

# Community Engagement at Tribal Land-Grant Institutions: A Tribal Approach to Reimagining the University-Community Relationship

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## Abstract

University-community engagement is more critical than ever in order to address society's most pressing issues, such as climate change, health and economic disparities, and racial justice. In particular, public land-grant institutions and their faculty can harness their unique roles as teachers, researchers, and Extension educators who use science-based knowledge to meet the needs of communities. The founding principle of service to the common person is embedded in the land-grant mission, yet that tradition is being tested by external forces that are pushing land-grants toward greater selectivity in whom they serve and how they engage. Reimagining university-community engagement will require innovative thinking and new models of engagement. Tribal land-grant colleges and universities offer a unique approach to community engagement that may provide ways for universities to regain their footing as the "people's universities." This article will explore university-community engagement from a tribal perspective and provide an example of how one tribal land-grant college maintains strong connections with its community. A tribal model of community engagement may offer important lessons for public land-grant institutions and other organizations that seek to serve their communities in a more authentic way.

More than ever, public institutions of higher education, and land-grant institutions in particular, are being asked to demonstrate their value proposition to the states and communities they serve. Some leaders have argued that land-grant universities are being faced with a dilemma as they try to retain their commitment to being accessible "people's universities" while being driven by internal and external forces to become increasingly selective in admissions, pursue more private/corporate research, and adapt their extension strategies to a more urban, diverse, and high-tech demographic (Martin, 2005). The land-grant tradition was founded in part on the democratic ideal of making higher education accessible to the "common man," to serve what were called the "industrial classes." For roughly 120 years after the passing of the first land-grant act in 1862, land-grants were largely true to their mandate and focused on providing education for working-class people (Martin, 2005). Through teaching, research, and extension services, the land-grants have helped raise the living standards of the middle class over generations, thereby strengthening the economy and U.S. democratic institutions.

But many within the land-grant system and in the public have noted that land-grant institutions have become highly selective in recruiting and admitting students (Baker, 2019; Gavazzi & Gee, 2018; Swail, 2018). Driven by prestigious national

rankings, competitive pressures, and diminishing state support, land-grants are taking less risks by selecting those students who are already most likely to succeed. This phenomenon is not unique to land-grants. Statistics show that the country's top colleges are not serving socioeconomically disadvantaged students well (Leonhardt, 2013). But if public land-grant institutions walk away from their responsibility to be the "people's universities," who will fulfill that fundamental land-grant role?

Land-grant institutions are under pressure. In many states, political leaders are increasingly concerned about costs and graduation rates (TIAA-CREF Institute and APLU, 2013). The most direct strategy for increasing graduation rates is to accept White middle- and upper-class students from suburban areas (Martin, 2005). With diminishing state support, the increasing use of tuition-driven budgeting also means that international and out-of-state students contribute more to the university's bottom line than in-state, local students do (Grawe, 2019; Mitchell et al., 2019). Furthermore, the costs of recruiting and supporting lower-income, first-generation, and diverse students are high and rising. College readiness and remedial programs, which are most effective when delivered via individual tutoring or in small classes, are expensive. In states with high percentages of Black, Hispanic, and Native American students, universities must invest in supporting students who may not be

well prepared for higher education. Teaching and advising students from diverse backgrounds requires more from faculty, who themselves are under pressure to conduct research, publish, and pursue revenue-generating projects. When state funding is insufficient to support these students, universities can lower their costs by being more selective (Martin, 2005; Owings et al., 1995).

In commemorating the 100th year of the passage of the Smith-Lever Act, leaders in the land-grant system proposed six grand challenges for the future of the Cooperative Extension System. First, Extension must find innovative approaches to sustainable agricultural and food production systems in the context of climate change, diminishing land and water resources, and the need for better health outcomes. Second, Extension must adapt its rural-focused model to meet the needs of a more urban, diverse, and poorer audience. Third, Extension must help people make better food choices and have more active lifestyles. Fourth, Extension must remain a network that mobilizes people, resources, and ideas driven by local needs. Fifth, Extension must use its educational network to help preserve and protect natural resources in the context of climate change. Finally, Extension must be integrated into the university's mission across and throughout campuses to fully leverage the power of land-grant universities (Henning et al., 2014).

Funding for the Cooperative Extension System comes from federal, state, and county sources, which can facilitate innovation. Unfortunately, in today's competitive budgetary environment, justifying funding to fully support local- and state-level Extension capacity is an ongoing challenge (National Research Council, 1995). In recent years, proposed budget cuts to Extension have become an annual affair in many states, and in some cases, eliminating Extension has been proposed (Dicarlo, 2020; Krell et al., 2016). Many rural counties are also under pressure to implement budget cuts to Extension (Bacon, 2020).

University Extension has responded to budget cuts by eliminating positions and programs, reorganizing, reprioritizing, and/or creating new, more efficient delivery mechanisms (Mercer, 2014). County-based Extension offices have been collapsed into district or regional offices. Subject matter specialists cover larger and larger—even statewide—geographical areas (Krell et al., 2016). Field specialists increasingly rely on technologies like Zoom and YouTube to offer online tutorials and webinars (Clarkson & Zierl, 2018; Wilson et al., 2018).

Today, the Cooperative Extension System remains active in nearly all of the nation's 3,000 counties, but demographic changes and budgetary pressures have changed how it operates (National Institute for Food and Agriculture [NIFA], n.d.). With fewer full-time employees, Extension relies heavily on nearly three million trained volunteers and new technologies to disseminate information. Despite its efforts to become more efficient, Extension remains a target of criticism for many. In one opinion article, a community member wrote:

For nearly 100 years, the [State University] Extension Service has annually taken hundreds of thousands in local property taxes from every county, set up district and local commissions, built countless buildings and provided programs on youth, family science, community and economic development. Yet [my region] remains poverty-ridden, low achieving and very unhealthy. (Mercer, 2014)

Tribally controlled institutions of higher education became a part of the land-grant system under an act of Congress in 1994. Although these institutions were only granted formal land-grant status in 1994, their story starts in the late 1960s and early 1970s as the Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCU) movement grew across Indian Country (Benham, 2003; Oppelt, 1990; Shreve, 2019; Stein, 1992; Szasz, 1999). Those were the times of the Civil Rights Movement, anti-war activism, and increasing environmental advocacy, and tribal self-determination was a part of these larger societal currents. American pan-Indian activism grew and was catalyzed by incidents such as the taking of Alcatraz Island and the armed confrontation at Wounded Knee (Goldstein, 2011; Magnuson, 2013). At the policy level, tribal self-determination meant that Native American tribal governments and communities started to take more control over their lands and social institutions and assert their sovereignty. In a practical sense, this meant controlling foundational societal institutions such as law and order, health, natural resource management, and education, with the ultimate goal of building tribal capacity and sovereignty.

The Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975 (Public Law 93-638) gave American Indian tribes the authority to contract directly with the federal government to provide their own essential services (e.g., education, health, law enforcement, etc.), which up to that

time had been provided to tribes through the Bureau of Indian Affairs (Durham, 1999). That self-determined education was a key pillar of the self-determination movement is not surprising: Education would raise new generations of tribal leaders, rebuild and revitalize cultural and social understandings of tribal ways, and preserve and advance Indigenous knowledge of the natural world. It was a poignant counter to the Indian boarding school policies of the late 1800s and early 1900s, which sought to use education to strip Native Americans of their identity and culture (Adams, 1995). Self-determined education began to take place in primary and secondary schools, early childhood education settings, and eventually in postsecondary higher education institutions. The first TCU, now Diné College on the Navajo Nation, opened its doors in 1968 (Oppelt, 1990).

At their core, the 1994s are nation-building institutions that work to strengthen tribal sovereignty by educating tribal students, researching solutions to pressing issues, and building prosperous tribal communities. Strengthening tribal sovereignty and society through education is their core mission—their *raison d'être*. This nation-building mission infuses everything they do, including supporting cultural revitalization, increasing socioeconomic well-being, and building upon Indigenous ecological knowledge. It defines the 1994 land-grant's purpose as helping build the tribal nation (Crazy Bull et al., 2020).

The 1994s' connections to their communities are deep and multifaceted. The 1994s themselves are microcosms of their communities. Walking the halls of campus, one will see mothers and fathers, aunts and uncles, grandparents and children mingling with students, faculty, and administrators. TCUs' boards of regents, administrators, faculty, staff, and students live, work, and celebrate together in their communities. A college's facilities person may be a respected cultural leader within the community. A student may be a tribal council member. The university president may be seen as a leader, elder, grandmother, powwow dancer, and friend.

One will also see how culture and an Indigenous worldview are infused in all aspects of the colleges, from the cultural symbolisms of artwork displayed throughout campus grounds to the architectural design of buildings and meeting

spaces. Culture is a key component of the 1994s' identity. Core values—including showing respect for all living and natural things, generosity and reciprocity, responsibility for “seven generations” of sustainable living, and prioritizing communal interests over individual interests, to name a few—flow from their cultural orientation (Dembicki, 2019).

Therefore, academic and extension programming at the 1994s is driven by the community without special effort, as if by default. Faculty and Extension educators bring the community into every discussion and meeting because they, their staff, and students are themselves from the community. The community's culture, identity, and social structures are infused within and embodied by the 1994s. In this context, community engagement is inherent in how the 1994s sit within and as part of their communities. In short, each 1994 *is* its community.

Because the 1994s embody their communities and their needs, their work is by nature need-based, transdisciplinary, cross-functional, and holistic across campus. There are few, if any, entrenched silos or functional or disciplinary boundaries. The 1994s are too small, too new, and too need-driven to have fallen into the trappings of bureaucracy, silos, and turf battles. The 1994s' focus on outcome-driven programming discourages the construction of bureaucratic scaffolding (Phillips, 2003, 2005), and this approach fits with Native American cultural orientations of holism, communalism, and emergent leadership. As strategically amorphous learning organizations, 1994s organize and reorganize according to community needs and changing circumstances (Wheatley, 1993).

There are 35 1994s in the United States, spanning 16 states. In the fall of 2020, they served 8,130 full-time and 6,714 part-time students, for a total of 14,844 students.<sup>1</sup> Each institution has an average of 143 faculty and staff (American Indian Higher Education Consortium [AIHEC], 2021).<sup>2</sup> Almost all 1994s are based on reservations and serve as anchor institutions in remote rural communities. They provide vital services to their communities far beyond the traditional roles of higher education institutions. They serve as tribal archives, repositories of Indigenous knowledge, childcare providers, community centers, libraries, and tribal research/data centers. During the coronavirus pandemic, they provided direct food

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<sup>1</sup> Student enrollment decreased 2% year-over-year in 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic.

<sup>2</sup> These are the most recent data, for the 2018–2019 academic year.

assistance, public health services, and broadband connectivity hubs and hotspots (AIHEC, 2020). Extension services at 1994s focus on priority issues such as diet and health, youth development, natural resource management, and economic development. Research is applied and focused on specific tribal needs and solutions (Phillips, 2003).

The 1994s receive woefully inadequate federal support to administer their land-grant programs. In fiscal year 2021, funding for their instructional services averaged about \$129,000 annually per institution, Extension funding averaged \$243,000, and research funding averaged \$114,000 (NIFA, 2021). With such meager funding, 1994s combine their federal support with other funding sources and integrate programming across disciplines and functional areas to achieve greater efficiency and impact. By necessity, these limitations drive 1994 Extension to think and program holistically across disciplines and organizational structural boundaries. Thus, Extension programs work with college students in service-learning and internship experiences, faculty embed research activities into classroom instruction, and community members are participatory researchers. Many times, the dean, department chair, faculty, students, researchers, and community members are working shoulder to shoulder on a research or extension activity.

Given the above, how do the 1994s define and operationalize “engagement”? The Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities (1999) explored the idea of engagement and proposed a seven-part definition of an engaged institution: Engaged institutions must demonstrate responsiveness, respect for partners, academic neutrality, accessibility, integration, coordination, and resource partnerships. The commission called upon land-grant institutions to reconceptualize what it means to be of service to all—one of the founding principles of the Morrill Act. The report highlighted Salish Kootenai College (Pablo, Montana) as a 1994 institution that had an advantage over existing public institutions because it “*promised* [emphasis added] to serve the needs, and develop the talents of, Indian people on the reservation” (p. 33). That promise, a covenant, is the TCU tribal charter.

The tribal charter is what defines a TCU in both a legal sense and an operational one. The charter must come from the local tribal government, and this ensures that the TCU is legitimate in the eyes of the community and the tribal nation (Benham, 2003). The charter includes the articles of incorporation or similar guidelines and describes how the institution will operate as a legal entity of the tribe, including the composition and operations of the governing board. Per the Tribally Controlled Community College Assistance Act of 1978, a tribal charter is one of the three legally defining attributes of a TCU.<sup>3</sup> In spirit and practice, the tribal charter is a covenant between the tribe and the TCU that the tribal college will serve the tribal community’s interests and needs and the tribe will support the TCU as a matter of national (tribal) interest.

### **The College of Menominee Nation**

The College of Menominee Nation (CMN) in Keshena, Wisconsin, provides a model for what a reimaged, engaged land-grant institution might look like. Chartered by the Menominee people in 1993, CMN was authorized by the U.S. Congress in 1994 as one of three land-grants within the state of Wisconsin.<sup>4</sup> The CMN charter identifies the institution’s core mission: to meet the needs of the community with resources and education. The charter specifically addresses the college’s obligation to offer quality higher education to the Menominee people that allows each student the opportunity to meet their own goals as well as the needs of the Menominee Nation.<sup>5</sup> The charter specifies the relationship between the tribe and CMN, but it gives the college operational autonomy from the local tribal government. A board of directors separate from the tribal government is responsible for hiring the president of the college as well as the chief academic officer and the chief financial officer. This ensures that power and accountability is distributed among these three principal leaders. The board is composed of seven Menominee tribal members.

The CMN staff, faculty, and students are nearly all members of the Menominee community, with a few exceptions. The administrative structure of the college is remarkably flat in terms of hierarchical

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<sup>3</sup> The other defining attributes are a majority Native American board of directors and a majority Native American student population.

<sup>4</sup> The others are Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe College (Hayward, WI) and the University of Wisconsin (Madison, WI).

<sup>5</sup> Menominee Indian Tribe of WI, Tribal Ordinance 96-16, College of Menominee Nation Charter, Article I, Chapter 637.

lines of authority and reporting; there may be only three levels of reporting between an entry-level position and the president. CMN has neither the resources nor need to create numerous levels of managers and directors. This flat organizational structure limits bureaucracy and red tape and provides anyone working at the college or in the community access to the president, demonstrating a strong sense of shared servant leadership. It invites direct input from the community, and in turn, information and resources are able to flow directly to the community. In a cyclical manner, information flows from community to college and back again.

A strong connection to the community allows the college to organically develop its extension programs, and its unique approaches are not often found in mainstream institutions (Nichols & Kayongo-Male, 2003). The Extension program is located within CMN's Department of Continuing Education, the mission of which is to instill in students and community members a culture of lifelong learning and to foster a welcoming atmosphere while utilizing and adapting to new technologies. Within this mission, the Extension program works actively with the community to ensure that it has a clear sense of its role in providing knowledge and resources to both the Menominee community and the broader community of rural northern Wisconsin. This engagement, both formal and informal, is critical in how CMN Extension develops its programming and community learning opportunities.

As part of its mission to be responsive to the community, CMN makes itself strategically and tactically nimble so that it can move effectively to meet the community's needs. A somewhat typical experience that illustrated CMN's streamlined administrative processes arose when CMN sought to collaborate with a state land-grant institution (one of the so-called 1862 land-grants)<sup>6</sup> on a grant proposal that presented a promising opportunity for the local Menominee community. The time that the 1862 institution needed to enact the appropriate processes and receive the appropriate approvals risked missing the proposal submission deadline. CMN, on the other hand, had the ability to get its administration's approval to move forward with the proposed project quickly and seamlessly. Because a relationship was already in place between top administrators at the two organizations, leaders at CMN communicated with the leaders at the 1862 to

fast-track the proposal. Streamlined processes and direct lines of communication at CMN between staff and administration and with the 1862 allowed CMN to respond quickly to a community need.

A prime example of programming that meets community needs through active engagement is the Menominee tribe's growing interest in sustainable agriculture. Until recently, there was little direct interest in growing food locally; the Menominee Reservation is located on 232,000 acres of heavily forested land, and there was no historical knowledge of or cultural connection to local food production. However, the discovery of ancient garden beds on the Menominee Reservation showed evidence of raised fields dating back to A.D. 800–900, repairing a lost historical and cultural connection between the tribal community, its ancestors, and the land (Overstreet, 2005, 2018). The new discovery brought with it a renewed interest in local food production and food sovereignty for the Menominee community, and the college saw this as an opportunity to take the lead as a land-grant institution and develop community-engaged programming utilizing nontraditional agricultural techniques. CMN instructors were not always the subject matter experts, but they understood the need to facilitate peer-to-peer learning led by others within the community, such as elders and cultural leaders. They honored, respected, and helped give voice to Indigenous knowledge. By authentically listening to the community, the college was able to learn from community members and earn their trust, legitimizing the college's extension programming. The success of this engagement effort was also due to relationships that the college had built with other agencies and programs on the reservation, such as the Menominee Tribal Clinic, the Menominee Department of Agriculture and Food Systems, the local University of Wisconsin's Extension office, and the Menominee Food Distribution Program.

CMN Extension is also part of the Menominee Wellness Initiative, an advisory group that shares and communicates ideas and programming related to health and wellness. One example of the strong collaboration occurring thanks to the efforts of this group is the annual seed and plant giveaway. The program not only distributes seeds and plants but also includes Menominee traditions and culture. The seeds are blessed each year by a local Menominee elder to bring a good growing season and harvest and to bring health to everyone

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<sup>6</sup> Named after the First Morrill Act of 1862, which authorized state land-grant universities



participating. The beginning of the growing season for the Menominee is also considered the “New Year,” as the Menominee follow the agricultural seasonal calendar for cultural and traditional activities. The Menominee Wellness Initiative, through collaboration with elders, was able to hold a traditional celebration for the New Year that had not occurred for many years: a Green Corn Dance. The group pulled together enough resources to hold a feast with a drum and dancers and worked with elders to bring back many of the old traditional dances that were no longer being taught or seen at local powwows.

As a small institution, staff and faculty at CMN multitask and play numerous roles across campus. This cross-campus cross-training can be hard on employees who “wear many hats” and are at times responsible for job duties outside of their primary realms of knowledge and experience. This does not deter employees with strong ties to—and support from—the community. For a young person who might be a first-generation college student, the opportunity to be mentored by and to learn from a community member who was once in their shoes is invaluable. Employees are able to perform for the good of the institution while adding experience to their career and bettering themselves. From its inception, the college has made it a point to welcome youth, specifically K–12 students, onto campus. The college’s founding president, Dr. Verna Fowler, believed that the more that local youth from the reservation are exposed to the campus, the more likely they are to understand the need for higher education and how it can help the Menominee Nation.

Administrative and programmatic multitasking can be exhausting and can wear down even the most energetic and driven employees. But it can also provide more cohesive and seamless collaboration among programs within the college. The fact that an administrator or faculty member can contribute in multiple roles in various departments can facilitate knowledge sharing and communication at a level that is otherwise not attainable when departments and programs are focused inward and not working together. Mid-level administrators and entry-level employees alike have direct access to senior leadership and know each other on a first-name basis.

Most importantly, community engagement at CMN means giving voice to the community and then listening. Community voice means more than simply stakeholder input or community listening sessions: It means empowering community

members to actively cocreate academic and extension programming by contributing their Indigenous knowledge and lived experiences. It means authentically listening with respect and intellectual curiosity. Finally, it means that tribal college students and their families are integrated in all aspects of the college and community. A recent CMN graduate and current staff member, Lloyd Frieson Jr., provides an example of how one person’s experiences, woven through the lives of students, community members, and college staff, can create a powerful voice for a new model of engagement.

### **A Community Voice**

*Posoh* (Hello), my name is Lloyd Frieson, Jr. I am an enrolled Menominee tribal member and a graduate from the College of Menominee Nation. I enrolled in CMN in 2012 and have acquired three degrees since then, and I am now working on a fourth degree in digital media. In 2016, I received double Associate of Arts degrees, one in social sciences and the other in sustainable development, and then in 2017, I acquired a Bachelor of Arts degree in public administration. I currently work at the college as a traditional recruiter specializing in early recruitment of “traditional” high school students. I also serve as the student adviser to the high school students, connecting them to resources that will help them succeed in a college environment. These resources include providing tutors and faculty time, as well as technical assistance such as access to the internet, Wi-Fi hotspots, and laptops.

I began my college experience in 2007, as a participant in technical education extension workshops available for community members. I will always remember returning to the Menominee Reservation (our family had lived off-reservation for my father’s work) and crossing “the line” (the reservation boundary). As we entered the reservation and drove past the CMN campus, I was so proud and excited to learn that the tribe had their very own college. The college provided me technical education for electrical troubleshooting, building and construction skills, and a 120-hour pre-apprenticeship program that introduced me to a variety of different trades with the hope of landing an apprenticeship. The college has always reached out, through one way or another, to its surrounding communities in hopes of educating people who were at most times too busy with work or other life issues. I think seeing the college reach out and help me and so many other people is what inspires me to do the same today.

In the summer of 2012, I was fresh out of a sustainable development course, with a newfound deeper understanding and view of what I do as a consumer and how it impacts our Earth. I landed an internship with the college's Sustainable Development Institute (SDI) that summer as a community garden assistant. During my internship, I had the opportunity to work with the youth of the area during their summer programs, demonstrating the different techniques of cultivation, fertilization, and irrigation. I was also asked by the CMN Community Resource Center to do a presentation on raised bed gardening for community members—those who attended the class received a raised bed garden for their home. I was very busy during this internship but meeting the community members and helping some start their first-ever garden was well worth it. This experience opened my eyes to the importance and the impact of the connection between the tribal community and the college.

Since then, community members and especially our elders still call on me for information or assistance in getting a garden started. Being called on by our elders is always an honor and privilege. The elders tell stories of the past when almost everyone would have a garden and grow special crops. In gatherings and community meetings, they described what crops would be grown and by whom. These community gardens produced a wide range of foods that were shared during an annual community gathering at the end of the harvest season. Community members would bring most of their crops and livestock to a specific place to barter and to share with community members whose crops did not do so well that year. The community gardeners would also make sure that other community members had enough food to last for the winter. During one of the times I visited with the elders, I was gifted the meaning of *Netaenawehmakanak* (All My Relations). I knew what the translation of the word was but did not fully understand the ingrained connectedness to the word *Netaenawehmakanak* and why it appealed to me so spiritually until that day when, as I was installing a raised bed garden for her, the elder explained it to me. *Netaenawehmakanak* is the teaching that all things are connected and that I am not above anything on or above this planet, and anything on or above this planet is not above me. I am not above the four-legged, two-legged, the scaled, or the feathered, and they are not above me. We are all the Creator's creation with specific paths. There is only one thing that separates us

from all the other creatures and that was a gift from the Creator: free will. Our purpose is to use our free will to help build our community with all of our relations in mind.

At the end of 2013, as I finished two semesters of classes and my internship with SDI was ending, I was presented with an opportunity to work with the Menominee Youth Empowerment Program (MYEP). The college was implementing MYEP with community youth through CMN's Extension office with funding through the Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health. It was a 5-year program with 60 Menominee middle school students participating. The goal was to educate students with seven specific objectives to prepare the students for life after school. I was a youth mentor in the program and presented on life decisions and substance misuse topics. I would talk to the students about life choices and how turning to drugs, alcohol, and other substances could have a life-changing effect and not for the better. I talked about the struggles of addiction and how it would have family impacts as well as relationship hardships. Our students were at the age when trying different things for themselves was highly probable and my job was to at least bring the subject to the table and discuss it.

MYEP brought in different speakers and presenters on topics from STEM to financial literacy. These presentations allowed the students to ask questions and really get to see the options available to them through education. Most of the students I knew previously from the annual Menominee Culture Camp. Working with such a huge group of students helped me realize that some of our students were going through some tough times with homelessness, broken homes, domestic violence, low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, hunger, and little motivation to succeed after high school. I became very empathetic for some of our students and attempted to reach out the best I could. Some did respond while others did not. I would overhear some of the students say that they were fated to live a certain way after high school. I would quickly interject as to why they would think this way when education is the stepping stone to break the cycle of "being fated." This is why I have always pushed the students to acquire a college degree or certification in some type of field to help them build a stronger foundation so they would not have to believe they were fated or destined to be a particular way.

The annual Menominee Culture Camp is a weeklong stay at a designated wooded area

where language, culture, and some archaeological presentations are given. There is no internet and phone reception at this location. The children who would sneak their phones into camp with hopes of gaming or calling friends were met with the harsh reality that there was absolutely no signal. I have been asked to be the Fire Keeper for the camps since 2010. I was first approached because of my involvement with CMN and the community connections that I have made over the years. People know that I have always stressed the importance of education to young people and the community. As the Fire Keeper, I would tell stories of struggle and perseverance through education. The students would have questions as to how to get started and when was the earliest they could sign up for classes. I would hand out flyers about CMN to the children and let them know that if they had any questions to come see me. The children were very responsive to the idea of becoming a college graduate and their enthusiasm was welcomed.

Most of the campers would form circles and discuss “what if” possibilities and share what they would fix first in their communities if they had the chance. I would reiterate that time was always moving and the best time to plan your future was now. The campers really began to envision college as a way to help their community seriously. After their group discussions and the final circle was formed for the night, I would explain to them that they had become the Seventh Direction. The campers would ask what is this Seventh Direction, and I would explain the teaching around the fire. I would explain that in our culture we give offerings to the directions of East, South, West, North, Grandfather Sky, and Grandmother Earth. And there is another direction that we should give offerings to and that is ourselves. Once we start being mindful of what our community and its members need, once we begin to pay respect to the relations that have given themselves to us to sustain our way of traditional life—wood for fires and lodge, deer for meat during the winter, medicines for ailments, and fish year-round—once we do those things, we have become the Seventh Direction.

Whether we know it or not, someone is always watching the decisions we make and [is] following our footsteps. This may be a little brother or sister, niece or nephew, or a next-door neighbor who thinks you are awesome. No matter what we do, those people are following our choices and therefore we have become a direction ourselves. I tell my campers to be careful of the decisions they make

because you are a direction and where you lead, others will follow. I have been keeping fire for the Culture Camp for 10 years. I am blessed with these opportunities because I am engaged with the college and am making connections through education.

In closing, I would like to thank the College of Menominee Nation for giving me so many opportunities to not only better myself, but with helping me understand that as a graduate I have a responsibility to my community and its future. The responsibility of ensuring that I do everything within my power to help my community members strive in being the best they can be comes from the teachings of the Seven Directions. The job I have now is actually where I need to be at the moment because it gives me a direct link to the leaders of the future. Someday, I would like to throw my hat in the ring for Tribal Legislator so that I can help lead my community further, and we'll see how that goes. Thank you for this opportunity to tell some of my story. *Eneq* (The End).

## **Conclusion**

As illustrated by Mr. Frieson's story, every touchpoint of engagement between a TCU and its tribal community is an opportunity for a profound and personal connection. Tribal nation building occurs brick by brick and, at TCUs, student by student. Students learn a sense of service, sacrifice, and responsibility to the tribal community. The benefits that students receive from TCUs and then share with their communities come from cocreated programs run by dedicated, community-driven faculty, Extension educators, administrators, local boards of regents, and ultimately a tribal charter that embodies the core mission of a tribal land-grant institution—that is, tribal nation building.

How might the story of community engagement at 1994 institutions inform collaboration within the larger land-grant system? First, the 1994s show that deep and long-standing relationships within communities can facilitate successful university partnerships with communities that are hard to reach geographically and culturally. University-community partnerships that are based on long-term, trusting relationships are more likely to succeed (Jackson & Marques, 2019; Kim, 2021; Nichols & Kayongo-Male, 2003). One study showed that a community partnership among a 1994 institution and two mainstream universities in an experiential student learning program was sustainable because of the 1994's long-lasting relationships (Kant et al., 2014).



Second, 1994 land-grant institutions show that Native American community engagement can be advanced by welcoming Indigenous peoples into faculty ranks and leadership. Gittelsohn et al. (2018) drew upon the experiences of eight investigators who worked with Native communities to highlight the best practices needed on the university side of the partnership ledger. These requirements included supporting the development, promotion, and tenure of Indigenous investigators; creating policies and procedures that are culturally and historically sensitive to Indigenous communities' research experiences; and developing best practices in sharing credit with communities and allies. Moving beyond outreach, land-grant institutions could engage Native communities by welcoming their members into faculty ranks, leadership and governance, and the student body.

Finally, we return to the need to give voice. Without voice, people remain invisible, and this is an unfortunate theme of the Native American story in society. Lifting up the voices of those marginalized in society requires an audience that is genuinely listening. Universities by nature are a cacophony of voices, but who is listening to the disenfranchised? The voices of community should be invited into honest spaces that are intentionally created and nurtured at all levels of the institution, from students to faculty to administrators to the president. When these voices become truly heard with respect, openness, and intellectual curiosity, the path forward to an authentic, reimagined model of community engagement that honors the land-grant tradition will become clear.

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