



Beyond acknowledgement: Indigenous-centered projects on reclamation at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

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Abstract

This essay discusses the work of several campus units and projects at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign that center and build collaborative relationships with Tribal Nations, and support the efforts of sovereign Nations to access and manage their cultural heritage. These projects and initiatives include the NAGPRA (Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act) Office, which develops strategies with partner Tribal Nations to facilitate repatriation; the Spurlock Museum of World Cultures, which has partnered with Native and Indigenous artists and communities to develop exhibitions and programs; the University of Illinois Archives, which has been collaborating with Native communities to co-curate and co-develop access protocols for archival materials collected by anthropologists in the 1960s; and the Round Rock Community History Project, which engages Kindergarten to Grade 8 students and teachers at a reservation-based school on the Navajo Nation in partnership with the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and the Collaborative for Harmony, Empowerment, and Innovation.

Keywords

NAGPRA, Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, repatriation, museums, cultural heritage management, principles of library and information science

Introduction

In the spirit of reciprocity and centering the histories related to our institution, the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), we open this essay by sharing and briefly discussing UIUC's land acknowledgement statement. The formal statement adopted by our university reads as follows:

As a land-grant institution, the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign has a responsibility to acknowledge the historical context in which it exists. In order to remind ourselves and our community, we will begin ...

with the following statement. We are currently on the lands of the Peoria, Kaskaskia, Piankashaw, Wea, Miami, Mascoutin, Odawa, Sauk, Mesquaki, Kickapoo, Potawatomi, Ojibwe, and Chickasaw Nations. It is necessary for us to acknowledge these Native Nations and for us to work with them as we move forward as an institution. Over the next 150 years, we will be a vibrant community

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inclusive of all our differences, with Native peoples at the core of our efforts. (Office of the Chancellor, 2018)

This statement reflects the diverse histories of Tribal Nations whose homelands include what is now the state of Illinois, and recognizes the university's current occupation of these homelands.¹ It specifically notes the importance of working with these Nations rather than simply acknowledging their connection to these homelands; acknowledgement without further action is a frequent critique of such statements. Haley Shea (2024), a citizen of the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma whose Tribe's homelands include Illinois, notes that land acknowledgements "can also feel like an empty gesture where people/institutions want to show they're on the up and up but don't do anything beyond that."

The university's Native American House, an educational and cultural center for the campus community, has provided recommended additions to the official campus statement:

These lands were the traditional territory of these Native Nations prior to their forced removal; these lands continue to carry the stories of these Nations and their struggles for survival and identity ... [and we have a responsibility to acknowledge] the histories of dispossession that have allowed for the growth of this institution for the past 150 years. We are also obligated to reflect on and actively address these histories and the role that this university has played in shaping them. (Office of the Chancellor, 2018)

This version of the land acknowledgement statement addresses the forced removal of Tribal Nations from these lands and their continued relationships with their homelands, as well as the university's responsibility not only to acknowledge but also to actively address its role in the dispossession of Tribal Nations from the lands it now occupies.

Our work as scholars in disparate fields on the UIUC campus actively centers Tribal Nations and their wishes and priorities as part of a larger effort to address the histories of harms caused by land dispossession and research exploitation that come with being a land-grant institution. Indigenous and other scholars have written about the particular role that land-grant institutions play in the national landscape of land dispossession and its far-reaching impacts on Tribal Nations (e.g. Lee et al., 2020). The campus units and projects described in this essay reflect a commitment by a growing group of campus partners to respond to these histories in a way that directs campus resources toward centering and assisting Tribal Nations in areas of importance to their

communities, due to the university's responsibilities to these Nations and to highlight their continued presence and relationship to their homelands.

The field of anthropology, and research conducted by anthropologists, has played a particularly harmful role in the academic dispossession of Tribal Nations' linguistic and cultural heritage in addition to universities' land dispossession. Anthropological collecting practices (e.g. Pollock, 2023) generated an enormous amount of such materials in UIUC's libraries, archives, and museums, as well as personal collections, through archaeological excavations, oral history interviews, recordings, and ethnographic collecting, among other means. In our view, this created an additional level of responsibility on the part of the university to address how these collecting practices caused and continue to cause harm to Tribal Nations. We consider this approach to reflect a new understanding of institutional action, which we might refer to as "consultative anthropology," in which decisions regarding collections' care, research, museum exhibitions, and related activities center the priorities of the Tribal Nations with which we work.

Arguably, the most harmful forms of collecting that occurred at UIUC (and institutions across the country) are those that generated collections that are subject to the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA; Department of the Interior, 1990). NAGPRA is a federal law requiring the repatriation of Native American Ancestral human remains and cultural belongings of particular importance to Tribal Nations, including funerary belongings, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony. The presence of these Ancestors and cultural belongings in museums and other collecting institutions is widely recognized as causing active harm to Tribal communities, especially because of the cultural and spiritual dangers posed to Tribal citizens and their Ancestors by the continued possession of these Ancestors and belongings in museums and laboratories where they were never supposed to be present.

UIUC's collecting practices resulted in a significant number of Ancestors and cultural belongings in university departments and museums, which need to be repatriated under NAGPRA. While this is a legal requirement for the university, it is also our ethical responsibility to return these Ancestors and belongings to their descendants and communities. In this sense, we consider NAGPRA to be a useful framework for understanding how we can work beyond legal mandates as a campus in order to address the university's collecting histories and connect Tribal Nations with linguistic and cultural heritage materials currently in the possession of the university. In

addition to its compliance responsibilities, the NAGPRA Office at UIUC serves as a point of contact for Tribal Nations that can help to identify archival and museum collections that may be connected to particular communities but are not explicitly subject to NAGPRA. This allows us to actively and intentionally consult with Tribal Nations regarding how they wish their heritage materials to be cared for, accessed, and, in some cases, returned to their Nations.

The Spurlock Museum of World Cultures, opened in 2002, cares for over 44,000 objects, belongings, and other items of cultural property from around the world, along with corresponding archival records and library material. Many of the Spurlock's collections were housed in other museums and galleries that were previously operated on the University of Illinois campus. The collections came to the museum through fieldwork conducted by faculty, staff, and students, as well as donations and purchases. While former and current staff ensured the museum was in compliance with NAGPRA since shortly after the Act became law, it is only in the past seven years that the museum has radically shifted its focus to prioritize Native and Indigenous knowledge and changed the focus of operations from objects to people. The museum continues to revise its policies and procedures in collaboration with other campus units and stakeholders in pursuit of transparency, justice, and reparative practices.

The University of Illinois Archives not only includes archival materials (e.g. field notebooks, correspondence, photographs, and audio recordings) that resulted from anthropological collecting and research, but also records that, to varying degrees, document these collecting practices. As the institutional repository for UIUC, the Archives preserves administrative records of campus units and student organizations, and the papers of faculty and alumni. These archival materials thus largely derive from the Department of Anthropology and represent various faculty research projects. While archival materials are not explicitly subject to NAGPRA, the UIUC Archives is developing policies and procedures that invoke the spirit of NAGPRA and recognize the importance of archival materials to Tribal Nations and of archival repatriation, while also reassessing its collections and learning more about their provenance (when documented and known). Conversations around best practices, guidelines, shared resources related to archival repatriation, and respectful engagement with Indigenous records and communities are increasingly becoming central within both the archival and NAGPRA communities (e.g. Grimm and Krupa,

2024; McCracken and Hogan-Stacy, 2023; Society of American Archivists, 2024), which inform this work. At the same time, the Archives seeks to coordinate with the NAGPRA Office on campus and the Spurlock Museum so that its policies and procedures are in concert with broader campus efforts and a shared ethos. Among the materials that the UIUC Archives includes is the Doris Duke Indian Oral History Program Archives,² which consists of individual project records of graduate students under the supervision of UIUC anthropology professor Edward M Bruner. The project spanned from 1966 to 1971 and had the goal of documenting Tribal Nations primarily through oral histories. With recent funding from the Doris Duke Foundation, the UIUC Archives has been working with originating communities to return original materials and digital copies. The project has also led to collaborations, such as through a virtual archives tour for the Round Rock Community History Project. This work has inspired a broader assessment of Indigenous-created materials in the Archives and steps toward the development of new policies for these materials.

The Round Rock Community History Project is a history, story, and heritage preservation project that emerged from a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, commonly known as charitable organizations, called the Collaborative for Harmony, Empowerment, and Innovation (CHEII) out of Round Rock, Arizona. The program engaged students from Round Rock K–8 School, a rural Diné (Navajo)-based public school in northeastern Arizona, to research, document, and connect to their Tribe's history, community's heritage, and families' stories through in-person learning and virtual presentations. The hope was for Diné youth to "tell [their] own stories, write [their] own version, in [their] own ways, for [their] own purposes" (Smith, 1999: 28).

NAGPRA at UIUC

Although NAGPRA itself was passed in 1990, the NAGPRA Office at UIUC was established in 2020 after a campus assessment determined that the university retained a substantial amount of Ancestral human remains and other NAGPRA-eligible objects and collections. While the university had previously completed repatriations under NAGPRA, the administration's decision to establish a standalone NAGPRA Office reflects a campus-wide realization that the process had not been completed and required dedicated staff and resources in order to address its NAGPRA responsibilities in a respectful way that centered the wishes of Tribal Nations. We emphasize that

NAGPRA can be utilized as a helpful framework for other community-based consultation and repatriation work on our campus and at other institutions, and describe how NAGPRA has impacted our efforts in this regard at UIUC.

Repatriation practitioners and allies often say that “NAGPRA is the floor, not the ceiling.” What this means in practice is that while the NAGPRA legislation outlines a very specific set of requirements for institutions, it should be viewed as the bare minimum necessary for the respectful return of Ancestors and cultural belongings, and that institutions can and should consider how they can expand their repatriation work beyond these minimum standards. This is also reflected in the periodic regulatory changes to NAGPRA—for example, the most recent update to the regulations went into effect in January 2024 and requires institutions to defer to Tribal Nations’ traditional knowledge in the care and handling of Ancestors and NAGPRA-eligible objects and collections (Department of the Interior, 2023, 43 C.F.R. Part 10.1(d)). The new regulations also require free, prior, and informed consent by Tribal Nations before any access to, research on, or exhibition of Ancestral human remains and cultural belongings that fall under NAGPRA’s purview (43 C.F.R. Part 10.1(d)(3)). By including this language in NAGPRA’s requirements, the Department of the Interior addresses a long history of harm caused by the continued research and exhibition of Ancestors and cultural belongings, and is beginning to prioritize the protocols and preferences of Tribal Nations in their care and return. Many institutions have formally adopted similar language in their policies and procedures as a result of this change to federal law.

At UIUC, our campus policies and procedures around NAGPRA compliance included restrictions on these types of access prior to NAGPRA’s legislative updates. Researchers and museum staff requesting access to NAGPRA collections must demonstrate that they have received explicit permission from all potentially affiliated Tribal Nations in order for any proposed work to be approved by the NAGPRA Office (NAGPRA Office, 2024). These procedures were developed in consultation with partner Tribal Nations and are subject to revision at their request. The NAGPRA Office maintains regular communication with Tribal partners in order to ensure that any access to NAGPRA collections, including by NAGPRA Office and other institutional staff, takes place with appropriately documented consent from relevant Nations and in a manner that is deemed culturally appropriate by those Nations.

The NAGPRA Office at UIUC is an administrative office within the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research and Innovation. While many NAGPRA practitioners are housed within specific academic departments or museums within universities, our administrative position provides the authority needed to oversee all campus units impacted by NAGPRA and ensures that NAGPRA work on our campus proceeds consistently across the university as a whole. This also allows us to advise units on campus when requests for access are made or when Tribal Nations make care-based decisions regarding their Ancestors and cultural belongings. We also serve as a point of contact for university–Tribal relations; in many cases, Tribal Nations have no relationship with the university before NAGPRA consultations are initiated. These initial conversations emphasize relationship-building between the university and partner Tribal Nations, and occasionally result in the development of collaborative projects that may not have been realized without the intervention of the NAGPRA Office.

We also manage NAGPRA Office compliance projects in accordance with the priorities of our Tribal partners as a result of consultation. While UIUC (along with many other institutions) has a backlog of NAGPRA projects, we identify those of priority interest to Tribal Nations and proceed with those Ancestors and collections first at their request. UIUC is currently facilitating NAGPRA consultation for the Cahokia site in west-central Illinois with a number of other institutional and Tribal partners, and while this is a particularly large and complex group of archaeological collections, it was identified early on by Tribal partners as a priority for NAGPRA compliance at UIUC. It is important that we, as institutional representatives, both recognize and honor the wishes of Tribal partners, even if their direction moves us in a way that is less convenient or timely for the institution; our priorities must reflect Tribal priorities in order to effectively build respectful partnerships and facilitate work that moves forward in a good way.

While compliance is an important and necessary part of the university’s responsibilities related to NAGPRA, our office has taken additional steps to facilitate NAGPRA education in the national landscape. In 2023, the NAGPRA Office at UIUC launched the Intensive NAGPRA Summer Training and Education Program (INSTEP) in collaboration with the NAGPRA Office at Indiana University. We recognized a lack of accessible, consistently available training for the NAGPRA community around NAGPRA’s requirements and implementation. INSTEP focuses on building a community of practitioners who receive training in

NAGPRA legislation, best practices, Tribal governments and their protocols, and respectful consultation with Tribal Nations, among other relevant topics. Importantly, INSTEP requires no registration or attendance fees, and provides funding for travel and lodging for Native and Indigenous participants in the program. Native and Indigenous applicants also receive priority consideration for the program. As a well-resourced institution, UIUC has the capacity to take on additional NAGPRA-related responsibilities even if they are not directly related to legal compliance. This allows us to recognize the harms caused by museums and other collecting institutions, including our own, as well as provide strategies for addressing and repairing those harms. Taking responsibility for past behaviors and practices is critical for encouraging the development of respectful relationships between institutions and Tribal Nations.

Spurlock Museum of World Cultures

Unfortunately, like many museums, the Spurlock Museum at UIUC has not always honored the sovereignty of Native peoples. Although the museum opened in 2002, our collections are the result of over 150 years of collecting activity by the university, faculty, and students, as well as private donors. Until 2018, the museum's North America Gallery was dedicated to exhibiting art by the Native People of North America; however, what was actually exhibited was a collection donated by a white couple, the Laubins, who dressed as Native people, studied Native American arts and culture, and claimed to be adopted into a Native family. The collection was

poorly researched, and the museum has a poor understanding of which objects were made by the Laubins and which may have been made by the Native artists they studied. After discussions with Native stakeholders in 2017 and 2018, the museum removed all of the exhibits in this gallery. We are now attempting to decolonize our museum through collaboration, voluntary repatriation, and consensual curation.

Turning to collaboration, we continue to listen to and build relationships with Native artists and communities. The museum adopted a self-imposed mandate that we will not develop any new exhibitions without collaboration from source communities or descendants. We also compensate communities and/or individuals for this work. In 2023, we opened the new exhibit, *Welcome to the Pow-Wow* (see Figure 1), curated by Dylan Jennings, Jason Schlender, Dino Downwind, Sasanehsaeh Jennings, Michael Demain, Joshua Atcheynum, and Sheena Cain, and with contributions from the artists Jenny Kappenman, Isaiah Stewart, Emily Ponyah, Nathan Largo, Lisa Wrazidlo, and Emily Nelis. As part of this exhibit, we commissioned ledger art from Joshua Atcheynum and arranged paid loans for the regalia, which will rotate on and off exhibit every two years. In these collaborations, museum staff take on the role of facilitators, offering advice and perspectives on museum practice, best practices, and practical considerations, such as what the available exhibition space can accommodate. We are aware of and typically follow best practices, such as those outlined in the School for Advanced Research's (2023) recently published *Standards for Museums with Native American Collections*. However, in the end, we are guided by the understanding that the



Figure 1. Photograph of a section of the *Welcome to the Pow-Wow* exhibition, 2024.
Source: Courtesy of the Spurlock Museum.

wishes of Native Nations, descendants, and source communities are the ultimate authority, and we do all we can to assist in bringing their exhibition ideas to fruition. Additionally, their wishes are the ultimate authority for how we care for, transfer, and share the cultural works that we steward.

To further collaborate with Native people, we have begun to purchase Native art, such as works by Weshoyot Alvitre, a Tongva artist in the Los Angeles area. We are prioritizing art that shows strong voices of Native people engaged in important activism work. Alvitre's work *Take a Knee* (Spurlock catalog number 2024.03.0005) was used in the campaign to rename the Washington football team that used a racial slur as its name from 1933 to 2020. Her works *We Can Sioux It!* (2024.03.0003) and *NODAPL!* (2024.03.0002), among others, brought attention to the water protectors during the Dakota Access Pipeline protests. Additionally, *We-hey We-hey To 'koo'ro't* (2004.03.0007) highlights the importance of showing respect and compassion for animal relatives and Ancestors. Displaying these works in collaboration with Native artists allows the museum to amplify Native voices and our community to hear from the artists themselves and connect to contemporary issues that affect us all. These acquisitions were funded by the John N Chester Estate endowment at the University of Illinois. The museum is dedicated to setting aside funds each year for the purchase of Native art and the development of collaborative projects with Native stakeholders. We see this funding as an important ongoing act of restitution and also a mechanism for living our values and the sentiments stated within the university's land acknowledgement statement.

We are transparent in admitting that, like most museums, our collections include a significant number of works that were not collected in an ethical manner. It is also likely that some were obtained illegally. We recently hired our first manager of repatriation and ethical practices, who prioritizes collections for research, consults with source communities, and works to transfer important objects back to their home communities through voluntary repatriation.

Additionally, we are rewriting our contracts to acknowledge continued ownership and oversight of objects by source communities. We acknowledge that we can never own cultural property that rightfully belongs to Native and Indigenous peoples. If we are to properly care for these objects and beings, we must do so in partnership with their families and communities. For numerous reasons, voluntary repatriation of most of the objects in our care is not possible. In these instances, and whenever possible, we seek the consent of source communities and descendants to care for the collections that we steward.

Over the past two years, we have entered into several co-curation agreements that allow the Spurlock Museum and home communities to share the care of certain works, and these pieces will travel back and forth periodically between the museum and their home communities. Making these types of agreements to jointly care for important objects helps us remember that many items in our care are living, breathing entities that have needs beyond their preservation. It also builds trust with source communities as they see that their knowledge and perspectives are prioritized. One example of this work is our ongoing collaboration with First Nations visual artist Skeena Reece. Reece gifted the museum a mask, Txem-Sym, carved by her father, Victor Reece (see Figure 2). We are currently developing a small exhibit with Skeena and her family, and the mask will travel back and forth between our museum in Illinois and its home community in British Columbia. A collaborative exhibit is also forthcoming. Through these practices and commitments, we live our values and bring life to the university's land acknowledgement statement. The staff at the Spurlock Museum hope to begin to change museum practice and the field of museology in partnership with source communities.

University of Illinois Archives

In 1966, the Doris Duke Foundation provided funding to seven institutions in the USA to establish the Doris Duke American Indian Oral History Program. These institutions—the University of Arizona, University of Florida, University of Illinois, University of New Mexico, University of Oklahoma, University of South Dakota, and University of Utah—had the remit of documenting Native communities primarily through the collection of oral history interviews by anthropology faculty and graduate students. While the projects at each institution varied in terms of scope and the Tribal Nations they documented, each resulted in the creation of a substantial archive of materials beyond oral history interviews, including recordings of music and ceremonial events, photographs, newspapers (see Figure 3) and clippings, copies of census records, field notes and notebooks, programs, and reports. According to Edward Bruner (1972:), Professor of Anthropology and director of the Doris Duke project at the University of Illinois: “The idea of gathering data on Indian history from the Indian point of view was also a congenial one within Anthropology.” The project was meant not only to capture Native perspectives, but also to create archives that would be eventually returned to all the communities (Penfield, 2005). This promise, however, was



Figure 2. Photograph of Txem-Sym, a mask carved by Victor Reece, temporarily on display at the Spurlock Museum during a performance by Skeena Reece, 2024.

Source: Courtesy of the Spurlock Museum.



Figure 3. An example of a Native newspaper collected by an anthropologist as part of the Doris Duke project in the 1960s.

Source: *North Island Gazette*, June 21, 1967, Box 32, Doris Duke Indian Oral History Program Archives, Record Series 15/2/32, University of Illinois Archives.



Figure 4. One of the 90 audiotapes in the Doris Duke Indian Oral History Program Archives.
Source: Courtesy of the Doris Duke Indian Oral History Program Archives, University of Illinois Archives.

never fulfilled, resulting in a legacy of contested archives that remained with the institutions instead of the originating communities that created them.

At UIUC, the project directed by Bruner included 22 graduate students, who studied Native communities in the USA and Canada. Each student amassed a diversity of material, resulting in a collection of individual archives from each project and community illustrating an array of anthropological record-keeping practices. From the closure of the project in 1971 through 2007, the collection was held by the Department of Anthropology, before being transferred to the University of Illinois Archives. The collection consists of 90 tape recordings (see Figure 4) and over 2000 print-based materials. While many of the tapes are oral history interviews, the collection also includes a number of music and event recordings. The oral histories primarily take the form of audiovisual tape recordings, but some interviews are only available as printed transcripts. Some “interviews” were also recorded in other ways, such as through field notebooks, which a few anthropology students used as their main medium for documentation.

In addition to each project illustrating different record-keeping practices, each varies widely in terms of the types of documentation collected, created, and given. The materials raise a number of questions about consent—whether it was explicitly given or whether the Native consultants even realized that they were being recorded. What is clear is that the

materials were collected without a plan in place for their long-term preservation and, above all, without a plan to return them to their originating communities. While the materials capture a snapshot of these communities at a specific moment in time, and the family and life stories of the consultants, they are also sites of trauma and problematic content that perpetuate white biases and presumptions about Tribal Nations. They are materials that document human experiences and lay bare the complexities of ethnographic archives, as well as the anthropological ethics of care needed for preserving and managing these materials. An ethics of care binds archivists “to record creators, subjects, users, and communities through a web of mutual affective responsibility” (Caswell and Cifor, 2016: 159). A slight repositioning of the notion of an ethics of care to an *anthropological ethics of care* would likewise encourage archivists to be cognizant of their affective responsibility, and it also charges anthropologists to embrace this responsibility. It could be argued that anthropologists often have a kind of archival role as record co-creators/keepers, and thus it is important to recognize the multiplicity of voices and perspectives in the records they co-create and/or collect, and the responsibility that they therefore bear for those materials and to the communities with which they have worked.

Since 2021, we have collaborated with Native communities to repatriate, co-curate, and co-develop access protocols for archival materials collected by

anthropologists at the University of Illinois in the late 1960s that were mainly focused on oral history interviews. The project team includes Bethany Anderson, Jenny Davis, and Chris Prom. UIUC is one of the seven repositories that received funding from the Doris Duke Foundation and are participating in similar projects.

This project has entailed reaching out to Native communities to consult with them about these materials, but one of the first things we did as part of this project was to inventory the materials in the collection as fully as possible (at the item level in most cases), so that when we reached out to communities, we would have as much and as accurate information as possible to share with them. We also digitized materials and uploaded them to a Mukurtu portal that had been created for the project. As part of the consultation process, we schedule virtual meetings and on-site visits, as well as phone calls—whichever works best for the communities we are working with. The project was initially conceptualized as focusing on mainly audiovisual recordings in the collection, but as it progressed, we realized how important it was also to consult with Tribes about the print-based materials, especially because some of the interviews were recorded in field notebooks or existed only as printed transcripts—and, at the same time, the printed materials could shed light on the audiovisual recordings. It has been important for us to develop relationships with communities, and we are committed to be in conversation about stewarding these materials moving forward.

From these materials, we have identified approximately 60 Native communities represented so far. Noted here are just a few of those communities. We have spent a great deal of time trying to disentangle the original anthropologists' documentation and record-keeping practices in order to identify more information about the communities represented in these materials, and to center and better describe the provenance of the originating communities. One thing we realized going through this process was the number of inter-Tribal and multi-Tribal materials, or materials that represent several communities. For example, we have several event recordings from the Vancouver Sea Festival in 1968, which contain music not only from Coast Salish communities, but also from the Yuchi People in Oklahoma. There are also cases where we are unsure which community created the materials because of the scant metadata or lack of descriptive information from the anthropologists, and we cannot tell from the recordings themselves.

The work to connect these materials with their originating communities is ongoing, and the Archives is also working to develop collection and archival repatriation policies. Above all, however, the work by Tribal partners to review and develop access protocols for these materials is often time-intensive and requires a great deal of labor and coordination within a community. While we are offering as a small gesture an honorarium to all communities for working with us during the review process, to compensate them for generously sharing their time and knowledge, this work must extend beyond the grant project proper and be established as a sustainable and permanent initiative supported by the university.

Round Rock Community History Project: awakening stories at the heart of the Diné Nation

Histories and stories connect us to the past and to people, places, and events. Among Indigenous communities, histories and stories are a collection of lived experiences and memories passed on orally from one generation to the next (Archibald, 2008; Smith, 1999). Diné (Navajo) scholar Jennifer Nez Denetdale (2014: 71) reminds us that the intergenerational knowledge contained in oral tradition “becomes the foundation for finding our way back to the ways in which our ancestors envisioned the past and the future.” In 2023, a small Diné community in Round Rock, Arizona, had the goals of tracing the past and reclaiming Diné story knowledge and local histories, and revitalizing Diné language and culture through the art of storytelling, story listening, and incorporating those teachings into everyday life.

The Navajo call themselves Diné, which means “The People.” The term Diné is used in this essay to honor the Tribe’s traditional name, which was given to them by the *Diyin Dine’é* (“Holy Deities”). The Diné are a federally recognized tribe who reside on the largest Indian reservation in the USA, spanning over 27,000 square miles in northeastern Arizona and parts of New Mexico and Utah. The Diné live within four sacred mountains called *Diné bikéyah* (the ancestral homeland of the Diné). They speak a type of Athabaskan language called *Diné bizaad* (“Diné language”) and maintain relationships with other tribal relations through *K’é* (a clan system). These are the identity markers of the Diné (Lee, 2020).

This section of the essay highlights the ways in which a Diné-led nonprofit organization collaborated with an elementary school, an archival institution, a museum, and a city library to help Diné elementary

and junior high students further explore the core parts of who they are, where they come from, and their place in the world. The Collaborative for Harmony, Empowerment, and Innovation, or CHEII (which translates as “grandfather” in Navajo), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization founded by Faith Roessel (Diné) of Round Rock, Arizona, partnered with Round Rock K–8 School to implement the Round Rock Community History Project. Jenny Davis (Chickasaw), Associate Professor of Anthropology and American Indian Studies at UIUC, helped fund the project due to one of her doctoral students, Nathan Tanner, bringing it to her attention. It should be noted here that CHEII was already doing culture-related and story-inspired activities with Round Rock K–8 School, and was contemplating how to preserve those teachings. Using the ideas of CHEII, Tanner, an education historian and doctoral candidate in the Department of Education Policy, Organization and Leadership at UIUC, sought the university’s help to support the Round Rock Community History Project. One of the authors, Oliver Tapaha (Diné), a postdoctoral research associate at UIUC, a lifelong resident of Round Rock, a former teacher and principal at Round Rock K–8 School, and a CHEII board member, organized and brought virtual history lessons to the Round Rock K–8 students.

It was through this fortuitous and mutual interest in the preservation of community history that the CHEII leadership agreed to a partnership with UIUC, in particular on virtual student access to the University of Illinois Archives, the Spurlock Museum, and the Newberry Library’s D’Arcy McNickle Center for American Indian and Indigenous Studies of Chicago, Illinois. Tapaha developed the approach to share and engage Round Rock K–8 students in online discussions about archival materials related to the Diné. Historically, Indigenous histories, expressions, and lifeways have been recorded by researchers and placed in repositories outside of Tribal communities, and culturally sensitive objects were burned, stolen, or held captive behind glass windows to shape the narrative that Indigenous peoples were becoming extinct as a people and as a culture (Genovese, 2016; O’Neal, 2015). In recent years, there have been concerted efforts on the part of non-Native repositories to return or reconnect long-held cultural artifacts to the Tribe(s) of origin (O’Neal, 2015). At UIUC, this is part of Jenny Davis’s mission. She has helped repatriate Indigenous human remains and objects of cultural patrimony, and has archived materials housed at the university so that they could go back to Tribal communities. If the return of cultural objects is not possible, Davis establishes agreements with Tribes to hold artifacts at the collecting institution for research purposes,

with the Tribes deciding how materials are stored and who can access them. The aim of the Round Rock Community History Project’s virtual presentations was to access age-appropriate archival materials from these three institutions and share them with Diné youth to help them in understanding what an institution may have in its repositories that is of their Tribe’s history.

The principles outlined in Underhill’s (2006) “Protocols for Native American archival materials” were considered when determining which artifacts were culturally respectful and could be shared with students. The University Archives staff engaged students by using the document analysis method to review and evaluate primary sources. One unique artifact that the Round Rock K–8 students investigated was a paper transcript produced by the linguistic anthropologist Leanne Hinton. She had interviewed a Havasupai man in 1964 to learn about the origin of their horse songs. The Havasupai man stated that the songs came from a Havasupai boy, who had learned them from a Diné family. He had been told that the boy was taken by a Diné family (possibly during the pre-Navajo Long Walk years, when raids and conflicts happened among Tribes that were trying to escape from or survive the US military) and returned to his own Tribe a few years later, bringing with him horse and sweat-lodge songs he had learned from the Diné family he lived with. The students were encouraged to think critically about how and why the transmission of sacred songs happened among the Diné.

The students also examined photographs taken during the Flagstaff All-Indian Pow-Wow, which was held from 1929 to 1979 in Flagstaff, Arizona. The Pow-Wow was celebrated on the Fourth of July because the federal government forbade traditional ceremonies until the early 1930s. The organizers, who were all white men, recognized that linking the event to a significant holiday would make it difficult for Indian agents to interfere. Many Round Rock K–8 schoolteachers recalled riding in a wooden, horse-led wagon to Flagstaff to attend this annual event as young children. The students reflected on what the event meant for their families.

The Spurlock Museum offered a virtual tour of its gallery on North and Central America. The students viewed culturally appropriate tangible artifacts such as *molas*, or traditional South American textile embellishments, which they compared to the *biil’ée* (a Navajo woven dress). They were informed that intangible sacred items, such as the Pow-Wow song that echoed in one part of the museum, were forms of traditional cultural expressions that were also

recorded and retained by archival institutions. They also learned about the cultural taboos of handling Ancestral objects and the purpose of NAGPRA, and gained an understanding that artifacts stored in museums did not define them.

The final presentation was delivered by the Newberry Library's D'Arcy McNickle Center for American Indian and Indigenous Studies. The Indigenous staff at the library showed digitized collections and videos about the Indian relocation in the 1950s and 1960s. The students had conversations about the Indian Relocation Act of 1956 and the effects the law had on American Indians and Alaska Natives, who moved from their reservations to urban areas. Many Diné families participated in this program to assimilate into American culture. The staff also shared counter-stories from Indigenous people who moved to large cities, and the negative experiences they had with housing, employment, and education. The students were urged to think about how practices of resistance were acts of survivance.

Thus, the three institutions' objectives were to train the Round Rock K–8 students to think as researchers, historians, archivists, and social justice advocates, and be capable of developing and answering questions about their community, and constructing knowledge and stories about the history of their communities and Tribe. More importantly, the program aimed to enhance Diné students' cultural identities by reinforcing the value of Diné lifeways and strengthening their kinship ties to their families, community, clans, and land.

Round Rock K–8 School is a reservation-based public institution that sits in the center of the Diné Nation. The school was founded in 1952, originally under the Department of the Interior, and then transferred to the State of Arizona as a public school to keep children near home rather than in boarding schools far from their families and community. The school's purpose has always been premised on a "both-and" approach—to provide quality curriculum and instruction that reflects *both* the Diné ways of life *and* Euro-western culture (Roessel, 1962). Today, the school operates under Red Mesa Unified School District and prides itself as being a small school with a big heart. It serves approximately 75 students from Kindergarten to Grade 8.

The Round Rock Community History Project was conceptualized in the fall of 2022, and program activities were implemented at Round Rock K–8 School in the spring of 2023. Faith Roessel led the project by meeting with school leaders and asking difficult questions to ensure that wise and culturally appropriate practices were at the forefront. Evelyn Anderson, a Diné Elder and CHEII board member, offered

guidance on respectful engagement with the community. Sam Slater (Diné), president of the Diné Studies Association, and Lael Tate (Diné), a CHEII board member, wrote lesson plans for weekly "scavenger hunts," which started with "About Me" to prompt students to explore their family and clan histories, then broadened to investigate their community and "Place"—Round Rock. These community history lessons were shared with teachers, who were encouraged to incorporate them in class and personalize them to better inform their pedagogical context (Clarke and Lee, 2004). The students were instructed to record their personal experiences and the conversations they had with local knowledge-holders through drawings, photographs, recordings, writings, interviews, or songs. CHEII devised lessons and projects that resulted in classroom teachings by community members (e.g. painting as an expression of identity and historical/cultural landmarks), traditional food and wellness weekend workshops, and a culminating event at the end of the school year highlighting the founding of the Round Rock K–8 School with photographs and documents.

The Round Rock Community History Project connected students to stories of the past and with each other and the community in the present. According to Archibald (2008), many Indigenous stories have been "put to sleep" or taken away through colonization. But at Round Rock K–8 School, some stories were "awakened" by Elders, families, students, and teachers when they shared their stories and memories about Round Rock at the culminating event in May 2024. The community was reminded that,

[a]s a person listens to stories relayed, she or he takes on the memories of the person who tells the narratives. In this way, our ancestors' memories become our memories, and we become part of the vehicle of oral history. (Denetdale, 2014: 73)

Conclusion

The campus units and projects described in this essay seek to center Tribal Nations and foster reciprocity. In particular, we believe that it is important to prioritize the needs of Tribal Nations over those of universities, organizations, or other non-Native stakeholders, especially if we are to engage in true collaborative work. As part of this, we employ an ethos and best practices that center Tribal protocols and expand on NAGPRA's requirements. As noted above, "NAGPRA is the floor, not the ceiling," and so too the examples described in this essay seek to expand above and beyond those rules and regulations. Collaboration around and engagement with the

histories captured by cultural belongings and archival records is also important, and illustrates the ways in which these histories are still alive and carry vital meanings and memories for the communities with which they are connected. All this work, however, requires an additional consideration: the importance of dialogue with the discipline of anthropology to develop consultative practices and integrate an ethics of care into current and future research.

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Notes

1. In this essay, we capitalize terms such as Tribal Nations, Native, Indigenous, and Ancestors to reflect the particular importance of these terms in Tribal communities and in accordance with Younging's (2018) *Elements of Indigenous Style*.
2. The title of the collection is derived from the original title given to the project.

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