Building Bridges: Catalyzing Institutional Change at Utah State University via Experiential Learning with Ute and Navajo Students

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the development, implementation, and impact of a cultural competence course initiated by the Mentoring and Encouraging Academic Success (MESAS) Program at Utah State University (USU). The MESAS Program supports American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian students through various initiatives, including the Faculty Advocate initiative, talking circles, the Indigenous Knowledge Symposium, and the Native American Living/Learning Community. Under MESAS, faculty, staff, and non-Indigenous students are offered the cultural competence course which aims to increase an appreciation for the contributions of Native American and other underrepresented groups, while addressing institutional barriers to their academic success and social well-being. The course has been adapted for faculty, staff, and graduate students involved in roles such as summer research mentoring and emphasizing the importance of cultural sensitivity in creating a supportive environment for Native American students, particularly those transitioning between campuses. The article also highlights a case study of a USU professor who applied the lessons from the course while interacting with students from the Ute Tribe and Navajo Nation, illustrating the practical application of Culturally Responsive Teaching practices and the Funds of Knowledge framework. Overall, the study highlights the course's positive impact on fostering inclusive teaching practices and deepening relationships with Native American students. The findings contribute to the broader discourse on integrating cultural competence in higher education to enhance the experiences of underrepresented student populations.

KEYWORDS

Critical pedagogy; cultural competence; Native American; undergraduate teaching and research.

INTRODUCTION

Learning as Preparation for Educating

While seemingly intuitive, learning is the precursor to teaching others, even in the higher ed setting where educators often have multiple degrees and a wealth of skills and experiences different from those they teach. Yet, having a *different* set of skills and experiences is not the same as having a *superior* set of skills and experiences. For educators to engage with students, particularly those with cultural or racial backgrounds different from their own, they must first be willing to be educated, which begins with increasing cultural competency. Chun and Evans (2016) discuss the importance of cultural competence in educational settings and provide strategies for fostering inclusivity and diversity awareness. Foronda et al. (2015) emphasize cultural humility's importance in education and other fields while providing a detailed analysis of cultural humility. Furthermore, Barnes and Slaton (2020) discuss the application of cultural humility in higher education settings.

Cultural competency, the Funds of Knowledge (FoK) framework, and Culturally Responsive Teaching practices more generally, are paramount for educators seeking to effectively connect with their students. Cultural competency involves being mindful of one's cultural heritage and perspectives on diversity, as well as understanding and adapting to the cultural norms prevalent among others. The Funds of Knowledge (FoK) framework leverages the cultural backgrounds and skills of students to inform classroom practices and aspects of the curriculum (Gonzales, 2022). Culturally Responsive Teaching practices put cultural competency and strategies like the FoK framework into practice. All three of these concepts and practices include acknowledging the individual differences within student groups while also appreciating the broader cultural spectrum that enriches our society. Such awareness serves to enhance and diversify the teaching strategies of educators (National Education Association, 2019). However, the importance of these concepts is often minimized as controversies around topics like Critical Race Theory and supposed indoctrination in higher education serve as distractions that prevent useful pedagogical and institutional changes.

BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) students face a unique set of challenges, both when initially entering higher education and once within the institutional setting. The study titled *Examining BIPOC Student Barriers in Undergraduate Research* by White and Mi (2023) explores the challenges BIPOC students face in accessing undergraduate research opportunities by highlighting issues such as disparities in access to information and the importance of faculty mentorship from individuals with shared backgrounds. Rosenow (2023) discusses the structural and continuous nature of settler colonialism, emphasizing the elimination of Indigenous peoples as a defining feature. For example, the 2021 census showed that only 0.7% of students in U.S. institutions of higher education come from an indigenous background. Furthermore, that number indicates a 38% decline in enrollment since 2010 (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2023). The historical and contemporary experiences of American Indians, as the original Indigenous inhabitants of what is now known as North America, are markedly distinct

from those of other minoritized groups in the United States. Settler colonialism continues to have a significant impact on Indigenous communities, characterized by deliberate efforts to erase American Indian cultures, the dispossession of ancestral lands, the interruption of traditional life ways and land stewardship practices, and an enduring legacy of genocide, discrimination, and political marginalization. Research shows that settler colonial practices have influenced Native American identity through racialization and cultural stereotyping (Davis-Delano et al., 2021). While shared cultural values, traditions, and historical traumas exist among American Indian Tribes, significant diversity exists in terms of language, customs, values, practices, histories, and challenges imposed by colonialism (Blume et al., 2019).

Presently, American Indians represent 1.1% of the U.S. population, with 3.7 million individuals identifying as such (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). While the U.S. Census racializes them as a relatively homogeneous group, the category of "American Indian" includes citizens of hundreds of distinct Tribal nations and communities. There are 574 federally recognized Tribes in the United States, along with numerous other Tribal communities that are either acknowledged at the state level or currently unrecognized by federal authorities (Bureau of Indian Affairs, 2023).

This study examines the crucial role of Culturally Responsive Teaching practices, such as the implementation of the Funds of Knowledge (FoK) framework. It emphasizes the need for enhanced cultural competency as the initial step of such teaching practices. It presents a case study of a professor who deliberately worked to improve his cultural understanding of American Indian populations. He aimed to provide American Indian students with a more equitable college experience by applying the FoK framework, enhancing his mentoring skills, and diversifying his curriculum and teaching methods. This manuscript explores two key questions: How can the implementation of the Funds of Knowledge (FoK) framework within Culturally Responsive Teaching practices contribute to creating a more equitable college experience for American Indian students? Additionally, how does a professor's intentional effort to enhance their cultural understanding of American Indian populations impact their effectiveness in mentoring students and diversifying their curriculum? Although the FoK framework is typically associated with K-12 education, this professor's experience demonstrates its applicability in higher education settings, with increased cultural competency as a fundamental first step. The paper offers essential resources and recommendations for higher education professionals seeking to better serve their students, with a particular focus on American Indian students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural Competency and Culturally Responsive Teaching

Given today's increasingly complex and interconnected dynamics, there is an urgent need for school reforms. In multicultural societies where students from diverse backgrounds attend the same institutions, an inclusive and critical teaching approach can assist with facilitating equity. To better understand what multiculturalism means in a pluralistic context, it is essential to

examine individual cultures and ethnic groups both separately and collectively (Pierre, 1993). Luo and Li (2024) discuss the importance of inclusive pedagogical approaches in diverse classrooms, emphasizing the need for teachers to be confident and flexible in their teaching methods to meet the diverse needs of students. Furthermore, multicultural perspectives — rather than traditional educational approaches that assume cultural homogeneity —play a pivotal role in nurturing a generation of responsible and engaged global citizens (Hinnant-Crawford et al., 2019). In order to have the best chance of providing an equitable education to students from all backgrounds, it is necessary to increase one's cultural competency. Yiu (2024) investigates a multicultural education approach using East Asia as a frame of reference, providing insights into how diverse educational practices can be implemented effectively and offering good examples for broader application.

Sue (2001) proposed a conceptual framework of cultural competency, which consisted of three primary dimensions: 1) awareness, 2) knowledge, and 3) skills. Specifically, awareness involves self-awareness, including recognizing personal biases and experiences. Knowledge refers to understanding the culture and practices of different communities. Lastly, skills are related to communicating effectively with individuals from various cultural backgrounds.

Sue (2001) developed this cultural competency framework. She was influenced by scholars such as James A. Banks (2006), who spent so much time working on multicultural education that he became known as the "father" of the field. Geneva Gay (2000) established the culturally responsive teaching framework, and Sonia Nieto (2012) focused her work on culturally sustaining pedagogy. These scholars and others contributed to the development of culturally responsive teaching, with cultural competency being a central element of it.

Culturally responsive education involves valuing and using students' identities and backgrounds to create environments where they can learn effectively (Gay, 2000). It takes a deliberate and inclusive approach beyond respect, empathy, or sensitivity. For example, assignments that ask students to reflect on their upbringing and how it shapes their worldview can help foster awareness of social justice and cultural sensitivity. Students have reported that such assignments deepen their understanding of social justice and offer critical reflection and cultural awareness opportunities.

One student shared that an assignment was the first time they seriously reflected on how their background, as a white, working-class individual from a predominantly white area, shaped their perception of race. This topic was rarely discussed in their home. This type of assignment exemplifies how culturally responsive education moves beyond basic respect or empathy, creating intentional and transformative learning experiences that encourage students to examine their identities and the social structures around them critically.

Student Perspectives and Tribal Critical Race Theory

In the classroom, it is natural for students from diverse backgrounds to feel excluded when curricula do not reflect their identities and cultural values (Paris & Alim, 2017). School education

should incorporate the experiences of individuals from various ethnic groups, not solely those of White Americans and Europeans. Yet, this is rarely the case, and many students, lacking the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) of White American or European content, cannot achieve their full potential within higher education institutions. Unfortunately, Native Americans are no exception; they are underrepresented in textbooks and official curricula despite their significant contributions to the country's development (White-Kaulaity, 2006; Lewis & Nixon, 2023). Evident disparities in academic achievement between American Indian students and members of other demographic groups underscore the need for culturally responsive education. Typically, White students outperform American Indians and Alaska Natives on standardized tests (Freeman & Fox, 2005). However, educational institutions often fail to foster the creativity and imagination of Indigenous students, exacerbating these disparities (Yiğit, 2018). Freeman and Fox's (2005) research emphasizes the systemic failure of schools to address the unique needs of Indigenous communities (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008).

The utilization of Tribal Critical Race Theory is helpful in this regard. TCRT combines elements of Critical Race Theory and Indigenous studies to address the challenges faced by Indigenous people in education, emphasizing power dynamics, race, and tribal sovereignty. It asserts Indigenous peoples' right to self-governance and advocates for the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge and voices to challenge existing power structures and foster a more equitable education system (Brayboy, 2021). The TCRT body of literature points out that in higher education, "privileging western epistemologies over other forms of knowledge, the erasure of Indigenous perspectives through research methods, and training students with the express goal of erasing former ways of doing and replacing them with the "correct" western approach" (Dabdoub et al., 2023, p. 1) is central to the "educating" process. However, even if instructors are enthusiastic about including the background and experiences of their students in the classroom, they will face significant challenges if they do not know the cultures and communities from which students hail. For this reason, the Funds of Knowledge framework (Gonzalez et al., 2005) is essential.

Funds of Knowledge

Funds of Knowledge (Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992) recognizes that every individual possesses knowledge that is a product of their environment, culture, family, upbringing, and communal history. Moll and Greenberg (1990) describe it as "the essential cultural practices and bodies of knowledge and information that households use to survive, to get ahead, or to thrive" (p. 321). Tapping into these assets can make the curriculum more tailored to students' needs and identities, make the classroom more welcoming and inclusive, and break down barriers between institutions and individuals (Gonzalez et al., 2005). By utilizing the Funds of Knowledge of students, the students see themselves reflected in the work being done in the classroom (Nagasa, 2014). Through interactions with students, their families, and communities, instructors develop "strategic connections" that allow them to build meaningful relationships with students and better facilitate learning (Moll et al.,1992, p. 132). In their study of American Indian students

in institutions of higher education, Dabdoub et al. (2023) found that American Indian students with a high sense of ethnic identity tended to work best with faculty and that it led to a better college experience, particularly given the importance of community to many Native American cultures (Brayboy, 2005). Therefore, it can be assumed that the Funds of Knowledge framework and the connections that it facilitates can lead to better experiences and outcomes in college for American Indian students.

This approach has traditionally been used in K-12 education and less in higher education. Yet, Daddow (2016) points out that utilizing this method does "address the collision between the socio-economic and culturally diverse realities of many students' lives, and the mono-cultural and class-based institutional structure of the university" (p. 745). This paper documents how this method was utilized to consider how to provide the best possible educational services to American Indian students at Utah State University. While research on the use of Funds of Knowledge in the college classroom may be limited, the positive results were not.

BACKGROUND

Cultural Competence Training

Utah State University is considered a Predominantly White Institution, or PWI, with an enrollment of 27,943 in 2022. 64.6 % of the student population is full-time, accounting for 18,038 students, while the remaining 9,905 are part-time. Student enrollment is 82% White for both undergraduate and graduate students. Other represented groups include Hispanic or Latino students (6.56%), students identifying with two or more races (2.46%), American Indian or Alaska Native students (1.42%), Asian students (1.01%), Black or African American students (0.74%), and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander students (0.30%). Among full-time undergraduates, the largest group is White females (44.9%), followed by White males (37.8%) and Hispanic or Latino females (3.38%). In full-time graduate programs, White females are also the most represented demographic, at 43.5%, followed by White males (29.5%) and Hispanic or Latino females (5.48%) (Data USA, 2024). Since Utah State University is a predominantly white institution with minimal numbers of Native Americans, the worth of cultural competence courses rose exorbitantly. These courses are becoming crucial to the development of cultural sensitivity and cultural humility—an essential variable in empowering teachers and learners so that they can effectively engage with and support minority students, including the underrepresented Native American community.

Cultural competence is essential for fostering positive relationships between professors and students. It involves a deep understanding of one's cultural identity and perspectives on diversity and the ability to comprehend and embrace students' and their families' diverse cultural and communal norms. Additionally, it entails acknowledging the individual variances within groups and honoring the collective diversity that enriches our society. This depth of understanding informs and enhances teaching methodologies within the culturally competent educator's classroom (National Education Association, 2019).

Utah State University has two satellite campuses, one located in Montezuma Creek and the other in Monument Valley, both on the Navajo Nation reservation. The USU Blanding campus is small, with only five buildings, but can boast a student population where the majority, more than 60%, are Native American. This contrasts with the Logan campus, with faculty, courses, and research opportunities unavailable at Blanding. These contrasts between the two campuses amplify the need to review resource allocation and the growth of academic programs and services to improve students' experiences at USU Blanding further.

MESAS offers a Cultural Competence Course developed under the prestigious Howard Hughes Medical Institute's Inclusive Excellence Initiative grant in collaboration with Utah State University (https://www.tohilab.org/teach). The Howard Hughes Medical Institute's Inclusive Excellence Initiative exemplifies a progressive shift toward inclusivity in educational practices, significantly expanding its influence by incorporating 33 additional institutions into its consortium. This expansion builds upon the foundation set by the original 24 colleges and universities included in 2017. The initiative's primary objective is to dismantle systemic barriers and facilitate comprehensive engagement in scientific education for all students, regardless of their diverse backgrounds. It strategically targets students from underrepresented ethnic groups, first-generation college attendees, and working adults managing familial obligations, advocating for equitable access to educational opportunities. Central to this initiative is the Cultural Competence Course, meticulously designed to furnish educators with essential tools and insights to serve students best. The course is designed by native-American Cherokee Nation professor Dr. Melissa Tehee and her Native-American doctoral students. This course aims to enhance educators' abilities to connect with and support students from a multitude of backgrounds, thus fostering an academic environment enriched by diverse perspectives and experiences. Such an environment promotes a more inclusive approach to scientific education and serves as a breeding ground for innovation and enhanced problem-solving capabilities. The Inclusive Excellence initiative invites stakeholders in the educational sector to partake in this transformative movement, emphasizing the active utilization of diversity as a cornerstone for achieving educational excellence (https://www.hhmi.org/news/33-schools-support-diversity-and-inclusion-campus-through-2018-hhmi-inclusive-excellence).

The cultural competence course features four meticulously crafted modules designed to deepen self-awareness and foster empathy towards others, drawing upon the well-established cultural competence framework (Sue, 2001):

- *The Self-Awareness Module* guides participants in exploring and acknowledging their own cultural heritage, defining personal values and beliefs, and critically evaluating their privileges, biases, prejudices, and stereotypes.
- *The Knowledge Module* delves into significant historical events, educates participants on socio-political issues, and provides insights into the dynamics of racism, discrimination, and stereotyping.

- *The Awareness of Others Module* fosters an understanding of differing values and beliefs, empathy towards others' experiences, and the adoption of perspectives with ethnocultural sensitivity.
- *The Skills Module* equips participants with practical tools through experiential learning and practice, focusing on mastering active listening, creating inclusive spaces for dialogue, asking thoughtful questions, and effectively engaging with individuals.

Native-American Cherokee Nation professor Dr. Melissa Tehee and her Native-American doctoral students have collaborated to design this captivating course. I chose to take the course to prepare for my role as a mentor and to learn practical methods for connecting with students from diverse backgrounds. Much of the coursework involved reflection-based assessments. While the material was thought-provoking, the course went beyond being merely interesting. It encouraged participants to confront their own biases and engage in honest reflection on challenging topics. The course's emphasis on truthfulness ensured that it addressed essential issues for understanding and communicating with students from any background.

COURSE REFLECTIONS

New Understandings

The cultural competence course provided profound insights into the Indigenous community's unique approach to knowledge, emphasizing their deep understanding of the environment. Indigenous knowledge is rooted in firsthand experiences within specific places and communities, passed down through generations. The course illuminated how Indigenous knowledge is orally transmitted and experienced through movement and visual cues, often within close-knit community settings like storytelling sessions between elders and youth or communal rituals such as bathing among women. Indigenous education emphasizes relationships, prioritizing observation, awareness, intentional action, and preserving cultural values and traditions from elders and community members. Learning in Indigenous contexts occurs within a web of connections between individuals, their surroundings, the natural world, and past and future generations. Indigenous scholars like Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, who explores the resurgence of Indigenous knowledge in her work "As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance" (Simpson, 2017), Lee Maracle, known for her writings on Indigenous feminism and sovereignty, and Eve Tuck, who co-authored the critical essay "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor" (Tuck and Yang, 2012), have all contributed significantly to this understanding. In developing cultural competency, particularly concerning Native American communities like the Ute Tribe and Navajo Nation, the journey begins with active listening and a genuine desire to understand their culture and history. This endeavor may involve exploring resources such as literature, documentaries, and educational materials authored by Native individuals. Some recommended resources include Leanne Simpson (2011) "Dancing on Our Turtle's Back," which discusses Indigenous resurgence and community-based

practices, Lee Maracle (2002)'s "I Am Woman," a powerful work on Indigenous womanhood, and the documentary (PBS, 2009) "We Shall Remain", which provides a historical perspective on Native American history from the Native viewpoint.

While Western civilization often prioritizes success, Native cultures prioritize authentic humanity. Recognizing and appreciating the unique traits of different cultures enriches the professor's cultural awareness, enabling them to better meet the needs of their Native American students in the classroom. Proactively addressing any issues they may encounter, rather than waiting for them to approach them, is fundamental to their approach. It is crucial to acknowledge the distinct characteristics of both Western and Native cultures to develop the skills required for effective communication and connection with tribal students. While recognizing that Native cultures are diverse and multifaceted, understanding these general traits can lay the groundwork for building authentic relationships and fostering mutual understanding.

In both professors' Social Inequality and environmental sociology courses, integral components of the Native American Studies Minor curriculum at Utah State University, we have allocated a dedicated module to deepen understanding of Native cultures and foster inclusivity within our educational environment. This module is compulsory for students pursuing the Native American Studies Minor, underscoring our commitment to promoting cultural awareness and creating an atmosphere of inclusiveness.

Native American Summer Mentorship Program (NASMP) by MESAS

This experience inspired the creation of NASMP, designed to support the retention and representation of Native American students pursuing 4-year STEM degrees. NASMP participants, coming from diverse backgrounds, gather in Logan for a four-week immersive program. They undergo orientation sessions specifically tailored to familiarize them with the nuances of Logan and the main USU campus, which differ from their familiar setting at the Blanding campus. Throughout their time, students engage in research across various laboratories, refining their skills and culminating their experiences with a final poster presentation. Students selected for a cohort participate in a 4-week program (from mid-May to mid-June). The first week focuses on team-building, skill development, and exploring resources at USU Logan's campus. Students engage in week-long lab activities in the following weeks, working in small groups across various labs. Participants, all enrolled in at least an Associate's program at USU Blanding, receive a stipend to cover living expenses during the program. While most students are in their second year, some have just completed their first year, with ages typically ranging from 18 to their early 20s. Remarkably, over 60% of NASMP alumni proceed to transfer to four-year programs, with 40% transitioning to the main USU campus in Logan. However, discussions with transfer students uncovered a need for broader institutional support to ensure their success in Logan. In response, the MESAS program was conceived to address the challenges hindering student transition and cultivate an environment conducive to academic and personal development.

Professors in the Field

It is important to note that some faculty members may prioritize exceptional students for research collaborations, but our objective is to engage and empower individuals who may typically be marginalized. We actively reach out to underrepresented groups, including first-generation, non-traditional, distance education students, students of color, and veterans. This aligns with the professor's commitment to equity, inclusion, and ensuring that every student receives a high-quality education.

Mentoring Students from the Ute Tribe

As a Turkish-American and immigrant scholar-teacher, my journey to higher education has been deeply shaped by my commitment to diversity, equity, and the liberal arts. Coming from a background that blends two distinct cultures, I have always been passionate about bringing diverse perspectives into educational spaces. My path to academia was not without its challenges; as an immigrant, I navigated a new educational system and culture, often feeling the tension between being legally recognized as "white" under the US Census and yet socially "othered" in various contexts. This duality has informed my approach to teaching and scholarship, driving me to advocate for inclusivity and representation both inside and outside the classroom.

As an instructor based on the Logan campus, I closely collaborate with students statewide, including those from the Ute Tribe. One such student contributed to a project titled "Community Perceptions of the Negative and Positive Impacts of Oil and Gas Development in the Ute Tribe," which aimed to understand how Ute Tribal members perceive oil and gas development on their land through in-depth interviews with tribal members and leaders. A former undergraduate student, who is a co-author of this paper, assisted in data collection and manuscript preparation, drawing on knowledge gained from my social research methods course. Reflecting on her experience, she remarked, "It was refreshing to have a professor who is willing to learn with you, about you, and where your perspective comes from." To establish trust and rapport with my students, I took a personalized approach by visiting a former undergraduate student's family on their reservation, demonstrating a genuine commitment to understanding her background. I further supported her by nominating her for a departmental award, which she won, and collaborating with her as a co-author on our research paper. These actions, combined with the skills she gained from my social research methods course, empowered her to present at the USU Student Research Symposium, where she expressed deep gratitude for the opportunity. This approach fostered a strong, supportive relationship, enabling her to achieve beyond her expectations. The students presented their research at the USU Student Research Symposium, with one expressing gratitude for the opportunity, saying, "It's something that I never thought I would do or accomplish; it's an amazing opportunity that I am grateful for."

Additionally, I attended the Pow Wow festival organized by the Ute Tribe in Fort Duchesne for the first time, aiming to strengthen connections with my Ute students. This visit

enabled me to engage in meaningful interactions with tribal leaders, and with the assistance of my students, we successfully expanded project participation. The warm welcome I received underscored the profound respect for visitors to their community, evident in an invitation to a dinner where I engaged in enriching conversations about the tribe's food culture, local politics, and the environmental impacts of oil and gas development. Informed by insights from the Cultural Competence Courses, my experiences emphasized the crucial role of genuine engagement in building trust within the community. I could better address their needs by offering proactive support and understanding their challenges. As a mentor, I advocated for my Native American students, resulting in one receiving the Legacy Award for dedication to our institution and another securing the Undergraduate Research Creative Opportunity Grant at Utah State University through my guidance.

Moreover, I learned to question how institutional policies might inadvertently overlook Indigenous voices and how the university's practices could be more inclusive and responsive to the unique needs of Native American students. This reflection led me to advocate for systemic changes, such as increasing support for culturally relevant programming, revising curricula to include Indigenous perspectives, and ensuring that university policies are adapted to better serve underrepresented communities. By addressing these broader issues, I aim to contribute to a more equitable and inclusive educational environment at Utah State University.

Reflecting on these experiences, a former undergraduate student expressed appreciation for feeling welcomed into the community and highlighted the efforts made to foster a sense of community among those from more rural campuses. The professor's commitment to understanding and empathizing with Native Americans—from learning about their culture and history to advocating for their rights—was characterized by genuine curiosity and devoid of any malicious intent. Recognizing Native Americans as sovereign people deserving of representation, the professor ensured that Native American students had a seat at the table.

Mentoring Students from the Navajo Nation

In 2023, as part of the Native American Summer Mentorship Program, Navajo Nation students at the Utah State University Blanding campus in San Juan County traveled to Logan to participate in research activities. During this period, I had the privilege of collaborating with one of these students on a project focusing on community perspectives regarding proposed changes to the Bears Ears Monument in San Juan County. The student played a pivotal role, particularly in conducting telephone interviews with locals, specifically emphasizing amplifying Native American voices. I guided qualitative interview techniques, addressing the nuances and etiquette crucial for such research endeavors.

Additionally, the mentorship provided logistical support, such as transportation arrangements in Logan and shared dining experiences, ensuring the student had a comprehensive learning experience. Our involvement aimed to enhance the student's research skills and contextual understanding of the project, culminating in a final poster presentation showcasing their

insights and contributions. Throughout the process, we emphasized a collaborative and relational approach, emphasizing interconnectedness and reciprocity. We aimed to integrate Indigenous perspectives deeply into the research, rooted in the cultural context and contributions of the community, rather than simply adding them as supplementary to Western methods.

Additionally, I visited the USU-Blanding campus, a six-hour drive from Logan, to engage directly with the students and faculty there. This visit illuminated the unique challenges Blanding campus students face, such as limited internet connectivity, which is essential for accessing educational resources. Through discussions with students and faculty, I gained insights into the campus's resource limitations compared to the main Logan campus. I also endeavored to connect with the local community, including a visit to the Indian reservation, underscoring the vital importance of trust in Native American communities by prioritizing authentic engagement and communication to foster meaningful relationships beyond academic interactions. The meeting at the reservation emphasized the barriers preventing the development of Tribal climate resilience. By exploring opportunities to overcome these challenges, we seek to strengthen Tribal capacity in implementing culturally sensitive climate change initiatives. This effort is intended to empower Tribes to play a more influential role in shaping climate policy and planning at both state and federal levels. The approach involved recognizing the community as a shareholder in the research process to initiate reconciliation, ensuring their voices and needs were central. This included collaborative decision-making, transparency, and ongoing communication to foster trust, address past injustices, and support the community's needs in meaningful ways.

DISCUSSION

Curricular Change

As an instructor based on the Blanding campus, it is crucial for me to comprehend the cultural needs of my students. I strive to cultivate a teaching environment that respects and celebrates the traditional values my students hold. Acknowledging that many Indigenous communities perceive the Western educational system as a legacy of colonialism, I recognize the historical injustices associated with education. Consequently, I approach my teaching with sensitivity to the ambivalence that some Native American students may harbor towards higher education, aiming to promote inclusivity and effectiveness in the classroom. With these goals in mind, I have made significant changes to my curriculum.

I now incorporate indigenous knowledge systems into my courses, and they serve as a bridge for Native American students, rendering conventional subjects more accessible and meaningful to them. In my courses, particularly Social Inequality and Environmental Sociology, I ensure that at least one module covers a broad spectrum of knowledge, including ecological, medicinal, agricultural, spiritual, and social perspectives. This content is rooted in Indigenous

peoples' lived experiences, cultural practices, and oral traditions, reflecting their deep connection to the land, environment, and community. These aspects are intricately tied to Indigenous communities' cultural identity and heritage, playing a crucial role in their resilience and sustainability. In the future, I plan to include Indigenous students and elders in the course planning process to ensure that Indigenous knowledge, perspectives, and experiences are authentically represented in the curriculum.

In the future, I plan to include Indigenous students and/or elders in the course planning process to ensure that Indigenous knowledge, perspectives, and experiences are authentically represented in the curriculum.

My newfound knowledge, connections, and relationships with my students have made me able to incorporate the Funds of Knowledge from their communities into my courses in a meaningful way. For instance, I integrate indigenous perspectives on landscape understanding and mapping when discussing modern map-making techniques. I purposely showcase maps crafted by those from indigenous cultures. This approach underscores the diversity of viewpoints enriching our understanding of the world. I aim to demonstrate the value of a 'braided' comprehension, where indigenous perspectives and Western science converge to generate knowledge. This approach, also referred to as "Two-Eyed Seeing," emphasizes the strengths of both Indigenous knowledge systems and Western scientific methods, enabling a more holistic and inclusive approach to learning and problem-solving (Bartlett et al., 2012).

Moreover, these lessons offer valuable insights for non-indigenous students who may have yet to encounter alternative ways of learning and conceptualizing the world. I aspire to broaden their understanding and appreciation of different cultural frameworks by exposing them to diverse perspectives. Therefore, the education offered in my courses has been broadened and has positively impacted my curriculum.

CONCLUSION

During the summer, a cohort of Native American students from Utah State University's Blanding campus participates in a four-week program at USU's Logan campus, where they engage in practical laboratory work and research activities as part of the Native American Mentorship Program (NASMP). These students primarily come from Nations and tribes in southern Utah and northern Arizona. They are typically in their first or second year of college, with limited to no prior research exposure and potential gaps in familiarity with their fields of study. Nonetheless, the program aims to introduce these students to various STEM disciplines, seeking to broaden their academic and career perspectives through hands-on laboratory experiences.

The experiences shared in mentoring students from both the Ute Tribe and the Navajo Nation highlight the profound impact of culturally sensitive engagement in academia and how incorporating Funds of knowledge can lead to positive outcomes in the college classroom - both for students and the instructor. Through projects like the exploration of community perceptions of oil and gas development in Ute Tribe or the investigation of proposed changes to the Bears

Ears Monument, students were empowered to contribute meaningfully to research endeavors, bridging academic pursuits with community concerns.

The mentorship programs provided academic guidance and emphasized the importance of authentic connection and understanding cultural nuances. By immersing themselves in the tribal communities, educators demonstrated a genuine commitment to building trust and fostering reciprocal relationships. This approach enriched the students' learning experiences and underscored the value of cultural competence in academia. Moreover, the commitment to incorporating indigenous knowledge into the curriculum reflects a recognition of the diversity of perspectives and a dedication to inclusivity. By embracing alternative ways of learning and thinking, educators empower Indigenous students and broaden the horizons of non-indigenous students, fostering a deeper appreciation for cultural diversity and interdisciplinary collaboration.

Overall, these experiences underscore the transformative potential of culturally responsive teaching and mentorship in higher education, paving the way for more inclusive and equitable academic environments where diverse voices are valued and empowered. The cultural competence course aims to foster a deeper understanding of one's own culture and values while providing opportunities to explore and learn from diverse cultures, thereby enriching personal growth. It emphasizes the recognition of how one's cultural background influences interactions and equips participants with skills to engage with students from Native American cultures effectively. Additionally, the course facilitates the development of transferable skills applicable to working with students from various cultural backgrounds, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and engaging classroom environment conducive to student engagement and learning.

Mentoring students from the Ute Tribe and Navajo Nation showcases the profound impact of culturally sensitive engagement through projects addressing community concerns, such as oil and gas development and the Bears Ears Monument; students bridge academic pursuits with community interests. These mentorship programs provide academic guidance and emphasize authentic connection and understanding of cultural nuances, enriching learning experiences and highlighting the value of cultural competence. Embracing Indigenous knowledge systems reflects a dedication to inclusivity and broadens perspectives for both Indigenous and non-indigenous students. Culturally responsive teaching and mentorship foster inclusivity and empower diverse voices, promoting more equitable educational environments. Further, cultural competence courses and summer mentorship programs increase understanding and engagement with Native American students, improving their academic and career options. Besides, research could investigate best practices for creating and sustaining meaningful collaborations between universities and Indigenous communities and ensuring these partnerships are mutually beneficial. Future studies could analyze how mentorship programs offered to Ute Tribe and Navajo Nation students can be scaled and adapted for efficacy in different territories or with other Indigenous communities.

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