students) “bending” or revising projects to facilitate personal advancement (even though the advancement of science) is further amplified by the institutional incentives and structures that reward some types of projects. The nature of institutional funding and support encourages academics to find ways to separate, simplify, and “tidy up” complex and deeply

interrelated dynamics into discrete projects and outcomes. Linear projects with identifiably discrete results that can be accomplished on externally-generated grant/project timelines, and which address a discrete dimension under the control of researchers or “service-learners,” are more likely to find support. It is quite rare to have support for projects that are truly accountable to communities, work on their timelines, are responsive as events unfold in unanticipated ways, and address the interconnected elements of communities healing from centuries of multidimensional colonial wounds.

Tribal and community awareness of the individualism-community accountability gap, in the context of a long history of academic exploitation fueled by both individualistic self-interest and scientific ethnocentrism, creates significant obstacles to any collaboration. It makes building and deepening trust a challenging and long-term process. Trying to generate significant projects and demonstrate measureable results or “impacts” on one- or two-year timeframes is a tall order against a backdrop of generations of distrust, domination, and colonialist ethnocentrism in which schools, schooling, and knowledge were a front line means of “killing the Indian” in order to “save the man.” Many families still have memories of individuals who were sent off to boarding schools and who never came back or came back very confused about how to be a tribal member. Cumulatively, these cultural and historical challenges highlight how collaborations with indigenous nations and communities appears to be a high-risk venture requiring at least a medium or long-term commitment. Investment of much time and energy is required; meaningful “success” is uncertain.

## **Romanticization of Indigenous People and Cultures and Community Voice**

Bringing Pitzer’s overwhelmingly non-indigenous – and counter-culturally minded – student population into contact with local indigenous peoples creates very real possibilities for romanticization and a host of related complications, including cultural appropriation. As part of colonization, Europeans (and subsequent Euro-Americans) constructed striking and limiting ideas of American Indians as “noble savages.” While the noble savage discourse elevates some aspects of the imputed qualities of American Indians, it functions to conceal and deny the complexity of Indian cultures (even apart from the treatment of all American Indians as one undifferentiated category). The idea of the noble savage also serves to mystify the actual and specific native cultures and practices that are most linked to the valorized (and generalized) traits. For example, many Americans are interested in American Indians’ spirituality and relationship to nature, topics also linked to the notion of the “ecological Indian,” constructed in the image of Western environmentalism. Such admirers are inclined to see these qualities as inherent, mystical, and abstracted from material needs and less pristine dimensions of life. In contrast, our community partners (and many other sources) convey that, in contrast, spirituality and relationships to the environment are grounded in practical concerns, generations of empirical observations about natural processes, and communities’ site-specific participation in the natural world.

The elders and communities we work with have generously shared many cultural teachings and experiences with our students. Always in the background, however, are concerns about the countless types of cultural appropriation that American Indians frequently experience, and which are tremendously damaging. This is a difficult topic for us to monitor and address with our students. We support students' cultural curiosity and the fact that many of them are "seekers" on a journey of growth that involves spiritual dimensions. At the same time, a singular interest in Indian spirituality is tremendously off-putting for many tribal peoples. For the community members we work with, spirituality is rooted in generations of belief and practices, is an obligation to their ancestors and future generations, and thus is a burden as well as a blessing. Its practices, symbols, and meanings cannot readily be understood in a short-term encounter (whether that is one semester or five years). Native spirituality and culture is embedded in and part of mundane facts of life, not just "mystical" moments, and cannot be extracted from communal context and the other dimensions of lived experience.

We attempt to prepare students for appropriate cultural engagement. We expose them to native critiques and discussions of cultural appropriation. We provide them with specific guidelines and cultural protocols. We impress upon them that they are not simply acting as themselves, but that they are Pitzer ambassadors who have opportunities due to past culturally-respectful efforts by Pitzer faculty, staff, and students. We also tell them the whole relationship between Pitzer and community partners can be undermined, or even destroyed, by a single student acting in offensive and thoughtless ways. In our experience we have found that some students are very resistant to any constraints or specific behavioral expectations, regardless of how culturally appropriate these are and how strongly we flag these concerns. We are always aware of the significant potential for encounters that will discredit us and diminish whatever degree of respect and trust we have built up with our community partners. Our reputation – and the doors that open based on it – is only as good as the most problematic student behavior.

Issues of romanticization and the representation of indigenous people, culture, and history are even more complex than simply exhorting students to be continuously self-reflective about the stereotypes and interests they bring and to act with immense respect. As numerous scholars have discussed usefully, indigenous people sometimes represent themselves in ways that seem aligned with stereotypes reflecting the discourse of noble savages or, more frequently, the ecological Indian. Sometimes, this only appears to be the case, as our non-indigenous preconceptions are so strongly shaped by noble savage and ecological Indian ideas that we miss the more specific, nuanced, and sophisticated cultural message, teaching, or account. At other times some community members do invoke positive aspects of popular stereotypes. These are very interesting moments that create self-reflection about the nature of our respective and multiple identities (for example, being both a teacher of Pitzer students and a learner in relation to American Indians' experiences and beliefs) and the multiple dimensions of learning (analytical, historical, emotionally integrative, etc.) that may be occurring for students at any one time. What is our role in such instances, and how should we navigate and

support student learning, community members' expression and authority, the relationship between Pitzer and community members that is being manifested at that moment, our own learning (and socio-emotional presence), as well as other processes?

Some of the beliefs and factors we contemplate in such moments are the deep need for our students to hear indigenous voices and representations; the desire for indigenous peoples to be able to be authorities and exercise their agency in relation to university groups; the tremendously lopsided and truth-denying nature of (Euro-American) representational power throughout the history of American settler society, and reflections on the number of times we allow misrepresentations and omissions regarding indigenous people by faculty or other academic figures to go unchallenged. We also move back and forth across different registers of goals and agendas; from academic interest in critical thinking and vigorous debate to a more integrative desire for students to fully grasp how profoundly American Indians cultural perspectives do differ from predominant and taken-for-granted conceptions. In the end, we trust that any given student cannot grasp everything at every moment, and that promoting critical thinking and placing students in complex community encounters is what we can do to facilitate their growth, development, and capacity to act. Rather than insisting on a singular truth in relation to stereotypes, or regarding any community issue that is vigorously contested, we do our best to ensure respectful interactions in the present while having faith that over time they will consider, reflect upon, and integrate the varying information they encounter. Toward this end, we attempt to be present ourselves in ways that honor and meet the personal connection that our community partners bring and expect in return. Without abandoning the responsibilities accompanying our positions, we try not to be limited to them; while we are professors and tribal liaisons, we simultaneously aspire to be readily perceptible as part of the circle of humanity, and as such learning beings who are open, connected to all our relations, and present with those around us. While we are not always able to be equally present in all of these roles and dimensions, these are the qualities that we value and that our community partners have consistently taught us.

### **Conclusion: Appreciation, Expanding Circles, and Looking Ahead**

Given all the tensions and challenges confronting attempts to work across the divides we identify previously, we are incredibly grateful that so many individuals have given so much to these efforts. Many native elders and leaders have been remarkably open to dialogue, brainstorming, and collaborations. Based on our experience and all we have learned, the participation of highly respected elders, even if they do not have formal statuses, is crucial. Their support can place academic actors who are potential partners within additional circles and networks that might otherwise have been unavailable and unknown. At the same time, elders' feedback and questioning made us scrutinize and re-think our plans at many points. In this sense, when elders and other community members ask hard questions or raise challenging issues, it helps clarify academics' intentions and also previews some of the potential conflicts and issues. Academics seeking to work and partner with Indian communities and nations should pay close attention to any incipient criticism or concerns, as it will help prepare for success.

In many cases there may already be invaluable campus resources that can aid the development of new collaborations. For example, if faculty or administrators have any pre-existing ties to indigenous community members, new efforts can build off of these relationships. On our campus, environmental studies faculty had such ties, which we then nurtured toward new projects. More generally, disparate individuals who might for their own reasons be interacting with indigenous community members can cumulatively generate significant connections across the campus-community divide. In such cases, the work of promoting collaboration may involve creating greater linkages between the various individuals with such ties and cultivating a collective awareness of the potential for a deepened institutional relationship with community members. Through such efforts of *knitting* together campus-community networks in which members of our academic community were already embedded, we increasingly made our campus a more familiar and comfortable environment for community members, which in turn, contributed to a much higher visibility for Indian people and issues.

Academic deans, admission staff, and other campus leaders, each with their own domains of concern, can play crucial roles in providing support and validation for such efforts. At crucial moments early in our work together, the dean of faculty made decisions to support these efforts; this aid helped us build enough momentum and a track record to enter into subsequent collaborations and also to pursue other needed resources. Relationships are the foundation of our collective efforts, but resources are also required; we appreciate those who have supported these efforts with aid of various kinds. We have been able to continue our efforts only because of ongoing material support from Pitzer that while relatively modest in scale, is absolutely crucial. Faculty, administrators, staff, and, of course, students have been both encouraging and also willing to consider what are sometimes unfamiliar frameworks and projects. We are all the more delighted in this fact given that Pitzer and the Claremont Colleges in general have had a small number of American Indian students during this time period, and that there is no American Indian studies program. Collaborations with American Indian communities and tribal nations are not dependent on having a sizable Native American student population.

It is important to note that during the last two years an active Indigenous Student Association has emerged, and has helped initiate an effort to advocate for an American Indian studies program at the colleges. We are excited about this possibility and have been supportive of this effort. We are also pleased that there is a widely-shared understanding among the involved faculty, staff, and students that any such program should embrace community engagement in its founding principles; this notion is also reflected in the overall field of American Indian and indigenous studies. We are also eager to support the recruitment of American Indian students given that we can provide some support for them and help connect them to elders and community resources and networks. But as we make clear earlier, working with and learning about American Indian issues is not only for Indian students; it holds tremendous insights and critical lessons for all, and especially those socialized in the American settler society.

The circle of faculty, staff, and students involved in small and large ways in these relationships and collaborations continues to expand; we increasingly are interconnected with other circles here at the colleges, in Southern California, and beyond. For us personally, our interests and relationships have led us to put increasing attention on learning from and being part of indigenous efforts that reach across borders to engage in community renewal and revitalization. In particular, we are enthusiastic about efforts to acknowledge and incorporate indigenous knowledge that are unfolding from Victoria, Canada to Los Angeles to Mexico to Ecuador. We have well-established or emergent relationships with indigenous community members and academic institutions in each of those places, and are inspired by the tremendous activity and cross-fertilization that we are fortunate enough to learn about first hand. We hope to continue to be part of these and other circles and efforts.

We are deeply grateful simply that we have been able to sustain these evolving collaborations and relationships, and that collectively we have had some real impacts. Many significant challenges have been overcome. Many students have had deeply impactful learning experiences that have directed them toward new intellectual, vocational, and personal directions. Some students have sustained interest in indigenous issues and have sought additional opportunities to learn and to be respectfully supportive of and involved in indigenous communities. Many projects have come into being or have advanced closer to community wishes, through our collaborations. Literally and metaphorically, gardens have been dug, and flowers have grown. Importantly, local indigenous people have become more visibly present at and comfortable on Pitzer's campus. Hopefully, the many barriers that have separated Pitzer and the Claremont Colleges from local Indian communities are now lower due to our collective and cumulative efforts.

We believe that other colleges and universities can engage with urban Indian communities and tribal nations in a similarly dynamic process. To do so, we suggest that institutional leaders must look for those communities and nations that may be in their midst and must intentionally learn about them. Secondly, administration and faculty must actively and thoughtfully reach out to organizations, formal representatives, and informal leaders, while continually trying to deepen their understanding of these communities and their perspectives, interests, and concerns. Thirdly, any such efforts must be done in a long-term strategic framework that is centered on relationships. Any projects and outcomes will result from building relationships, not the other way around. Short-term goals such as three- or five-year projects can be developed but should be located within a vision based on an even longer time horizon that includes processes of recalibration and alignment. The potential success of all of these outward-focused actions, however, will rely on simultaneous processes of decolonizing the academy and particular institutions. If a college or university demonstrates that it is conscious of the historic and continuing injustices toward American Indians and that it can critically examine its own orientations and practices, this creates the conditions for meaningful relationships. Academics must realize that they have much to learn from these communities and nations, and commit to seeking a relationship rather than imagine they are engaging in

acts of benevolence, even in the extension of educational opportunity. Addressing these outward- and inward-facing tasks and challenges will require change. However, these processes can generate collaborations that are all the more poignant. Indeed, they may generate uncommonly rich learning and relational possibilities that are likely unimaginable, even unknowable, at the onset of a relationship.

## **Acknowledgement**

Many native elders and leaders, starting with Robertjohn Knapp, have been remarkably open to dialogue, brainstorming, and collaborations. Most generously, they welcomed us into many circles and networks that otherwise would have been not only unavailable, but also unknown to us. While we don't have room to thank all the individuals, Tony Cerda, Barbara Drake, Julia Bogany, Cindi Alvitre, and Deron Marquez are just a few of the many other community members who have consistently worked with us closely over the years. Thanks to you and the many tribal nations we have learned from and worked with.

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