

# Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

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## Fighting Back from Systemic Erasure: Using Truth to Challenge Perceptions

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*Dear Higher Education,*

I am the Program Director for Solitude, the oldest structure on the campus of Virginia Tech, which was once part of a plantation owned by the Preston Family. The plantation house sits on campus along with a cabin where enslaved people once lived. Pretending the past did not happen or glorifying the house as a vestige of southern White supremacy does not fix the present-day concerns associated with the history of the site. The opportunity to see this space as a place to help students, faculty, and community grasp a better understanding of the world we live in and how we got here, adds value to the structures. Conversations about the past can help change perceptions of the truth.

I am a public historian with thirty years' experience interpreting the history and culture of my people. Public historians have a responsibility to share historical facts in a way that will encourage visitors to our museums to seek out additional information that goes beyond the conversation. We call that planting a seed or sometimes a disturbing thought which requires more investigation on the part of the person who received this new knowledge. We must hone our verbal skills to reach a diverse audience and deliver the knowledge in a manner that can be accepted. I have used this process to help protect, preserve, and promote Indigenous knowledge as a citizen of the Monacan Indian Nation of Virginia. Virginia Tech's home campus sits upon a portion of our original territory. My ancestors fought assimilation and erasure for centuries and we fought for the right to equal educational opportunities. As I turn my attention to a project on social justice on campuses these words of Chingachgook from the ending scene of *Last of the Mohicans* by James Fenimore Cooper runs through my head:

"The frontier moves with the sun and pushes the Red Man of these wilderness forests in front of it until one day there will be nowhere left. Then our race will be no more or be not us."

My early years were steeped in assimilation and segregation. Virginia Indigenous communities had been legally reclassified by the Virginia Racial Integrity Act of 1924 as colored or Negro leaving no opportunity to self-identify. Our segregated existence became a shared experience with African Americans. At the same time, we lived with the expectation that Indigenous people would adopt the ways of the dominant culture and replace our learning models with those of the western education models. My family employed a land-based education system at home where we were given the knowledge we needed to survive in a hands-on fashion and shown an interconnectedness to nature. This teaching process did not require advanced degrees. My mother did not get past the fourth grade and my father did not finish the eighth. Due to poverty, there were very few books in our home. I experienced firsthand the shift from a segregated two room schoolhouse for grades first through eighth to a primarily White high school. This was not something that happened centuries ago. This is modern history.

As minoritized students going through integration, we were thought to be less intelligent by many of our White teachers. These teachers were armed with only their perceptions of us. They had little knowledge of our

community. The experience of coming from a hard-working lower class colored coal camp community made me resolve to prove myself as equal to my White counterparts and determined to preserve the cultural knowledge I was given under the tutelage of my parents. Having lived and learned in diverse community settings I saw firsthand the importance of using different educational processes like land-based learning used within many Indigenous communities. I saw firsthand the importance of keeping our stories and controlling our own narrative. It is my belief that these different learning practices could be helpful to us today.

For thirty years I have researched and documented the history of the Monacan tribe, of which I am a descendant and citizen. I realize the need to have ownership of our stories and tell our own truths. We, as people from a marginalized culture, desired to give voice to those who had been silenced for centuries. In doing the work for my people I came to understand that we were not alone in our quest to be seen, appreciated, and applauded for our contributions to this nation. The control of the western-based educational system by the dominant culture has allowed certain opinions to be formed and for unconscious biases to flourish. Over centuries people have formed opinions that were not grounded in facts.

My work is to change perceptions by using facts, speaking the truth, and sharing truths long hidden. We can use the past to illuminate the future. Can we expect to have whole opinions if they are based on half-truths? What happens when we are no longer allowed to speak the truths hidden in our history? Learning from the past allows us to identify the obstacles that are a part of the contested spaces we share at institutions of higher learning. That recognition of the past demands we take responsibility and work toward reparative actions. The process starts with moving perspectives by using knowledge, truths, and facts.

Working in public history has allowed me many opportunities to enlighten visitors to the Monacan Indian Exhibit where I served as the manager. I remember one conversation with a guest who told me she thought the Indians were treated badly but the Black people had nothing to complain about. This was just after the National Museum of African American History and Culture opened. The guest was upset by the amount of press received by the newest Smithsonian Museum. She did not understand--or refused to understand--why this museum was so important. I simply informed her that African American history is in fact all our history. It belongs to us as a nation and not just to the people of African descent. These same perceptions are sitting there as the undertone of what colleges and universities are dealing with in their attempt to acknowledge past injustices of stolen people on stolen land.

History has taught us that members of marginalized communities were once seen as inferior and unworthy to walk the halls of predominately White institutions whose beginnings were seeded in the bed of White supremacy and segregation. Virginia Tech started their journey in 1872 during the aftermath of the Civil War as a school for White males, by White males, and has spent the last 80 years attempting to overcome that past in order to level the playing field for all who applied and were accepted. This work is accomplished by bridging gaps in race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion and disability. The interconnectedness available on a college campus can serve as a small microcosm of a truly diverse world. The opportunities we provide our students include knowledge of and chances to navigate the varieties of humankind. It is a major step toward sending graduates out into the world prepared to live out our motto of *Ut Prosim*, That I May Serve, (all of humanity). Positive strides toward this goal have occurred over the last few decades. The process of using the past to illuminate the future is perhaps more important now than it has ever been as it serves as a guiding light to help navigate the future by using facts.

There are multiple ways we can honor the lives and challenges of our ancestors. It starts with learning the truth of our conjoined histories. We must be careful when interpreting the past with today's societal norms. How we interpret history tends to evolve with our personal knowledge. Including a wider lens approach with a complete explanation is useful in enlightening those who have remained strongly loyal to their own beliefs based on having knowledge of only part of our history. We must speak the truth of the past, the whole truth, so we can learn from

those facts and become aware. Once we commit ourselves to gaining a full understanding of the truth, we can look at measures required to put in place a system of equality and justice to propel us into a future that will no doubt contain many challenges.

Steps like this have been taken in helping Virginia Tech emerge as a leader in providing community and diversity on the campus. I am not saying we have arrived; I am saying we have taken the first steps on the journey. This work started in part with digging deep, analyzing reflections of the past, and placing people who have knowledge of doing the work into positions where they can maximize their efforts to make positive changes. Not everyone has the passion or ability to do the work.

Like other marginalized populations Native Americans are striving to make their mark on the campus of Virginia Tech by overcoming the erasure of the past that happened through paper genocide and assimilation of their cultural identity. Indigenous groups are fighting against the idea that, to quote Chingachgook, “our race will be no more, or be not us.” The Monacan/Tutelo nations were quickly written out of history as they were erased during early colonization. As a land-grant university it is important to remember the first land-grants in the colony of Virginia gave away land of its original inhabitants like the Monacan and other Indigenous populations of the mid-Atlantic to Europeans. That erasure played a role in allowing the process of land seizure to be conducted as the frontier “moved with the sun.”

The erasure of Native Americans made way for new immigrants to become part of the landscape. These new immigrants developed large farms that required enslaved people to be ushered into the interior. These laborers, mainly of African descent, were forced to improve thousands of acres of land while raising crops, animals, and children to help increase the wealth of their owners. Yet, while they labored to cultivate and build upon the very land where Virginia Mechanical and Agricultural College, now Virginia Tech, sits, neither they nor their children could legally attend for decades.

By the time the Morrill Act of 1862 was authorized and signed into effect by Abraham Lincoln, the land had been granted to European colonizers over a century before. Quoting Chingachgook once again: “the Red Man was still being pushed from their wilderness.” The Morrill Act allowed over eleven million acres of western land from 250 tribal entities to be designated for sale to generate revenue to help establish centers of higher education and to promote a practical education for the common people of America. This process funneled the largest percentage of dollars to primarily White institutions such as Virginia Tech, and less to historically Black institutions such as Virginia State that also hosted Native American students. After funds from the sale of western Indian land was used to help establish the Virginia Mechanical and Agricultural college, it took over seven decades before the descendants of the enslaved were eligible to attend the college now known as Virginia Tech. White women and people of Asian and Pacific Island descent were able to attend VPI long before Native Americans and African Americans gained the opportunity to enroll.

Education affects income. Today 25% of Native Americans and 19% of African Americans live in poverty.<sup>1</sup> This is an opportunity to use historical facts to shine a light on the present and the future. From this sometimes-troubled history a pathway forward was revealed to those willing to do the work to right the injustices. Tribal nations see the need for equity to be applied to the cost of tuition and an important step for our marginalized communities.

The importance of learning about the past is to demonstrate how changes can occur and look at the processes higher education has used--and can still use--to create spaces for diverse populations of students, faculty, and staff on their campuses. The erasure of truth affects perceptions. We have learned that higher education’s perceptions or ideas of what they think marginalized communities need may be entirely different from what the

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<sup>1</sup> United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2023/demo/p60-280.html>

communities themselves see as a need. Pretending the past did not happen or refusing to teach the truths of our contested past does not add to the conversation or fix the problems. Engaging in community learning exercises are beneficial. Institutions can learn there is great loneliness involved with being one of the few from an ostracized community in these predominately White spaces. I am sure loneliness can also be a concern at Historically Black Colleges and Universities, (HBCU).

The first Native American, African American, and other marginalized students faced isolation and lack of community. As a person who went through integration, I can speak of the loneliness of being the only person from my community placed in a space not originally meant for me. Acceptance into these places of higher education does not mean acceptance by the communities of students who attend or by the faculty. Laws may have changed but attitudes have not. Underrepresented students are still fighting the battle I fought decades ago: the need to prove they belong, and they deserve to be there while still resisting cultural assimilation. The struggle is made harder when there are few people from your community, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, or disability. In this day and time colleges are discovering the necessity to provide a space where each individual student has a pathway to success is paramount and are reaching out to other universities to learn from their successes.

Reflections of positive experiences when used to open a path for those who come behind us is an important process. Someone had to be first. Someone had to persevere. While it is entirely possible that first Native students attending Virginia Tech may have gone un-noticed to one another, there is much pride among those who were the first to do so. Records indicate Helen Maynor Scheirbeck of the Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina (Ed.D., '80) was perhaps the first Native American woman to receive her doctorate from Virginia Tech. She was certainly not the last. Since 1980 many Indigenous students who have graced the halls of this university. While Native Americans comprise less than three percent of the population, and their presence on campus is less than the national average, their accomplishments are still noticeable. Virginia Tech established a student organization, Native @ VT, and a program of American Indian and Native Studies was added to the curriculum. Local Indigenous community support helped propel these advancements, which is why community engagement is so important.

Many public places have decided to learn about the original stewards of the land where they sit. Part of the process includes acknowledging the Indigenous people whose land is now owned by someone else. Acknowledging the original custodians must include restorative steps so that the acknowledgment is more than performative. The process of acknowledging the land of the Eastern Siouan speaking Yesa, known as the Monacan and Tutelo people became a major step forward on the campus of Virginia Tech. The process was not an easy one. People from diverse tribal units participated in writing the acknowledgement. A lesson on community-based input was learned and applied. While not every individual got exactly what they wanted the process of working through the ideas and input allowed the community and the institution to come together to begin a process for reparative action.

The community work on the statement also brought to the forefront the need for a declaration acknowledging the plantation history associated with the land, the early landowners, and the institution of slavery associated with the original institution of higher learning and the history of being a primarily White school for decades. Land owned by the Preston family includes the land of Virginia Tech's main campus in Blacksburg Virginia. The descendants of enslaved people of African descent who lived and worked on the land have been instrumental in keeping their family history in the forefront of the discussion. Stories detailing their association with the land are documented and will continue to be told for what we hope will be perpetuity. This is being done by the descendants telling the story about their ancestors in their own manner. This conversation is triggering, both to the descendants and to the African American students who struggle with the notion of a former plantation house occupying space on their college campus. Sometimes it is good to be triggered, especially if growth can occur.

Thus, Virginia Tech developed a [Labor Recognition](#) that follows the Land Acknowledgement. The Labor Recognition speaks directly to the wealth generated by the enslaved and the decades that passed before the first Black people were admitted to the university and finally offered scholarship opportunities. Virginia Tech also authorized the Office for Inclusion and Diversity to act as stewards of the former plantation house, Solitude, the oldest structure on campus, and the adjacent Fraction cabin where the families of the enslaved lived. Solitude/Fraction is now used as a space for restorative justice, bringing people together in conversation about contested space and shared history, and how to move from segregation and exclusion to equity and inclusion.

Higher Education, you have a history and important truths to tell. These institutions all sit on land that was once under the custodianship of an Indigenous group and many of our tribal nations are still here. Let's acknowledge that history as important by identifying past truths and working toward reconciliation. Collaborating with communities to meet community needs while simultaneously building communities on campus are both important models. We need these campus communities to build stronger campus populations. Before Abraham Maslow published his theory of the hierarchy of needs in 1943, Indigenous groups had their own understanding of the circle of human needs starting with the individual who contributes to the community that supports the cultural practices that circles back around to build a stronger individual. And so the circle continues. We can apply that concept to the many underrepresented populations on campus by helping them to build communities that develop pathways to heal and move their communities forward. This is a crucial step in growing diversity on campus beyond demographics. This should not just be centered around getting students and faculty from different populations on campus; it is preparing a place and space for them. True diversity in education should be the goal and include learning from other communities. The Virginia Tech motto of *Ut Prosim*, That I May Serve, must include having the ability to serve all populations regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, and disability. Learning about and from these communities provides a necessary foundation for being of service to a wider audience, not just the community from which we originate.

By doing the work to develop the Land Acknowledgement and Labor Recognition we helped not only the students but also faculty and staff learn truths necessary for transformation. For many on campus this was the first step to learning about history and the impact that history had on some of the populations who have chosen Virginia Tech as their home for a few years. Perhaps if we as a nation had started learning about our diverse populations sooner, it would not have taken centuries to pass laws like the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 2019 Crown Act or take decades to dismantle the 1924 Racial Integrity and VA Sterilization laws. We are still facing the fact that just because laws changed did not mean attitudes changed. We must continue to use truths and knowledge to change attitudes.

Higher Education, you have an obligation to make sure knowledge is applied. Just like any course of study, the ability to apply the knowledge learned is where the true power resides. I plan to use my work in public history to share truth and knowledge about our contested past. I hope to continue to enlighten visitors to the Solitude/Fraction site, and to participants of my presentations to the true history of how colonization negatively impacted my tribal nation and other underrepresented communities associated with the land upon which Virginia Tech sits. I will support the growth and development of diverse communities and encourage learning from their histories so that their history becomes our history. I want to encourage people with the passion to do the work of inclusion, diversity, integrity, and social justice to continue to strive for success and never give up. Teaching diverse historical truths allows us to honor the past and influence a changed perspective. We can use these truths to be transformative as we help people see from other points of view. Speaking the truth can be challenging, but it is necessary as we plot a course of action for future generations. Applying knowledge unleashes the power to prepare for a successful future, a future where we can all survive and thrive, collectively.

Wishing you all the best,  
Victoria Ferguson  
Director of the Solitude-Fraction site at Virginia Tech

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## References

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## About the author

Victoria Persinger Ferguson is an enrolled citizen of the Monacan Indian Nation of Virginia. Victoria is a graduate of Marshall University and has a background in researching science methodologies to support historical information. She has spent 30 years seeking primary source documentation and archaeological information to help explain and support theories on the daily living habits of the Eastern Siouan populations of Virginia's interior up through the early European colonization period. She has written and presented work at Virginia Tech, Washington and Lee, Sweet Briar College, James Madison University, Mary Washington University, and archaeological conferences. Her last presentation, Food Practices of the Eastern Siouan, is being considered for publication in the Archaeological Society of Virginia's Quarterly Bulletin. You may glimpse her in two PBS documentaries: Virginia Indians: Reclaiming our Heritage and Pocahontas Revealed. She is the author of the children's book, *Dark Moon to Rising Sun* and co-authored *Sassy Sassafras, A Two Spirit Story*. She continues to research and write historical works, including the recently completed nonfiction book, *Fan Me with a Brick*. Victoria was recently appointed Virginia Tech's Presidential Ambassador to Native Nations.