

Creating Learning Environments for Native Hawaiian and other Indigenous Students

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Abstract

As indigenous governing entities expand their political and administrative reach, more indigenous students will be seeking out degrees in public administration. While many indigenous students opt to stay close to their home many still expect to travel to attend college (Thomas, et al., 2012). Public administration programs should recognize the trend in indigenous governance growth and adjust their curriculum to include this developing sector. When we start with indigenous students' values and incorporate their values into the curriculum, assessment, and environment we see students thrive.

Creating valuable learning environments for indigenous students is not a zero sum proposition. Rather, such an environment can prepare both indigenous and non-indigenous students to effectively understand and respect issues related to indigenous people. The overarching result will be the development of students who will be better prepared to create strong and inclusive policies when dealing with indigenous issues.

Introduction and Roadmap

This paper explores how institutions of higher education, programs of study, and individual courses can create learning environments where Native Hawaiian and other indigenous students can thrive. Based on discussions and practices at the University of Hawai'i, West O'ahu (UHWO) this paper breaks down how utilizing a valued centered approach to influence curriculum development, assessment creation, and holistic support environment will lead to the creation of a learning environment that is particularly well suited towards Native Hawaiian and other indigenous students.

UHWO developed out of the unique social and geographical distinctions between O'ahu's West side and East side. The high cost of living associated with the most populous island of Hawai'i is ever so slightly alleviated on the West side, which resulted in a dramatic demographic shift in living to the West side over the last 30 years (Murakami, 2013). Jobs, however, stayed in Honolulu and commute times are typically two hours each way during rush hour. Students, however, not wanting to brave the roads for higher education demanded more options on the West side, which gave birth to UHWO.

The demographics of UHWO are similar to other University of Hawai'i institutions, but also stand out in several ways. The demographics of the West side overall plays a large part in these differences. First, UHWO has the higher percentage of Native Hawaiian students and students of other Pacific Islander descent at 26.9% (UHWO, 2015). In addition, in part due to the close proximity of military installations, UHWO services a high percentage of military, veterans, and military spouses. Finally, UHWO has a large number of first generation college students. These students, while highly motivated, more often lack the resources to thrive in a Western pedagogical model.

Native Hawaiians make up approximately 21% of the state population (Goo, 2015). With such a large representation the University of Hawai'i System outlined in the UH System Strategic Directions, 2015-2021 a plan to become the foremost indigenous serving institution of higher education. UHWO has taken this goal to heart and encouraged the use of student centered learning. The experiences detailed are based on teaching strategies utilized in Public Administration courses and on developmental excursions.

This paper will first place the importance of creating indigenous learning environments into context, then move to a discussion of indigenous values. Indigenous values must be at the center of any successful indigenous learning environment. Next the paper will discuss methods of infusing indigenous values into the curricula. Before concluding with the importance of a wraparound support system, the paper will explore types of assessments that can be utilized that are based on indigenous values. When we start with indigenous students' values and incorporate their values into the curriculum, assessment, and environment we see students thrive.

Relevance

The late 20th Century to present has seen a period of revitalization among Native American tribes and Native Hawaiian Organizations (NHO). Many tribes have been able to capitalize on gaming and other economic development opportunities supported by a policy era of self-determination to improve conditions on their reservations. Tribes, such as the Citizen Potawatomie Nation, have also been able to reach beyond their jurisdictional boundaries and support their urban citizens as well (Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development, 2008). While Native Hawaiians do not have the same political status as

federally recognized tribes they have been able to use lands retained from colonization as leverage to amass several well-endowed trusts that focus on the betterment of Native Hawaiians. In part because of this period of economic growth, an interest in nation building has surfaced. The study of indigenous nation building explores how indigenous nations can improve their governance system to better reflect their values and, in turn, become more efficient, more proficient, and more legitimate in the eyes of the citizenry.

Institutions of higher education play a key role in nation building. These nations and NHOs need educated employees who understand the indigenous concepts and are able to competently provide services to the people. According to Brayboy, the nation building theory allows indigenous students to conceptualize their relationship with higher education. Rather than an institution that was intended to extinguish native culture and assimilate them into American society, now they can view education as a mechanism to further tribal sovereignty, engage in capacity building, and improve their communities (Brayboy, et al., 2012).

Unfortunately, while college attendance rates have risen across the board, the rates for indigenous students have not been keeping up with other types of students (Hokoana, 2010; Drywater-Whitekiller, 2010). Although it is not clear what barriers are preventing indigenous students from attending higher education, what is clear is that with lower attendance rates it becomes more important to retain those students who do attend. However, historically, college retention rates for indigenous students have been less than stellar (Bingham, et al. 2014, Guillory & Wolverton, 2008). By focusing our efforts on creating learning environments that embrace Native Hawaiian and other indigenous

students, we acknowledge these stark numbers and begin to address this deficit with methods that can be inserted into any class or program.

Indigenous Values – The Value Proposition

Before we can address the issue of how to create learning environments that support indigenous students we need to explore the unique traits that many indigenous students bring to the higher education experience. While indigenous students are as diverse as other students there are certain similarities that can be seen across many indigenous communities (Cajete, 1999). The goal here is not to generalize these students to the point where they form a monolithic entity, but rather to discuss certain values that many indigenous people have passed down from generation to generation regardless of whether they have maintained ties to their homeland or relocated to another area.

The following values of community, land, and observation should form the foundation of the learning environment. Understanding these indigenous values will guide the educator in the process of infusing the curricula with culturally relevant teaching strategies. These values should be at the core of policies and programs aimed at indigenous student retention. Building the curriculum and assessments out from these values will create a learning environment where Native Hawaiians and other indigenous students succeed.

When asked indigenous students often cite family and community as the reason they attend college. These students are motivated by a desire to give back to their community (Drywater-Whitekiller, 2010; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008). While not universal many indigenous students intend to return to their community and serve their nation or a NHO.

Institutions should recognize this value indigenous students place on community service and find ways to connect the curricula to indigenous students' goals. This will not only make the material more relevant, but it is also a key motivator for indigenous persistence in higher education (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008).

Indigenous people, especially those that live on or near their traditional homelands, value their connection to the land. Much of indigenous culture is shaped by land given the resources that it provides for the community. In fact, creation stories often start with the creation of the land and then the people (Trinidad, 2013). Indigenous students recognize that healthy land systems are needed to sustain a people. In fact, 'āina or land in Hawaiian is literally translated as "that which feeds us" (Blaich, 2003). Respecting and protecting the land is a theme that can be used to build a community of indigenous students and to connect them with the larger educational environment. Mālama 'āina or to care for the land is a concept we use to not only validate the indigenous perspective, but share that value with non-indigenous peoples (Trinidad, 2009).

One component of the value of land to indigenous people is the importance of place (Johnson, 2010). Place-based learning or 'āina-based learning has gained momentum in recent years. George Kanahale summed up this connection best, "If we are to be truly consistent with traditional Hawaiian through, no one really owned the land in the past . . . The relationship was the other way around: a person belonged to the land" (Kanahale, 1986, p. 208). 'Āina based learning seeks to capitalize on this deep-seated connection to place in order to provide openings for indigenous centered learning. This often works best for students who have an intimate connection with the land that you visit, but it has a profound impact on many students new to the islands as well. As an indigenous ways of knowing,

place based learning reinforces the value of the indigenous culture to indigenous students (Blaich, 2003).

Finally, many indigenous communities impart knowledge to the next generation through observation. In effect elders encourage indigenous youth to observe and mimic (Benham & Heck, 2013; Lemus, et al., 2014). Because of the value placed on observation it can be challenging for indigenous students to transition to a learning environment that emphasizes a trial and error style of learning (Morgan, 2009). Designing classroom activities to employ the value of observation can increase indigenous students' comfort with a more Western model of higher education. By developing a learning environment where indigenous values anchors the curriculum creates a value proposition that will appeal and retain indigenous students.

Curriculum

Incorporating Indigenous Ways of Knowing

Keeping course content fresh requires constant effort. Recently much discussion in higher education teaching strategies has revolved around the role that technology can play in the classroom (McCormick, et al., 2013; Heitink, et al., 2016; Morgan, 2014). Educators have used technology to increase student engagement and reach a broad array of students. An equally important movement among indigenous educators is returning education to the land (Price, 2016; Reilly, 2011; Sheurman, et al., 2010). Incorporating indigenous ways of knowing may seem daunting at first, but in reality non-indigenous educators can incorporate placed based learning, interdisciplinary approaches, and indigenous voice into their curriculum quite easily.

Traditionally, indigenous people survived off the land. Many indigenous students still carry a strong family tradition of hunting, fishing, and gathering. We can easily see how the 'āina can sustain and nourish our bodies. By incorporating place-based learning we are opening up a space for the 'āina to unlock knowledge that will educate the mind. Incorporating place based education into the curricula has proven useful in sparking the interests of indigenous students, especially those that have difficulty seeing how public administration plays a role in their lives.

Linking indigenous knowledge to modern materials is one way to engage indigenous students. When visiting a local archaeological site at Palehua we were exposed to a grouping of stones set just beside a large market or gathering place. This grouping is arranged so that the stones are spaced approximately five feet apart and are the height of a low chair. The stones are angled to face three large stones that are up a slight incline from the rest of the grouping. Having students sit in these stones and share observations of the area one by one until finally the students seated at the grouping of three stones begin to speak. Instantly students notice how their voices naturally carry across the space, but yet are not so strong as to flow outside of the grouping. Indigenous people often describe feeling chills as they realize that this was a space where indigenous leaders of long ago sat to discuss community politics. Knowing that their ancestors had places that served the same function as the halls of Congress instills pride in the students and connects their ancestors' actions forward to modern political discussions.

Incorporating these indigenous ways of knowing is one way to insert a fresh perspective into the curriculum while simultaneously welcoming indigenous students. Indigenous ways of inquiry tend to be more holistic than Western paradigms (Hart, 2010;

Barnhart & Kawgley, 2005). As a result, an interdisciplinary approach is warranted. Public administration and political science educators should mine fields such as Native American Studies or Indigenous Studies and law to find materials that provide the indigenous perspective on their topic. For example, the legal field has been at the forefront of indigenous policy research and educators can find a plethora of law review articles on various indigenous policy, case law, and governance concepts. A recent law review article in the American Indian Law Journal provides a comparative analysis of the socio-political economies of Native nations, which could be juxtaposed with the state economy (Guedel, 2017).

Indigenous voice is also a key component of indigenous ways of knowing. Non-indigenous instructors can still provide this indigenous voice in a variety of ways. Ideally, educators can incorporate guest speakers into their curricula. While, it is true that not all higher education institutions are located near indigenous communities, federal policies and poor economic opportunities have supported the growth of a Native American and Native Hawaiian diaspora, which educators can take advantage of. Most urban centers have a pan-Indian center where many indigenous people congregate. Establishing a relationship with such a group or a local reservation, if one is nearby, will develop a deep guest lecturer pool. In general, indigenous people enjoy sharing their culture and discussing their perspectives on issues.¹

Developing a relationship with the local indigenous community is also beneficial in that it may open up internship opportunities for students. Tribal nations, even those with healthy economies, often lack resources and human capacity. Effectively running a government is staggeringly expensive, and many nations are likely willing to place students

¹ Although indigenous guest speakers are often more than happy to share their knowledge, providing a modest honoraria or reimbursement is appreciated.

in government internships or clerkships where they will be further exposed to new perspectives and differing models of governance.

Assigning indigenous authors is another way to provide an indigenous perspective and also serves as an inspiration to indigenous students. Indigenous authors and scholars exist in nearly every field and can provide role models for indigenous students as well as reiterate the place of indigenous people in modern society. In addition, using indigenous focused case studies and examples can expose students to new perspectives. These case studies are valuable because they bring indigenous politics and governance into the modern era and highlight the diversity of indigenous people. In a recent course on Administrative Decision Making I utilized a labor relations case study involving the Mashantucket Pequot Nation and the United Auto Workers union. The case guided the students through the collective bargaining process and culminated in the first collective bargaining agreement negotiated under tribal law, which protected the nation's sovereignty while allowing the workers to unionize.

Online databases such as the Electronic Hallway hosted by the Evans School of Public Policy and Governance and the Enduring Legacies: Native Case Studies hosted by Evergreen State College house indigenous case studies for public administration and political science. These case studies are accompanied by teaching notes that provide instructors with additional background materials to facilitate student discussion. Along the same lines educators can easily find indigenous political figures and use them as leadership examples in lectures. For example, when discussing leadership, I often include Wilma Mankiller and Winona LaDuke as examples of politicians and community advocates. These figures have transcended the sometimes isolated realm of indigenous politics to become well-respected national figures.

Other forms of media such as videos can supplement readings or be interposed into classroom lectures. One method that I've recently incorporated is to share excerpts from poetry or spoken word written or performed by indigenous authors. I have students break into groups to discuss its relevance to governance. For example, when covering policy-making and interest groups in recent class I shared a spoken word piece by Winona Linn (excerpt follows):

He came up to me after a show
and call me a knock off Pocahontas
And I wanted to tell him
that to insult me accurately he should have at least picked the
right race
Cuz Pocahontas was Powhatan
and I am Meskwaki
But I knew he wouldn't know the difference . . .
. . .
And could only resort
to calling me out on the color of my skin
Because my skin didn't match
with his perception of Indian
And my hair was only black
during my Emo phase in high school
And never highlighted with
the colors of the wind . . . or whatever . . .
I wanted to tell him . . . (Linn, 2013).

This poem is used as a prompt for students to discuss how identity politics, interest groups, media, public administrators all play a role in shaping perception and how these perceptions influence governance and politics. Students appreciate this exercise as they identify with the speaker and are able to use their critical thinking skills to link their experiences to potential policy decisions.

Utilizing Indigenous Based Assessments

The indigenous value of learning through observation and mimicry lends itself to assessment through hands-on practice. Assignments that allow students to practice skills

that they will utilize in their careers allow students to develop these skills in a safe environment. Students are also able to see how the assignment impacts their lives and future. For each case study that we go over in my public administration classes students are asked to draft a case brief that outlines the problem, the key players, their underlying interests, and possible solutions. Going through this exercise for each case study trains the students on how to approach complex problems in the workplace. It also helps them understand the power of brevity and clearly articulated positions. One key element when developing new assignments is to make sure that there are templates and samples so that students are able to observe and mimic prior to taking action.

Another assignment that I have students undertake in an indigenous governance class is to review a constitution from an indigenous nation. The students select from a prescreened list of constitutions and use the principles of nation building that we go over in class to provide recommendations for revisions to the constitution. This assignment requires students to have enough familiarity with the indigenous community whose constitution they are reviewing that they are able to determine what is culturally appropriate for the nation. They also must be able to apply the principles learned throughout the course to an actual constitution. Students have found this helpful and several indigenous students have remarked that their nation was considering a constitutional revision, and now they felt better able to understand the importance and the process.

The value of community importance lends itself to a propensity for team or group assignments. As a result I incorporate group assignments and discussions in most of my courses. Full class discussions often intimidate students, especially first generation college

students. Smaller discussion groups allow them to safely explore concepts before reconvening in a larger group environment. Indigenous students are familiar working together to achieve a common goal and can take more of a leadership role in these types of configurations. Team based working environments are common in the workforce and including this skill set in student assessment ensures that all students are able to produce outcomes when they leave the university.

Incorporating a service component to assessment allows indigenous students to fulfill their value of community service. Regardless of whether indigenous students are near their homelands or not they tend to appreciate service projects for fulfilling their desire of giving back to the community and/or caring for the land. This is because even if students do not trace their ancestry to that particular land they still recognize the importance of mālama ‘āina or caring for the land. Shared work at the beginning of the semester also serves to create a community among your classes.

It is not always possible to conduct ‘āina-based learning and in those cases incorporating a community oriented assignment can serve many of the same goals. One example of a community oriented assignment is to have students work with a community organization on a project that the organization and the instructor agrees upon. After developing relationships with community groups that are in need of assistance, educators can break students into groups and have them complete a project for the organization. For example, a community group may need assistance developing a plan for intergovernmental relations with a state agency or drafting testimony for legislation coming before the legislature. Developing these relationships can take time, but this type of community oriented assessment will give students valuable skills, a stronger resume, and experience

working with others. Furthermore, the institution and program is also able to highlight the value it brings to the community.

Holistic Environment

Creating a learning environment that embraces Native Hawaiian and other indigenous students starts in the classroom, but should expand across the program and larger institution as well. Higher education institutions have a responsibility to create environments where all students flourish. To do so institutions need to focus on three key elements: setting boundaries, removing distractions, and building partnerships.

Setting boundaries

While it may seem obvious it is nonetheless important to state that institutions have a responsibility to not only encourage exploration and discussion, but also set appropriate boundaries. Institutions should encourage educators to explore controversial issues and to allow for the sharing of a variety of perspectives. However, a solid line must be drawn when comments slip into stereotyping and racism. Likewise instructors should feel comfortable challenging these comments knowing that their institution supports them. Incorporating a policy or mission that the institution encourages inclusive respectful student engagement supports the value of community and place.

Creating boundaries built around respect allows students to openly engage in dialogue. In many cases non-indigenous students may be ignorant to the indigenous perspective, but it should not be left to indigenous students to educate them (Field, 2017). The instructor must step in to correct misperceptions. Focusing on creating a classroom

community further reinforces the idea that students have a responsibility to treat each other in a respectful manner. Providing opportunities for students to engage in varied small groups assists in ensuring that all students are interacting with each other and benefitting from each other's unique background.

Removing distractions

Indigenous students often reach higher education filled with excitement and concerns. Those institutions most successful at retaining these students are the ones that are best able to remove these distractions and allow indigenous students to focus on academics. One of the biggest concerns for many indigenous students is financial (Tierney, et al., 2007; Serra, 2003). The ability to meet financial need as well as provide assistance to students who need help navigating the financial aid system plays a significant role in retention.

Developing relationships with national programs such as College Horizons, a nonprofit that supports indigenous students by hosting workshops to prepare them for the college application process. College Horizons also supports soon-to-be college students by helping to fill the gap in their ability to handle college level coursework. Programs such as these help identify and prepare indigenous students including helping them select the best package that will support their academic success (Keene, 2016).

In addition, some institutions have Native American or Native Hawaiian Student Centers that serve as an on-campus community and meeting space for these students. These centers are able to quickly navigate financial aid issues and other issues indigenous students frequently face. For example, ensuring that indigenous students meet with student

services, counselors, and other support services will help ensure that the institution is aware of student needs (Rousey & Longie, 2001). Many students at UHWO are primary caretakers for young children. Although we do not have on-campus childcare services student parents often help each other care for children while their parents are in class. In institutions that are not large enough to support a stand-alone center should encourage interested instructors to help organize an indigenous student group. Student groups can help build connections between students in diverse disciplines and refocus struggling students to meet a common goal.

Another distraction that many indigenous students voice is feeling as if they must speak for their tribe or, in some cases, for all indigenous people (Cajete, 1999). It is often counter-cultural to speak for another group, but students are often asked in class to provide the “indigenous” perspective by other students and even the instructor. This puts unnecessary pressure on indigenous students. In other cases indigenous students feel a responsibility to share their community’s perspective because it does not exist in the course otherwise. In both cases, instructors have a role to play in ensuring that no undue pressure is placed on indigenous students and that only those who wish to share their perspective do. One way to accomplish this is to infuse other indigenous voices in the curriculum, which will alleviate the gap that these students feel obligated to fill.

Building partnerships

Building partnerships with the local indigenous community and other indigenous organizations supports an inclusive environment for indigenous students on campus. These partnerships can be the source of guest lectures, brown bags, service opportunities,

internships, mentors, and future jobs. Developing a diverse array of these partnerships signals to indigenous students that the institution understands the community and cares about their success.

In fact, these partnerships do not just benefit indigenous students. They benefit all students since non-indigenous students will also be exposed to these perspectives. This provides yet another way for non-indigenous students to have meaningful experiences with an indigenous population and better understand their issues. As indigenous people are becoming more savvy in bringing their issues forward, we've see intergovernmental relations strengthening in areas such as between tribes and land management agencies, cross-deputization agreements between tribal and local law enforcement, and among tribal, private, and public utilities, just to name a few. Many students who enter politics or public administration will have to work on issues that intersect with indigenous people. Having experience exploring indigenous issues in a safe learning environment will likely improve their future performance when confronted with these issues.

Conclusion

Native Hawaiian and other indigenous students deserve to enter higher education with the same chances of success. Creating learning environments that support these students levels the playing field as they transition to higher education in a process that some have described as having to "learn a new culture" (Bingham, et al., 2014). Institutions of higher education have a role to play in supporting indigenous students. Doing so will not only improve indigenous student retention rates, but will benefit the entire campus by providing a different perspective to education.

Incorporating indigenous ways of knowing through adding indigenous voices whether written or oral and developing relationships with the community to foster a pool of guest speakers will benefit all students. Utilizing community oriented assessments and other indigenous assessment methods, likewise, reinforces the value of indigenous communities to the program. It also stretches non-indigenous students and exposes them to different methods of assessment. These two principles guided by the indigenous values of community, land, and observation create the foundation of a supportive indigenous learning environment.

Public administration programs should embrace Native Hawaiian and other indigenous students. Native nations inhabit a distinct space in American governance. To date, these domestic dependent nations have received little attention in traditional political science and public administration curricula. However, with the expansion of many native nations and some becoming regional economic powerhouses it would behoove programs to integrate indigenous governance into the curriculum.

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