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Gentle Action Theory as a Method of Deliberative Democracy in Addressing the Lack of Voice for Indigenous Students in Institutions of Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper examines how Indigenous college students attending non-tribal colleges and universities in the United States experience feelings of alienation and marginalization. The concept of democracy and deliberation from the model of the larger oppressive society is not an Indigenous cultural norm. Civic engagement is experienced differently in Indigenous communities. This paper articulates the outcomes of a deliberative forum which examined the concept of democracy employing Gentle Action Theory as the method to provide students an opportunity to share their thoughts and experiences and to express their frustrations and needs regarding their academic endeavors. The comparison of Traditional Ways and cultural norms provided a basis for discussions of identity and their experiences as students.

Keywords

Indigenous students, Native American, Indian, Gentle Action theory, democracy, deliberation, Traditional Ways, culture, identity, oppression, racism, voice

*Note – Indigenous, Native American, and Indian are used throughout the paper. All are accepted within tribal culture and some are used in reference to Federal Indian Law.

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Introduction

Indigenous students attending non-tribal colleges and universities across the United States are in the minority in terms of ethnicity of the overall population at those institutions. They are first and foremost enrolled in institutions that were never designed for them. The Indigenous population as a whole in the United States does not have a significant voice in society. Indigenous students want a voice in their education. They want to be respected and understood.

Democracy and deliberation are two subjects that are experienced differently in tribal cultures than in the mainstream United States society. Gentle Action Theory is a method of addressing Indigenous students' needs and wants in a manner that both respects and works well with Traditional Ways and advances democratic engagement through deliberative action.

Indigenous Students and Higher Education

The Postsecondary National Policy Institute (2021) provides us with the following facts:

- American Indians and Alaska Natives comprise only 1% of the U.S. undergraduate population and less than 1% of the graduate population.
- 19% of 18–24-year-old Native American students are enrolled in college, compared to 41% of the overall U.S. population.
- 41% of first-time, full-time Native American students attending four-year institutions beginning in 2012 graduated within six years, compared to 62% for all students.
- Native American students are less likely to have family members that have attended college.
- 43% of Native American students are first-generation students.

These facts demonstrate the lack of representation Indigenous students experience in higher education. The facts also suggest how first-generation undergraduates face a myriad of barriers in their pursuit to graduate college. Predominantly non-white and from low-income backgrounds, they are often the first in their families to navigate college admissions, financial aid, and postsecondary coursework. In particular, first-generation students may struggle to know how to do the following:

- Apply for college
- Choose the best college for them
- Understand how financial aid works
- Write entrance essays and scholarship applications
- Have a mentor to assist in the process
- Know anyone from the Native community attending their chosen college
- Leave home, as many students from reservations have not left home before, and parents and elders may not support the decision to leave or to attend college in the first place
- Choose and register for classes
- Find living arrangements

- Access on-campus food programs
- Purchase/order books
- Understand and access transit options
- Access health services
- Access disability services
- Use online technology

All of these factors result in Indigenous students facing extensive obstacles. If and when Indigenous students find themselves enrolled in and attending institutions of higher education, do they have a voice? To find out, I held a forum on January 12, 2020, structured to align deliberative democratic processes with Traditional Ways and cultural norms.

Deliberative Democracy Forum: Traditional Cultural Ways

There are numerous cultural differences between Western culture and Native American culture. Native American culture has been classified as a collectivist culture (Cherry, 2021). Common traits of collectivist cultures include the following:

- Individuals define themselves in relation to others (e.g., “I am a member of...”).
- Group loyalty is encouraged.
- Decisions are based on what is best for the group.
- Working as a group and supporting others are essential.
- Greater emphasis is placed on common goals than on individual pursuits.
- The rights of families and communities comes before those of the individual.

These cultural traits are important, because they help to define how we communicate, how decisions are made, and how we treat each other. In particular, the communication component is important to understanding Native American culture. Under the heading/title “Listen Before You Speak,” materials from Rice University (nd.) characterize communication styles among Native American people this way, to which I have added my own commentary:

- “Native American people are a quiet people” (p. 3). We are quiet with people we do not know or do not have relationship with, while in our own groups we are freer and share robust laughter and our opinions and feelings in a respectful manner.
- “Native Americans put much more of an emphasis and value on listening rather than speaking” (p. 3). We are taught to listen and to be respectful to the person speaking. The status of the individual is also taken into consideration. For example, are they an Elder or are they the Chief, a Medicine man or a Storyteller?
- “Native Americans do not find power in words that other cultures may” (p. 3). We are not taught that our words should have power over another person or that our words are more important than the words of another person. As a Cree person, I was taught not to put myself forward.

While recognizing these general characteristics, it is also important to understand that these are cultural norms which vary from tribal community to tribal community.

The aspect of time is also important to understand in Native American culture. DeVito (1995) discusses the manner in which Native American culture as a collectivist culture views time. Western culture as an individualistic culture divides time into seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, and years. Time is valued as a commodity which can be used, wasted, lost, and charged for its perceived value. It is linear, with beginnings and endings: the end of the day, the end of the year, the end of a meeting set for a specific time.

Time in the Native American culture is perceived as circular. There are no definite beginnings or endings, only what is, what always has been, and what always will be. There is a more fluid and flexible attitude toward time and schedules.

Gentle Action Theory

Gentle Action Theory is an approach that begins from within a system, where new forms of “gentle action” are developed to address societal issues in creative ways (Peat, 2008). Gentle Action Theory is an alternative to previously employed methods historically used in both research and application in Indian Country, an approach that begins with an initial “creative suspension” of action (Peat, 2008, p. 87.) Gentle action is unlike the typical Western idea that one must do something and that it must be done right now. Instead, gentle action allows for dialogue and time for creativity in designing activities and pondering solutions.

By contrast to Western ways of responding, Traditional Ways of knowing and being seek harmony in all living things, and time and space is created for the process to unfold in its own time, versus rushing in with the potential to do more harm than good. Gentle Action Theory connects well with our collectivist cultures’ values of interconnectedness and inclusiveness, as it respects process and relationships while seeking solutions. Gentle action emphasizes a kinder, gentler, creative, flexible process.

Gentle Action Theory is also respectful of people, culture, and place. Native Americans are a people of place. Our creation stories, our ceremonies, and our culture are tied to place. Place is sacred to us, as it is there we find our beginnings, our ancestors, and the embodiment of our spiritual connections to the natural world. Respect is embodied in Gentle Action Theory in a manner that blends well with our Traditional Ways.

A fundamental element of the theory is that the process begins inside of a system. For too long, Native Americans have had outsiders come into our communities telling us what our problems are and how to fix them, using an arrogant power to insert themselves in ways that are harmful to the culture. Instead, I employed the tenets of Gentle Action Theory in all aspects of the planning and delivery of the Deliberative Democracy Forum I held with the students, in order to align with the Traditional Ways and cultural norms of our communities.

Deliberative Democracy, Gentle Action Theory, and Traditional Ways

The Kettering Foundation (nd.) asserts that “public deliberation is crucial to combating the alienation of citizens who feel shut out of the political system, citizens who want a stronger hand in shaping their future but don’t see how they can make a difference” (Kettering, n.d., p. 2). The foundation offers some of the tenets of their belief system, including the following:

- “Public deliberation is useful when there is a discrepancy between what is happening to people and what they think should be happening—yet there is no agreement on what should be happening. There is no such thing as an expert on what should be; that is a matter of judgment. To make sound judgments, people have to weigh possible actions against what they consider valuable. This careful weighing is at the core of deliberation” (p. 3).
- “The deliberation we are talking about takes into consideration people’s subjective experiences and the intangibles they hold dear. Facts are important, but determining what they mean is also important” (p. 4).
- “Deliberation, in other words, has an intrinsic worth; it is satisfying in and of itself and not merely a technique. But at the same time, deliberation has to promote some kind of action; that is the reason for deliberating in the first place” (Kettering, p. 5).

There are aspects of these concepts that meld well with Traditional Ways for Native American people and with the tenets of Gentle Action Theory. For example, the report’s authors state that

[d]eliberating is a natural act. When people make sound personal decisions, they often deliberate with family and friends; for instance, when choosing a job, they weigh different options against all that is important to them. Modern political discourse seldom models deliberation, yet participants in deliberative forums usually need only a reminder of the purpose of deliberation to get into the conversation. When people deliberate, they tell stories; their conversations move back and forth rather than going in a linear fashion toward a conclusion (Kettering, n.d., p. 3).

I appreciate this description because Native Americans come from an oral tradition. Our oral tradition is part of cultural and tribal identity. It speaks to our shared beliefs as tribal nations, as community, as family, and as individuals. As previously noted, we are not linear people; circularity is fundamental in how we see and process beliefs and information. It’s how we speak and how we think, and public deliberation as defined by these authors reflects our communication norms.

Further,

[deliberation] requires considering the various concerns that people bring to a decision, so it promotes inclusiveness, not necessarily for the sake of being inclusive, but because

citizens aren't likely to join in collective efforts if their concerns aren't recognized. Similarly, the options for action that follow from people's concerns have to be dealt with fairly in order for the results of the deliberations to be legitimate. So deliberation fosters fairness (Kettering, n.d., p 5.).

Gentle Action Theory and Traditional Ways are both about problem solving grounded in building community, which requires acting with sensitivity, establishing trust, and seeking harmony. Gentle Action Theory rests on good motives. By basing action on what the community recognizes as a problem and the way the community desires to seek the solution, the process has the potential to be one in which the community is satisfied with the end result. Traditional Ways of knowing and being are grounded in motives that seek what is the best for the community and individual members.

“Deliberation, in other words, has an intrinsic worth; it is satisfying in and of itself and not merely a technique. But at the same time, deliberation has to promote some kind of action; that is the reason for deliberating in the first place” (Kettering, n.d., p. 6). Gentle action refocuses the energies and dynamics of the group to co-create solutions as a new “social organism” (Peat, 2008, p. 95). In describing Gentle Action Theory, Peat offers a metaphor: what if all the wavelets around the edges of a pond could cooperatively coalesce towards a predetermined area? The result would be an action internal to the system, versus an external action such as what happens when a pebble is thrown into the pond, creating a movement of the whole body of water. Similarly, when a system or group performs in a coordinated way, a significant change can occur towards addressing a societal issue.

Deliberative Democracy Forum: Preparation

The first step to holding the Deliberative Democracy Forum was to decide whom to invite. I selected Native students who had taken or were taking one or both of the courses I teach at Portland State University. In addition, I invited two students who were student leaders in the Native American Law Students Association (NALSA) at Lewis and Clark Law School, where I direct the Indian Law Program and am the NALSA advisor. The students received an invitation via email with a request for an RSVP (which is, frankly, a Western construct). I also spoke with students in person before or after class. The e-mail and in person discussions included the following important details:

- Options to get to the site via mass transit
- Parking information
- Accessing funds for bus tickets or parking, as needed
- The provision of snacks and lunch, and accommodations for dietary needs and desires (e.g., vegan, gluten-free, etc.)
- Accessing the space for those with physical limitations and disabilities
- The availability of a play area for children just off of the meeting area and information regarding space for breastfeeding
- Restrooms

- My cell phone number and email

A great deal of thought went into making sure to offer as much information as possible up front. Additionally, providing my personal contact information exhibited my openness and availability to the participants.

The site chosen was the Native American Student and Community Center (NASCC) on the Portland State University campus. The NASCC is considered a “home away from home” for Native American students. It is also a community gathering place where cultural events, workshops, celebrations, and ceremonies are held. The NASCC building design reflects both the civic architecture of the surrounding campus and the organic elements of Native American architecture.



[Photo caption: Native American Student & Community Center, exterior]

The next step was the set-up of the room itself. The room where the Forum was held is called the Nimiipuutimt Gathering Area. Nimiipuutimt is the word for the Nez Perce language. The building design was envisioned by a Navajo architect. The room is circular with high ceilings. The flags of the Nine Tribes of Oregon hang there, and Native artwork is found there and

throughout the Center. Round tables were placed in a circular pattern. Along the outside of the kitchen wall, long tables were set up for food and beverages. The Forum participants were greeted by a student I hired for the day to assist me and whom most of them knew. There was a sign-in table where participants were welcomed. Round tables were set up in a circular pattern close enough together that participants could hear each other and be physically in community. The round tables held the supplies needed for the day, including cardstock to make a nameplate, extra-large Post-it notes, a variety of colored Sharpies, scratch paper, pens, and pencils. These details were all important, as preparing for guests is a sign of respect in Native culture.

There are cultural protocols that vary from tribal nation to tribal nation; however, there are commonalities, too. Smudging is a ceremony held prior to the start of the gathering. Since we were not able to smudge inside the building, we used the designated outside area. Participants were provided with a smudge stick that was made of white sage, sweetgrass, cedar, and an abalone shell. The smoke is fanned using a feather and hands, sent up to Creator and the Ancestors. The purpose is to cleanse oneself of negativity, bring balance, and join together in a good way. Once people were gathered, we stood, and I offered the Opening Prayer. In a larger community gathering the prayer is offered by an Elder; in this circumstance it was done by me, as I was the meeting convener and the eldest person. We then went around the circle and introduced ourselves, including our tribal affiliations. We were then prepared to begin the Forum discussions.



[Photo caption: Native American Student & Community Center, Nimiipuutimt Gathering Area]

Deliberative Democracy Forum: Delivery

One by one, I posed the following questions to the participants:

1. Without relating it to political parties – how do you define the concept of democracy? How is the concept interpreted in your culture?
2. As a student how and what does “having a voice” look like to you? Have you found a way to express your voice at the institutions of higher learning that you have attended?
3. What are some of places/groups that you have found to connect at your institutions and exercise your voice?

4. Thinking of one thing that has been missing for you in expressing your voice or having representation at the institutions you have attended – what is that thing and how should that pathway be provided?

The questions were considered both in writing and verbally. Participants shared personal stories of their experiences, along with those of their family members, friends, and community. There were laughter and tears.

The questions had a different color extra-large Post-it note connected to them. The notes exhibited insightful thoughts the participant wanted to share with the larger group. While we had lunch together, the participants posted their responses on the walls with each question/answer posted as a color group. We then walked around and read the reflections. Participants also used the time to add to their longer written reflection. After lunch, we discussed the ideas put forth in the postings on the wall. Some people shared additional thoughts from their longer written reflections on the questions posed. There was no debate on whether a response was important or not, or scoring of the level of importance; all the responses are equally important.

Deliberative Democracy Forum: Responses

The following responses came directly from participants in the Forum. The responses are primarily in English, but there are some in the Warm Springs dialect of Ichishkin. The responses have been typed according to how they were written on the original forum responses, so there may be some discrepancies from the original based on the interpretation of individuals' handwriting. The responses were transcribed as written, with no changes to punctuation or grammar, to ensure that the authenticity of the students' voices remained intact.

1. Without relating it to political parties – how do you define the concept of democracy? How is the concept interpreted in your culture?

- Democracy--The concept of citizens or people a part of a group having an equal say in all important and sometimes not important decisions. The concept in my culture is often not as practiced. People with higher power or even men make most of the decisions.
- Democracy means the people, chaos with a title. The people drive priorities and it reaches a broader range of classes of people. In my culture, it is interpreted as increased resources for the lower class people. Lower class meaning oppressed and low-income.
- Democracy is a system for the people by the people. Not one person is the all say so. It's about working together to find resolutions & make plans. It's a joint effort on the productivity & livelihood of a people. People's voices are supposed to be heard & not silenced. Everyone has input in decision making.
- Growing up I never fully understood what democracy was, in fact I only knew "good" and "bad." Growing up with a white woman raising me influenced this. She told me what

was “good” and what wasn’t, leaving no room for critical thinking. As I’ve learned over time nothing is that simple. Governmental groups can claim one title, make promises, and act against what they’ve promised. As a woman of color I see democracy as a title and at times nothing more. It doesn’t matter what title you claim or how much you talk if your actions do not support your ideologies.

- (Politics as the arbitration of value differences) Democracy: ideally a representative collection of systems of expression that aim to improve the lives of the inhabitants of that system. In the American culture this “demo” comes with the ideals that something must be used/exploited/put down/repressed for the benefit of others in the system. Capitalism has commodified the expression people have & created a veil of individualism that does not seek to benefit the whole in its advancement.
- Democracy
 - Everyone can have a “say” (whether they do or not is up to them)
 - Communal care
 - Relationship building
 - Self determination
 - Established values are important
 - Idealistic concept that is/has been unattainable
- Democracy: “Equality,” An elected group chosen to represent the general population.
 - Nami Tananmaki: No “official” authoritative figures, everyone had a say. Some lead ceremonies, some lead other type of activities. Miimi anamun nami nch’ich’ima panishaishxinxa nch’i wanapain, chau pawacha maik nch’i miyuuxma, kush mun payanaui ichn Tichamyau ku patq’ixna Tl’aawx Ticham pmai. Kush chau pashukwaxa nami tananma kuuksim miyuuxna. Kush laikai nawa miyuuxma chikuuk.
- Democracy-- Input of all individuals in a society + the option to withhold one’s input; input for how the society should be ran
 - Diné
 - Unknown to me how the chief selection process was held
 - Womxn had equal voices + higher sense of “power” in pre-colonial traditional societies; matriarchal
 - Ex: Treaty of Bosque Redondo: womxn actually organized the treaty
 - Equitable vision for their communities; all people had voices -- children included listened + learned
- Democracy: Democracy is when everyone comes together, talks an issue or issues out, comes to a consensus and figures out how to solve the issue(s). I’m not 100% sure how my traditional tribal government worked, but currently, it is somewhat corrupt and does not get the full consensus of the peoples because it can hide information from shareholders.

- When I think about democracy I think about the phrase “power to the people.” It is a system or ideology that prioritizes what the people want. From my cultural experience, we pride ourselves on being a democracy because we give everyone a say but in reality only certain voices get heard.
- D -- Not enough representation
 - Confusion
 - “Voting”
 - In this country it doesn’t accommodate/work for every community
 - Built on lies
 - Teach with actions not always with words (use other forms of communicating)

2 & 3. As a student how and what does “having a voice” look like to you? Have you found a way to express your voice at the institutions of higher learning that you have attended? What are some of places/groups that you have found to connect at your institutions and exercise your voice?

- As a student in higher education, I think that having a voice would look like advocating for myself.
- Having a voice looks like getting invited to the table by stakeholders who will take into consideration your stance and priorities into the bigger picture, in order to accommodate whatever your ask is. As a student, I talk with peers about different oppressions but as far as an institution there seems to be no ability.
- Having a voice also means the ability to reach your goals and discuss changes that need to be made.
- I have sought places where I have a voice. In higher ed that has been in student gov, now in my role as VP. In my roles I have wanted & been motivated to be the (a) voice of truth of colonization to those unaware/aware of it & working in the systems. Being a voice, with learning content growth, to those with less ability & accessibility to expressing their voice or being acknowledged has been the way I have found my voice. Learning, leading, sharing, giving space & then taking space with grace is my voice.
- Having a voice means engaging in active participation in a setting where you can take on equally the roles of talking + listening, and you are not forced into one or the other role. Usually in classrooms I do not feel comfortable sharing because there is not space for folks to actually listen to what I have to say. I believe that also listening is incredibly important but it is often forsaken for the “mandatory participation” when participation = talking.
- Having a voice in higher ed means that we can influence what is happening in our educational systems. We get to say that we need a certain resource & the institution listens & follows through. This does not always happen. Teachers & staff should be encouraging students to speak up for their needs. Having a voice does not mean telling

staff your needs, but there's no follow through. I think PCC is trying to get more input from students by having representatives of the needs. I have been lucky to have some teachers that want to uplift Indigenous voices. All students should be able be comfortable to share what they need, and what they want to do. There isn't a fear of being torn down or silenced, or invalidated.

- If I'm being honest I'm still finding a way to have my own voice. I'm still searching for what that means in relation to my intersectionality. Ideal situations would include me being able to speak clearly, not loudly, to anyone who is directly in charge. I need the ability to speak directly to the person who has the power to change or affect aspects of my life. Currently I try to participate in events that may help my voice be heard. Do I feel like I've accomplished anything I want to at PSU? Not even close.
- (Student voice? Did you have a way to express?) In Oregon, yes. It seems perhaps a sign of the times that student leadership and "listening" sessions have become a part of the institution -- at least on the outside. Through being in student leadership I was able to bring attention to Native student issues in particular. And, to create communities to work through issues amongst ourselves. Resolution is another story. + Restorative Justice.
- Anamun ash wa putłanpa, chau ash wacha maik nch'i snwit awałn chau na awa chna. Tł'aawx taamanwit iwa miyuuxkni. Au nash wa c'miyaaspa awała iwanisha UO shiaputumptki, paish chau ash wa inmi snwit tł'aawx skuuli łamaman, kush inmi sapsikwatpamapa, tł'aawx inmi sapsikwała pashapnishamsh taaminwa namiai na tz'ixta nami 'shtna. Achaku paish pashukwaxa mun na yamawi awała taxana maik nchc'i skuuliłamaman, miimi na shuwaxa tun 'scent na winanikta!
- Voice: Not Native enough, not colonized enough; Not Navajo enough, not Karuk enough
 - Finding strength in my voice, learning how to find it in environments where your voice is muffled
 - Being confident in your/my words in all contexts
 - Education: "Unsafe" classrooms that don't permit you to speak without people silencing you with demands for explanation or w/e
 - Lateral violence: Urban vs Rez - both?! > Sense of belonging > Nowhere > No voice?
 - Kim Smith debacle
- Having a voice is being listened to and taken seriously- instead of "taken in consideration." Being able to have the ability to be critical and share improvements/changes/visions. Having a voice doesn't mean the other party has to agree, but the need for listening and processing the information is vital. Reciprocal conversations is necessary too.

- Native American Law Student Association and professors in general that discuss what Native American people face and how to better my long-term ideas with my experience and education through Natural Resources.
- The ability to bring all of who I am and be listened to as well as have the ability to listen to others and learn from them. Be able to challenge what is considered.
 - Find communities that support me as a student --(1st gen students)
- Having a voice a lot of the times requires to know that someone is listening because it validates what you have to say.
 - Looking for communities where someone will listen and welcome what you have to say.

4. Thinking of one thing that has been missing for you in expressing your voice or having representation at the institutions you have attended – what is that thing and how should that pathway be provided?

- I know there are a lot of ways to help out and volunteer both here and the community but I feel like sometimes everyone but a small few are kept out of the loop with this kind of community building. I feel that we are missing unity, and that we are drifting farther apart because of tiny things/arguments that are not being addressed or acknowledged, and then we are all supposed to move on when the people who are bringing hurt are not held accountable for these actions so we can all heal as a community and continue to grow, not fester in all of our bodies and make us bitter and hardened.
- I am a large advocate of having increased accommodations for Native American people in the education system of all levels. In other aspects of life for Native people, there are extra resources and accommodations because of the history of trauma and the inability to succeed in today's society due to particular and specific circumstances of history. In order to mirror aspects that accommodate Native American people, education also needs to create a different and better structure to understand that Native students have an increased difficulty in school due to history, trauma, and inability to be equipped to be successful because of socioeconomic situations growing up. An example is the "rough" social structure that Native Americans face going into college and are deterred and view the system as daunting, but instead should be welcomed in a different way and have far more support and different punishments that actually help the student on a case by case scenario.
- The need for outreach and community:
 - Not all about issues/meetings -- how can we be connected with one another?
 - Having people show up when needed.
 - Having taken the intro class requirement be taken seriously.

- The ability to just sit and learn, without having to teach my classmates around me because of my “expertise.” I feel like I’m constantly teaching when I am paying to learn here. I also feel unheard/not taken seriously outside of the INST department. My concerns are not seen as valid and are promptly dismissed. No punitive action has ever been taken in response to a hostile learning environment (that I’ve experienced). I would say more representation could be posed as a solution, but would that be enough?
- Experience in HighEd:
 - Something missing to share voice/representation
 - Suggest pathway
 - Missing:
 - Format to share issues/feedback that is approachable such as webform that is open to telling the story rather than prompts that limit response
 - Conflict resolution amongst “formal” community such as a SALP club
 - Suggest:
 - Trainings in creating working agreements, skillful communication
- Basically creating purpose/space for people to express unjudged with real world implications is what I would like to see
 - The assumption that someone else will do the work, make the change I seek to enact (basically the power vested in singular leaders whom take on immense responsibility create a feeling of apathy or disengagement because the responsibility has been taken on by someone else) Having more opportunities for engagement/empowerment/input using modern techniques such as social platforms or collaborative organizing could improve by in/representation/engagement by those who are able to find value in participation because of its impact, accessibility, and feelings while doing so
- From being in higher education; one of the things that made me feel that I could not voice my thoughts or opinions in a classroom setting was a sense of community or belonging. In my RW class I was the only Native, when we were reading “There, There” people would ask me what I thought, assuming that I would be able to speak on behalf of all Native Americans when in reality most of our experiences are different.
- **CLASSES!!!** The Black Studies department is dying. The class I have to take for my major are offered once a year if not less. Certain classes that I would love to take are not offered anymore since there aren’t enough professors and money. This takes away my voice, lets me know how little my school cares about me and how much they do care about my money. Not only that but also they aren’t putting any effort into caring for my professors who are the ones using the degree I’m currently getting. Overall the school takes away my voice and agency when they disregard my wants and needs as a student, take as much of my money as possible, provide horrible funding in return, and undervalue the professors who are doing work that I want to do.

- I think my biggest thing is language. I'm having a hard time trying to learn one of my Native languages. I don't have connections to my tribes and so I don't even know who is teaching them. Trying to do that language in the program that I'm in is not possible right now. There's no coaches who are Native that know connections. I'm having to go to community members for help on this. Being urban, learning the language helps me figure out who I am through my ancestors. Most people in higher ed isn't going to think about learning a language in this way.
- Au chikuuk, mun na naq'ixana nami sapsikwatpamaki, taaminwa miyuuxłama pashapnishaiksh skuliłamaman Timat timashpa pamiinłnami pxmi skuulitpamaki. Paish iq'inupa atawitki. Kush pamun chau patq'ixa yiktash skuliłamaman. Au nash wa UOpa, kush papasamxnaxa ttush tananmaman shin payanawina laxs anwichtpa, shin panawashamsn miimi pawacha xlakt skuliłama chau aniixixana nami skulitpama kutkutawnski, achaku chau shin na mshtk'ukn pni snwit timashpa. Taiku patq'ixa nami timaxa nami pxwi timashpa, kush chau payikxa awaln q'inuxa nami snwit.

Deliberative Democracy Forum: Considerations of the Day

The participants lent themselves to the process and it was, as we like to say, a “good day” together. The Forum provided a place for participants to exercise their voices and build community. The goal of the Forum wasn't to determine set solutions and/or goals. Rather, it was to provide a place and methods for deliberation. The participants shared both their expectations of the institution and of themselves.

In our closing time together, we discussed some opportunities available to them to express their needs, exercise their voices, and build social capital. These include:

- Taking courses in the Indigenous Nations Studies Program (INST).
- Forming relationships with the professors in the INST.
- The Native American Student and Community Center (NASCC) team meets weekly and works together to plan programs centering Native American, Alaska Native, Pacific Islander, and other Indigenous community voices. Throughout the academic year, this team meets with multiple people from other PSU departments and with external community organizations to build robust programs that are student-centered and support student's retention.
- The American Indian Science & Engineering Society (AISES) increases the representation of American Indians, Alaskan Natives, and Pacific Islanders in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) fields. Using a “full circle of support” model, AISES programs serve the organization's members as pre-college and college students, professionals, mentors, and leaders.
- United Indigenous Students in Higher Education (UISHE) assists American Indian, Alaskan Native, and Indigenous Peoples in maintaining cultural values while pursuing their educational goals.

- Healing Feathers promote wellness to Native American/Alaska Native students of Portland State University and community members.
- Cultural Events are offered by NASCC and the larger Portland area Native communities.
- Native Caucus is a group of Native professors, staff, and current and former students who meet quarterly to discuss the needs and priorities for Native students in terms of programming and provide a pathway of communication to institutional leaders and decision makers.
- Access to community in the greater Portland area, which has a large Native American population. Ceremonies, cultural events, placements for internships and volunteering offer access to Elders and Leaders and are immeasurable opportunities for students to be in community and to build community.

Conclusion

The juxtaposition of Traditional Ways, Gentle Action Theory, and Deliberative Democracy can be utilized to create meaningful and culturally respectful places for student voices. While the focus of the Forum was not to determine a goal, solutions, or a set timeline, the process can be used to design steps to move forward. As a program director and adjunct professor working with Indigenous students, I will continue to create opportunities for them to use their voices and to build community and social capital, while encouraging them in collectively designing the solutions they find most fits their way of being in the world.

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