Campus Highlight

We See You: The Collaborative of Tribal and Higher Education in Michigan (C-THEM)

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Here's a loaded question about trust: How do large, tax-supported American universities build or earn trust with their state or local indigenous communities? Large land-grant and flagship campuses like Michigan State University and the University of Michigan (U-M) often reside on lands ceded by indigenous nations in treaties, sometimes with the promise of higher education for tribal children.

The Anishinaabe children of the Three Fires Confederacy in Michigan—the Odawa, Ojibwe, and Potawatomi—encountered significant barriers to college access, partly caused by the splintering of Indian families and nations through forcible relocation hundreds of miles away to reservations of marginal land quality.

American policy in the last hundred years also included acts of sequestering: the sequestering of indigenous children into state-run boarding schools that separated children from both their parents and their cultures,[1] and the sequestering, under the banner of anthropological research, of indigenous human remains and funerary objects dug up from burial grounds and stored within locked, climate-controlled collections.[2]

In Michigan, where a large majority of colleges are populated by students, staff, and faculty who are predominantly white, a sense of belonging is a key factor for the success of students from underrepresented backgrounds. We continue to work hard to create welcoming climates on our campuses, but barriers endure. How do we break these down? The answer is, in part, the same for all incidences of trauma, whether historical or continuing: slowly, and with investments of time, commitments, resources, and relationships.

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The roots of the Collaborative of Tribal and Higher Education in Michigan (C-THEM) are, like roots of a tree, multilayered. Long and sustained relationships have been built through the University of Michigan's Office of Governmental Relations, particularly through the leadership of Dana Sitzler, the office's associate director of state outreach, who has strengthened bonds with education and health directors at Michigan's twelve federally recognized tribal nations, regularly attends and hosts director meetings, learns of tribal issues, and helps to bring tribal leaders and U-M faculty and administrators together.

Other relationships developed by acknowledging the pain felt by the Anishinaabe for their ancestors' remains and funerary objects being held in U-M's collections. U-M made a commitment to return, repatriate, and rebury on ancestral lands the thousands of ancestral remains and items in the collections. Healing began, and trust was built between U-M staff coordinating the transfer of remains and tribal representatives receiving their ancestors.

Students spoke up, as they have for so long, expressing their desire, among other things, to be *seen* by the university, to have their tribal nations acknowledged on campus, and to be supported in their efforts to thrive and feel a sense of belonging. These ideas resonated with research from a 2018 report, *Reclaiming Native Truth*, that showed "how biases keep contemporary Native Americans invisible and/or affixed to the past and are holding back Native Americans from achieving political, economic and social equality,

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1 Ziibiwing Center of Anishinabe Culture & Lifeways, *American Indian Boarding Schools: An Exploration of Global Ethnic and Cultural Cleansing* (Ziibiwing Center, 2011).

2 "About NAGPRA," Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, Accessed August 22, 2019, https://nagpra.umich.edu/about-nagpra/.

photo courtesy of University of Michigan

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as well as accurate and respectful representation."[3] Students who identify as Native, or two or more ethnicities, may feel lost on campus. Native students on many Michigan campuses—whether two or four-year colleges—have seen dwindling numbers and students returning home from college after one or two semesters.

C-THEM member Anna Larson is the tribal education director for one of the twelve federally recognized tribes in Michigan, the Hannahville Indian Community in the Eastern Upper Peninsula. Hannahville's website proudly states, "The people of Hannahville are descendants of those who refused to leave Michigan in 1834 during the great Indian Removal. They lived with the Menominee in Northern Wisconsin and the Ojibway and Ottawa people in Canada. In 1853 some of these people began returning to Michigan. It was at this time they settled along the Big Cedar River."[4]

Hannahville is located thirty-six miles from the northern Wisconsin border and four hundred miles from Lansing, the capital of Michigan. The closest two-year campus is Bay de Noc Community College, twelve miles away in Escanaba, which hugs the beautiful northwestern corner of Lake Michigan. Many Hannahville students wishing to attend a four-year college travel to Northern Michigan University in Marquette, eighty miles away. Larson says that Hannahville students often struggle to find cultural connections when they move to college, having lived their lives around their close-knit community. They want to go to college, she said, but connecting to the campus and staying until graduation are the largest challenges.

Geographic and institutional challenges like these abound for a new statewide collective like C-THEM. Members are spread across the two large peninsulas of Michigan, which are connected by the five-mile Mackinac Bridge. Unlike almost every other US state, Michigan does not have a statewide governing board of higher education that administratively connects its

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3 Reclaiming Native Truth, *Research Findings: Compilation of All Research* (First Nations Development Institute and Echo Hawk Consulting, 2018), https://www.theonefeather.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/FullFindingsReport-screen.pdf.

4 "Hannahville History," Hannahville Indian Community, accessed August 22, 2019, http://www.hannahville.net/hannahville-history/.

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people and campuses together. Instead, Michigan's four-year and two-year public colleges are autonomous, having their own constitutions and governing boards—fifteen boards for the public universities and twenty-eight boards for community colleges, in addition to the three tribal colleges. Communications across these colleges and trying to build a collective among them is daunting but urgent, since so many Native American students are enrolled in community colleges and would like to transfer for a bachelor's degree and beyond.

"Built on the tribal belief that today's generation is responsible for the prosperity of future generations, Seven Generations A+E provides sustainable solutions inspired by indigenous planning and building orientation and regularly mentors Native students."

Thankfully, our colleges are aligned with the tribes through the Confederation of Michigan Tribal Education Directors, who meet quarterly and whose chair, Sam Morseau, of the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi Indians, created a three-hour block for C-THEM to meet just before their own one-and-a-half-day tribal meetings. It was Morseau, taking inspiration from the nascent C-THEM collaborative, who spawned and built the first regional C-THEM college pathway partnership between Western Michigan University (WMU) and three separate bands of the Potawatomi Nation: Pokagon, Gun Lake, and Nottawaseppi.

photo courtesy of Western Michigan University

Students and staff from three tribes, Pokagon Band of Potawatomi Indians, Huron Potawatomi, and Match-E-Be-Nash-She-Wish (Gun Lake) Band of Pottawatomi Indians, at Western Michigan University.

Through a partnership between the education directors of the three tribes and the office of the chief diversity and inclusion officer at WMU, Candy McCorkle, events in September 2019 brought Native students from the three tribes to campus for tours, information, and engagement with Native students, staff, faculty, and alumni at WMU. Additionally, Seven Generations Architecture and Engineering, a tribally owned company, will provide career pathway connections to students interested in pursuing a career in architecture or engineering.

Built on the tribal belief that today's generation is responsible for the prosperity of future generations, Seven Generations A+E provides sustainable solutions inspired by indigenous planning and building orientation and regularly mentors Native students. The firm is a subsidiary of Mno-Bmadsen, the investment enterprise of the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi Indians. Mno-Bmadsen literally means "walking the good path."

This regional focus has emerged as a C-THEM strategy for increasing college pathway connections for Native students. Plans for regional events between tribes and regional universities in both peninsulas are taking shape. In May 2020, the C-THEM collaborative will join with invited students from all over Michigan to gather at the Saginaw Chippewa tribe's "Honoring, Healing and Remembering" event, recognizing the "suffering, strength, and resilience" of children compelled to attend the Mount Pleasant Indian Industrial Boarding School, one of the aforementioned spaces designed for ethnic cleansing.[5]

We have just begun our collaborative, seeded with funding from Bringing Theory to Practice and propelled by an excitement for learning and growing together. We are committed to encouraging and supporting new cohorts of indigenous students to find college pathways and thrive on college campuses statewide. It's a long-term, relationship-building process with the goal of involving all colleges in Michigan.

5 *American Indian Boarding Schools: An Exploration of Global Ethnic & Cultural Cleansing* (Mt. Pleasant, MI: Ziibiwing Center of Anishinabe Culture & Lifeways, 2011), http://www.sagchip.org/ziibiwing/planyourvisit/pdf/aibscurrguide.pdf