Review of Reclaiming Indigenous Research in Higher Education

Rose Buchanan

National Archives and Records Administration, rabuchanan77@gmail.com

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*Reclaiming Indigenous Research in Higher Education*, edited by Robin Starr Minthorn and Heather J. Shotton, challenges some of Western methodologies’ basic assumptions by demonstrating the value of Indigenous approaches to social scientific research. Contributors argue that Western institutions have long marginalized Indigenous perspectives in higher education, overlooking or outright dismissing the unique experiences of Indigenous students as well as the efforts of Indigenous researchers to explore and understand them. Within the past twenty years, however, a rich body of literature has arisen among Indigenous scholars seeking to decolonize the academy and demonstrate the value of Indigenous ways of knowing. *Reclaiming Indigenous Research* contributes to this larger conversation by providing a space to acknowledge and celebrate Indigenous scholars for their work, as well as practical applications of Indigenous methodologies in research about Indigenous students and communities. This volume has implications not only for higher education but also for institutions that support higher education, such as archives.

The volume opens with a foreword by Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy (Lumbee), one of the foremost scholars of Indigenous experiences in higher education. Brayboy notes that Indigenous peoples have been researchers since time immemorial, observing the patterns of nature and developing their own theories about ways to survive and thrive in their environments. Indigenous peoples have also been studying at institutions of higher education in the United States since the colonial era. Their presence as both researchers and scholars, Brayboy argues, has been “invisible, leading to the notion that there were not Native people in colleges.” This assumption points “not to the absence of Native peoples” in the academy but more to “the lack of awareness of our presence” (xi). Editors Robin Starr Minthorn (Kiowa/Apache/Umatilla/Nez Perce/Assiniboine) and Heather J. Shotton (Wichita/Kiowa/Cheyenne) build on these themes in their introduction. They describe the volume as a means to “challenge exclusionary power structures that have served to silence our scholarship and render us invisible,” and as an effort to “demonstrate, validate, and solidify Indigenous approaches” to higher education research (2, 4).

The subsequent thirteen chapters demonstrate how Indigenous methodologies can be used to better understand Indigenous students’ experiences in higher education. The chapters often alternate between applying Indigenous methodologies to explore various topics—such as the role of relationships in Indigenous student success—and examining Indigenous methodologies themselves. Erin Kahunawaika’ala Wright (Native Hawaiian), for example, studies how a culturally based (kuleana-centered) program at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa provides a space for students to explore the meanings of Native Hawaiian identity in relation to themselves, their families, and their communities. Wright’s interviews of sixteen graduates of the program...
complicate traditional thinking about higher education, which assumes a focus on individual student success. Her work suggests instead how higher education can be used to further goals of Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination. Similarly, Adrienne Keene (Cherokee Nation) demonstrates that the line between academic and social spaces is indistinct for many Indigenous students, who see college not just as a means to earn degrees for their own benefit but also as a way to give back to their tribal communities. In focusing on programs in which they had personally participated as students, Wright and Keene embrace the authenticity that comes from lived experience and challenge Western ideas about bias in research. They also reject the traditional narrative of Indigenous student failure in favor of telling stories of Indigenous student success, often defined as students who have been able to maintain their Indigenous culture and sense of identity as they attend non-Indigenous institutions.

Other authors dig deeper into the role of research in Indigenous communities and the positionality of researchers to their topics. Charlotte Davidson (Diné/Three Affiliated Tribes: Mandan/Hidatsa/Arikara) describes how the Diné concept of walking in beauty, which compels consideration of the harmful or healing effects of individuals’ actions on others, can form the basis of a reflective methodology that acknowledges researchers’ relationships to the people, communities, and places they study. Likewise, Sweeney Windchief (Assiniboine) places Indigenous worldviews at the center when he asks Indigenous graduate students to describe a metaphor for their education. Many responded by situating their own experiences within traditional stories from their communities. To fulfill his “role and obligation” as a researcher, Windchief reflects on his own metaphors for education and shares them with participants, embodying the type of respectful, reciprocal relationship that he characterizes as a key element of performing Indigenous research (79).

Contributors likewise demonstrate how more conventional research methodologies (both quantitative and qualitative) can be combined with Indigenous worldviews to provide deeper insights into Indigenous students’ experiences. Theresa Jean Stewart (San Luis Rey Band of Mission Indians, Gabrieliño/Tongva), for instance, uses frequencies, descriptive statistics, and cross-tabulations to analyze data from two nationwide studies of college students and identify predictors for Indigenous student leadership. However, she roots her analysis in Indigenous understandings of leadership, which are more situational and relational than hierarchical, individual-centered Western concepts. On the other hand, Natalie Rose Youngbull (Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes of Oklahoma) uses one-on-one interviews to delve into the reasons why some high-achieving Indigenous students who received prestigious scholarships did not persist to graduation. Analyzing the interviews through the lens of Indigenous research theories (including Tribal Critical Race Theory and Native Nation-Building), Youngbull identifies multiple factors, from feelings of alienation and isolation on campus to institutions’ inflexible deferment policies, that impact students’ decisions to remain in school. She ultimately calls on institutions to take more responsibility for providing the resources and support Indigenous students need.
Youngbull is not alone in challenging institutions to acknowledge their role in marginalizing Indigenous voices. In envisioning a time when Indigenous methodologies will be commonplace in research paradigms, and when institutions of higher education will be more welcoming spaces for Indigenous students, faculty, staff, and administrators, many contributors to this volume call on institutions to take active steps toward redress and change. Kaiwipunika'ikawekiu Lipe (Native Hawaiian), for example, discusses the efforts that the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa has undertaken to transform itself into an Indigenous place of learning. Recognizing that Native Hawaiians are still underrepresented at the university, however, Lipe offers a culturally Hawaiian framework for understanding the inequalities and injustices that higher education institutions have perpetuated against Indigenous peoples. Stephanie Waterman extends these ideas into institutions’ digital spaces by analyzing the websites of five non-Native colleges and universities, and offering suggestions for grounding web content in authentic, positive representations of Indigenous peoples. Pearl Kiyawn Brower (Ifupiaq Eskimo/Chippewa/Armenian) brings multiple themes from previous chapters together in a case study of Alaska’s Ilisaġvik College, exploring ways to engage and nurture the next generation of Indigenous scholars and leaders in higher education. In the volume’s unique, collaborative conclusion, which arose from discussions at a workshop for volume contributors, the editors present authors’ collective recommendations for ways that scholars and institutions can continue to address the need for Indigenous voices and methodologies in higher education research.

Overall, *Reclaiming Indigenous Research in Higher Education* succeeds in fulfilling its dual purpose: to provide a forum wherein Indigenous scholars can share their research and celebrate that of their colleagues, and to demonstrate the value of Indigenous methodologies for exploring a variety of higher education topics. Editors and contributors represent multiple Native American and Indigenous communities from across the United States, and they draw on unique traditions from their particular cultures to discuss common issues and experiences in higher education research. Both editors and the majority of contributors are also women, adding another layer of diversity to the work and allowing authors to assert female perspectives that are important in many of their cultures.

While contributors assume a basic familiarity with Western-oriented, social-scientific research methods, most present their own methodologies in clear, concise language suitable for undergraduate and graduate students alike. Authors quote extensively from their research participants, allowing participants’ experiences to be conveyed directly, powerfully, and emotionally to the reader. Youngbull’s chapter on Indigenous scholarship winners who did not persist to graduation provides a particularly poignant example. As one student recalled, she met white students on campus who asked her if she was from India and who admitted thinking that Native people were all dead. “People don’t even recognize our existence,” the student told Youngbull. “They don’t even care we exist” (136). Yet, the contributors do not focus exclusively
on Indigenous students’ negative experiences; they also highlight students’ defiance in the face of marginalization and their success in areas inside and outside of academia. Youngbull, for instance, quotes a student who openly challenged a non-Native professor who tried to speak as an authority on his culture, and she tells the story of another high-achieving student who gave up a scholarship to serve in the military. These perspectives not only connect the reader to the students on a personal level; they complicate readers’ understandings of Indigenous student experiences. Throughout the volume, students are presented not as a homogenous group but as diverse in their backgrounds, interests, and experiences. They are from rural, suburban, and urban areas; grew up on and off reservations; are enrolled in non-Indigenous institutions and tribal colleges and universities (TCUs); are majoring in topics as wide-ranging as medicine and music; and describe varying and complex relationships with their tribal communities and cultural heritage.

In reflecting on their own experiences as scholars and researchers, the chapter authors openly discuss their personal connections to their subject matter and their motivations for choosing their research topics. Amanda Tachine (Navajo), for instance, describes how she initially struggled to find a methodology for exploring Indigenous students’ experiences in a way that she felt honored Indigenous, and specifically Navajo, perspectives. She walks readers through a personal journey of prayer, self-reflection, and consultation with elders as she developed a story rug framework for research. Such personal reflections—especially regarding challenges and barriers to academic research—are rarely discussed in traditional academic literature. Even as authors touch on common themes of reciprocity, traditional knowledge, and relationship-building, they also demonstrate the power of the personal, which underpins the very methodologies they are describing.

Although focusing on the higher education context, Reclaiming Indigenous Research offers important lessons—and opportunities—for archives professionals as well. Archival institutions were created by colonizing regimes and have played a critical role in the oppression and marginalization of Indigenous peoples. Those in power have used archival collections to actively disenfranchise and remove Indigenous peoples from their lands, and more subtly (though no less harmfully) to bolster stereotypes of “primitive” and “vanishing” Indigenous cultures. Archives professionals are also directly implicated in the exclusion of Indigenous voices from historical and contemporary narratives. Whether by restricting nonwhite, noncredentialed researchers from accessing collections, or by failing to seek out and preserve sources representing diverse viewpoints, archivists have played a key role in perpetuating the dominant narrative of Western colonization and ensuring that archives have remained largely non-Indigenous, Western spaces.

Fortunately, contributors imply several ways that archivists can begin to correct these past wrongs. Many contributors, for example, highlight the importance of stories to their cultures and communities. Archivists can build on this mutual connection by contributing their knowledge of
digital technologies and preservation best practices to help Indigenous communities document, store, and access their oral and written traditions on their own terms. The Sustainable Heritage Network (SHN) is one example of such a collaboration; established in 2012, the SHN provides in-person workshops, online tutorials, and educational resources to Indigenous peoples to help communities preserve, share, and manage their cultural heritage (see https://sustainableheritagenetwork.org). Archivists can likewise seek out and cultivate partnerships with Indigenous communities in order to identify culturally sensitive materials in their collections; describe and represent collections in more accurate, culturally appropriate ways; and learn how collections can be shared with communities to support language revitalization, educational programs, and other community goals. The Protocols for Native American Archival Materials offers guidelines for archivists seeking to develop such partnerships (see www2.nau.edu/libnap-p/protocols.html).

The contributors here emphasize the importance of transforming non-Indigenous institutions into spaces that welcome and celebrate the diversity of Indigenous peoples. To this end, archivists should consider applying the research methods outlined in this volume to studies of the impact and inclusivity of their repositories’ policies and practices. Archivists should also advocate for greater representation of Indigenous peoples among their own ranks. Supporting the expansion of large-scale, nationwide opportunities like the Society of American Archivists’ Mosaic Scholarship, which provides financial aid and mentoring support to minority students pursuing graduate degrees in archival studies, is one opportunity that archivists can support (see https://www2.archivists.org/governance/handbook/section12-mosaic). However, archivists should also consider supporting smaller-scale, local efforts to recruit Indigenous students and scholars to the field as well. These efforts might include sponsoring internships for Indigenous students at archivists’ repositories, speaking to Indigenous groups and classrooms about their collections, and offering advice to Indigenous students interested in pursuing archival work.

As archivists take a more active role in transforming their institutions into Indigenous spaces, Reclaiming Indigenous Research in Higher Education can serve as a guide for how to move forward. This volume is a thought-provoking, timely, and accessible work that challenges Western-oriented conventions for conducting research and charts a broader path for developing academic institutions into spaces that are welcoming for all.