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Community-Based Commentary

Indigenous Arts and Tribal Colleges and Universities: Expressions of Collective Native Identity

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Abstract

This commentary discusses the American Indian College Fund and Tribal College and Universities’ support of Indigenous arts as critical to cultural identity and place-based experiences for Native people. Indigenous arts are deeply rooted in connections to shared Indigenous values of kinship, relationship to all living and non-living things, language, and the land. In the United States, hundreds of Tribes have art forms that emerge from place, from interpretation of Tribal knowledge, and which meet the everyday, human needs of beauty, usefulness, and connectedness. Our right as humans to preserve and revitalize traditional and contemporary Native arts supporting our cultural identities and distinctiveness has existed since time immemorial. These rights honor the natural laws that existed prior to the creation of political or nation-state laws.

Keywords: Indigenous arts; Native arts; Indigenous identity; Tribal Colleges and Universities; American Indian College Fund

Introduction: Tribal colleges and universities, Indigenous arts, and the right to identity

Statements about values, imagery, and ceremonies are symbolic of the spirituality that is the foundation of TCUs’ (tribal colleges and universities) philosophical beliefs. TCUs usually have some version of their tribal value systems reflected in their missions, logos, statements of purpose, and other public documents. Buildings, landscapes, and art reflect living and non-living relations. (Crazy Bull & Lindquist, 2018, our emphasis)
Embedded in the traditional knowledge of Indigenous peoples and reflected in the arts taught throughout Tribal communities\(^1\) is the deeply held belief that our material (and spiritual) world is rooted in relationships. Indigenous people recognize that artistic expression is inseparable from cultural values and that practices that emerge from values are rooted in identity. Identity is a human right. Indigenous people everywhere describe themselves as people with distinctive characteristics. Their distinctions emerge from their origin and teaching stories, the way they organize their social structure including their governing structures and their rules of interaction (natural and human-made laws), their relationship to their homelands, their languages and their spiritual practices. All these characteristics describe identity and without that identity, these distinct groups would not exist as people. For Indigenous people, identity is inherent in our languages, place, and kinship, and therefore, in artistic expressions.

Tribal colleges and universities (TCUs) are post-secondary institutions founded by Tribal Nations in the United States (U.S) to promote tribal self-determination and identity. Thirty-five TCUs currently serve Tribal and rural U.S. citizens, primarily in the northern plains, woodlands, and southwest. The missions of these institutions are focused on revitalization of Tribal lifeways and on Tribal prosperity. In the context of Tribal individual and collective self-determination, art is one form of collective rights – Indigenous arts are not only cultural rights, they are social and economic rights. As a cultural right, Indigenous arts express values and identity; as a social right, arts express relationships and universal knowledge; as an economic right, Indigenous arts are a form of expression that can be tied to the economic support for individuals and their families. At TCUs, Indigenous arts are both inherent in the symbols and images of the institutions and are taught throughout their communities in diverse, intergenerational ways.

\(^1\)The authors capitalize “Tribes” in deference to the distinct political, social, and cultural status of Tribal nations in the United States.
This community-based commentary examines how TCUs preserve and educate about and with arts through the experiences of two Indigenous artists and educators and an educational leader within the tribal college movement. Bridget Skenadore, Diné, is the program officer for Native Arts and Culture at the American Indian College Fund (College Fund); Colleen (referred to as “Co” from here forward) Carew, Mescalero Apache-descendent is a faculty member at Salish Kootenai College (SKC); and Cheryl Crazy Bull, Sicangu Lakota, is the President of the American Indian College Fund².

(Re)learning Native arts

Our commitment to restoring Native arts is grounded in our understanding that Native people do not separate art from their values, teachings, and practices. Art is part of our identity, culture and history. We learn about our people and our origins through the teachings embedded in artistic expression and through the skills needed to create the art. Art also reflects the different dimensions of our ways of knowing, that are inherent in Native philosophy. Art reflects a connection to place and in tribal societies connects individuals and families to social and economic structures.

Creating art in Native communities also has deep spiritual meaning and is usually done in a ceremonial space. Gatherers of material resources from nature will pray and offer tobacco when picking plants or stripping bark from trees. Hunters will offer prayers when an animal sacrifices itself for food and material use. Artists will often burn sage, cedar or sweetgrass to smudge their materials before and during creation. Art is also part of our celebrations, our regalia and adornment, and our social and cultural...

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² The American Indian College Fund is non-profit organization whose mission focuses on Native students’ college access and success through scholarships and support services. The College Fund supports the 35 full member tribal colleges and universities of the American Indian Higher Education Consortium through programming and capacity building grants and activities. Its mission is to invest in Native students and tribal college education to transform lives and communities. Transformation includes revitalization of culture and language and of traditional knowledge and practices. Transformation also includes restoration of tribal ways of living, relationality, and wellness.
occasions. Gatherings of Native people for song and dance are filled with incredible expressions of art through beadwork, quillwork, and the creative use of fabric. Honoring ceremonies among the various tribes include gift-giving of items often made by family and friends such as shawls, quilts, and carved and woven items like masks and baskets.

We recognize that art in western society is often viewed as outside of the personal experiences or knowledge of the observer. We take field trips to art museums without a deep understanding of what art represents to the society in which it was created. Many people collect art in its various forms without knowledge of the history and meaning of that art. Western art is often a reporting of what is seen. We also acknowledge that this interpretation does not apply to all situations and are sharing it here to contrast western and Native views of art.

The Anishinaabe are a woodlands people whose artistic expression emerges from the natural resources and images of the places they live—floral patterns on regalia and birchbark baskets are examples. A non-Native person might see an Anishinaabe flower design and think of it as a pretty design, while an Anishinaabe person will see that there is reasoning behind the placement of lines, selection of color, and the number of flowers used. The creation of floral patterns is intended to interpret art in the natural world, affirm geometric and mathematical understanding of how the natural world is translated into art, and can serve as a signal to other Anishinaabe peoples regarding identity and status in those societies.

TCUs teach traditional and contemporary arts through certificate and degree programs and through community outreach. The two approaches discussed in this essay, restoration and preservation of lost or endangered art forms and connecting cultural arts to healing and wellness exemplify how Tribes ensure their arts remain known and vital. Native art, whether traditional or contemporary, is rooted in hundreds, if not thousands of years of experience and history, and is inherently telling

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3 Anishinaabe, also known as Ojibwe or Ojibway, mostly reside in the upper Midwest of the United States (Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, eastern North Dakota) and in regions throughout parts of Canada.
stories of tribal origins, family knowledge, spiritual practices and beliefs, and identity. For Native societies, art is part of our well-being and strengthens our cultural identities. Because art can also be a restorative practice, there are many efforts across Indian country to teach Native arts and pass on the teachings that are embedded in the arts.

*Restoring and preserving Native Arts towards Tribal self-determination*

As we have noted, TCUs have created profound and innovative programming that positively impacts and preserve Tribal knowledge and identity, and the College Fund supports this work. We have two programs to restore and preserve traditional Native arts. First, the Restoration and Preservation of Traditional Native Arts and Knowledge Program was established in 2013 to serve TCUs located in the upper-Midwestern states of Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota and Wisconsin. The purpose of the program is to expand knowledge and skills in the endangered art forms placing the TCUs in the Upper Midwest at the forefront of this effort and supporting opportunities to increase the intergenerational transfer of knowledge of art and culture at participating TCUs and among the tribal communities and artists they serve.

Second, since 1993 the College Fund has also administered a National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) fund. This fund supports cultural preservation and revitalization efforts at 24 of the 35 TCUs. TCUs use the funding for their college’s cultural preservation efforts. Past projects include community events, museum archival documentation, and establishment of cultural centers on campus.

From a human rights perspective, which is one of the major considerations of this special issue, there are characteristics of the cultural arts programs administered by the College Fund that are vital to the preservation and restoration of Tribal identity. Art forms among Tribes are both functional and creative. They make use of locally available resources

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4 See [https://collegefund.org/program-initiatives/programs.html#native-section](https://collegefund.org/program-initiatives/programs.html#native-section) to learn more about College Fund programs.
including resources acquired through trade, and the skills needed for arts are taught through intergenerational, experiential approaches. At the same time, the missions of TCUs arise out of a commitment to Tribal self-determination, and this must be at the forefront of our understanding of TCU efforts in terms of cultural preservation. We observe that preservation of identity, such as through the arts, is one manifestation of Tribal self-determination. Pedagogy at TCUs is thus ingrained with the restoration of tribal ways of teaching and learning. Furthermore, the most common forms of teaching and learning in Tribal societies allow learners to work directly with established practitioners and to give them the opportunity to practice the skills that are being taught. For the arts discussed in this essay, this pedagogy is apt, and intergenerational teaching and learning is the norm. These processes are pivotal to the passing of knowledge and skills from one generation to the next generation, while making connections to the teachings of our ancestors and ensuring that generations to come will also be able to make those connections.

Through intergenerational learning, TCUs are rebuilding artistic knowledge that was once lost in Tribal communities or to which there was limited access. Restoring Native Art Forms also helps preserve languages and cultural practices. Through Native Arts programming participants are being reintroduced to the history and culture of their people. Many Indigenous people across the country lost access to cultural knowledge due to the colonial policies of the U.S. government such as the establishment of reservations and the boarding school era. TCUs provide remedies to counter that loss by offering community education and academic programs that provide a place for tribal people to be introduced to or relearn cultural knowledge.

For example, Dakota people who reside in the borderlands between the woodlands of Minnesota and the eastern Dakotas and the Great Plains, were accustomed to using woven and parfleche (hide) containers and the

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5The Dakota along with the Lakota and Nakota are part of a linguistic group commonly called the Sioux and reside mostly in Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, eastern Montana, and Canada.
metal pots introduced when European settlers arrived. But one of the Tribal colleges, Sisseton Wahpeton College (SWC) located on the Lake Traverse Reservation in northeast South Dakota, discovered through community outreach and research of lost arts and traditional knowledge that their community also had a traditional practice of pottery making. SWC staff discovered that pottery had been a functional and artistic resource to their ancestors. Erin Griffin Director of Dakota Studies, explains, “Pottery was one of the first art forms to become endangered due to the fur trade. The fur trade impacted Dakota people before contact even occurred because surrounding tribes were engaged in trade and one of the earliest trade goods was metal pots. Knowing the extensive work it takes to create a pot out of clay and because of their fragile nature, it makes sense that pottery would be one of the first things to be replaced through trade” (personal communication, July 31, 2019).

**Testimonies of tradition and innovation**

In the fall of 2014, SWC began a Traditional Native Arts workshop series focused on incorporating Traditional Native Art forms back into their community. The first workshop taught participants about Dakota pottery and how their ancestors constructed pottery. Dakota pottery was chosen first because of seasonal harvesting and the need for seasonal weather to create the pots. Potters must go outside to harvest the materials and warm afternoon days help create the right conditions for gathering materials. Material used when creating Dakota pottery includes cattails whose buds must be harvested in the fall. This workshop emphasized the sense of place for participants strengthening their specific cultural identities as Dakota people.

In another example of the importance of place and art connected to identity, our co-author, Colleen “Co” Carew, through support for her dissertation completion from the College Fund’s faculty development program, conducted her dissertation research to illuminate perspectives and experiences of a sense of place through an Indigenous art making and storytelling experience. Co was inspired to conduct art-based research
because of the rich cultural stories and thoughtful interpretations that emerged from *Expression through the Arts*, an undergraduate course she taught for five years at Salish Kootenai College. In 2018, Co conducted Indigenous arts-based research at Salish Kootenai College with 11 students and alumni representing five federally recognized tribes. She gave instruction to the participants to construct a 3D moccasin using paper and asked them to embed colors, shapes, symbols, and designs that described their understanding of a sense of place. The Native American moccasin was used as the symbolic cultural catalyst to reflect on one’s Indigenous knowledge rooted within this symbol. Culturally based ancestral, family, and personal stories emerged from the colors, shapes, symbols and designs that were drawn, painted, or collaged onto the paper moccasin. The Indigenous ways of knowing that emerged from the study affirmed the participants’ rights to the following values and characteristics of Indigenous life: 1) unwavering support from one’s family and community; 2) interconnection of culture and land; 3) intergenerational knowledge transfer; 4) deepened cultural knowledge, balance; and 5) understanding of a felt sense of place.

Participants constructed multi-media images and replicas of moccasins and made connections between the images they used and their own ancestry, tribal origins, oral stories, cultural identity, family, community, and landscape (see Image 1). Also, images were incorporated that represented homes such as tipis, kinships such as pictures of family members, and natural connections such as trees, eagles, and feathers. Several participants created abstract images that represented emotions, relationships, and inspiration. One participant created an origami flower that symbolized her family coming alive and blossoming when they are together. Another provided a description of her moccasin rooted in the colors and symbolism of the land, which represented her ancestry and cultural identity.
The research findings, artwork, stories, and reflections were framed through Co’s lens as a Native researcher and were approached from a holistic, culturally based understanding of how a sense of place is developed with participants. During a final focus group, participants shared their overall impressions of the experience and discussed how art was healing, making statements such as, “Art heals my soul” and “I can finally rest when I’m here just doing art” (Carew, 2018). The overall sense of peace experienced by the participants in the study and shared in their own words
exemplifies the values and characteristics of Indigenous life that Co examined.

As an educator, Co also offers abstract self-portraits in a class titled “Expression Through the Arts,” at Salish Kootenai College. She shares,

*I have lived and worked on the Salish and Kootenai reservation for over 35 years. During this time, I worked as a school-based social worker, mental health provider and as a department chair, developing an accredited social work program at the Salish Kootenai College. I have known many of my now adult students as children or adolescents, therefore I also have knowledge of their trauma stories. I noticed that images or words relating to the difficult times that they have had are side by side images of strength and hope.*

Self-portraits help the artists/creators connect images to emotions and feelings about themselves, their relationships and their experiences. Co uses the self-portrait experience as another strategy to engage student reflection and creativity. The self-portrait images are often whimsical in nature. Symbols or shapes relating to one’s Native American culture appear frequently. Also, sharp lines, jagged edged marks or tear drops representing difficult times can be seen on the portraits themselves. Student comments reflect the healing nature of both the experience of art-making and the art product: “I have had a rough road but I’m now living a clean and sober life. The artwork that I created reminds me of who I am now.” Another student stated that she was going to take her art piece to a treatment facility she was entering that week. She said that she wanted to put it over her bed and wake up every morning to the reminder of her “true sense of place.”

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Note that Co’s study also used a Native American advisory group to affirm the right of the community to participate in development and analysis of the research associated with her dissertation. The advisory group reviewed the artwork and outcomes and created artwork to understand the entire process. A few of the comments made by the advisory group are as follows: “Artwork and stories are a language of the heart” and, “this project brought the participants back to themselves.” The comments overall were poignant and reflective of the healing aspect of the research project.
Our co-author Bridget also shares how TCUs develop and implement programs that primarily use oral teaching to share intergenerational knowledge. This is reflected in the arts research and education that we do and support, which incorporates storytelling, music, poetry, and language preservation to enhance restoration and engage the arts in meaningful ways. Moreover, we note that the knowledge that is being taught is not written in textbooks or commonly documented by community members; rather, oral stories and personal narratives artistically depicted not only heal, but they are also helping Indigenous people teach and learn about the history of multiple Native art forms while developing the skills to produce this art.

We also assert that Native arts are integral to place, particularly through the practice of linking the gathering of material resources and the production of art to seasons and to ceremonial and social events. There are multiple examples throughout the TCUs, and one prominent example can be found at Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College in northern Minnesota. Restorative teachings are based on the Ojibwe uses of trees and tree bark during the summer season when the trees are at their strongest and offer the most plentiful materials. This TCU hosted three workshops that take into consideration place and the seasons associated with place—teaching and creating lodge structure, black ash basketry, and woven cedar mats all depend on having enough time, heat, and daylight hours to work outside to create pieces.

*Traditional knowledge considerations in the arts*

While we are most interested in the recovery and preservation of Native arts across TCUs and Indian Country that involve all Indigenous people in these places, we provide a word on a different considerations regarding traditional knowledge and arts practices, which include gender; ultimately, this topic requires more in depth discussion and a wide variety of local perspectives in order to do it better justice.

Traditional Indigenous knowledge recognizes that arts require specific considerations according to different variables. For example, some
arts are gender specific, and some TCUs design their workshops for those constituents. The College Fund has a place-based women’s leadership program, Indigenous Visionaries, that supports selected TCU students and their mentors to develop strategies together that engage traditional knowledge and activism with early childhood education, traditional arts, and/or environmental sustainability. One of the Indigenous Visionaries Native Arts Fellows uses her art to help people battle trauma. Though her ribbon skirt teaching she is helping women gain their confidence and building their self-esteem by allowing them to make their own ribbon skirts. Ribbon skirts (Image 2) were introduced after French traders brought the ribbons to Midwestern tribes, which eventually spread to other regions and tribes. Ribbon skirts play an important role to those women who wear them. A master artist said that the ribbon skirts are worn as a form of medicine and to have positive and lovely thoughts and prayers when creating them because those thoughts and feelings are transformed into the dress. So, when the person is wearing them the bottom of their skirts will touch Mother Earth, and Mother Earth will feel their prayers. Today ribbons skirts have become widely popular with the new generations of Native women. Ribbon skirts are being worn as everyday clothing, and also during swearings in of public office and on the frontlines of protests.

Additionally, blending women’s roles with protest, Indigenous people also use their art as part of their activism and have created powerful images that magnify current events. Art can influence social change and support healing. In 2017, when the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe\(^7\) and thousands of allies and supporters gathered along the Missouri River in southern North Dakota, these people, known as water protectors, used art for expression and protest. Sitting Bull College, located on these lands, hosted various ribbon skirt making workshops so female water protectors

\(^7\) For more information on Standing Rock see the official tribal website: https://www.standingrock.org. For more information on the protests, see: https://standwithstandingrock.net and https://www.npr.org/2018/11/29/671701019/2-years-after-standing-rock-protests-north-dakota-oil-business-is-booming
had their contemporary clothing with traditional meaning for their work. The water protectors were wearing their skirts to honor the earth as they fought for her protection.

Image 2: College Fund Student Ambassador dressed in a ribbon skirt with applique
Image 3: Participant in Sitting Bull College ribbon skirt workshop
Age and thus age-related ability of young children also influences when Native peoples can be taught certain skills, and family plays a significant role in how arts education occurs. Commonplace in Native communities is the identification of families as having artistic knowledge and skills that are shared within the family, on behalf of the entire community. Community includes all ages and families that come together to learn. In her work, Bridget observes that family members learn from each other, affirming the kinship value of Native communities. She shares,

*It is especially heartwarming to see younger participants have the passion to learn about a Native art form because they are the next generation of knowledge holders. One of my favorite examples was when I visited the College of Menominee Nation in Keshena, Wisconsin, as they hosted a Menominee snowshoe workshop. I witnessed various families participate in this workshop, but what stood out to me was a grandpa and his young grandson learning together. They were helping each other prepare the materials, bending and shaping and stringing the snowshoes in a way that brought joy to my heart. It was powerful to see intergenerational learning and teaching being passed from one generation to the next.*

Another powerful example of how Indigenous art addresses social issues impacting all Native communities is Cannupa Hanska Luger’s sculptural installation titled *Every One*. Luger, a graduate of the Institute of American Indian Arts, a TCU located in Santa Fe, New Mexico, created a sculptural piece to highlight the growing number of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, queer and trans community members (MMIWGQT) across North America (and indeed, worldwide). This

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8 For more information, please see the artist’s website: http://www.cannupahanska.com/mmiwqtbeadproject.
9 For more information, please see the work of scholars like Sarah Deer: http://www.niwrc.org/speaker/sarah-deer and information on the MMIWG movement,
installation had a crowd-sourced component as Indigenous communities across the U.S. and Canada, at Cannupa's invitation, created and sent two-inch clay beads to him. Lugar then prepared the bead to form a monumental sculptural installation of a Native woman's face (See Image 3). Over 4,000 beads were created, and the installation has been shown throughout the U.S.

Image 4: “Every One”

Conclusion

Our co-author, Bridget, says,

Native people intertwine art into their everyday life, we do not separate it. As an artist myself when I am learning about Native Art forms, I am honoring the people I am learning from because their teachings are helping me grow as a Native woman. I am taking the teachings behind the art forms and applying them to my everyday life.

Native people are place-based people. We are our land, and we are the product of our environment. As we have shared, through work with TCUs, we have learned from participants that Native Arts workshops and academic courses are bringing positive change to their communities, including critical opportunities for self-healing. Instead of turning to activities that might not be socially or individually positive, they are participating in workshops that allow them to interact with other people in their community; they are learning about their culture; they are working with their hands; and they are leaving with change.

We uphold that Indigenous art heals, restores, strengthens, enlightens, connects us to where we come from and who we are. We gather our materials from the earth to create pieces of art. We incorporate the lessons of master artists and culture bearers as we gain knowledge from their teaching, their stories, and their experiences. We use the songs and language of our people to learn more about who we are as people, where we come from, and where we are going. We build relationships with those who want to learn alongside us as we send our knowledge out into our communities. We understand the need for learning through traditional Native arts and contemporary arts – and how these two areas inseparable areas are intertwined and complement each other.
References


Photo Credit:

*Every One*

Artist: Cannupa Hanska Luger, 2018

Over 4,000 ceramic clay beads created in collaboration with hundreds of communities across the US and Canada.

*Lazy Stitch* exhibition organized by Cannupa Hanska Luger at the Ent Center for Contemporary Art, UCCS Galleries of Contemporary Art, Colorado Springs, CO 2018

Image courtesy of UCCS Galleries of Contemporary Art