

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

Walking on Sacred Ground: Honoring and Challenging the Past

KAREN DIVER

Dear Higher Education,

Do your events start with a land acknowledgement?

Sitting in the audience is a Native American who hears you knowingly admit that the institution is benefitting from historical and contemporary colonization, even while they personally have difficulty being there on a day-to-day basis. Some of these institutions hire people like me to help them navigate how to talk about and address those harms.

My name is Karen Diver, a citizen of the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa. My remaining homelands are in Northern Minnesota, just west of the tip of Lake Superior. As a first-generation graduate of college, I earned a bachelor's in economics from the University of Minnesota Duluth, and a master's in public administration from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

I served as the first woman leader of my Tribe, Chairwoman, from 2007-2015. I left that position to serve in the Obama White House as the Special Assistant to the President for Native American Affairs from 2015 until the end of the Administration, representing and advocating for Tribal rights with 24 federal agencies in service to 574 Tribes.

After leaving the Obama Administration, I served as the inaugural Faculty Fellow for Inclusive Excellence-Native American Affairs at the College of St. Scholastica, a private college in Duluth, Minnesota. This was followed by a position as Director of Business Development facilitating the Indigenous education needs of Tribes at the University of Arizona.

I'm currently serving as the inaugural Senior Advisor to the President for Native American Affairs at the University of Minnesota. As a part of the President's senior leadership team, I facilitate ongoing relationship building with the eleven Tribes that call Minnesota home. Through these Tribally led communications, the University of Minnesota develops priorities that attempt to repair relationships, increase service and support Tribal sovereignty.

The positionality of my role within the President's office is important for a number of reasons. Firstly, Tribes are NATIONS, government entities that pre-date the forming of the United States. The nationhood status of Tribes is well established legal fact. This makes the relationship based on Tribes political status not about race, despite the fact that Indigenous peoples have unique cultural and spiritual backgrounds and have been the subject of intense genocidal and assimilationist policies.

Having my role in the President's office means that I can provide guidance in building meaningful relationships with Tribal Nations in Minnesota and provide a direct conduit to senior leaders within the institution to affect

system change work. Whether working on affordability with tuition waivers and housing supports to building capacity for Native American student support services.

Secondly, especially for land grant institutions, the very formation of higher education in the United States was funded through land theft which was used to fund endowments. Thirdly, except for Tribal colleges the demographics of institutions of higher education don't begin to match the population of Native Americans in students, staff, or faculty.

Building capacity for Native focused educational efforts will generally cause concerns for the ability to find the resources. Most institutions will want to focus on philanthropy to mitigate the lack of resources. Clearly, this does not create sustainable efforts to support students or faculty pursuing research and knowledge creation for Indigenous peoples. Regular and meaningful allocations from endowment, legislative appropriations and earned income are needed to provide stability. To fail to provide these allocations is to perpetuate systemic racism.

Finally, the academy is nearly completely devoid of any pedagogy that is not western based in focus and has perpetuated ongoing harm through exploitive and paternalistic research practices and erasure in the curriculum. The University of Minnesota has robust Indigenous Research Guidelines (IRG) that require Tribal affirmative consent to do any university work on Tribal lands or with its citizens. The IRG stresses that Tribes are governments, and that higher education should be in good relations and provide services that are desired by Tribes, rather than driven by our own agendas and interests.

Native learners do not see themselves represented in their degree programs. The most often seen erasure is demographic data sets that do not even list Native Americans, and simply lump them as "other". From traditional ecological knowledge to culturally competent health care services among others, the academy is slowly recognizing that there is robust knowledge creation that has happened, and continues to happen, that does not rely on the approval or concurrence of mainstream educational systems. The best way to include Indigenous knowledge in the academy is to invest in Native faculty who are proving to be adept at adapting their own mainstream based educations and aligning it with their own knowledges and values.

It's also hard to recruit and retain Native learners without creating support structures outside the classroom. To feel supported, they need to be in community. There are many strategies that are not mutually exclusive including Native student groups, Native student advisory boards, dedicated navigator/problem solvers, living and learning communities to full blown Native American Cultural buildings. The financial strain of the full cost of attendance should be a goal, as is flexible learning options including cohorts, hybrid, and online learning programs. Creating pathways from Tribal colleges and allowing all credits and degrees obtained to transfer into mainstream higher education. Unfortunately, most often imposition of judgement about "academic rigor" or other gaslighting is used to exercise control and pass judgement, rather than partnership and communication in barrier removal and allyship.

All of this is to say we can and must do better with our Native Nations and Indigenous peoples. While the institutional racism affects us the same, the solutions need to recognize more than the fact that you are on our land. It's recognizing that the colonization of our peoples continues unless we can see ourselves in higher education, and that higher education is a barrier free part of the solutions towards the well-being of Indigenous peoples and the support of the sovereignty of Tribal Nations.

Sincerely,

Karen Diver
Senior Advisor to the President for Native American Affairs, University of Minnesota

About the author

Karen Diver is currently the inaugural Senior Advisor to the President for Native American Affairs – University of Minnesota. In addition to previous roles in higher education, Karen served President Obama as the Special Assistant to the President for Native American Affairs at the White House in the Domestic Policy Council from November 2015 until the end of the Administration. Karen served as Chairwoman of the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa from 2007 -2015, and Executive Director of the YWCA of Duluth from 1992-2003. Her current service includes the Great Lakes Fishery Commission as a US Commissioner, and member of the Climate Related Financial Risk Advisory Committee of the Financial Stability Oversight Council at the Department of Treasury. She has a Bachelor's in Economics from the University of Minnesota, Duluth, and a Master's in Public Administration from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.