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Resituating the Expert: What Educational Consulting Work with Tribal Communities has Taught me About Being an Educator

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Educational consulting is a funny thing. As a consultant, you're charged with the responsibility to be an expert within an organization you know little about, in any specific way. You do your diligence to familiarize yourself with an organization's history and structures, but these things matter so much less than the deeper, human aspects of the organization. The people who make up the organization—who they are, the stories they carry, the ways they see the world—are harder to discover. Deeply engaged in the stories of strength and struggle and personal experiences of indigenous communities captured in Orange's *There There* helped me reflect on my challenges in my work as a so-called *expert* doing educational consulting with several Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) over the past two-and-a-half-years.

There There powerfully provides an example of how to flip one's worldview to see how society looks through the experiences of a people who have been colonized, marginalized, and systematically oppressed for generations. The narratives of characters in this novel are powerful: Orvil, struggling to grasp and reconnect with his own identity and community; Dene working to find enough external validation to capture stories of his people for the sake of their experiences; and Jacquie, working to overcome generations of trauma and be who she strives to be for her family and broader Native community. All of these characters are working to navigate how to be in a world that continuously silences them and who they are.

In this, I see many parallels to how TCUs navigate a complex context of validation seeking and resource dependence. Within their tribal communities on the reservation, TCUs work diligently to demonstrate the value they have for their communities in nation building, strengthening their sovereignty, and improving quality of life. For the external governing and policy bodies they rely on for funding and accreditation, however, TCUs are continuously striving to meet external standards that are often misaligned with the educational missions they value.

Consulting in this context is a challenge. As a consultant, you have timelines and outcomes to produce. Packed agendas rarely leave time to *talk story* and *visit*, to just sit and listen without a specific intention or purpose. You rarely have time in a short visit to participate in a community event to see how life is experienced in the

day-to-day. As an outsider who visits a handful of times a year, it's difficult to make genuine connections with elders and youth who shape the understanding of where they have been as a people and where they hope to go and how the college can realize those dreams and visions. The norms, values, and requirements of higher education accreditation systems intensify the challenges of consulting. Working with TCU leaders, practitioners, faculty, and students has taught me so much about the ways our dominant frameworks that guide higher education policy and practice ultimately fail our students.

For instance, at TCUs, there are programs sustained by graduating one student a year, an outcome that in other contexts would justify program closure. But that one graduate a year means one more EMT on the reservation or one more Native teacher who can infuse culture in a classroom or one more auto mechanic that can keep cars running through long winters. The value of these programs go beyond these specific and immediately measurable outcomes, but truly highlight the public good that higher education serves within the community and beyond that can be hard to capture.

I've also learned the true value of language and culture. Nationally, language programs, ethnic studies, and other cultural educational programs are devalued and consistently challenged. For much of my life, speaking Spanish was a taken-for-granted skill that I acquired passively by living in predominantly Latinx communities and that I appreciated as a way to communicate with my grandparents without filtering our own thoughts and emotions. However, when you can count and name the number of living people who speak the language of your ancestors, the transmission of culture and language takes on a much deeper and broader meaning. In many of these communities, cultural preservation is a form of resistance, a reclaiming of language and customs that the US government continually has sought to murder, and a means for saving the memory of generations of people who are fighting to remind the world that despite it all, they are still here.

As an "expert" who is being compensated, the pressure to perform in a certain way may make it hard to also humble oneself to all you don't know, all you have to learn, all that is necessary to support this organization. I quickly learned that I am not there to dictate. I'm not there to force the outside world's perspective, but rather I'm there to be a thought partner, a confidant, a playmate who can help co-imagine a world that could be through the lens of the context of what is. This requires a deep sense of strengths-based views of others, a capacity to challenge my own sensemaking and ways of thinking to embrace others' in order to expand beyond

what I thought possible. Working with TCUs has enhanced my world view as an educator, of how to better work as an advocate and ally within the continual struggle of Native peoples and how structural oppression impacts their nations.

Desiree D. Zerquera, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor in the School of Education within the Department of Leadership Studies. As an engaged scholar, her work centers around the structuring of inequity in higher education with a focus on data use, mission management, and policy implementation. She has collaborated with organizations across the country to support strengthening of equity in colleges and universities.