

Reclaiming Native Truth



A PROJECT TO DISPEL AMERICA'S MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS

RESEARCH FINDINGS: COMPILATION OF ALL RESEARCH

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Ernesto Yerana, *Xicanx/Yaqui/Sephardic*
Photograph by Thomas Ryan RedCorn

Introduction

Project Goals:

- **Improve the portrayal of Native Americans in the news and entertainment media**
- **Ensure the respectful inclusion and accuracy of Native American history and cultures in educational curricula**
- **Promote greater inclusion for Native Americans in the development of public policy**
- **Ensure inclusion and equity within philanthropy that promotes investment in Native communities**
- **Support solutions that will propel Native American communities forward**

Context Setting



***Reclaiming Native Truth* could not come at a more vital time.**

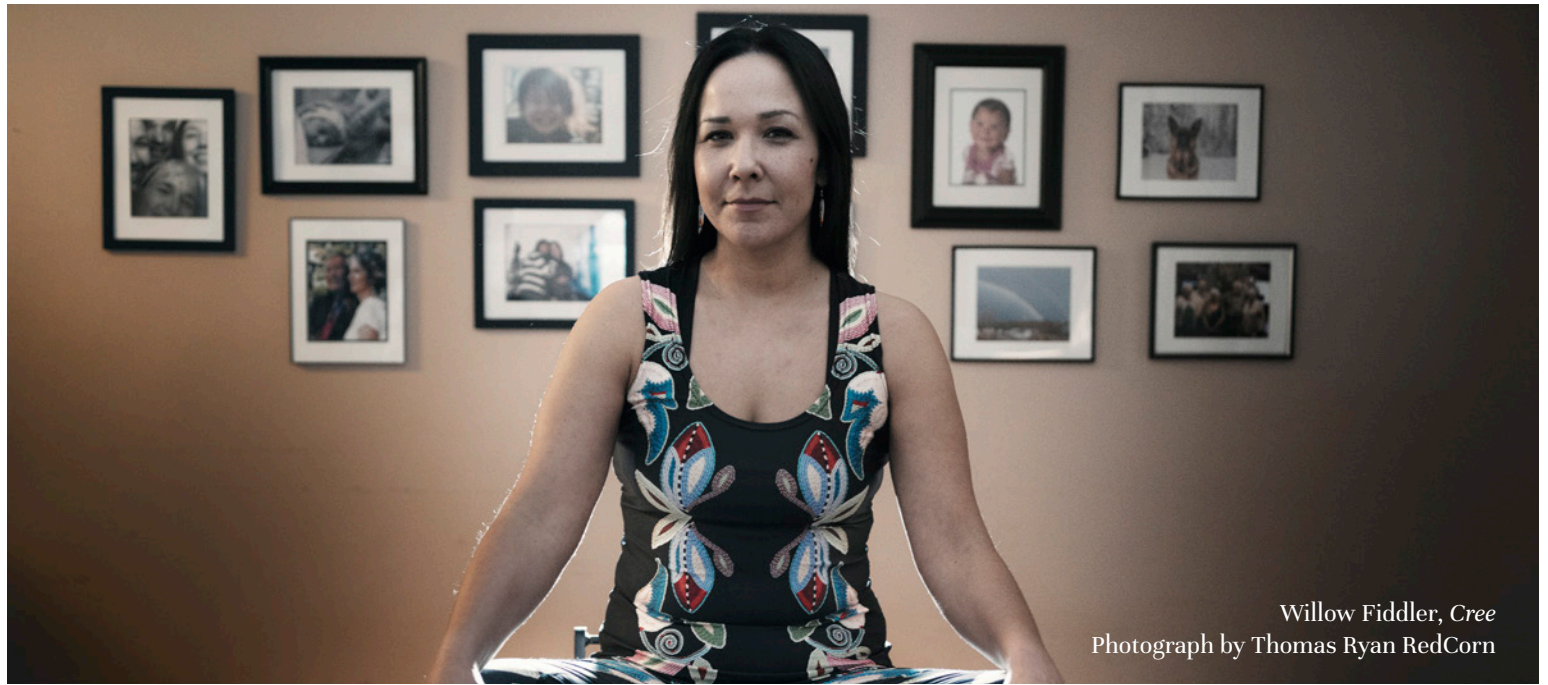
Reclaiming Native Truth is a national effort to achieve equity, inclusion and policy changes that will improve the lives of Native families and communities.

For the first time ever, we know what different groups of Americans — across socioeconomic, racial, geographic, gender and generational cohorts — think (and don't know) about Native Americans and Native issues. We have learned how biases keep contemporary Native Americans invisible and/or affixed to the past and are holding back Native Americans from achieving political, economic and social equality, as well as accurate and respectful representation. We have also learned what types of messages will begin to shift public perception.

The diverse methodologies employed by a highly respected research team now provide Indian Country with an arsenal of data and findings to use as we work toward new narratives and social justice, fighting bias and structural racism. As you read the findings that follow, we expect that a few will feel like a confirmation of what we have always known, felt and experienced ... but finally we have evidence and a frame of reference.

Some findings are surprising and invite us to continue to dig deeper to understand what they mean. Several findings give us hope and shine a light on opportunities we can immediately seize to create a path forward. In its totality, the research provides us with rich information we need to create strategies to shift the public dialogue so it is reflective of who we truly are. It empowers us to take control, exert tribal sovereignty and shape our own destiny. And it could not come at a more vital time.

The fight against the Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock, which coincided with the launch of *Reclaiming Native Truth*, built powerful momentum upon the heels of other local and national efforts and campaigns led by Native organizations. This movement engaged Indian Country in new ways, from tribal leadership to the grassroots. And our research shows that it increased attention on and support for the rights of Native peoples from non-Natives across many sectors.



Willow Fiddler, Cree
Photograph by Thomas Ryan RedCorn

Yet coexisting with this positive force is a nationwide period of intense division, debate over identity and rights, and questions about the direction of our country. On a daily basis, tribes and Native individuals experience fallout from negative stereotypes in the media and the general public's misperceptions. Ignorance, bias, stereotyping, overt racism and outright invisibility fuel attacks on tribes. They limit our ability to protect sovereignty and treaty rights, shape and inform public policy, celebrate cultural identity, access resources, and protect the dignity and humanity of Native peoples.

In the face of immense challenges to fundamental tribal and individual rights, we have a historic opportunity to understand and transform public perceptions of tribal nations and Native peoples across society. We have a chance to create a new narrative and support cultural shifts that can advance social and policy change to support racial equity and justice for Native Americans and tribal nations.

Shifting the narrative about Native peoples demands that we fully understand current public perceptions and the dominant narratives that pervade American society. These narratives, or stories, create people's overarching perception of Native Americans and inform their interpretation of new facts and experiences. Until we shift the broad public narrative, we cannot move hearts and minds on the issues that shape current reality for Native Americans.

On this journey, we stand on the shoulders of those who have been working diligently before us. It is our sincere hope that *Reclaiming Native Truth* provides the data, expert insights and collaborative space needed for organizations and movements to work together toward designing a collective vision, goals and strategies to shift the public narrative and create societal change leading to more opportunities for Native peoples.

Thank you for your interest in this project. We look forward to working with you.

To learn more and stay connected, please visit reclaimingnativetruth.com.

What Is Narrative Change?

A narrative change strategy approach is about reframing and changing stories in the dominant culture to create more political possibility for social justice movements.

Narratives, or stories, are transformative and have power, and we can use existing narratives to challenge dominant ideas.

Using known narratives and changing them taps into collective social and cultural consciousness, drawing on a wealth of metaphors, symbolism, images and strategies already familiar to people.

Research Methodologies

This comprehensive research was designed to uncover what different groups of Americans across socioeconomic, racial, geographic, gender, political ideology and generational cohorts think (and don't know) about Native Americans and Native issues, as well as to learn what types of messages will begin to shift public perception.

Key questions that guided the research:

- What are the dominant stories, or narratives, about Native peoples in North America?
- Who holds these views?
- How do these views affect public perception, public support and public policy?
- What can be done to educate people about Indian Country?
- What can be done to counter the negative stereotypes, myths and stories about Native peoples that are present in the media, among policymakers and among the general public?

FOCUS GROUP LOCATIONS





OUR RESEARCH INCLUDED A COMBINATION OF LITERATURE REVIEWS, SOCIAL LISTENING, FOCUS GROUPS, ONLINE FOCUS GROUPS, NATIONAL SURVEYS AND IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS, AS DETAILED BELOW.

2

comprehensive literature reviews conducted on existing public opinion research on Native peoples and on the strengths and limitations of narrative frameworks to transform negative stereotypes by challenging implicit bias and misperceptions

28

focus groups completed in 11 states and nationally online (see map on previous page)

10

message-testing discussion groups: 6 in-person groups with Native Americans representing 21 different tribes, 2 each in Oklahoma, Phoenix and Minneapolis; and 4 online groups of non-Natives with diverse participants.

45

in-depth interviews completed among “elites,” including members of Congress; former political appointees; judges; foundation officials; and civil rights, business and entertainment leaders

13,306

respondents to nationally representative surveys on key issues and perceptions regarding Native peoples

240,380

Facebook and Twitter posts on cultural appropriation and Native peoples analyzed

4.9 million

social media posts analyzed from Twitter, Facebook, 300 million blogs, and other social media platforms to uncover the dominant narratives around Native Americans and how the conversations differ across channels, demographics and influencers

Executive Summary

The research for **Reclaiming Native Truth** included multiple projects, used varied methods to engage broad groups of people, and generated detailed and specific findings. Across all of this, some overarching themes emerged – both those that confirm our assumptions and provide more detail about the challenges of the current narrative, and those that point us toward a path for change.

CONFIRMING AND ILLUMINATING CHALLENGES IN THE CURRENT NARRATIVE

ROMANTICIZED PAST, INVISIBLE PRESENT

Contemporary Native Americans are, for the most part, invisible in the United States.

Across the education curriculum, pop culture entertainment, news media, social media and the judicial system, the voices and stories of contemporary Native peoples are missing. Into this void springs an antiquated or romanticized narrative, ripe with myths and misperceptions. Focus group participants admit that they do not think about Native American issues and largely believe the population is declining. Many people outside of Indian Country lack personal contact with a Native American and even put the onus for this on Native Americans, describing them as insular.

As a result, people fall back on media tropes of the savage/noble warrior or reports of negative outcomes such as poverty and alcoholism rather than seeing Indians in everyday roles. They underestimate the degree of current discrimination. Even in Congress, most members have little knowledge of Native issues and rely heavily on peers with

greater interest and expertise when casting votes. In the research sector, from academia to philanthropy, few notable studies in the public realm have been done about perceptions of Native peoples.

This lack of visibility and relevance in modern culture dehumanizes Native peoples and erodes support for Native issues. As an example, college students unaware or in denial of the prejudice, bias and discrimination faced by Native Americans are less supportive of Native issues. The good news is that when people are exposed to accurate facts about Native American history and contemporary life, they believe the information, feel cheated that they didn't learn it in school, and quickly become more open to a new narrative. This effect is even more powerful when delivered by contemporary Native Americans.



Marlena Riding In, Pawnee
Photograph by Thomas Ryan RedCorn

DEFICIT FRAME HAS DEEP ROOTS

Limited personal experience and pervasive negative narrative set by others cement stereotypes.

It is no surprise that non-Natives are primarily creating the narrative about Native Americans. And the story they adopt is overwhelmingly one of deficit and disparity. The most persistent and toxic negative narrative is the myth that many Native Americans receive government benefits and are getting rich off casinos. Another common narrative focuses on perceptions of unfairness, in particular around false perceived government benefits to Native Americans that are not offered to other racial and ethnic groups. **This narrative can undermine relationships with other communities of color.**

This persistent narrative has a complex origin. Certainly there is the impact of entertainment media and pop culture, as well as the biased and revisionist history taught in school. Layered on top of these factors are the effect of limited — or zero — experience with Native peoples and the confusion between tribal benefits and government benefits. Even within Indian Country we have adopted and reinforced this narrative. In court cases and philanthropic funding requests, we play up our deficits and disparities to make the case for support — an approach that is essential in these instances but that bleeds into the dominant narrative. This deficit framing reinforces negative stereotypes among the dominant culture and can harm the self-esteem and aspiration of our own people, and especially our children.

TENSION: UNITY AND DISTINCTION

Americans value the “melting pot” and blend tribes into a homogeneous culture.

Native Americans are viewed as a homogenous group, without an understanding of Native peoples as citizens of hundreds of nations with different languages, customs, traditions and laws. The number of sovereign nations within the United States is unknown to many focus group participants. In media and social media, references to Native Americans rarely differentiate between tribes. Meanwhile, many Native peoples identify first as a member of their tribe, then as a Native American. They often don't relate to photos or stories about other tribes and are skeptical of any images or messages that use one tribe to represent all Indians.

Complicating and reinforcing this view is the fact that among non-Natives, “assimilation” is not a bad word and the mythology of the American “melting pot” is strong. Among other communities of color, assimilation does not carry the same threat of cultural extinction and so is not perceived to be negative. Even if all Koreans in this country fully assimilated, for example, there would still be a Korea in Southeast Asia that would maintain their culture. Americans are almost instinctively inclusive, seeking sameness and working to find commonalities across cultures. They are proud that their nation represents so many different cultures. “Native Americans are just like us” was a phrase repeated often in focus groups.

“An ordinary citizen of Texas has far more in common with a citizen of Massachusetts or Oregon than a Penobscot Indian from Maine or a Seminole from Florida has with a Gwich'in native from Alaska or a Hopi from Arizona.”

— Interview with a congressperson, Pipestem Law findings

SOVEREIGNTY GROSSLY MISUNDERSTOOD

Its origin, details and rights are not clear, even for people charged with upholding it.



Top: Juanita Toledo, Jemez Pueblo
Bottom: Native Advocate, United Nations
Photographs by Thomas Ryan RedCorn

Sovereignty is not well understood, either by the public or within the judicial system. Even after gaining a better understanding of the term, few people actually believe tribes are sovereign — or should be sovereign — and cannot conceptualize more than 600 sovereign nations across the United States.¹ While people support sovereignty around land use, they find it difficult to accept that tribes have a different set of laws on reservations. People who oppose the sovereignty of Native American tribes often think that the rights of Native Americans harm the rights of non-Native people. The focus groups found that using language such as “final say over water and land” was a concept that was broadly supported by both Natives and non-Native people and avoided confusion with the term “sovereignty.”

The lack of understanding about sovereignty extends to federal judges, who most likely have never taken an Indian law course in law school, yet routinely render major decisions affecting tribal nations and their citizens. One American Indian law clerk shared that a non-Indian law professor at a Top 10 law school had made comments throughout the course such as “tribes often call themselves ‘nations’ to puff themselves up.”

Although many members of Congress do not understand treaty and trust obligations to tribes, political elites interviewed view sovereignty as a powerful right and indicate a recognition of the challenges facing Native Americans and the historical circumstances that created those challenges, and a commitment to changing policies where possible.

¹ As of this writing, there are 573 federally recognized tribes and many state-recognized tribes, as well as many other sovereign Native nations.



92nd Annual Crow Fair at Crow Agency, Montana
Photograph by Vicky Stott

PROXIMITY SHAPES PERCEPTION

People who live near or work in Indian Country, especially in areas of great poverty, hold bias.

Bias toward Native Americans changes from region to region, with the greatest bias showing among people who live near Indian Country. This may be in part because areas in and around Indian Country tend to be more rural and politically conservative. Attitudes are often shaped by the relative prosperity of proximate tribes and reservations. For example, perceptions of Native Americans by focus group participants in Bismarck, North Dakota, where reservations struggle with poverty, are far more negative than in Seattle,

Washington, where some tribes are relatively better off financially. In polling, there is no increase in support — but no decrease either — among people who say they “know” a Native American. Proximity and familiarity matters in the judicial system, too. Non-Native judges and law clerks often personally experience Native Americans only on trial in criminal cases and generalize this narrow view into assumptions about all Native peoples—assumptions they hold to be true.

CONTRADICTIONARY STEREOTYPES COEXIST

People comfortably accept and maintain conflicting narratives about Native Americans.

Americans hold both negative and positive stereotypes of Native Americans, and many hold both at the same time without question. The most pervasive dual narratives are that Native Americans live in abject poverty on reservations, yet they are flush with casino money. Other conflicting beliefs

include that Native Americans are both spiritually focused and struggling with alcohol and drugs, that they are resilient and also dependent on the government, that they are both savage warriors and noble savages, and that they care about the environment yet live on trash-filled reservations.



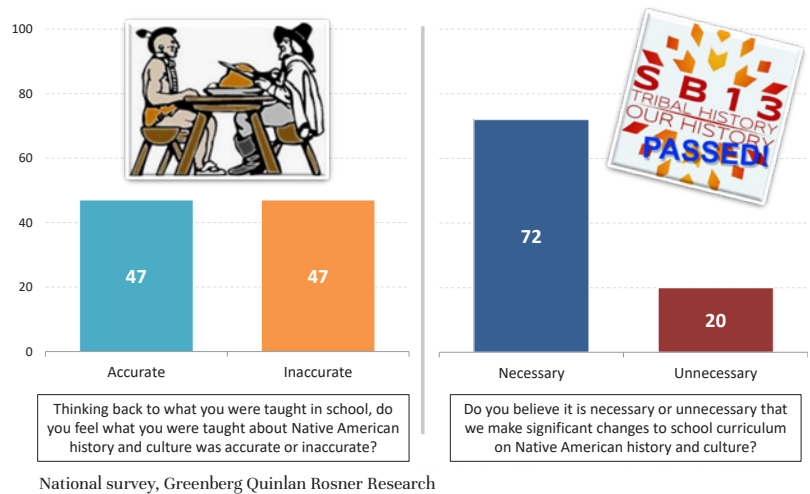
David Rico, *Choctaw*
Photograph by Thomas Ryan RedCorn

REVEALING HOPE AND A PATH FOR CHANGE

MAJOR OPPORTUNITY WITH EDUCATION

Across the research, people call for more accurate education about Native Americans.

Nearly half of Americans say that what they were taught in schools about Native Americans was inaccurate; 72 percent say it is necessary to make significant changes to the school curriculum on Native American history and culture. In focus groups with parents and teachers, both groups recognize that the school curriculum covering Native Americans is under-representative and inaccurate. Teachers rate “history of Native American peoples” and “pre-Columbian American history and culture” as two of the worst subjects in terms of coverage and accuracy. People often express disappointment or anger that what they were taught was so sparse or misleading. In discussion groups with Native Americans, some parents talked about teaching their children the “real history of their people” when they get home from school.



HISTORY OPENS HEARTS AND MINDS

Presenting accurate history opens a conversation about current reality.

Americans admit to genocide of Native Americans, though they significantly underappreciate the scale and force of violence that has taken place since 1492. Many believe atrocities done to Native Americans ended in the 19th century and underestimate the current levels of discrimination faced by Native peoples in comparison with other racial and ethnic groups and LGBTQI people. When key experiences in Native history are shared, people find these facts believable

and express an interest in doing more to address current conditions. Hearing this history not only amplifies the impact of positive messaging but diminishes the impact of opposition sentiment. After hearing accurate history, a majority of Americans — spanning major racial and ethnic groups, ages and education levels — believe more should be done to help Native Americans.

CLUES FOR A NEW NARRATIVE

Research illuminates elements of a new story that will spark change.

While more work is needed to craft the final narrative, the research leads us to several possible approaches and some clear elements. The literature scan indicates potential nondeficit narrative styles, including amplifying assets, using a tone of hope, and portraying Native Americans as likable and relatable. Focus groups and social media listening identified aspects of messaging that test well, with the strongest centering on Native culture (especially connections between Native culture and broader American culture), history (especially information about 500 broken treaties and about boarding schools), values and resilience. Messages and images that take the time to introduce — or reintroduce — contemporary Native American people to non-Natives are the most effective.

The research also explored how Native Americans perceive potential messages, ensuring that the resulting campaign feels authentic and respectful, and that they are open to being ambassadors of the new narrative. This revealed the care needed to craft a narrative that recognizes distinctiveness between tribes and does not reinforce the notion that all Indians are the same. The fact that Americans are ignorant of tribal diversity and value unity creates a delicate tension here.

These insights can serve as a strong direction to inspire, develop and test overarching narratives that will shift hearts and minds. For an update on the new narrative, proven through testing to be effective in moving hearts and minds, please see page 42.



Angela Furgeson, Mohawk
Photograph by Thomas Ryan RedCorn

NATIVE VALUES DEEPLY RESPECTED

Assets assigned to Native Americans are seen as desired and missing in American culture.

Focus group and survey respondents recognize the huge contributions Native Americans have made to American culture. Even in the context of deficit frames, positive associations include spirituality, commitment to family, connection to art and culture, and sense of responsibility to land and the environment — values and assets that many people believe are missing in American society today. In contrast, however, financial assets held by tribes and the economic development generated by tribes as well as other contributions to their local communities did not surface in the research.

Native Americans are perceived to be determined, independent, proud and resilient in the face of extreme challenges. Most online users appreciate and want to know more about Native American culture; some even try to associate themselves genetically, claiming Native American heritage, even if only a small percentage, and demonstrating cultural appropriation.

FAIRNESS, CONNECTION ... AND PATRIOTISM?

The research hints at potential values – some surprising – that might anchor a new narrative.

People make decisions first by instinct, guided by their closely held values, and then by interpreting facts, perceptions and experiences through that values lens. The instinctive process happens thousands of times faster than the cognitive process, making it essential for us to align our new narrative with our audiences' closely held values. From the research we can infer some potential values held across demographic and geographic groups. Each of these values carries a dual meaning, sometimes supporting Native issues, sometimes countering them. The art is to tease out the underlying value and build it into a resonant, positive narrative. This merits further exploration and testing.

One potential value is *fairness*. The research shows that people who have internal motivation to be fair, unbiased and

nonracist are more likely to support Native issues. The dual meaning is strong here, with sentiments that it is unfair both that the United States has broken treaties with Native tribes and that Native Americans receive government benefits that others don't.

Connection and *unity* are strong values, with many Americans seeking sameness and working to find commonalities across cultures. The duality is that this value can open curiosity and exploration, but may also lead to perceived assimilation of tribal identities into the idea of an overall "American culture."

A surprising set of values that emerged are *patriotism* and *masculinity*. These values can predict support for protection of sovereignty, but they stand in the way of some other issues, especially the mascot debate.

MASCOTS CONTROVERSIAL BUT MOVABLE

Mascots hurt Native youth and reinforce bias, but are seen as honoring Native Americans.

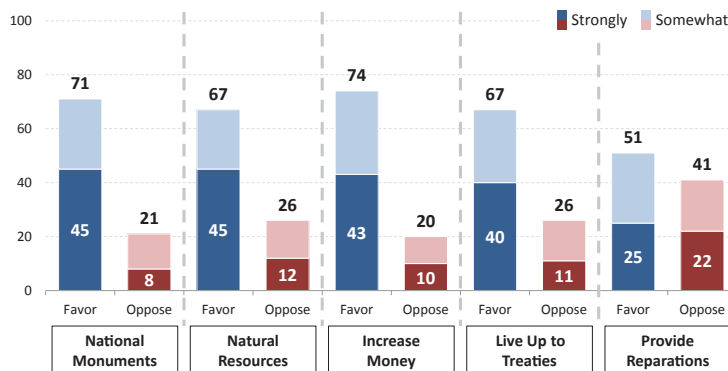
“I am a big sports fanatic. I am in shock they are not in favor [of mascots]. You would think they would be promoting them.”

— White college educated woman in focus group, Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research

A leading representation of the Native American story is through caricatures and dehumanized portrayals associated with mascots for sports teams and schools, which the literature shows are damaging to Native high school and college students, negatively affecting feelings of personal and community worth. Research has also shown that mascots reinforce bias among non-Native people. **In focus groups with Native Americans, four out of five said they are offended by Native-themed mascots.** This is in contrast to two national surveys (conducted independently of our research and highly contested by leaders in Indian Country for their methodology) that found that Native Americans are not offended by Native American mascots.

Currently, among non-Natives, half the country believes that mascots honor Native Americans and a majority oppose a ban on sports teams’ using Native-themed mascots. This was the only policy issue that was not supported by a majority of Americans in the national survey. However, there are allies for change. Sixty percent of millennial women, for example, support a ban on mascots, and younger respondents are more aware of the damage induced by mascots. Obtaining support for policies that require changing the names of mascots may be a daunting challenge; however, the literature scan and social listening demonstrate that success may be possible through other pathways to drive this change.

Please tell me whether you FAVOR or OPPOSE the following changes in U.S. law when it comes to Native Americans.



National survey, Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research

POLICY SUPPORT, UNLIKELY ALLIES

Diverse allies exist across American culture and favor many policies.

Congresspersons interviewed believe tribes have significant political influence. A majority of Americans support the increase of funding to reduce poverty and improve health among Native Americans. Support also exists to expand national monuments to protect sacred Native American lands and to ensure that Native Americans have the final say on matters that affect their natural resources. Just this year, the states of Oregon and California passed bills that revamped the school curriculum to provide a more accurate depiction of Native American culture and history. Both states also codified the participation of Native Americans in writing their own stories. This and other efforts by states to improve school curricula create pathways for other education policy efforts.

Sixty-three percent of people surveyed support “doing more for Native Americans.” (Only 5 percent argue for doing less.) There is support for many Native issues and policies. Some of our allies are surprising and unlikely: younger White men who didn’t go to college and who value masculinity and patriotism, for example. Millennial women are a strong base; in fact, they are our staunchest allies on the mascot issue. Overall, people of color are more supportive than Whites of Native Americans on many of the individual measures and issues. In addition, people with internal motivation to control prejudice tend to dismiss negative stereotypes and are more supportive of Native American issues.



Laverne Cook-Wise, *Tlingit*; Esther Lucero, *Navajo*;
Justice Dominy, *Tlingit & Assiniboine Sioux*
Photo source: TONL.com

Detailed Findings

To inform the narrative change strategy that will result from this research, we organized the combined findings into sections that align with the components of that strategy:

- Insights on current narratives
- Potential stakeholders to engage in support of *Reclaiming Native Truth*
- Potential values upon which to build a new narrative
- Messages and elements that may be part of that new narrative
- Channels for engaging and activating the stakeholders most essential to narrative change
- Policy issues and opportunities that draw the strongest support

Throughout this section we cite the work of the four research teams on this project. Those teams, the designations we use in citations, and the page number for a summary of each team's work are as follows:

- **Dr. Stephanie Fryberg and Team (Fryberg)**, summary on page 47.
- **Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research (GQRR)**, summary on page 50.
- **Perception Institute (Perception Institute)**, summary on page 64.
- **Pipestem Law (Pipestem)**, summary on page 66.

Exploring the Current Narratives and Their Roots

INVISIBILITY IN CONTEMPORARY LIFE CREATES A VOID THAT IS FILLED WITH STEREOTYPES AND MISPERCEPTIONS.

To most Americans, Native peoples are invisible in contemporary daily life, including in both actual lived experiences and in the world portrayed through pop culture, sports mascots, media, K-12 education and other sources. In the broader society, there is little awareness of the narratives of Native Americans in everyday roles in society, nor is there an accurate narrative about Native culture, history, contemporary life and communities. This finding is front and center across the research.

The lack of visibility, relevance and humanization of Native peoples in modern life erodes support for Native issues and allows media-fueled stereotypes to persist. It also contributes to an underestimation of the discrimination Native Americans face relative to other ethnic and racial groups (GQRR).

EXISTING NEGATIVE NARRATIVES ARE SET AND CONTROLLED BY NON-NATIVES.

Where narratives about Native Americans do exist, they are primarily deficit based and guided by misperceptions, assumptions and stereotypes. Such a narrative is created by messages in the news and pop culture and shaped by narrow experiences that are generalized into broad assumptions. It leads to and reinforces assumptions and judgments, caricatures and stereotypes, and discrimination.

This narrative is primarily created and controlled by non-Natives in media, entertainment, tourist spots and schools ranging from kindergarten to law school. The writers, directors, producers, professors and other influencers who create these representations of Native peoples are mostly non-Native, yet they are shaping how people view and portray Native Americans (GQRR).

The dominant narratives are written in broad strokes, portraying a homogeneous culture, with little recognition of the diversity among Native peoples and tribes. Complicating this portrayal is the fact that among many Whites, assimilation is not a bad word. For many, the mythology of the American “melting pot” is strong, making it challenging to move from homogeneity to diversity in order to rewrite the narrative (GQRR).

The writers, directors, producers, professors and other influencers who create these representations of Native peoples are mostly non-Native, yet they are shaping how people view and portray Native Americans.

THIS NARRATIVE OVERWHELMINGLY USES A DEFICIT FRAME.

Focus on disparities. By emphasizing the economic, health and other disparities experienced by some Native peoples — and generalizing to suggest that these disparities affect all Native Americans — this narrative fails to portray strengths, resilience and contributions, and it does not communicate the complexity of Native histories and current experiences.

This focus is even perpetuated by Native allies and advocates, who often emphasize disparities to make the case for needed change. While this approach can be effective when litigating in court or raising philanthropic dollars, it can backfire in the court of public opinion, where these disparities can lead to a perception that Native peoples have “deficits” or are themselves the cause of the disparities (Perception Institute).

Deficit or disparity narratives often fail to trigger moral urgency among non-Native populations to address oppressive conditions; they can also lead to feelings of hopelessness among the communities such narratives purport to describe. Finding the balance of illuminating disparities and injustices without slipping into a deficit frame is a leading opportunity in this work (Perception Institute). **Some of the prominent deficit narratives revolve around the following:**

- Poverty
- Alcoholism and substance abuse
- Deplorable conditions on reservations: pollution, little commerce, poor-quality education, poor health
- “Underprivileged” or “at risk” language, which undermines the sense of control and self-determination for individuals and groups and ignores systemic discrimination
- Native Americans as problems to be solved (GQRR, Pipestem)

Perceptions of unfairness. Another existing narrative focuses on perceptions of unfairness. The most pervasive and damaging example is the false perception that Native Americans get rich from casino dollars and from government subsidies that are not offered to other ethnic or racial groups. This is one of the most harmful narratives, leading to the following:

- Rationalizing past and current injustices and reinforcing other stereotypes (e.g., lazy, indolent, alcoholic)
- Undermining potential alliances with communities of color by creating a perception of preferential treatment
- Adding to confusion or doubt about how a tribe can be a nation while also “relying on U.S. government checks” or how Native peoples can be both sovereign and “dependent”

- Allowing some government leaders to believe (or say others in government believe) “we are doing enough” (GQRR)

Perceptions of “otherness.” This narrative portrays Native peoples as insular and aloof, old-fashioned, or not of the 21st century. It is reinforced by history curricula that often end in the early 1900s (GQRR).

Perceptions of inferiority or ineffectiveness. Particularly among some in the judicial and legal professions, there is a perception or narrative that Native American professionals are less smart than their non-Native counterparts (Pipestem). Some judicial and legal professionals also believe that tribal leadership is ineffective or uneven, with some tribes perceived to have strong leadership while others are perceived to experience frequent turnover (Pipestem). Exacerbating these perceptions is the turnover among state agency employees and department heads, with each staff transition bringing new people who lack cultural competence and understanding of federal policy and how tribal governments work (GQRR).

Policymakers and leaders in our sample described tribal governments as having a sort of “poverty mentality,” whereby they fail to plan ahead and are often more reactive than proactive; they also criticized tribal governments for not being sufficiently transparent or receptive to constituent feedback. These perceptions may be formed in part because some federal money for tribes is managed by the federal government rather than going directly to the tribe, a process that policy leaders criticize as paternalistic and reinforcing the stereotype of Native Americans as unsophisticated, uneducated and unable to make decisions for themselves (GQRR).

Some states are the exception, however. Montana governors, for example, have appointed tribal members to boards and commissions and have hired Native Americans in their cabinets. Other states have made changes to their laws explicitly putting tribal governments on the same level as local governments (GQRR).

There is a dual perception among the policy leaders we interviewed that tribes lack the political influence of African-American and other communities, because of their small numbers and lack of a cohesive message or coalition, and that tribes have significant influence because of political contributions (Pipestem).

DEEPLY RESPECTED NATIVE VALUES DRIVE POSITIVE NARRATIVES.

Positive narratives advance assets and traits that are assigned to or assumed about Native Americans — traits that the non-Natives we interviewed say they value and see as missing in society today. The appropriation and assimilation apparent across non-Native social media conversations is often built on these values (GQRR). Although positive narratives are less prominent than the deficit narratives, they provide clues and footholds for a new narrative.

Assets in the positive narratives include perceptions that Native Americans are

- committed to preserving their culture;
- committed to family and community;
- spiritual (mystical);
- resilient in the face of discrimination, oppression and genocide;
- close to the land or stewards of the environment; and
- patriotic Americans, veterans and active military (GQRR).

A note of caution. Many of the asset frames are based upon and advance positive stereotypes. Many non-Natives in our sample believe that these positive stereotypes are acceptable (those who believe this include people who are internally motivated to control prejudice and those who exhibit cultural racism or the idea that Native peoples' position in society is due to a deficiency in their cultures). In reality, however, even positive stereotypes feed into the homogenous, misinformed and inaccurate narrative (Fryberg). **The opportunity for *Reclaiming Native Truth* is to identify the positive attributes that can be reclaimed and built into an authentic asset frame without perpetuating stereotypes.**

CONFLICTING POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE NARRATIVES COEXIST.

Within the range of both positive and negative associations about Native Americans, some individuals in our study hold concurrent yet conflicting views, including that Native peoples are any of the following (GQRR):

- Both poor and flush with casino money
- Both spiritually focused and struggling with alcohol and drugs
- Both resilient and dependent on government benefits
- Both savage warriors and noble savages
- Both caring of the land and living in trash-filled and polluted reservations
- Both separate from and part of U.S. culture

The opportunity for *Reclaiming Native Truth* is to identify the positive attributes that can be reclaimed and built into an authentic asset frame without perpetuating stereotypes.

Potential Stakeholders

The research suggests that a wide range of groups of people across the country — including some unlikely allies — are interested in and support Native peoples, issues and rights. The strongest allies emerging from the research include politically progressive groups such as younger people (e.g., millennials and college students), college- and postcollege-educated people, and people of color (GQRR).

In addition, people with internal motivation to control prejudice tend not to accept negative stereotypes and are more open to being supportive of Native issues (Fryberg). Furthermore, the research suggests that when given different types of information about Native Americans, individuals who tend to be resistant to Native causes may become much more receptive to supporting a variety of issues (Fryberg).

The research surfaced some potential priority communication opportunities and policy issues for change, including education, pop culture and mascots (see pages 32–33 for a full description of the opportunities and issues). From those priorities we can infer a set of priority stakeholder groups whose engagement and movement may be essential to shifting perceptions of Native Americans. In most cases, the research was not designed to identify, map and prioritize specific stakeholders; additional exploration will be a critical step in the strategic planning process. However, based on potential levers for change, priority stakeholders will most likely include decision-makers and influencers in entertainment, sports, education, policy and media, among others.

In some cases, the research provides insights about specific stakeholder groups, as described below.

**For Native Americans, the
new narrative must be
authentic, empowering
and powerful.**

NATIVE AMERICANS

To successfully bring about a narrative change that shifts perceptions, attitudes and behaviors among non-Natives, **Native American people themselves — including tribal, spiritual and grassroots leaders; leaders of Native organizations; youth; artists; and story makers — are priority stakeholders who will carry the new narrative as messengers, ambassadors and storytellers. For them, the new narrative must be authentic, empowering and powerful.**

Native elites in government, business, civil rights, media and entertainment described, in in-depth interviews, the difficult decision of either leaving the reservation for better opportunities or going to college to get training and then coming back to help. Most mentioned a sense of pride and resiliency, as well as the struggle to hold onto their culture and pass it down to younger generations. They also noted cultural differences — in particular, respect for both elders and the environment — and the feeling of trying to maneuver through life in two worlds (GQRR).

In message-testing focus groups, Native Americans emphasized the importance of revising the educational curriculum so their children — and all children — know the true story about Native peoples, past and present. They gravitated toward messages that tell their story and their history and that represent modern Native Americans. They rejected messages about the “American melting pot,” recognizing that this is an existential threat to their cultures and to tribal sovereignty. They wanted to see Native peoples accurately represented visually and rejected any images from a specific tribe used to represent all tribes and Native peoples (GQRR).

STATE AND FEDERAL POLICYMAKERS

Respondents in our interviews said that most policymakers have little knowledge of Native issues and do not understand treaties or trust obligations to tribes, since many do not have tribes in their districts.

Congressional members from both parties in our sample viewed Native issues as fairly nonpartisan and praised tribes for being bipartisan. Respondents indicated that tribes have significant political influence in Congress, particularly with regard to environmental and natural resource issues. They perceived that gaming has generated resources for tribes to protect their political and legal interests (Pipestem).

How the government should respond to tribal needs, however, is more partisan. Across the board, in our research, there was respect for tribal communities and their resilience. However, some saw tribes as being fragile or vulnerable, facing ongoing racism, or existing at the whim of Congress (Pipestem).

Republicans in our sample tended to say that the government's role should be diminished, that the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) should be eliminated, and that tribes should receive resources directly to reduce dependence and to spark innovation and entrepreneurial solutions. At minimum, they said that more assimilated or financially stable tribes should receive less money (Pipestem).

Democrats in our sample, on the other hand, said they wanted to continue funding tribal programs and perceived that the problems are due to ongoing shortages of funding. They said that each tribe should be treated the same unless the treaty says differently (Pipestem).

Spending obligations to tribes, like those to other minorities, were seen by some people we interviewed as “handouts.” Others viewed Indians as “somebody else’s problem.” However, most of the members interviewed said they do not believe stereotyping is an issue in Congress (Pipestem).

This lack of knowledge and experience is also prevalent among the majority of federal policymakers outside the BIA and the Indian Health Service, respondents said (Pipestem). Policy elites said this lack of awareness and empathy may stem from guilt: Americans want to send money to help those in poverty in Africa, and they want to learn about Anne Frank and the Holocaust, but it is harder to own the reality of what happened right here with the First People (GQRR).

Native leaders in federal and state government whom we interviewed noted a mismatch between where the greatest potential for tribal power exists and where government staff knowledge lies. In general, they said, federal agency staff have a better understanding of the issues as they tend to have more consistent interactions with tribal governments and Native organizations; however, they said that the tribes have less power and influence at this level. At the state level, where tribal governments can have more impact, non-Native staff have fewer interactions and are less informed, they said (GQRR).

Across the board, in our research with policymakers, there was respect for tribal communities and their resilience.

FEDERAL JUDGES, LAW CLERKS AND LAW SCHOOLS

Most judges and clerks form perceptions and make decisions based on limited exposure to or knowledge of Native peoples. Their decisions, therefore, are influenced by the public narrative, and the decisions they hand down continue to fuel the negative narrative (Pipestem).

None of the federal judges interviewed had taken an Indian law course in law school; they reported that either their school didn't offer one or they did not recall seeing a course offered. All agreed that Indian law is a highly technical, "complicated" field of law and that, as a result, adjudicating a case involving questions of Indian law requires a good deal of effort to engage in self-education, even apart from and in addition to reading the briefs the parties on both sides submit (Pipestem).

All of the Native law clerks interviewed cited specific examples of occasions when their judge said something incorrect or ignorant regarding tribal nations and tribal citizens. Often, however, they felt they were able to explain to the judge why the statement was inaccurate or harmful (Pipestem).

Non-Native law clerks interviewed shared that the Native law cases they worked on were perceived to be "nonsensical," "irrational" and inferior in a theoretical sense. They were the cases that law clerks said they did not want to work on (Pipestem).

PEOPLE LIVING IN SPECIFIC GEOGRAPHIES AND IN PROXIMITY TO INDIAN COUNTRY

Attitudes vary widely depending on where people live. For example, according to our research, people in the Deep South were more open to Native issues (GQRR), while people living in the Plains and the Southwest were least likely to support Native issues, were least likely to report recognizing that Native Americans face ongoing discrimination, and ranked as least supportive of issues facing Native peoples (Fryberg).

There is more regional variation in attitudes among college students in our study as compared with the adult sample. College students who have lived the longest in the Far West region were most likely to report recognizing that Native Americans face ongoing discrimination and ranked as being more supportive of Native issues (Fryberg).

Proximity to Indian Country is also an indicator of attitude and perception. In focus groups, people living near Indian Country freely admitted their biases, while outside of Indian Country, the issue was more invisibility than overt racial bias. In states with a relatively high percentage of Native Americans, rural voters showed less respect for tribal sovereignty and rights than did more urban voters. This finding may be, in part, because areas in and around Indian

Country tend to be more rural and politically conservative, as opposed to large, progressive cities. It also may be fueled by resentment among non-Natives who live near reservations in areas of high unemployment and economic stress and who falsely perceive that citizens of tribal nations receive entitlements that they do not (GQRR).

Even within Indian Country, diverse opinions emerged based on the relative prosperity of proximate tribes and reservations (GQRR):

- Discussion in focus groups in Bismarck, North Dakota, was the most extreme, with people freely admitting bias. Their perceptions of poverty on the nearby reservation affected their attitudes and stereotypes about Native Americans in general.
- In Seattle, where people tend to be exposed to or aware of some tribes that are relatively better off financially and that have sound fishing rights and other assets, focus group participants' perceptions of Native Americans were more favorable.

GROUPS DEFINED BY RACE AND ETHNICITY, AGE, IDEOLOGY, AND OTHER CHARACTERISTICS

Several of the research studies allow us to look at responses within specific groups, providing further insights about potential stakeholders. Findings include the following:

- Of the African-Americans surveyed, 71 percent supported reparations. However, 52 percent of African-Americans polled also perceived that Native Americans unfairly receive more from the government than do other groups. This belief was shared by a majority of respondents from all other ethnic and racial groups (GQRR).
- Hispanic adults, especially those who are more conservative, are some of the most supportive of Native issues, in part due to their perceived blood ties with Native peoples; 68 percent of those surveyed are supportive of doing more (GQRR).
- Younger, White, non-college-educated men are allies on some issues. Only 20 percent of those surveyed support a ban on Native-themed mascots, but they do support Native Americans on most other issues — for example, 74 percent support expanding national monuments to protect sacred Native lands (GQRR).
- College students from predominantly White universities tend to lack knowledge about or close personal contact with Native Americans. The more college students are unaware or in denial of the prejudice, bias and discrimination faced by Native peoples, the less they report supporting Native issues (Fryberg).
- Of millennial women surveyed, 60 percent support a ban on Native-themed mascots (versus 38 percent of millennial men overall and 20 percent of younger, White, non-college-educated men) (GQRR).
- White liberals said they support policies to remedy inequities. They indicated that they may be confused by Native issues, what Native peoples want and what is in Native peoples' best interest, and they often need more information about how to move forward in a pro-Native way (Fryberg). However, the research notes that aligning along partisan or ideological lines carries both risk and reward, enlisting part of the country as allies but potentially creating partisan gridlock and mitigating real progress (GQRR).
- Opponents to Native issues, such as less-educated White respondents, showed the potential to become allies when presented with information about Native issues (Fryberg).

PHILANTHROPY

Research with foundation leaders (GQRR) provides insights into why just under 0.3 percent of total U.S. foundation support explicitly benefits Native Americans. Those leaders in our study who fund Native communities and issues said they appreciated the different long-term vision, the Native perspective on the history of the area or issue, and the growth in cultural sensitivity and awareness.

Although members of this group show some romanticizing and positive stereotyping, they don't reveal negative biases. On the contrary, they perceive threats like alcoholism and cultural erosion as coming from outside the community, fueled by structural racism, rather than from failings within the communities. All of the funders interviewed expressed willingness to increase giving to support Native peoples and issues as long as it falls within their core mission.

To move foundation leaders in this direction, the greatest need is to increase the visibility of Native peoples and tribal nations among foundations. Most foundations are coastal and urban, and they fund projects they see around them. Many in our study perceived that their geographic area does not include a significant Native presence. However, even those who do take a regional focus admitted to a knowledge gap about tribes in their region. Most failed to see the presence of Native Americans living in urban centers.

Other issues include the following:

- **Capacity.** Funders in our study perceived that many tribes lack the technical expertise to fill out a complicated grant application. They perceived that this may be due to the high rate of turnover in tribal governments. For example, one person may have been trained in grant writing and developed a relationship with the funder, but then that person leaves and a new person without that knowledge comes on board. Funders in our study saw nonprofit groups as quite sophisticated and noted that regional nonprofits are working with tribes in their region to help them access funding. Some funders also reported adapting application and reporting processes to be more flexible.
- **Cultural competency.** According to most funders in our study, they have no Native voices in their leadership or board, lack cultural competency, and may not fully understand Native issues. They reported worrying about the risk of inadvertently offending Native Americans. Some assumed to know what's best or to make decisions based on mainstream practices that do not align with Native practices. For example, if a funder makes decisions based on traditional grant evaluation methods that prioritize reaching high numbers of people, it may decline funding opportunities in sparsely populated tribal areas with less quantifiable, but equally important, results.

**Those working on behalf
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THOUGHT LEADERS

One component of the research included interviews with leaders in business, faith and civil rights organizations. Findings included the following (GQRR):

- **Business.** According to the business leaders interviewed, doing business in Indian Country poses unique challenges for companies, and sovereignty is seen as a barrier to private business growth on reservations. However, the business leaders in our study also saw significant opportunities for growth. They associated Native Americans with environmentalism and described proximate tribes as stewards and protectors of the land. Some mentioned the close-knit and family-oriented Native communities and noted that they prefer contracting with Native companies, which they said tend to be relatively small and family owned, because of the focus on creating and maintaining close relationships.
- **Faith.** Leaders in our study said that Native spirituality can be misunderstood, romanticized or treated as a New Age fad rather than something ingrained in culture. Christian ministries, they said, experience pushback from non-Natives who cannot reconcile Christianity and Native spirituality, which they view as mutually exclusive. They noted that non-Natives in the faith community may harbor a false sense that the United States is taking adequate care of its Native peoples and that their needs are being met through government programs, subsidies and handouts. Members of the faith community in our study therefore turned their focus and resources to missions in Third World countries, where they believe their philanthropic outreach can have greater impact.
- **Civil rights.** Civil rights leaders in our study perceived Native peoples to be notably absent from the national conversation around race and diversity. Those working on behalf of other people of color — especially in the Latino community — noted the shared history of discrimination and were open to strengthening alliances that create mutual benefit. (To some policy elites, however, viewing Native peoples in primarily racial terms rather than political terms is dangerous, as political recognition as a sovereign nation should give each tribe a stronger voice above and beyond that of other ethnic and racial groups.) Civil rights leaders said they see more power in numbers and thus recommended reducing conflicts among tribes and joining together to increase their visibility.

We gained additional insights on stakeholders in the narrative testing research we completed at the end of this project. Please see page 40 for details.

Clues About the Values upon Which to Build New Narratives

Brain science says that people interpret information and make decisions first through their values lens and then through cognitive processing of facts and evidence. In most cases, they accept facts that align with their values and reject facts that don't. In some cases, receiving facts that conflict with their values may actually make people grasp their existing narrative more tightly (Perception Institute).

Although our research did not specifically identify and test values that could motivate action by specific stakeholders, we can infer some potential value drivers based on findings about current perceptions, messages that test well, and insights about how people came to hold the beliefs they do. Once the new narratives are built, we have an additional opportunity to test them and their underlying values.

VALUES THAT MAY SHAPE HOW NON-NATIVES VIEW NATIVE PEOPLES

- **Strong internal commitment to avoid racism and bias and to control prejudice.** In our study, other racial and ethnic groups and liberals were most likely to have this internal commitment.
- **Fairness.** When people know or learn about the history and continuation of prejudice and discrimination against Native peoples and believe that the United States should remedy those issues, their support for Native issues increases (Fryberg). This is the aspect of fairness with which we want to align. However, the fairness value could lead to other unproductive narratives, such as the following:
 - *The world is fundamentally fair, so we don't need to provide resources to Native peoples, and/or Native peoples must be to blame for the challenges they experience.* For those who believe the world is fair and therefore show low levels of support for Native Americans, learning about systemic oppression may make them amenable to change. However, this group may be particularly resistant to information about contemporary success (Fryberg).
 - *It is not fair that Native peoples receive government benefits that others don't (GQRR).*
- **Patriotism and masculinity.** People holding these values, as well as the value of national glorification, are more likely to hold positive stereotypes and support protection of sovereignty. These values are strong among young, White, non-college-educated men (Fryberg).
- **Inclusiveness, common ground.** Americans are almost instinctively inclusive. They tend to seek sameness and work to find commonalities across cultures. Most want their country to be a melting pot and are proud this nation represents so many different cultures. For example, online, many White people participating in social media are quick to claim Native heritage, even if only a small percentage (GQRR).

Americans are almost instinctively inclusive. They tend to seek sameness and work to find commonalities across cultures.

Pathways Toward New Narratives

Although the research did not lead us to clearly defined overarching meta-narratives, it did provide clues about what may be the most effective approach, component parts and tone. It also defined some strong message points and individual issue narratives. (As a final step in this research we developed and tested a new narrative, based on these findings. Results from a national survey show that the new narrative is effective. Please see page 42 for details.)

MESSAGE THEORY: FOUR POTENTIAL MODELS FOR NEW NARRATIVES

Four alternatives to the deficit/disparity model show promise in the literature. However, none has been fully proven to create narrative transformation. We have an opportunity to shape and test new narratives using these models in order to both advance a new frame and add to the field of evidence on narrative. The four models are as follows:

- Asset framing, which emphasizes qualities of strength within a group
- Efficacy messaging, which emphasizes the possibilities of positive change and hope in solving societal challenges: Some versions of this approach also underscore the role

of self-efficacy and allow readers to visualize themselves as part of the solution to tackle oppressive social structures.

- Likable portrayals, which focus on portraying members of particular groups as “likable” as a means of inspiring empathy and positive regard
- Mutual humanization, which emphasizes the humanity of both the group of concern and the dominant group to engender empathy and a belief in a shared fate (Perception Institute)

EFFECTIVE MESSAGE COMPONENTS OF NEW NARRATIVES

A narrative is the overarching story that shapes the way people feel, process information and act. Messages, on the other hand, are discrete ideas or proof points that are encompassed within and that support the overarching narrative. Our research tested messages. Although these messages do not clearly define overall narratives, they do inform the development of such narratives.

Successful messages and images take the time to introduce — or reintroduce — Native peoples to non-Natives; highlight diversity and humanity; and educate non-Natives about the history, culture and values of Native Americans. History is especially important to opening conversation, hearts and minds. Hearing the history not only amplifies the impact of positive messages but also diminishes the impact of opposition sentiment. The sequence of messaging is important: share accurate history, link that to continuing modern injustice and then knock down stereotypes. The stereotype busting could begin with myths about government benefits and casino money, as these were the most rampant and damaging stereotypes across our focus groups (GQRR).

The strongest messages connect Native American values and culture to broader American values and culture. Many non-Natives do not know Native culture and therefore cannot appreciate the contributions of Native peoples unless these are explicitly spelled out for them. Although messages that focus on Native values (such as respect for family and elders and caring for the earth) and resilience test well, they must be very carefully framed to feel authentic to both non-Natives and Native peoples (GQRR).

There is tension around inclusiveness and distinction. Americans tend to seek inclusiveness, sameness and commonality across cultures. However, the Native peoples in our research tended to push back on messages that seemed “overly” inclusive, because they omit the distinctiveness of and association with their own tribe; they also tended to push back on images of one tribe that are generalized to represent all Native peoples. Therefore, *Reclaiming Native Truth* must present messages that convey the uniqueness and distinctiveness of Native peoples, while also layering in commonalities to unify them with the wider American population (GQRR).

Images and messages must link history with modern reality. In the various messages, issues and images that we tested with non-Natives, connecting the past and present served to paint a complete picture and to help non-Natives connect with the reality of Native issues. Some considerations are as follows (GQRR):

- Because the history taught in public schools is so inaccurate, incomplete or altogether absent, reminding (or educating) non-Natives about historical injustices is a critical starting point in messages. In our research, information about the 500 broken treaties was the most compelling; information about Native American children being taken from their families and sent to boarding schools resonated as well.
- Although most non-Natives we interviewed recognized the historical mistreatment of Native peoples by the U.S. government, they underestimated its scale and did not appreciate how it still affects modern Native Americans. Some of those interviewed believed that “all that happened a long time ago.” Thus, information about historical context must be linked to information about the current reality of Native communities in terms of both their struggle and their resiliency.
- Most people interviewed reported that they did not know any Native Americans, at least not intimately. Seeing relatable, modern depictions of Native Americans is persuasive.
- Information is powerful. Most non-Natives perceive facts about Native Americans to be believable, and learning more can lead to perception shifts. For example, most participants in message testing were able to let go of the idea that Native peoples get “free stuff” once they were told otherwise; all that was needed was one or two facts, which are especially powerful when delivered by Native Americans telling stories about their own lives (GQRR).
- Information about current census data and contemporary success is vital to show that Native peoples still exist and to combat invisibility. When confronted with this information, people in our study were less likely to agree that there are few Native Americans left in modern society. On the other hand, providing historical information, information about disparities and information about systemic oppression made people in our survey more likely to agree that there are few Native Americans left in society (Fryberg).

Although most non-Natives we interviewed recognized the historic mistreatment of Native peoples by the U.S. government, they underestimated its scale and did not appreciate how it still affects modern Native Americans.

Information about disparities and systemic oppression may increase support of Native issues. Even within an asset frame, there is an opportunity to educate people about the depth and continuation of systemic oppression and discrimination. Our challenge is to find the right balance between educating people about the past and moving quickly into current assets and opportunities.

- When people in one of our surveys were presented with different kinds of information about Native Americans, the facts about systemic oppression seemed to have the most net positive effect when it came to support of Native issues. In fact, that was the only information tested that led to significantly greater support for protecting tribal sovereignty rights, eliminating Native-themed mascots and providing Native communities with resources meant to promote resource equity (Fryberg).
- This finding was echoed in another of our surveys, which found that respondents who heard a short battery of historical items (including current history) were more likely to support “doing more” for Native Americans than respondents who did not hear this battery. Moreover, the impact of anti-Native messaging was effectively mitigated by this history (GQRR).

Communication Opportunities Ripe for New Narratives

The research begins to surface channels for engaging and activating the stakeholders who will be most essential in narrative change.

**Most Americans likely form
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popular culture, including
sports teams with Native-
themed mascots.**

NEWS MEDIA, ENTERTAINMENT AND POP CULTURE

Since most Americans do not know any Native Americans personally, nor do they live in proximity to Indian Country, they likely form most of their perceptions from the news media, entertainment media and popular culture, including sports teams with Native-themed mascots. In the few instances when many of those channels do portray Native peoples, they do so using the negative frames described above or otherwise harm the larger narrative (GQRR).

For example, one of the policymakers interviewed described how media coverage of the Standing Rock protests depicted the Sioux Tribe as environment-loving Indians up against environment-hating oil companies, thus reducing a complex issue to a stereotype (Pipestem).

Media, entertainment and pop culture participants, influencers and arbiters will be an important stakeholder group (Pipestem). Media and entertainment leaders in our study who are looking to increase Native representation on their staffs said they expend significantly more time and resources in their search for Native employees than in searches for other employees. Forming mentorship programs or raising the profile of existing professional networking organizations could connect these employers with Native workers more easily (GQRR).

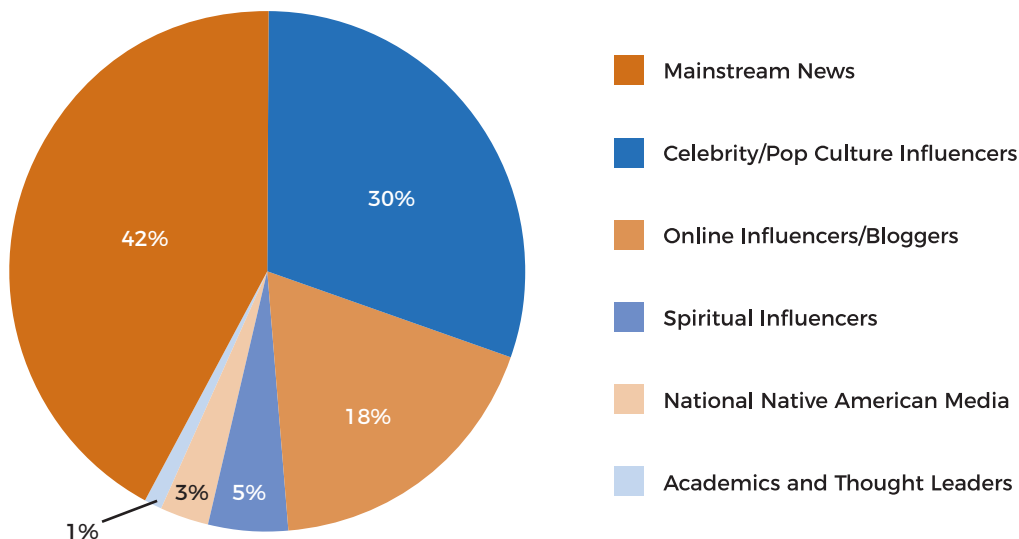
ONLINE AND SOCIAL MEDIA

This channel overlaps with the one above but merits focused attention because of its power and reach and because of the specific insights from the research. There are several distinct online stakeholder groups (GQRR):

- **Native peoples.** Native social media sources are very active, but often their reach is mostly within the community. As a result, Native content — which is among the richest and most positive anywhere, often filled with messages about pride and about embracing one's heritage (e.g., #proudtobenative) — too often does not reach non-Natives.
- **Non-Native individuals.** The conversation around Native issues and Native peoples is more polarized online, where anonymity has coarsened the national conversation on just about every issue. That said, political and civil rights leaders in our survey believed that social media has been essential in educating non-Natives, especially younger generations, about Native culture and issues.
- **Mainstream news and entertainment outlets.** The most complete media analysis in the research was conducted online, where many mainstream news sources and entertainment outlets, as well as celebrity and culture influencers, have been aligned with Native issues, showing positive momentum and opportunity for ongoing engagement. During the time that we were analyzing social media conversations, these posts had the highest reach, as shown in Figure 1.
- **National influencers with like interests.** The research also identified a diverse list of online allies talking about Native issues, including mainstream news media; organizations and networks concerned with equity and rights for communities of color; online influencers and bloggers; spiritual leaders and academics; and thought leaders. This list is dynamic, changing from month to month. Some of these influencers promote factual information and highlight positive portrayals of Native peoples; others use Native issues mostly to serve a political or issue-based agenda or for cultural appropriation.

The conversation around Native issues and Native peoples is more polarized online, where anonymity has coarsened the national conversation on just about every issue.

Figure 1.
Online influencers aligned with Native issues, by percentage of reach
(October 2016–March 2017)



EDUCATION

Education — from pre-K through higher education — was cited as a key lever for change across much of the research.

A study of schools in 2011–2012 found that nearly 87 percent of state history standards failed to cover Native American history in a post-1900 context and that 27 states did not specifically name any individual Native Americans in their standards at all.²

People interviewed said that they feel that what they learned — or are teaching — in school about Native culture is inaccurate, and they strongly supported the need for curriculum change. Education is vital. When non-Natives understand that Native peoples still face prejudice and discrimination, they are more likely to support Native issues (Fryberg).

Education challenges affect Native children, too. In focus groups with Native Americans, most shared that they went to public schools — or have children in public schools — where their own history is rarely covered; if it is covered, they said it is rarely covered accurately. They said they desperately want this history to be told. There is also a perception among policy leaders in our research that state education systems turn a blind eye to isolated reservation schools, where people we interviewed perceive that many of the teachers are White and lack cultural sensitivity, teaching down to the students, pushing for assimilation, and thinking the students do not have the potential to go to school and be successful (GQRR).

NATIVE ART AND CULTURE

Focus group participants and online users admitted to openly admiring Native culture, including having an appreciation for rituals, tradition, arts, dance, music, and traditional clothing and jewelry. They used words like “beautiful,” “amazing” and “rich” to describe Native culture online, and many

expressed interest in learning more about the culture. This interest creates a channel to engage non-Natives and provide a more authentic perspective about who American Indians are today (GQRR).

VOICES AND INFLUENCE OF NATIVE PEOPLES AND ORGANIZATIONS

Across all these channels, lifting up Native peoples and their history, culture and stories is a priority. For example, policymakers in our study noted that tribes often do a lot for their surrounding communities but rarely talk about it,

which means that these contributions go unnoted. Sharing this information could be powerful for changing perceptions (Pipestem), thus underscoring the need for greater reach of Native voices in social media.

DIRECT ENGAGEMENT OF PEOPLE WHOSE DECISIONS AFFECT NATIVE PEOPLES

Many of the people who set policy, preside over court hearings, establish cultural norms through entertainment, designate funding through foundations and other philanthropy, or have other significant impacts on the perceptions, narrative and opportunity of Native peoples have little contact with or knowledge of them. Recommendations and ideas from the research include the following (GQRR, Pipestem):

- Policy elites in our study recommended consistent training and education for all government staff on the relationships between tribes and the U.S. government. Legislators, they said, could also benefit from more training before each session to have a better idea of how policies could affect tribes.
- Some states have instituted mandatory trainings for state staff on tribal history and on ways to work with tribal communities today, as well as issues around racial equity.
- Native organizations in some states have successfully implemented tours and educational training sessions for government agency staff and legislators to increase knowledge of treaties and how these government-to-government relationships should work in practice.
- Policy elites in our study encouraged expanding such trainings, developing webinars and finding other ways to reach employees online, thus bringing more people into the fold so they can have a stake in the future of Native communities.

2 Shear, S. B., Knowles, R. T., Soden, G. J., & Castro, A. J. (2015). “Manifesting destiny: Re/presentations of Indigenous peoples in K–12 U.S. history standards.” *Theory & Research in Social Education* 43 (1): 68–101, DOI:10.1080/00933104.2014.999849.

Policy Issues and Opportunities

We found strong support for many Native policy priorities across a broad base of stakeholders. As *Reclaiming Native Truth* seeks both to advance a narrative and culture shift that affects attitudes and behaviors and to create specific changes in policy, practices and lives, the research indicates several issues or levers that are ripe for change or that are absolutely essential to shifting the narrative.

K-12 CURRICULUM

School curriculum is an area in which many Native and non-Native stakeholders desire and demand change and progress. Only 47 percent of people in our survey believed that what they were taught in schools about Native Americans was accurate. This number was higher among millennials, who may have experienced a more inclusive curriculum. A 72 percent majority believed it is necessary to make significant changes to school curricula on Native history and culture.

When asked to rank how effectively they are teaching certain social studies topics, the teachers in our focus groups ranked pre-Columbian history and Native history at the bottom. Thus, there is support for changing educational policy, as also demonstrated by recent actions in Oregon, California and other states that mandate inclusion of accurate history, developed with tribes and Native leaders, in school curricula (GQRR).

72%

believed it is necessary to make significant changes to school curricula on Native history and culture.

SOVEREIGNTY

Sovereignty was poorly understood across all stakeholder groups in our study — from elected officials and policymakers to influencers from other fields to the general public. There was added confusion about the concept of more than 600 sovereign nations within the United States and about how tribes can be both sovereign nations and “reliant on the government.” This misunderstanding, held across the country and in all population groups surveyed, is one of the most damaging, fueling many of the negative narratives and misperceptions, including the notion that Native Americans are receiving government benefits just for being Native.

Among business and policy leaders in our study, sovereignty and sovereign immunity were perceived as barriers that impede small, private business on reservations. However, despite the lack of understanding, there was overwhelming support for sovereign rights to land and control over land use (GQRR, Pipestem).

POLICIES TO ALLEVIATE POVERTY

The one benefit of the ongoing deficit narratives is that they have firmly established the existence of extreme poverty in some places within Indian Country. Americans are generally aware of these conditions, though they do not understand the severity and tend to be unaware of the ongoing oppression and failure of the government to uphold its treaty and trust obligations. Those interviewed recognize Native Americans

as one of the groups most in need of support (63 percent said the United States should “do more” to help Native peoples; 74 percent of those polled favored changes in U.S. law to increase monetary support) and generally support policies that will improve conditions in Indian Country, a position that can be leveraged to bring specific policy solutions forward (GQRR).

NATIVE-THEMED MASCOTS

The mascot issue is one of the most complex components of the research. Literature reviews clearly document the negative impact of Native-themed mascots on Native high school and college students, decreasing their sense of personal and community worth.

Such mascots have also been shown to lead Whites to feel stronger and more connected to other Whites, while increasing bias and prejudice toward Native peoples. For example, students who harbor negative implicit biases toward Native-themed mascots are more likely to hold stereotype-consistent expectations of fellow Native students, such as assuming Native students enjoy nonacademic tasks and are therefore less adept academically (Fryberg).

In focus groups with Native Americans, four out of five said they were offended by Native-themed mascots, which is in contrast to two national surveys (highly contested by Native leaders for allowing respondents to self-identify as Native Americans) that indicate that Native Americans are not offended by Native-themed mascots (GQRR). Despite this potential inconsistency, the evidence is fairly clear: Native-themed mascots perpetuate the negative stereotype and fuel discrimination.

When it comes to eliminating such mascots or passing policies banning them, however, the research is less definitive. Americans in our survey support Native positions on most policies except the mascot issue, which is more divided. In addition, the mascot debate in social media is highly politicized and nonproductive (GQRR).

When it comes to other issues, such as education and sovereignty, the more information people in our research received about Native history and current experience, the more supportive they became. With the mascot issue, however, when people in focus groups heard information about how mascots undermine the self-esteem of Native children and reinforce bias, those who opposed such mascots found support for their point of view, while those who supported them remained stubbornly unmoved (GQRR).

In other testing, after exposure to Native-themed mascots, White people reported a boost in self-esteem and feelings of closeness to other White people; were less likely to support banning Native-themed mascots; and were less likely to support Native sovereignty, teaching accurate information, or enacting policies that reduce inequities and poverty (Fryberg).

All that said, the fact remains that Native-themed mascots are damaging to Native children’s self-esteem and affect the way non-Natives view Native peoples (Fryberg). Although public policy change and bans may be difficult to advance, change is possible in local communities. In areas that have replaced or banned Native-themed mascots, the participation of local tribes or Native communities was highly influential in reclaiming the narrative (GQRR).

NATIONAL MONUMENTS

Of those polled, 71 percent said they favor policies to expand national monuments to protect sacred lands. Within Indian Country, this number increased to 77 percent (GQRR).

Lessons Learned from Standing Rock

One of the key recommendations coming out of the *Reclaiming Native Truth* National Stakeholder Convening was the need to unpack lessons learned at Standing Rock to discern more about the messages and narrative that positively portrayed Native peoples and issues, the strategies and tactics that were most effective (and what did not work), the experience of the collaboration and coalescing of nearly 400 tribes, the allies that emerged and those that remain engaged, and what assets/efforts can be built upon.

A total of 16 interviews were conducted with

- Standing Rock tribal, community and youth leadership;
- key members of the No Dakota Access Pipeline (NoDAPL) movement core organizing team;
- central Native and non-Native allies to the NoDAPL movement;
- prominent journalists; and
- celebrity and cultural influencers.

The interviews focused specifically on how and what strategies and methods of decision-making used by the tribe, organizers and allies had the greatest impact on shifting public perceptions, generating support, and contributing to gains and/or victories. What follows are four preliminary findings from this research. The full report of lessons learned, written by Mary Kathryn Nagle, Pipestem Law, P.C., will be issued in June 2018.

OVERARCHING FINDINGS

The movement at Standing Rock has significantly undermined the systemic erasure of Native peoples from the dominant American narrative. At a time when most Americans continued to believe that Native Americans and tribal nations no longer exist in the United States, Americans were presented with a movement that forced a new conversation around values, identity, and our collective connection to the Earth around us and the lands we live on.

For several months from August 2016 until February 2017 — and during a presidential election — millions of Americans and a global audience witnessed a powerful story unfold, told through citizen journalists, social media, alternative media and then ultimately mainstream media—as tens of thousands of individuals and hundreds of tribal nations traveled to Cannonball, North Dakota, to stand with the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe in its opposition to a pipeline that threatened to destroy the tribe’s drinking water, historical treaty lands and sacred sites.

Suddenly Native Americans were no longer simply characters from the past that occasionally pop out of oblivion and into a Western or a museum. Instead, Americans watched as contemporary Native Americans populated the daily news diet with articulate, powerful narratives concerning the sovereignty of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe — and all tribal nations — as well as the collective threat that climate change and losing our drinking water poses to us all.

This conclusion is supported by the work of the *Reclaiming Native Truth* project (RNT), which in the spring of 2017 conducted 28 focus groups with diverse demographics in 10 states and monitored more than 300 social media channels. This research conclusively found one agreed-upon conclusion: Standing Rock made a lasting impression on an unprecedented swath of the American public. The majority of focus group participants nationwide not only referenced Standing Rock but also voiced their support for the tribe to defend its rights to its land and water, as well as the rights of all to safe and clean drinking water. These findings cut across all demographics, including gender, political affiliation, race and geography. Standing Rock and the power of social media captured the imaginations and interest of a broad sector of American society and the world. Standing Rock dominated the conversations about Native Americans, as evidenced by RNT's social media research, particularly from August 2017 through January 2018.

As one of the movement's core organizers, Judith LeBlanc (*Caddo Nation*), noted, "we interrupted the narrative of who and what Indian people are in the 21st century." Jodi Gillette (*Standing Rock Sioux Tribe*), a former advisor to President Obama on Indian affairs, confirmed that the "Standing Rock fight against DAPL has provided enormous visibility to all

things Native, and it is important for people to recognize that role." Instead of figures from the past who no longer exist, the movement at Standing Rock "interrupted a narrative and helped people understand that not only are [Native people] still here, but that [they] have a special relationship to land and water that is inherent" and must be respected. And as Standing Rock's non-Native attorney Jan Hasselman (*Earthjustice*) noted, "In the last 20 or 30 years there hasn't been anything that pierced the broader public consciousness and made people aware of what's going on in Indian country [more] than this." Ultimately, "what Standing Rock did for all of America was that it brought past injustices to the present."

The movement at Standing Rock was successful for many reasons, but four in particular. First, the movement itself came from the grassroots and was combined with the leadership of a tribal nation. Second, the messaging of the movement was not opportunistic, but instead was organic and authentic, coming out of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe's traditional teachings and cultural values. Third, the movement brought together the largest unification of tribal nations in recent history. Fourth, the movement leveraged the power of social and alternative media, combined with the advocacy of celebrities, to force coverage by mainstream media.

THE MOVEMENT COMBINED TRIBAL LEADERSHIP WITH GRASSROOTS ADVOCACY

"You cannot interrupt the narrative without that grassroots component," acknowledged Judith LeBlanc. She continued, "There were grassroots folks at Standing Rock, who understood the very clear danger to sacred sites as well as to the water supply of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe," and "the chairman and the tribal council understood that the grassroots was demanding their leadership, and they stood with the grassroots leadership in trying to prevent the building of this pipeline." One of the movement's core organizers, Nick Tilsen (*Oglala Sioux Nation*), reflected that oftentimes, in movements, "the activists and the tribal leaders [remain] separate." One key distinction at Standing Rock, therefore, was "the fact that [former Chairman] Dave [Archambault] and the tribe [were] taking a stance on this as a tribe, and that there [were] activists there." Instead of separate, activists and tribal leaders stood together. "That created the perfect storm."

The grassroots element of the movement was particularly powerful because it was led by the values of the community. Many people, as Judith LeBlanc pointed out, "felt that the power of prayer, if organized, could potentially stop that pipeline." And at a time when the country was experiencing "so much division, especially ... since the 2016 election, every community [was] yearning for that values-led feeling that we must do something ... not just to protect the water ... for the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, but to protect the water and the land for all of the people, the 17 million who live, love and work along the river," LeBlanc said.

Ultimately, LeBlanc added, "one of the big lessons coming out of Standing Rock is that it's going to take everyone playing their role, from policy people to tribal leadership to spiritual leadership to community-based organizers to just random individuals who are drawn into initiatives, that everybody has a role."

THE MOVEMENT'S MESSAGING WAS GROUNDED IN CULTURE AND TRADITIONS

To connect past to present, the core organizers of the movement drew on their traditional teachings (teachings they have embraced since time immemorial) to create messaging points that were authentic and organic but that would also resonate with a universal, non-Native audience. The majority of individuals interviewed agreed that “Water Is Life” (*Mni Wiconi*) was one of the most powerful messages/narratives coming out of the movement. “*Mni Wiconi*” began to trend on online social media platforms like Twitter, and today “*Mni Wiconi*” can be found on T-shirts and stickers worn around the world. As Nick Tilsen stated, the *Mni Wiconi*/Water Is Life messaging was incredibly effective because “it [worked in] both [an] Indigenous and non-Indigenous context ... that people could relate to.... It became universal because water is everywhere, and everywhere it needs to be protected.”

Or, as Judith LeBlanc put it, “Water is life, plain, simple, direct.” As LaDonna Allard (*Standing Rock Sioux Tribe*) explained: “We stuck to *Mni Wiconi*. Water Is Life. And I don’t think that has even changed. When I was at the UN, every country stood up and said that. And I was sitting there thinking ‘Oh my God! China is saying *Mni Wiconi*!’ It is still the message today. How those words have [carried] to every corner in the world, it’s like it’s branded now.”

And as Tariq Brown Otter (*Standing Rock Sioux Tribe*), one of the youth who ran thousands of miles to take the petition to President Obama, noted: “Everyone has to drink water to live.” To former Standing Rock Chairman Dave Archambault, “It’s real simple.... Water Is Life” is “a phrase that anyone can relate to, anyone can be a part of. And then the other thing is the word Standing Rock — not the word, but the two words, Standing Rock. Now let’s put stand with Standing Rock or standing with Standing Rock. Those are simple phrases that people can identify with.”

Instead of focusing on the routine environmental messaging points that most utilize in opposing fossil fuel expansion, the movement “really embrac[ed] the history,” attorney Jan Hasselman pointed out. “It was vastly more successful at penetrating people’s consciousness than these really abstract environmental and climate messages which are incredibly important but have just proven to be very hard to get people to care about.”

This was, in part, because the chairman of Standing Rock at that time, Dave Archambault, stuck to what Hasselman called “very simple and compelling sound bites around history and justice. He wasn’t talking about the mechanics of oil pipelines and he certainly wasn’t talking about climate and ‘leave it in the ground.’ He was talking about history and embedding this story in the arc of the history of the Standing Rock people.” In the chairman’s *New York Times* op-ed (a publication that

marked the moment in time that many highlighted as the “tipping point,” when the movement went from obscurity and exclusion in mainstream media to a national news story consumed by millions), Dave Archambault connected past to present for Americans, stating:

It’s a familiar story in Indian Country. This is the third time that the Sioux Nation’s lands and resources have been taken without regard for tribal interests. The Sioux peoples signed treaties in 1851 and 1868. The government broke them before the ink was dry.

When the Army Corps of Engineers dammed the Missouri River in 1958, it took our riverfront forests, fruit orchards and most fertile farmland to create Lake Oahe. Now the Corps is taking our clean water and sacred places by approving this river crossing. Whether it’s gold from the Black Hills or hydropower from the Missouri or oil pipelines that threaten our ancestral inheritance, the tribes have always paid the price for America’s prosperity.³

Ultimately, the movement’s core organizers controlled the narrative and refused to let opponents and mainstream media define their movement. As someone who is quite familiar with the manner in which mainstream media ordinarily defines movements organized by communities of color, Amy Goodman of Democracy Now! made a point to state that what “was really important was [that] Native Americans [were] defining themselves.”

This self-definition was critical, in particular, around the label “protestors.” North Dakota, and the media supporting the oil company and the State, were creating a narrative that the Natives at Standing Rock were dangerous and violent. The movement’s core organizers rejected that narrative. As Nick Tilsen explained, “I think the other core messaging was that we’re Protectors Not Protestors.... We decided, let’s not be protestors. We’re not protesting the system, we’re exercising our inherent right to self-determination and responsibility to protect our water and our land, so we’re protectors.” Judith LeBlanc added that those who showed up to support Standing Rock “weren’t protestors, they weren’t there to create a violent situation,” so it was important to communicate “that they were there really grounded in prayer and in spirituality, in our values.”

Ultimately, “these messages brought people from many miles and brought delegations from hundreds of tribes,” LeBlanc said. “That’s the power of messaging that really meets that moment of a perfect storm, or the magic movement moment.... You had tens of thousands of Indians who, through tremendous sacrifice, came to Standing Rock. They needed to be there to stand with Standing Rock.”

3 Archambault II, D. (2016, August 24). “Taking a Stand at Standing Rock.” *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/25/opinion/taking-a-stand-at-standing-rock.html>.

The solidarity of 360 tribal nations inspired the grassroots activists, provided immeasurable support to the elected leadership of Standing Rock at the time, and amplified the movement's messaging around the inherent sovereign right of a tribal nation to protect its water, treaty lands, sacred sites and burials.

THE MOVEMENT CREATED THE LARGEST UNIFICATION OF TRIBAL NATIONS IN MODERN HISTORY

Amy Goodman noted, “this was the largest unification of Native American tribes from Latin America, the United States and the first nations of Canada that we have seen in decades.” The sheer number of tribal nations and individuals who came to Cannonball, North Dakota, to stand with the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe garnered unprecedented attention on social media, in mainstream media and around the world.

Steve Sitting Bear (*Standing Rock Sioux Tribe*) reflected that in August and September of 2016, the tribe was “try[ing] to arrange a meeting with the president and the first lady. But the people in the White House were asking, ‘Well how many tribes support what they’re doing?’” As a result, the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe “put out that call to action for resolutions and letters of support.” What happened next could not have been predicted. As Steve Sitting Bear recalls: “To be perfectly honest, I thought we would get, you know, maybe 20–30 tribes that were actually going to do something. But when we sent that out, I think by the end ... we had over 360 tribes that had done that. So that was organic. We didn’t expect that, it just happened and [then the movement] just grew even more.” The solidarity of 360 tribal nations inspired the grassroots activists, provided immeasurable support to the elected leadership of Standing Rock at the time, and amplified the movement’s messaging around the inherent sovereign right of a tribal nation to protect its water, treaty lands, sacred sites and burials.

The movement mobilized Native Americans from all walks of life; there was an awakening in conjunction with non-Native supporters that caused the Oceti Sakowin Camp to swell to more than 20,000 people on-site while also mobilizing an unprecedented global grassroots movement of support.

As Reid Walker (*Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara Nation, or MHA Nation*) recognized, “The beauty of this movement was that the tribes from across the nation mobilized and helped support it.” Adds Judith LeBlanc, “we won, because we built a level of unity and collaboration and reciprocity among hundreds of tribes, which has never been done before in history.”



Two young men ride their horses at the Oceti Sakowin Camp, Cannonball, North Dakota September 2016
Photograph by Josue Rivas

THE MOVEMENT LEVERAGED THE POWER OF SOCIAL AND ALTERNATIVE MEDIA, COMBINED WITH ADVOCACY FROM CELEBRITIES, TO FORCE COVERAGE BY MAINSTREAM MEDIA

Truly, such amplification would not have been possible without social media and alternative media. In line with the historical erasure of Native peoples, mainstream media initially, and for quite some time, refused to report on the Standing Rock movement. But “as Native Americans defined their own struggles, you saw the White corporate media struggling to change their coverage as well — or being forced to,” Amy Goodman noted.

The first mainstream journalist to cover the movement, Lawrence O'Donnell, later reflected on what prompted his coverage. It was, quite simply, “one word. It was the word ‘trespassing.’” He shared that he “read a small item about the protest.... It said that if the protests continued that the protestors would be arrested for trespassing. And it was just so stunning to me that the decedents of the very first people to ever set foot on that land would be arrested by the invaders of that land for trespassing. It just seems that the one thing that Native Americans should never, ever be arrested for would be trespassing. And that was the word that grabbed me in the first article that I read about it.”

He further noted that it was not necessarily the substance of the legal battle or “the history of the pipeline project in that article” that inspired him into action. Instead, “it was really just that word, that word ‘trespassing’ that made me do my first piece about this on my show, which was on August 25, 2016.”

Nick Tilsen witnessed Lawrence O'Donnell's initial coverage on August 25 and spoke about the power of his authentic coverage of the movement on national TV: “He wasn't just acting. He was astounded, like, ‘Whoa, we're doing this to Indian people now in the 21st century? This is crazy.’ And he was authentically moved by this and ... how wrong [it was] on every level.... [When] he did his first piece and that monologue ..., I think that it was one of the best monologues ever done conceptualizing the Indigenous people's issues.... And I think that it moved the hearts and minds of millions of Americans.”

Lawrence O'Donnell connected his two-minute monologue on August 27 to the reaction on social media, recollecting that “it was the shortest thing in the show, and it got a really kind of explosive reaction on Twitter and on social media. And that was fascinating to me because there were two kinds of reactions. First, the surprise and outrage by people who were learning about this for the first time. And then the other far more interesting reaction, to me, was from people who knew a lot more about it than I did, who were already out there [from] different tribes ... [whom] I discovered on Twitter and on social media who had much more knowledge about this. And so I started to feed off of that, and it became this dynamic exchange through social media between my show and the people who were way ahead of me on this.”

Just seven days on the heels of Lawrence O'Donnell's introduction of the movement to mainstream media, Amy Goodman filmed the dog attacks on September 3, the Saturday of Labor Day weekend 2016 — when Dakota Access LLC purposefully bulldozed and destroyed the 27 burials Standing Rock's former Tribal Historic Preservation Officer Tim Mentz had described in the affidavit he filed in court the day before, on September 2. Combined with Lawrence O'Donnell's monologue from one week before, this coverage made it impossible for the mainstream media to continue to ignore the movement at Standing Rock. Comedian and committed conservation activist Dallas Goldtooth remarked that “Democracy Now! really kind of took it to a whole new level after the [dog] attacks, and there was the good fortune to have them there during that day.... Their presence and journalism, you know, really opened — and I guess sent the invitation for traditional media to start covering the story.”

“Citizen journalism was absolutely critical for providing access to breaking news stories, as well as the diverse viewpoints. Social media was essential for getting reports out to a global audience.”
– Amy Goodman

In addition to alternative media, social media brought the Standing Rock movement’s message to millions who otherwise would have never heard of it. Amy Goodman stated, “Citizen journalism was absolutely critical for providing access to breaking news stories, as well as the diverse viewpoints. Social media was essential for getting reports out to a global audience.” Indeed, as Dallas Goldtooth put it, “social media allowed immediate, direct, one-on-one access and kind of this perception of unfiltered access” to what was happening on the ground. And thus when asked to compare Standing Rock with other historical Native-led movements like Wounded Knee and Alcatraz, Reid Walker (*MHA Nation*) stated that “the biggest difference now is that anybody with a phone with a camera on it is a media representative now. And images and issues can be spun around the globe in a matter of seconds now. So you can amplify and gain mass faster than you ever could have back then.” As Judith LeBlanc reflected, social media “gave an opportunity for people, grassroots folks to show, to explain, to talk, to challenge people to think about why we must, we must take such a ... stand to stop the pipeline from being built. And the social media was, I think, critical to the traditional media coverage, because as we can see from Trump, Twitter matters, Facebook matters.”

Finally, the messaging (“Water Is Life” and “Stand With Standing Rock,” among a few others) was amplified by a combination of highly effective tribal leader messengers, community members, key media personalities and highly influential celebrities—such as Shailene Woodley, Chris Hemsworth, Ezra Miller, Mark Ruffalo, Ava DuVernay, Michael Moore, Rosario Dawson, Katy Perry and Solange Knowles, as well as *Saturday Night Live* personalities in the skit “Weekend Update” with Colin Jost, Michael Che and Tina Fey. These celebrities were able to reach the millennials and people with no other ties or connections to tribal nations or Indian Country. Working together with grassroots Native activists and tribal leaders, they were able to break centuries of silence and amplify a message of sovereignty and solidarity that, to date, had been erased from the dominant American narrative.

Shailene Woodley reflected that the Standing Rock movement felt important to her “from the very first time I heard about it” because it was “started by the youth of Standing Rock and nurtured and supported by [the] tribal leadership of Standing Rock.” She continued, “The key component that created the perfect storm for my participation and my passion for it was ‘Enough is enough.’ I think any time any movement starts, it’s because [we] are fed up and people have taken as much as they can possibly take.” The final component, she shared, was what she saw as the “beautiful opportunity for unification in a way that we haven’t really seen, at least in my generation ... [and] the community I grew up in,” the opportunity “to know and to be educated about Native Americans from Native Americans, not from outsourced media or from a narrative—a White narrative or a Western narrative.”

LESSONS LEARNED

We must now build upon the newfound place Natives now hold in the American consciousness, a place we hold because the Standing Rock movement successfully penetrated the historical erasure surrounding Native peoples in the United States. As Judith LeBlanc reminds us, “In order for us to not only just interrupt the narrative, but also to strengthen the little crack that we made in the narrative, we have to find a lot of different ways to get those stories told.”

Ultimately, Standing Rock powerfully interrupted and disrupted prevailing negative narratives and the erasure of Native peoples. The new narrative pushed out by Standing Rock became truly powerful and transformative when it was combined with (1) messaging that was authentic, organic and resonant first and foremost with the values of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe’s leadership (traditional and elected), Native youth and Native peoples; (2) unity of nearly 400 tribes; (3) connections and working with unprecedented grassroots mobilization at the camp, nationally and globally; (4) social media and “citizen” and/or “participatory” journalists who forced a level of national and global consciousness and forced editors across mainstream newsrooms to stop assuming that nobody cares about Native stories because they appeal to a small and “insignificant” audience. Without a doubt, alternative media was also a major force.

New narratives alone are not enough. They must connect with grassroots organizing, cross-sectoral partnerships with non-Native allies, and unity, not only within tribes but also among individual Natives and allies.

Standing Rock created interruption and disruption, but that time is fading; we must put out the call to make a case for influence, philanthropy and investment in telling stories like Standing Rock and other “Native truths” today. Standing Rock created an opening that is closing rapidly. The time is now to build upon the lessons learned from Standing Rock and invest in creating capacity across Indian Country on a range of issues and infrastructure to build trust among tribes, Native citizens and allies while the opportunity remains.

New narratives alone are not enough. They must connect with grassroots organizing, cross-sectoral partnerships with non-Native allies, and unity, not only within tribes but also among individual Natives and allies.



Water protectors peacefully march to Bismark, North Dakota to hold a prayer in front of the state capital. Bismark, ND November 2016.
Photograph by Josue Rivas

The New Narrative Works

FINDINGS FROM A NATIONAL SURVEY SHOW IT MOVES HEARTS AND MINDS

Building on the themes that the research suggested would be effective in shifting the narrative — values, history and visibility — *Reclaiming Native Truth* worked with Native storytellers, artists and advocates from across the country to create a new narrative.

Reclaiming Native Truth research partner Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, in collaboration with Dr. Stephanie Fryberg and her team, tested this narrative in a nationally representative online survey of 2,000 adults from April 27 through May 1, 2018. Half of the people read the narrative, and the other half did not. Both groups answered the same questions about their level of interest in Native American issues, their perception of the amount of discrimination Native Americans face today and their support for key Native issues.

Respondents who read the new narrative showed significantly higher support for Native issues compared with respondents who did not read the narrative. In addition, their support was substantially higher than that of people who answered similar questions in a telephone survey a year ago.

This research shows huge majorities of Americans agreeing with the narrative and finding it credible. It also shows dramatic differences in attitudes toward Native American peoples and issues between people who read this language and people who did not.

THE NARRATIVES WE TESTED

The survey included an overall statement — based on the themes of values, history and visibility, plus a call to action — that represents the new narrative we seek to establish as the dominant narrative:

The history of Native Americans is one of great strength and revitalization. It is a story built around values that have shaped Native cultures and American society: respect for family and elders, shared responsibility to care for the land and an obligation to do right by the next generation. It is a story of resilience through great pain and injustice, from broken treaties and loss of land and language in the past, to derogatory sports mascots and biased history taught in schools today. Across more than 1,000 tribal nations and in every profession and segment of society, Native American peoples carry the cultural knowledge and wisdom that sustains Native nations and helps build a stronger future for all. Let's move forward together.

This research shows dramatic differences in attitudes toward Native American peoples and issues between people who read this language and people who did not.

Respondents who read this overall narrative also read the following issue-specific versions of the narrative, each also using the themes of values, history and visibility and a call to action.

The Indian Child Welfare Act

All children deserve to be raised by loving families in supportive communities, surrounded by the culture and heritage they know best. In Native cultures, family is defined very broadly. Everyone plays an active role in raising a child and is ready to help in times of crisis. But when the U.S. child welfare system was created, it was biased against raising a child in this way, as a community. As a result, the U.S. government removed Native children from their families — not because of abuse or neglect but because of this way of being. The Indian Child Welfare Act, or ICWA, was passed in 1978 to prevent Native American children from being unjustly taken away and adopted outside their culture. Today, however, ICWA is not consistently respected. We need to uphold and improve the law to make sure we are doing what is best for Native children.

Sovereignty and Treaties

Honor and integrity are important values we look for in other people. They're important values for countries, too. When a country makes an agreement or signs a treaty, you expect them to live up to it. And yet, our own country has broken more than 500 treaties with Native nations that were here long before the United States was founded. Today, there are more than 600 sovereign Native nations within the borders of the United States. Their residents are citizens of both their own Native Nations and of the United States, and they pay federal taxes like all Americans. Yet our federal and state governments, corporations and individuals continue to violate these treaties and challenge the sovereignty of these

independent nations to set their own laws and do what is right for their own citizens. It is only fair to honor our treaties with Native nations and to respect their sovereignty.

Native-Themed Mascots

Our own culture and heritage is often an important part of who we are and how we define ourselves. And no one deserves to see their heritage insulted or made fun of. Yet for hundreds of years, Native Americans have been mocked and dehumanized by slurs and images in team mascots at every level from elementary schools to professional sports. And while some people mistakenly believe that these mascots are harmless or even respectful, they represent a continued dehumanization of Native peoples and do real psychological harm to Native children. It's time to eliminate the use of Native American names, symbols and images as team mascots.

Representations of Native Peoples in Entertainment

Representations of Native Americans in entertainment — from books and television to Disney films — are often based on negative stereotypes. Even portrayals that seem positive at first can be harmful when they romanticize Native culture and imply that all Native American peoples are the same. This often happens because Native characters are played by non-Native people, and Native writers, producers, directors, actors, musicians and others are excluded from the industry. The truth is that Native storytellers and artists have always been here, and they are increasingly creating and driving innovation in popular culture and the arts. Native American peoples' stories and voices connect with values that are core to American culture and that are needed today more than ever. Hollywood needs to invest in and promote new Native stories in film and TV, hire more Native artists and replace false depictions with Native peoples' stories.

SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

Huge majorities of Americans in this survey agree with the new narrative and find it credible. A 65 percent majority say they would be willing — 31 percent very willing — to share these ideas with others.

More convincing than the subjective reaction to the narratives are the objective differences between the respondents who read the narratives and those who did not. Among those who did not read the narratives, for example, only 39 percent support a ban on Native American mascots; among the respondents who read the narratives, 53 percent support such a ban.

Of all who responded to the online survey (before reading the narratives, for the group that went on to read them), only 34 percent said they believe Native Americans face “a great

deal” or “a lot” of discrimination in this country, a figure comparable to findings from our telephone survey last year (36 percent). This figure rose to 55 percent after reading the narratives, among those assigned to read them. This means that nearly half (49 percent) of those who read the narratives moved toward believing Native Americans face discrimination in this country.

Most Americans Are Open to Hearing This Narrative

A 78 percent majority started the survey saying they are interested in learning more about Native American cultures. Strong majorities support Native American positions on most issues even before hearing the narratives. We saw similar outcomes in research last year.

- 63 percent agree that Native American tribes should have full legal authority on their own lands.
- 67 percent support the Indian Child Welfare Act.
- 78 percent believe it is important to feature more stories about Native Americans on TV, in movies and in other entertainment (33 percent believe it is very important).
- The mascot issue is much more difficult: 39 percent favor a ban on Native American mascots, while 34 percent oppose a ban.

- 38 percent of people who believe they have Native American ancestry say they are very willing.

The Issue Narratives Move People

Participants who read our narratives consistently demonstrate more support for all Native American issues (see Figure 2).

Figure 2.
Narrative impact

	Sovereignty		Indian Child Welfare Act		Mascots		Culture	
	Did not hear narrative	Heard narrative	Did not hear narrative	Heard narrative	Did not hear narrative	Heard narrative	Did not hear narrative	Heard narrative
Support	63%	70%	67%	79%	39%	53%	78%	83%
Oppose	21%	12%	10%	5%	34%	24%	5%	5%
Net Difference	+16		+17		+24		+5*	

* There is less impact here because we support starts so high (78 percent).

The Public Responds Strongly to Our Overall Narrative

Of those who read the overall statement of the new narrative (see page 40), an 81 percent majority said they agree with it, and just 5 percent say they disagree. Nearly 9 in 10 (88 percent) find it credible, and two-thirds (65 percent) say they are willing to share it with others. Some of the same allied groups we saw in previous research respond more enthusiastically here: younger, more politically progressive and more racially diverse people. But this narrative also works well among conservatives, among men without a college education, and in Indian Country.

While some variation emerges in terms of intensity, this message also works across communities and geographies.

- 81 percent of Whites agree, as do 80 percent of non-Whites.
- 82 percent outside of Indian Country agree, as do 75 percent within Indian Country.
- 85 percent of Democrats agree, as do 79 percent of Republicans.
- 79 percent of people younger than 30 agree, as do 79 percent of people older than 65.

The groups who say they are most willing to share the narrative may be likely to become active in a campaign.

- 37 percent of African-Americans say they are very willing to share this information, compared with 28 percent of Whites.
- 38 percent of Democrats say they are very willing.
- 37 percent of New Englanders report being willing, the highest regional total.
- 37 percent of younger, college-educated Americans say they are willing.
- 41 percent of people who know a Native American report willingness.
- 42 percent of fathers say they are very willing, compared with 33 percent of mothers.

Perhaps the most impressive shift appears around the mascot issue, where the public has consistently demonstrated resistance. After reading the narrative, 53 percent support a ban, with only 24 percent opposed. The narratives not only help energize allies — such as younger people, political progressives and people of color — but also have an impact among more resistant groups, such as seniors, people without a college education and residents of Indian Country.

Even more dramatically, the combined impact of the overall narrative and the issue narratives awakens Americans to ongoing discrimination against Native Americans. At the beginning of the survey, 34 percent of all participants believed Native Americans face a great deal or a lot of discrimination. By the end of the survey, 55 percent of those who read our narrative believed Native Americans face a great deal or a lot of discrimination. Not only is there movement among some of the allies identified in previous research (such as younger people and people of color), but there is also disproportionate change among groups less inclined to align as allies (such as Republicans, people in the Rocky Mountain states and people without a college education).

Clues About Groups Who Are Our Allies and Should Be Engaged First

No hostile groups emerged in this survey. Some of the uglier attitudes we have heard in some focus groups may well be represented here, and some of these respondents may hold stereotypes we have seen in the previous surveys. Yet it is convincing that the majority of every subgroup here agrees with our narrative. No broad group appears to be implacably opposed to our efforts. Some groups, of course, form a base of likely allies, some are movable, and some are simply tougher to reach.

A large potential ally group emerges among people who believe they have Native American ancestry.

About one-third (36 percent) of all participants in the online survey said they believe they have some Native American ancestry or relatives. Figure 3 shows various demographic groups and compares their share of the general population (e.g., 16 percent Hispanic) with their share of the 36 percent who claim native ancestry (e.g., 22 percent Hispanic).

Figure 3.
Breakdown of people claiming Native American ancestry

Demographic Group	Representation Among General Population	Representation Among Those Who Claim Native American Ancestry
Men	48%	45%
Women	52%	55%
White	65%	58%
African-American	13%	17%
Hispanic	16%	22%
Asian	4%	3%
Younger than 50	57%	65%
Older than 50	43%	34%
Non-College-Educated	67%	74%
College-Educated	33%	26%
New England	5%	3%
Middle Atlantic	13%	11%
East North Central	15%	14%
West North Central	7%	6%
Deep South	30%	35%
Border states	7%	8%
Mountain states	7%	8%
Pacific	16%	14%

These respondents consistently demonstrate more support for Native American issues than other groups and are among the most likely to move toward believing Native Americans face discrimination. For example, 48 percent of the respondents who believe they have Native American ancestry support a ban on Native American mascots (even without hearing the narratives), compared with 36 percent among respondents who do not report having Native American ancestry.

Given the numbers of respondents who believe they have Native American ancestry, the degree to which they shift in response to the narrative, their clear interest in Native American culture, and their commitment to Native American issues, these people strongly recommend themselves as allies in this campaign.

Some of the biggest shifts occur among groups who are, on other measures, more ambivalent about Native American issues and communities. For example, support for the Indian Child Welfare Act jumps 12 percentage points overall (net) but 19 points among seniors. Conservative women and older men show the biggest shifts on sovereignty issues. Without reading the narratives, only 38 percent of men without a college education support a ban on Native American mascots; among those who read the narratives, support jumps to 56 percent.

When it comes to perceptions of the amount of discrimination Native Americans face, larger than average shifts in response to the new narrative occur among younger men (from 36 percent believing that Native Americans face a great deal or a lot of discrimination to 58 percent believing this), liberal/moderate Republicans (from 28 to 47 percent), residents of the Rocky Mountain states (from 28 to 49 percent), younger African-Americans (from 40 to 70 percent), younger people overall (from 40 to 67 percent), and people who believe they have Native American ancestry (from 39 to 67 percent).

Considering the findings from this survey, and taking into account quantitative research from 2017, we can define priority audience segments for *Reclaiming Native Truth* (see Figure 4).

Figure 4.
Population segments

Allies	Movable	Tougher
People of color, particularly Hispanics	Younger non-college-educated Whites	Whites in Indian Country
Democrats	Asians	Seniors
Liberals	Young men	Conservatives
Residents of Northeast	Residents of Rocky Mountain states	Older non-college-educated men
People who know a Native American	Residents of Deep South	Republicans
People of Native American Ancestry	Liberal/moderate Republicans	
Young, college-educated people	Young African Americans	
Young women	Fathers	

Final Narratives for Use

Based on these testing results, *Reclaiming Native Truth* fine tuned the narratives and developed two guides, one for Native peoples and organizations and one for allies, with insights on using the narratives and advancing narrative change. To download the guides, please visit reclaimingnativetruth.com.

Summaries by Research Team

The following section includes a summary of each individual team's research, allowing readers to see the specific methodologies and findings emerging from each phase. These are the unfiltered and complete findings of our research efforts; some components are not necessarily what *Reclaiming Native Truth* and its stakeholders propose to act upon. Nonetheless, acknowledging all findings is important to begin shaping a narrative change strategy.



**Dr. Stephanie Fryberg
and Team (Fryberg)**

GREENBERG QUINLAN ROSNER RESEARCH

**Greenberg Quinlan
Rosner Research (GQRR)**



**Perception Institute
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**Pipestem Law
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Dr. Stephanie Fryberg (Tulalip) and Team

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ABOUT THE RESEARCH

The goal of this project was to investigate how people perceive Native Americans and the issues they face, as well as how people's racial, social and cultural ideologies relate to their perceptions. The project included three online studies:

- A survey of college students across the United States (N = 3,401)
- A survey of adults across the United States (N = 2,903)
- A test of how five different types of framings of information about Native Americans shaped attitudes: This study tested information, framed in different ways, about Native history, current census data, disparities, systemic oppression and contemporary success (N = 3,802).

As an associate professor of American Indian studies and psychology at the University of Washington, Dr. Fryberg has dedicated her scholarship to how social representation of race, culture and social class influences the development of self, psychological well-being and educational attainment.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

1. Some are comfortable with stereotyping; others are not.

Negative stereotypes were less acceptable to people who valued being nonprejudiced.

Negative stereotypes were more acceptable to people who felt it was unimportant to strive for equality between Native Americans and Whites, people who thought the problems faced by Native communities were due to cultural deficiencies, and people who were bothered by femininity.

Positive stereotypes were less acceptable to people who felt that it was unimportant to strive for equality between Native Americans and Whites.

Positive stereotypes were more acceptable to people who valued being nonprejudiced, people who believed that the United States is one of the best nations in the world, and women.

2. Recognition that Native peoples still face prejudice leads to greater support for Native issues.

Support for Native issues was highly related to recognizing that Native peoples still face prejudice and discrimination and to believing that we should actually remedy these issues.

Among college students, warmth toward Native peoples seemed to be strongly related to support of Native issues.

3. People who are more concerned with Native issues include those who are motivated to control their own prejudice, those who feel warmth toward Native peoples and those who feel tough.

The more that people were internally motivated to control prejudice, the more concerned they were with teaching accurate information about Native peoples.

People who were more concerned with protecting Native sovereignty included those who felt more warmth toward Native peoples and those who valued the toughness associated with traditional masculinity.

People who were more concerned with the public representations of Native peoples were liberals, people bothered by femininity (and supportive of traditional masculinity) and those who wanted to appear nonprejudiced due to fear of social sanctions.

People who were more concerned about material conflicts between Native Americans and non-Natives included those who were internally motivated to control prejudice and those bothered by femininity.

People who were more against Native sovereignty were those who felt that advancing the progress of Native peoples harms progress for non-Natives, those who endorsed the idea that we should not strive for equality between Whites and Native Americans, and those who denied disparities between Whites and Native Americans.

4. Facts and education, especially about disparities and systemic oppression, lead to greater support of Native issues.

Overall, learning about systemic oppression seems to have had the most net positive effect.

Learning about systemic oppression was the only information tested that led to significantly greater support for protecting tribal sovereignty rights, eliminating Native-themed mascots and providing Native communities with resources meant to promote resource equity.

This finding is true across most groups, with slightly stronger effects for Whites and for those without a college degree.

5. College-educated people show greater support for Native Americans than non-college-educated people.

Learning about disparities and systemic oppression narrowed the support gap between college-educated individuals and non-college-educated individuals.

6. Perception of fairness influences attitudes.

Those who believe the world is fair may show low levels of support for Native Americans but seem amenable to change, especially after learning about systemic oppression. However, this group may be particularly resistant to information about contemporary success.

Belief that the social hierarchy is legitimate influenced how people perceive Native issues, though not consistently across issues.

7. Information about current census data and contemporary success is vital to combating invisibility.

Historical information, information about disparities and information about systemic oppression all increased people's agreement with the idea that there are few Native peoples left in society.

Conversely, information about current census data and the contemporary success of Native communities decreased this perception.

8. Support for teaching accurate Native history increases significantly with more information.

With the exception of information about disparities, all information tested led people to increase their support for teaching accurate information about Native Americans.

POTENTIAL PRIORITY AUDIENCES EMERGING FROM THE RESEARCH

Priority audiences for the narrative-change campaign may differ depending on the final narrative, policies or issues that the campaign seeks to advance, and whether the goal is to change perceptions or galvanize action.

College students recognized discrimination but were more tolerant of negative stereotypes.

- Compared with the adult sample, the college student sample thought that negative stereotypes are more acceptable and positive stereotypes are less acceptable.
- The college student sample reported higher concern for the representation of Native Americans than the adult sample and were more likely to recognize that Native peoples still face discrimination.
- The college student sample reported being more anti-sovereignty than the adult sample. However, both groups were equally likely to support the idea that issues facing Native Americans should be remedied.

Women tended to be more supportive of most Native issues than men.

- On average, women (compared with men) reported being more positive toward Native Americans, more supportive of issues related to Native Americans, more likely to report recognizing that Native peoples still face discrimination, and more likely to report thinking it is important to remedy the inequality between Whites and Native Americans.
- Female college students (compared with male college students) were more likely to report recognizing that Native Americans still face discrimination and that it is important to remedy the inequality between Whites and Native Americans.
- Anti-sovereignty attitudes, however, seemed to break this pattern. Among college students, men were more supportive than women, and among adults, there was no significant difference between genders.

Non-White people tended to be more supportive of most Native issues than Whites.

- On average, non-Whites reported being more supportive of issues related to Native Americans. However, non-Whites thought that it is more acceptable to negatively stereotype Native Americans than did Whites.
- Among college students, White people (versus non-White people) were less likely to report recognizing that Native Americans still face discrimination. However, White people (versus non-White people) were more likely to report thinking that it is important to remedy the inequality between Native Americans and Whites.
- Among adults, White people (versus non-White people) were less likely to report recognizing that Native Americans still face discrimination. There was no significant difference among White and non-White people in their reports of thinking it is important to remedy the inequality between Native Americans and Whites.

People living in the Plains and the Southwest were least likely to support Native issues.

- Across the college student and adult samples, individuals who have lived the longest in the Plains region and the Southwest region were least likely to report recognizing that Native Americans face ongoing discrimination and ranked as least supportive of issues facing Native Americans.
- We found more regional variation in attitudes in the college student sample, as compared with the adult sample. College students who have lived the longest in the Far West region were most likely to report recognizing that Native Americans face ongoing discrimination and ranked as more supportive of issues facing Native Americans.
- Regarding thinking that it is important to remedy the inequality between Native Americans and Whites, college students in the Great Lakes region were most likely to report this thinking, whereas those in the Plains region were least likely to report it. Among adults, there was no significant difference among regions in reports of thinking it is important to remedy the inequality between Native Americans and Whites.

Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research

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One of the world's premier opinion research and strategic consulting firms, GQRR has a proven record of advancing the interests of people and organizations seeking progressive change.

Anna Greenberg (partner), David Walker (vice president) and Jiore Craig (senior director of digital strategy) are spearheading GQRR's work on this project.

Literature Review

ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

To inform the development of the research guides and messages for testing, literature reflecting public sentiment toward Native Americans was reviewed. Although there are a great deal of books and scholarly articles about Native culture, history and population trends, there is not a lot of polling or focus group data on the general public's perceptions of Native peoples.

FINDINGS

1. Lack of awareness ("invisibility") may represent the biggest obstacle in this project.

The public gets basic facts about the Native community wrong. When asked, most people admitted not knowing a Native person. Part of this outcome reflects pure demographics; a population of 3 million Native Americans, not including Pacific Islanders, will not have the same exposure as a population of 39 million African-Americans or 50 million Hispanics. As many academics have highlighted, however, Native Americans are also broadly missing from popular culture (e.g., sports, movies, music and television). By comparison, transgender people account for only 0.3 percent of the population, yet they play a far more visible role in our cultural conversation than do Native Americans.

2. "Familiarity" with the Native community does not necessarily lead to progressive views.

In the few surveys analyzed, respondents from Plains states and rural parts of the country did not show more sympathetic views toward Native Americans than voters in the Northeast. In fact, they showed the opposite; voters in rural parts of a state with a relatively high percentage of Native Americans showed less respect for tribal sovereignty and rights than did voters in more urban parts of the same state. Even respondents in that state who demonstrated a high level of knowledge about the Native community did not prove more likely to believe that Native Americans faced fewer opportunities than Whites.

3. Most Americans understand that the Native community has faced — and still faces — significant discrimination.

Some surveys show that the public believes Native Americans face the same level of discrimination as the Hispanic and African-American communities, though less than the LGBT community.

4. Respondents seem willing to express biased and racist views toward Native Americans.

Social desirability — that is, the instinct to convey only socially desirable views — did not inhibit respondents in the research reviewed from sharing some fairly racist views of Native Americans, particularly in a focus group setting among same-race respondents.

5. Many Americans find Native-themed mascots offensive.

As with the sovereignty issue, this finding holds true more for people who “have no stake” in the debate. Dallas Cowboys fans and New York Yankees fans may find Native-themed mascots offensive, and four in five Americans would be uncomfortable calling a Native person a “R*dskin.” However, fans of the Washington football team have a different view, as do baseball fans in Cleveland. (The Cleveland team’s decision to drop its mascot and keep its name came as we were finalizing this report.) Dr. Stephanie Fryberg’s work shows that exposure to Native-themed mascots lowers the self-esteem of Native youth and increases the self-esteem of White youth. This finding speaks to broader issues of the psychology of racism.

6. Americans recognize, at least to some degree, the huge contributions Native Americans have made to American culture.

This finding may inform the content of a different narrative for Native peoples. If the public comes to believe that the extinction of Native cultures will be the death of a unique American culture, it may make for a powerful argument.

7. Among Whites, “assimilation” is not a bad word, and the mythology of the “American melting pot” will complicate the effort to rewrite the narrative.

Even though this mythology justified a whole range of public policy that almost wiped out Native culture in this country, many Americans’ commitment to the notion of a cultural/ethnic melting pot and “one people” remains strong. Messaging that connotes to them too much “separateness” is often off-putting. Even among elites and the donor class, this kind of messaging can prove counterproductive.

8. The dominant contemporary narrative of Native peoples is one of poverty.

This idea seems rooted in perceptions of life on reservations, where an image emerges of a place of extreme poverty with high rates of alcoholism, high levels of pollution and trash, and little business, industry or opportunity. It is extremely difficult to find any article in the mainstream media — let alone any public opinion data — showing positive developments in the Native community outside of efforts to maintain culture. And while Native-owned media and Native-controlled social media highlight success stories regularly, they do not have good exposure outside Indian Country.

9. Casinos play an outsized role in the contemporary narrative of Native Americans.

There is a huge contradiction in the stereotypes of a community struggling with grinding poverty while at the same time “getting rich off of casinos.” However, for some of the people in our research, these two stereotypes seem to peacefully coexist.

10. While open to Native sovereignty, many are hostile to Native governments.

On a broad level, most Americans seem to support Native peoples’ right to self-determination and find the constitutional guarantees of sovereign rights convincing. That said, many are confused about what sovereignty really means in the context of Native peoples and ask questions such as “Is it like a separate country, or is it like a state government?” There may also be limits on how far people are willing to accept sovereignty. Some state-level polling shows mixed results — or example, for Native issues that might have an impact outside a reservation. Undermining support for sovereignty is the perception that tribal governments are corrupt, inefficient and ineffective. In fairness, Americans tend to believe that all governments are corrupt, inefficient and ineffective; however, this perception has a more immediate impact on notions of sovereignty.

National Survey

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

A national survey of 3,200 adults, age 18 years and older, was conducted on September 12–24, 2017. Each survey took approximately 20 minutes to complete. The survey was oversampled with African-Americans, Hispanics and Asian-Americans/Pacific Islanders, as well as with people living in Michigan, Mississippi and New Mexico (areas with a high density of Native Americans).

FINDINGS

1. Most Americans believe more should be done to help Native Americans.

A 63 percent majority across all major racial and ethnic groups, ages, and education levels (college graduate or not) believed more should be done (Figure 5).

2. Americans support Native positions on most policy issues.

Our survey assessed support for a variety of policy positions, as shown in Figure 6 and detailed below:

- A 71 percent majority supported expanding national monuments to protect sacred Native land.
- A 67 percent majority supported ensuring that Native peoples have the final say on matters that affect their resources, such as at Standing Rock and the Dakota Access Pipeline.
- A 74 percent majority supported increasing money that the United States spends to reduce poverty and improve health among Native Americans.
- A 67 percent majority supported requiring the United States to uphold treaty obligations that provide Native Americans access to education and health care and that give them control of their own lands.
- A 72 percent majority believed it is necessary to make significant changes to school curricula on Native history and culture.

Figure 5.

Generally speaking, when it comes to helping Native Americans, do you believe the United States should do more, do less, or keep things the same?

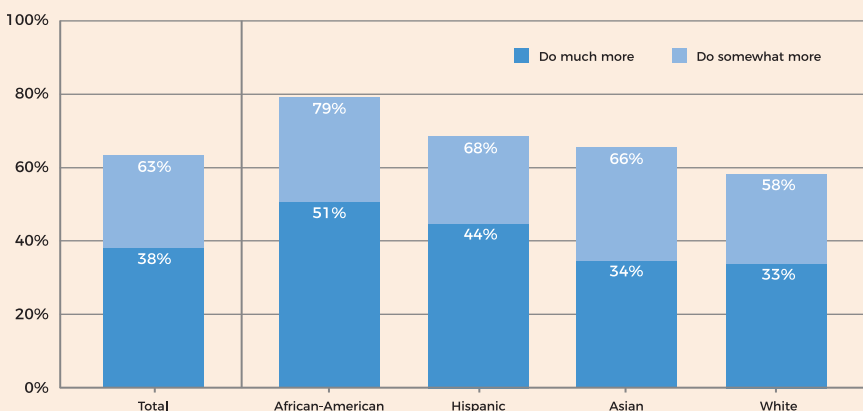
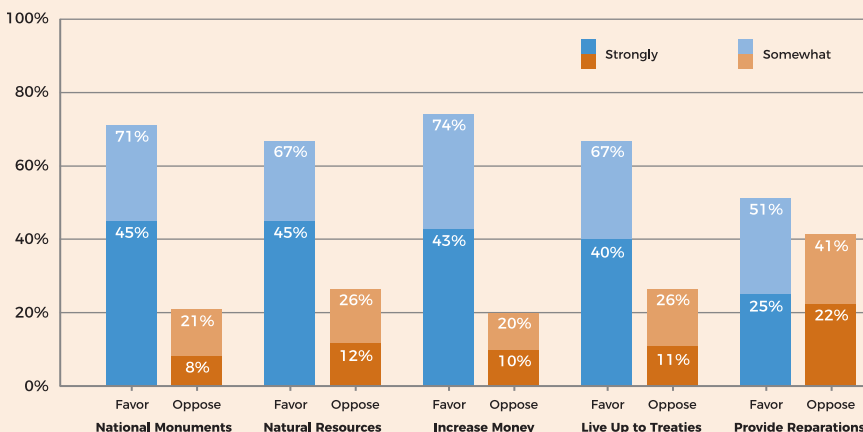


Figure 6.

Please tell me whether you FAVOR or OPPOSE the following changes in U.S. law when it comes to Native Americans.



3. The country admits to genocide of Native Americans.

A 59 percent majority, including 56 percent of White people, believed “the United States is guilty of committing genocide against Native Americans” (Figure 7).

4. Discrimination against Native peoples is underestimated.

While most saw “some” discrimination, only 14 percent believed that Native Americans face a “great deal” of discrimination (36 percent said a “great deal” or “a lot” of discrimination). Compared with other minority groups, those surveyed said that Native Americans fall in the middle, close to Hispanic people but below Muslim, transgender and African-American people.

5. Positive and negative stereotypes infect broad swaths of people.

Those surveyed held several positive stereotypes of Native peoples, arguing they are more environmentally focused and more spiritual than other groups of people. However, they held negative stereotypes as well. The broadest and most toxic is the belief that Native Americans get “free stuff.” A 53 percent majority believed (just 28 percent disbelieved) that “the government gives benefits to Native Americans just for being Native American that are not available to other minority groups.”

6. A major challenge is the “invisible Indian.”

A majority of Americans (62 percent outside of Indian Country) reported being unacquainted with Native Americans.

7. Familiarity with Native Americans and Native communities does not necessarily create sympathy.

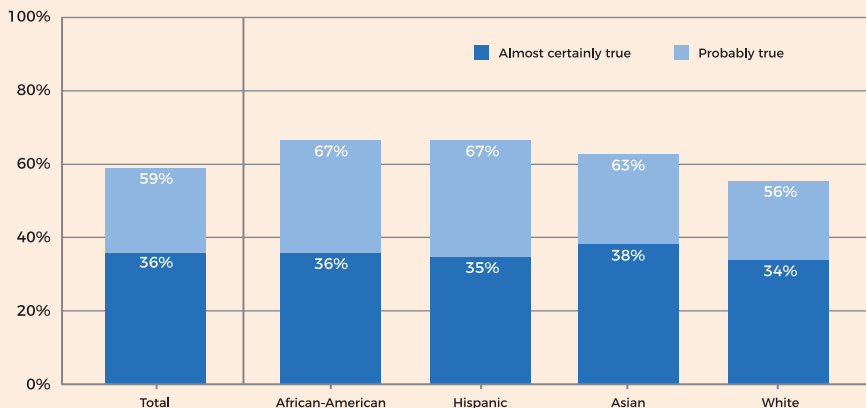
Support for Native Americans dropped in Indian Country (64 percent wanted to “do more” outside Indian Country compared with 56 percent in Indian Country). Knowing a Native person was also not correlated with increased support for Native positions.

8. The mascot issue may be the most difficult.

The only policy issue in which the public took an opposing view to that of Native Americans is banning sports teams from using Native-themed mascots (39 percent favored and 51 percent opposed). This does not imply that this issue is not worth pursuing or that it should be abandoned — only that it may be more difficult than other policy objectives. Certainly, there have been many victories, as at Stanford, Dartmouth, St. John’s, Miami of Ohio and so on.

Figure 7.

The United States is guilty of committing genocide against Native Americans.



9. The country reacts well to new message frames about Native peoples; messaging that is hostile toward Native Americans has some impact.

Most of the pro-Native arguments connected with respondents, but the strongest frames dealt with history, values and culture. Concepts that tested positively include the following:

- (History) The government signed over 500 treaties with Native Americans, all of which were broken by the federal government.
- (Values) Native Americans have great respect for family and elders, believe we all have a shared responsibility to care for the earth, and believe our actions affect future generations. These are values our world needs more of right now.
- (Culture) Much of what it means to be American we owe to Native Americans. Native Americans contributed to what is American culture today — from food to sports to art to our system of government. We need to preserve Native American culture because it means preserving American culture.

Although few respondents rated anti-Native arguments as compelling, these arguments often prevented people from moving, during the survey, to saying more should be done to help Native Americans.

10. History and sequencing matter.

Respondents who heard a short battery of historical items (including current history) were more likely to support “doing more” for Native Americans than respondents who did not hear this battery. Moreover, the impact of the anti-Native messaging was effectively mitigated by this history.

11. Opinion is much more fluid among younger Americans, though some surprising supporters emerge as well.

While the strongest supporters tended to be college-educated, non-White and younger, the greatest changes in opinion occurred in other groups. Over the course of the survey, 17 percent of respondents moved toward wanting to “do more” for Native Americans; this movement occurred disproportionately among people under age 50.

However, there was also more positive movement among Hispanic voters (in particular, Hispanic conservatives); younger, White, non-college-educated men; and people in the Deep South.

12. Potential stakeholders to engage are emerging.

Progressive younger voters and people of color could potentially be priority stakeholder groups that could be moved in support of leading narrative and culture change.

Under age 30:

- Moved from 67 percent wanting to “do more” at the start of the survey to 74 percent wanting to “do more” by the end of the survey.
- In self-ascribed terms, these are among the least knowledgeable about Native Americans.
- Exactly half supported a ban on mascots; as noted, however, there was a huge difference between younger men and younger women.

Asian-American/Pacific Islander, age 50 and older:

- Moved from 59 percent wanting to “do more” (lower than average) to 68 percent.
- Only 19 percent believed Native Americans face a “great deal” or “a lot” of discrimination, compared with 36 percent overall.

Hispanic:

- Hispanic adults were among the most supportive of Native issues, in part due to perceived blood ties with Native peoples. In the survey, they started out more supportive than average and ended up much more supportive, with 68 percent wanting to “do more.” This growth is driven by the more conservative elements in the Hispanic community.
- It is worth noting that although Hispanics proved more supportive than average, New Mexico (which is 48 percent Hispanic according to the most recent U.S. Census) is among the least supportive, with just 51 percent wanting to “do more” at the beginning of the survey. Hispanics in New Mexico were also less likely to support Native issues on some policy matters.

Deep South region:

- This region started lower than average but showed significant growth (from 59 percent to 64 percent wanting to “do more”).
- There was a bit more support among African-Americans in this region than among White people, though both increased during the survey.
- Both the “values” message and the “culture” message (see point 9 above) found more support in this part of the country than was seen elsewhere.

Younger, White, non-college-educated men:

- Broadly speaking, this was a tough group, but it also showed outsized growth in the White community (from 56 percent to 62 percent wanting to “do more”).
- Only 20 percent supported a ban on Native-themed mascots; however, this group supported Native Americans on most other issues (e.g., 74 percent supported expanding national monuments).

Social Listening

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Phase 1 of social listening explored online associations around Native peoples from the end of August 2016 through the start of April 2017. The social listening exercise compiled, analyzed and reviewed more than 4.9 million public social media posts from Facebook, Twitter, online news commentary and blog posts. Due to restrictions from privacy settings, this listening was qualitative and does not reflect the entire social media universe.

FINDINGS

1. Online conversations focus on culture, identity and contributions to society.

Three dominant categories emerged in the initial results of exploring conversations containing “Native American,” “American Indian” or corresponding hashtags: culture, identity and contribution to society. The positive and negative associations within each category are listed in Figure 8.

2. Strong positive associations emerge around pride and spirituality.

Most online users admired Native culture, including having an appreciation for Native rituals, tradition, arts, dance, music, and traditional clothing and jewelry. In addition, pride stood out in conversations among and about Native Americans. The degree to which non-Native online users tried to associate themselves genetically with this culture is also striking — many people claimed Native American heritage online, even if only a small percentage. As in the focus groups, spirituality emerged as a dominant positive association around Native Americans. Content that focused on Native rituals tied to spirituality saw high engagement and positive commentary.

3. Native Americans are seen as both separate from and part of U.S. culture.

Some online users saw Native Americans as part of U.S. culture and positively associated themselves with Native culture and heritage. Other online users viewed Native culture as distinct and separate from U.S. culture, including references to a Native history distinct from U.S. history, with specific cultural rituals; differences between life on and off a reservation; calling out cultural appropriation; and distinct Native qualities, such as strength, pride and resourcefulness.

4. The online world does not recognize the diversity within the Native peoples.

References to Native Americans rarely differentiated among tribes. References to specific tribes rarely included factual information to differentiate between the hundreds of tribes. Dominant associations treated Native Americans as one group.

Figure 8.
Social media posts including “Native American” and/or “American Indian,” by category

	Positive	Negative
Culture	Proverbs Spiritual living Art Dance Music Jewelry Style Strength Wisdom Pop culture American History Rights Tribes Mascots Pride Conservatism Liberalism	Appropriation Cowboys and Indians Greedy Reservation life PC culture Mascots Injustice Conservatism Liberalism History
Minority identity	Pride Indigenous Diversity Mixed Strength Inter-racial Immigrant Right Left Rights Progressive issues	Racism Discrimination White privilege Immigrant Inferior race Alt-right PC Snowflake Sensitive Right Left Genocide
Contribution to society	Dance Style Jewelry/art Music Military service Veterans Science Sports Strength Resilience Heroes Achievement History	Casinos Drugs Violence Drinking Benefits Handouts Welfare Injustice Crimes

5. Injustices are referenced as a part of history — and not necessarily acknowledged as happening today.

Online users, like focus group participants, freely acknowledged the historical injustice meted out to Native peoples. Notably, whereas the term “genocide” was broadly accepted in our groups, it was more contentious online. The bigger problem is that, as in the focus groups, many assumed that these injustices ended in the 19th century and questioned their relevance in the current debate. Modern-day issues were cited less often online than were historical issues.

Ironically, content featuring modern issues was generally well received. The *New York Times* article about young Native Americans launching an anti-suicide campaign is an example of mainstream coverage bringing awareness to important modern-day issues.

6. National exposure politicizes Native associations.

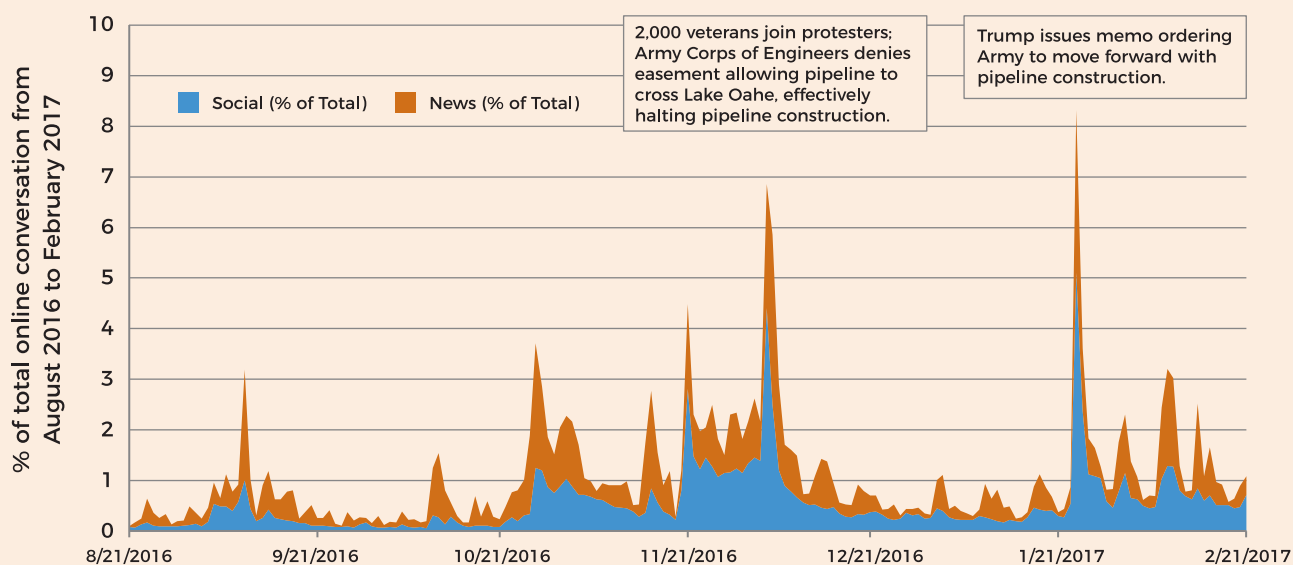
Politically contentious issues, such as the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) protests, can drive much of the online conversation around Native Americans. Not surprisingly, these conversations activate social networks beyond those tied to mainstream news outlets and beyond traditional Native sources.

The reach and volume generated by a highly politicized issue is obvious. Figure 9 shows search terms related to the DAPL protests from September 2016 to February 2017. The largest share of the DAPL conversation occurred when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers denied an easement allowing the pipeline to cross Lake Oahe, effectively halting work on the pipeline; it spiked again when President Donald Trump issued a memo ordering the construction of the DAPL to resume.

While the exposure of an issue like this cannot be underestimated, one obvious drawback of this kind of polarization is that once an issue falls within a partisan frame, it gets stuck in the same partisan gridlock and becomes hostage to political outcomes.

Many assume that these injustices ended in the 19th century and question their relevance in the current debate.

Figure 9.
DAPL social conversation spikes around wins for either side; veteran involvement.



7. Local support—from Native or non-Native communities—is essential for changing offensive mascots.

Local and regional debates on changing Native-themed mascots in high schools have been taking place across the United States for years. An analysis of the conversation around successful and unsuccessful fights provides important data on how to prevail. In a review of local efforts to change four high school mascots across the United States (in three of these cases, the mascot changed), the pro-change side was led by local Native activists and/or was focused on arguments around appropriation and offensive stereotypes. In the case in which change failed, the debate centered on nonlocal Native Americans and set up an outsider-versus-local dynamic.

8. Non-Native allies can help change the narrative.

The influencer analysis reveals many instances of non-Natives aligned with Native issues. In the past six months, the top influencers in this space were mainstream news sources, celebrity and culture influencers, national Native media, online influencers and bloggers, spiritual leaders, and academics and thought leaders.

Posts with the highest reach in the past six months came from mainstream news sources and celebrity or pop culture influencers, underscoring the fact that mainstream media and influencers are an important part of the conversation happening around Native Americans online.

9. The narrative can be distorted.

The analysis differentiates between those influencers and surrogates acting as defenders, promoting factual information and highlighting positive portrayals of Native Americans, and those influencers and surrogates using Native issues mostly to serve a political or issue-based agenda or for cultural appropriation. For example, many influencers contributing to the Bears Ears conversation were focused on other issues and used the significance of the land to Native peoples as supporting evidence to build their case. The DAPL conversation and the mascot debate similarly show influencers using Native Americans to promote an agenda. Other online networks promote and defend Native Americans. These groups may still be issue based or political, but their content differs in its portrayal of Native Americans and focuses on positive, factual information.

10. We need to break the echo chamber to reach new supporters.

The Native online network is made up of national, regional and local influencers, as well as pages dedicated to promoting positive information about Native Americans. These pages mostly have medium to limited reach within similar Native networks, thus creating an echo chamber.

While some Native networks are relatively large, they often consist of Native Americans and others who are already aware of the positive and factual information. To change associations among non-Natives, this content must be more widely shared.

11. Nonpartisan influencers may produce more productive debates.

Nonpartisan influencers talking about Native Americans may have more success at creating a dialogue among their audience members. Two posts fighting misconceptions around Native Americans from *Teen Vogue* and *BuzzFeed*, for instance, produced different dialogues. *Teen Vogue* is a fairly neutral messenger, which may have led to a more productive conversation. The *BuzzFeed* post reached viewers with contradictory opinions, but the politicized debate around mascots may have made this dialogue less productive and more polarized.

Focus Groups

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Between February 22 and May 20, 2017, we conducted 28 focus groups engaging 200 people across the country about Native issues and narratives. The groups largely reflected the demographic composition of the United States, including Caucasians, African-Americans, Hispanics, Asian-Americans, Pacific Islanders and observant Christians. Several groups specifically engaged parents and millennials. In addition, two national online groups were conducted with teachers and parents. Quotes included below are taken from across the focus groups and show common themes, representing all participants.

FINDINGS

1. Participants largely believe the Native population is declining.

The problem of “invisibility” is a constant theme, and the saying “out of sight, out of mind” applies here as participants admitted that Native issues are not something they ever think about. This has led not only to false assumptions and misperceptions but also to a lack of real historical knowledge and context, which makes it hard for participants to empathize with Native Americans. When asked what the country owes Native Americans, most participant answers initially ranged from lukewarm to negative.

- *“They’ve been mistreated and misplaced, but what does my generation have to do with that? It’s taking away from my generation and my kids.”*
- *“They are owed something more — not necessarily monetary — at least teaching the rest of the world what happened and not hiding it, not lying about Columbus.”*
- *“Our past is who we are, and it’s important to talk about it and know what happened, but not think that they’re entitled to anything for what happened long ago.”*

2. The majority of positive impressions revolve around cultural stereotypes or observable characteristics.

Many of these cultural traits may drive some of the project’s more successful narratives. “Resilience and independence,” for example, stood out because it stems from participants’ knowledge — however incomplete it may be — of Native American history and Native peoples’ struggles to overcome that history. (See page ## for an explanation of how these positive stereotypes can be damaging.)

Community and family focus. Participants commended Native peoples for their strong family ties and respect of elders. They highlighted age-old cultural traditions, with families and communities passing down customs and oral histories. Some said they had attended powwows and described the people as friendly, generous, loyal and very welcoming.

- *“Proud. Family oriented.”*
- *“They value passing down cultural traditions, customs, languages.”*

“[Native Americans] are owed something more — not necessarily monetary — at least teaching the rest of the world what happened and not hiding it, not lying about Columbus.”

— Focus group participant

Rich culture and art. Native Americans are perceived to be very artistic and creative. Those interviewed said they admire Native crafts, from jewelry and beadwork to pottery, and noted Native peoples' skill in music and traditional dances.

- *"A lot of traditions and history — something we lack nowadays."*

Environmentalism. People viewed Native Americans as having great respect for the earth and engaging in more sustainable agriculture and animal husbandry practices, finding a use for everything rather than letting it go to waste.

- *"People who love the Earth and the things that come from it."*
- *"Nature. In tune with everything. Care for the land."*

Spirituality. Participants associated words connoting spirituality, rather than religiosity, with Native Americans and often connected this spirituality to environmentalism.

- *"Rich in faith. Spiritual rather than religious. Mystical."*
- *"Keeper of the earth. A holy people."*

Resilience and independence. Many participants recognized the hardships Native communities have faced in the past and respected their drive to keep going and hold on to their culture and way of life. This belief lies at the core of one of our key messages.

- *"People who have overcome hardships. Survivors."*
- *"Cheated by government and business throughout history, but resilient in the face of the above."*

3. Dissonant traits follow positive attributes.

After listing the above positive associations, many participants proceeded to list the following dissonant traits. One of the more striking findings is how many of the same people can hold contradictory views of Native peoples at the same time.

Insularity. Some non-Native people believed that Native Americans are insular and aloof. Some referred to them as "rude." Participants in the Deep South in particular, where society is generally more segregated, believed that Native Americans mostly "keep to themselves" and note "they don't mix much."

- *"They stick so close together that they don't and won't help others."*

Poverty. Especially among participants in Indian Country, reservations were described in very bleak terms. Participants spoke of desolate lands, trailers and dilapidated houses, broken-down cars on the side of the road, no electricity or running water, and poor living conditions.

- *"Reservation life sounds horrific — a lot of alcoholism and not getting support or funding."*
- *"It's the Native American version of the ghetto or the projects."*

Alcoholism and substance abuse. Participants in Indian Country gave first hand accounts of ways in which alcohol and drug problems affected their communities. This issue was often brought up in conjunction with child abuse and sex offenders. Outside of Indian Country, it either went completely unmentioned or was not brought up nearly as often.

- *"Alcohol abuse. Drug abuse. Child abuse. Gambling addictions."*
- *"They drink too much and get in fights."*

Dependence on government. Misconceptions about government benefits led participants to make further assumptions about a lack of work ethic, sense of entitlement and chronic underachievement, sometimes summed up as "reservation mentality." Many conflated federal and tribal benefits.

- *"Free money — no incentive to work."*
- *"Lack of work ethic, discipline, drive. Unable to break out of reservation mentality."*
- *"They get a monthly stipend if they are at least 1/16th Native American."*

Casinos. Many participants did not recognize that just a fraction of Native Americans are growing wealthy from casinos. More broadly, casinos represented one of the most visible Native "presences" in American life for participants outside of Indian Country. Not everyone loves casino gambling on principle or the (perceived) impact this business is having on Native communities.

- *"Casinos — they were sold to voters as a huge financial opportunity for the communities, but all they have brought was crime."*
- *"Gambling. Money hungry. Too many casinos."*
- *"A lot of people get their check, go to the casino and spend it all, and then are broke until the next paycheck."*

4. Attitudes vary on key issues.

School curricula. In groups composed only of parents and teachers, both demographics recognized school curricula covering Native Americans as being unrepresentative and inaccurate. Teachers rated the “history of Native American peoples” and “pre-Columbian American history and culture” as two of the worst subjects in terms of coverage and accuracy of any subject matter tested (e.g., civics and U.S. government, state or local history, civil rights movement).

Mascots. Many respondents did not fully comprehend the core issue over Native-themed mascots: the objectification of Native peoples. While most were duly offended by overtly racist caricatures, like Chief Wahoo from the Cleveland baseball team and the name of the football team in Washington, they also did not understand why Native Americans would be offended by “respectful” images that connote “strength and bravery.”

- *“It’s just entertainment. You have to choose your battles, and if you’re going to consider something offensive — like some of the other things that we read on the other page — there is a lot more to be offended about than this little show.”*
- *“I think it’s a good representation. Other than they look like high school kids — they’re kids, they’re going to have an interpretation. At least it looked like he was attempting to mimic something you would see at a powwow.”*
- *“What group of people would want to be named after something they’re making fun of? They’re strong. Team names like Lions, Tigers are symbols of strength.”*
- *“I am a big sports fanatic. I am in shock they are not in favor [of mascots]. You would think they would be promoting them.”*

Findings from the Fryberg research about the impact mascots might have on youth were helpful in convincing some participants to reconsider their views. They recognized that youth are more susceptible to problems with self-esteem, and they understood how it could be harmful to see themselves and their culture so crudely copied.

Indian Child Welfare Act. Participants received information about the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), enacted in 1978 after studies revealed that large numbers of Native children were being separated from their parents, families and communities by state child welfare and private adoption agencies, with a devastating impact on Native children, families and tribes. The intent of ICWA was to “protect the best interests of Indian children and to promote the stability and security of Indian tribes and families” by keeping Native children in relative care whenever safe and possible. Despite this law, today Native families are four times more likely to have their children removed and placed in foster care than their White counterparts.

The starting point for non-Native participants — always — was “What is in the best interest of the child?” Non-Native Americans defined the child’s “interest” more in terms of financial well-being or family stability rather than preserving culture.

- *“It’s difficult to find a safe home, and when you’re limiting the number of good homes based on that [criterion], it’s even harder to get children placed. There are so many children getting removed, and if you limit it to Native Americans, that makes their wait for a stable home even longer.”*

Participants had a strong response to the fact that Native children are four times more likely to be removed from their home. But this also had the effect of confirming negative stereotypes of poverty, child abuse and poor living situations. Again, any message defending ICWA that does not begin with “the best interest of the child” will not win this debate.

Dakota Access Pipeline. The Standing Rock/DAPL issue is the most visible Native event this country has seen in decades. In almost every group, participants mentioned DAPL first when discussing Native Americans in the news or media; they then racked their brains to come up with other recent relevant examples.

Regardless of how the issue was approached — from presenting participants with a sort of “case study” to just simply asking about it during a more general discussion of sovereignty — nearly all (with the exception of participants in North Dakota) sided with the tribe. This speaks not only to Native peoples’ perceived environmentalism but also to participants’ limited notion of sovereignty.

While sovereignty is more complicated in other cases, participants felt that Native landownership is pretty straightforward: If the land legally belongs to the tribe, the tribe has the right to protect it. Many participants believed that “it’s their land” is enough justification.

- *“It’s their land; they’re putting up a big fight for a reason.”*

On the other hand, perceptions of the protesters (disrespecting the land and leaving behind trash) were not helpful, and the distinction between Native and non-Native protesters was lost in most of the media coverage. Participants in North Dakota who were closest to the controversy had the most negative view, expressing their distaste for the protestors and confusion over the negotiation process and timeline of events in the face of conflicting accounts in the news.

**“There’s something
beautiful about
people from different
places living on one
land, melding
different cultures.”**
– Focus group participant

5. The larger conversation around diversity influences perception.

This work does not take place in a vacuum; rather, it is in the context of a national conversation around race and diversity. This is a difficult conversation for many Americans who struggle to confront their own history, as we saw last year in Charlottesville, Virginia, and elsewhere; certainly, the election of Donald Trump owes much to the backlash against diversity among White voters. But regardless of political leanings, many Americans hold dear the myth of a melting pot. Assimilation, for them, is not a bad word, and many connect the concept with tolerance. This is true among some (not all) people of color, as well as among White participants.

- *“Melting pot [implies] that we become the same. To me, it means that I am free to marry any race I choose to. My children are free to marry any race. There is not that stigma of being mixed.”*
- *“It’s true, we always have been [a melting pot]. Everybody came from somewhere else.”*
- *“We have so many different people from everywhere in our melting pot. You can be who you want to be.”*
- *“I’ve always thought of that as a beautiful thing. There’s something beautiful about people from different places living on one land, melding different cultures.”*

6. Opportunities emerge among allies.

People of color emerged as potential “allies” to face common challenges of racism and discrimination; Hispanic participants, in particular, noted that their alliance is further enhanced by ties of ethnicity and blood as they recognized the possibility of common ancestry. Overall, people in these diverse groups acknowledged a shared history of discrimination; they said they know that the folks with the Confederate flags do not care if you are black, brown or red — just that you are not White. So they demonstrated greater empathy and understanding of what Native Americans endure.

It is not just overt discrimination that can unite these groups; other communities face similar challenges of trying to hold on to their cultures in the teeth of a broader (White) American culture. African-American participants noted that when slaves were brought over, they were forbidden to speak their native language, and their culture was stripped from them. Meanwhile, Asian-American participants described the struggle to maintain their culture while also “conforming” to White culture, particularly among second-generation Americans. More broadly, some (but not all) resisted the “melting pot” theory of cultural assimilation for the same reasons as Native Americans, so there is opportunity there.

- *“Having grown up in other countries, I did not like the idea of a melting pot because of this pressure to lose your culture, to keep certain things at home, to not be your authentic self.”*

Message Testing

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

During this phase, the most promising messages from initial phases of research were tested in focus groups, experimenting with different images and language, including both static images and video. Groups were conducted among both Native Americans and non-Native people.

MESSAGES TESTED

- “The federal government does not give benefits to Native Americans just for being Native American, and most Native Americans are not rich from casinos.”
 - “The government signed over 500 treaties with Native Americans, all of which were broken by the federal government. From 1870 to 1970, the federal government forcibly removed Native American children from their homes to attend boarding schools.”
 - “Native Americans have great respect for family and elders, believe we all have a shared responsibility to care for the earth, and believe our actions affect future generations. These are values our world needs more of right now.”
 - “Much of what it means to be American we owe to Native Americans. Native Americans contributed to what is American culture today — from food to sports to art to our system of government. We need to preserve Native American culture because it means preserving American culture.”
-

FINDINGS

1. Messages and images that take the time to introduce — or reintroduce — Native peoples to non-Natives and to educate non-Natives about Native history, culture and values find the most traction.

2. The strongest messages connect Native culture to broader American culture and celebrate Native values.

Non-Natives do not know Native culture and therefore cannot appreciate the contributions of Native peoples unless these are explicitly spelled out for them. Non-Natives also believe that American culture is an assimilation of many cultures and push back on overly ambitious claims of Native contributions. Messages that focus on Native values (such as respect for family and elders and caring for the earth) tested well but must be carefully framed to feel authentic to non-Natives and Native peoples.

3. There is tension around inclusiveness and distinction.

Americans tend to seek inclusiveness, sameness and commonality across cultures. In message testing, it was striking how many non-Natives, when asked, “What was the message of this piece?,” responded, “Native Americans are like other Americans,” even when this was not the intended message. Native Americans, however, tended to feel differently. Those interviewed identified with their own tribes and recognized that a “melting pot” represents an existential threat to their culture; they pushed back on messages that seem overly “inclusive” and that fail to recognize distinctiveness.

Threading this needle will be essential to the campaign’s success.

Non-Natives do not know Native culture and therefore cannot appreciate the contributions of Native peoples unless these are explicitly spelled out for them.

4. Images and messages must link history with modern reality.

In many facets of message testing — in various messages, issues and images — connecting the past and present was important to paint a complete picture and to help non-Natives connect with the reality of Native issues.

Some considerations:

- Because the history of Native Americans that is taught in public schools is so inaccurate, incomplete or altogether absent, reminding (or educating) non-Natives about historical injustices is a critical starting point in messages. Information about broken treaties and Native American boarding schools were especially compelling in testing. Native Americans strongly support this approach and desperately want their real history to be told.
- At the same time, although most non-Natives recognize the historical mistreatment of Native peoples by the U.S. government, they underestimate its scale and do not appreciate how the mistreatment still affects modern Native peoples. Some believe that “all that happened a long time ago.” Information about historical context must be linked to information about the current reality of Native communities in terms of both their struggle and their resiliency. This message is most effective when it focuses on doing better in the future rather than dwelling in the past.
- Most Americans do not know any Native American people, at least not intimately, so seeing “real,” modern depictions of Native Americans is persuasive. Videos of Native Americans sharing about their lives or dismantling myths (such as “Native Americans get free benefits and are rich from casinos”) were very effective.

5. Images matter.

As is often the case in messaging, the images can matter more than the language. A few examples:

- For Native Americans, it is important that Native peoples portrayed in messages cannot be confused with Hispanic or Caucasian people.
- For Native peoples, to the degree possible, images of one tribe cannot be generalized to represent all tribes; local tribes need to be depicted in local outreach when possible.
- Photographs can perpetuate stereotypes if not chosen with care. For example, Native Americans rejected a photograph showing grandparents and a child, without a father or a mother. Disturbing images (e.g., images from boarding schools), while painful for all viewers and particularly for Native Americans, are acceptable if they are used for strategic purposes and not simply for shock value.

6. A clear majority of Native Americans find Native-themed mascots offensive; non-Natives may not start there but can be moved.

In 2016, *The Washington Post* published a survey purporting that 9 in 10 “Native Americans” did not find the name “R*dskins” offensive. Although not statistically projectable, a clear majority of Native Americans in our groups found Native-themed mascots offensive, and many felt this way passionately. In fact, a few participants described Native-themed mascots as the biggest priority facing their community, and only a small handful did not find such mascots offensive. Native Americans in our groups said:

- *“It’s dehumanizing. People are gonna mess with you if they see you as cartoonish.”*
- *“Thought it was wrong that that poll asked a bunch of non-Natives if they think the R*dskins name is racist.”*
- *“We are not mascots, but it’s going to be hard to convince in the long run, but this is still in the works.”*
- *“It’s a huge issue. My mom protested this issue years ago. It said the same thing on her sign: ‘We are not your mascot.’”*

When shown a “We are not your mascot” ad, Native participants agreed with the message but also believed that the piece did not deliver enough context for non-Native viewers.

Among non-Natives in the focus groups, a minority believed Native-themed mascots honor Native peoples, and a significant number did not understand why Native Americans are offended by such mascots and recommended that Native Americans “get over it.” When participants were told about research showing how these mascots undermine the self-esteem of Native children and reinforce bias, these facts tended to reinforce existing opinion rather than change people’s position.

The one thing that did move non-Natives on this issue was an anti-mascot video produced by the National Congress of American Indians. This video worked because it demonstrates the basic humanity and current reality of Native peoples juxtaposed with the “R*dskins” logo.

- *“The fact that they DO NOT call themselves R*dskins was a pretty good point to finish on.”*
- *“I loved this video; I think it really drove home the point of how mascots affect Native Americans.”*
- *“You can see how many Native Americans feel through their eyes, and that’s helpful.”*

Perception Institute

perception.org

Perception Institute is a consortium of researchers, advocates and strategists who translate cutting-edge mind-science research on racial, gender, ethnic and other identities into solutions that reduce bias and discrimination and promote belonging.

Alexis McGill Johnson (executive director and co-founder) and Rachel D. Godsil (director of research and co-founder) are leading Perception Institute's research work.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Perception Institute conducted a comprehensive review of research literature around the strengths and limitations of narrative frameworks to transform negative stereotypes by challenging implicit biases and misperceptions. Researchers examined studies focused on the relationship between narrative frames and group stereotypes across the social science disciplines, including social psychology, neuroscience, sociology, anthropology, political science, education and public health.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Narratives matter.

Social psychologists have noted that narratives play a critical role in framing cognitive perceptions and stimulating empathy for others.¹ Neuroscience also provides support for the idea that exposure to dominant societal narratives around race can reduce empathy. Story framing plays a dynamic role in how social issues are interpreted and inscribed with meaning and how narratives have the capacity to humanize “the other” in a way that abstract facts and figures cannot.

2. Native narratives are not adequately represented in U.S. culture.

Native Americans have long recognized the influential impact of narratives within their culture through their strong tradition of weaving world view into their stories and myths. Storytelling for Native families is the “greatest teaching resource for communicating identity, values and life skills.”² While other communities of color have made progress in visibility and representation, Native narratives have not gained the same level of recognition in the United States.

In addition, although Native groups have used narratives for political movement building, these efforts are not widely picked up by the media and academics and are therefore missing in the literature. In Canada and Australia, however, current efforts to challenge negative stereotypes and deficit-based portrayals of Indigenous peoples are well documented.

3. Current narratives about Native peoples are set by others.

Due to modern and historical violence against their communities, Native Americans have often lacked the social, political and economic capital to exercise control over narratives presented about them in mainstream society. Current narratives are mostly written by outsiders who fail to grasp the nuances and intricacies of the many varied Native communities.

1 Godsil, R. D., & Goodale, B. (2013). *Telling our own story: The role of narrative in racial healing*. New York: American Values Institute.

2 Cross, T. L., Friesen, B. J., Jivanjee, P., Gowen, L. K., Bandurraga, A., Matthew, C., & Maher, N. (2011). “Defining youth success using culturally appropriate community-based participatory research methods.” *Best Practices in Mental Health* 7 (1): 94–114.

4. Deficit framing dominates the current narratives about Native Americans.

The literature focused on Native Americans relies heavily upon deficit-framing approaches that highlight disparities and that fail to portray strengths, resilience, contributions, complexity and authenticity. Native peoples have been rendered largely invisible in the media; however, when they are given a spotlight, they are portrayed as savage warriors or associated with negative outcomes such as alcoholism and suicide rather than everyday roles like student, lawyer or plumber.³

5. Highlighting disparities may be intended to create moral urgency, but it often exacerbates bias.

Advocates often frame data to create urgency and mobilize people into action around a particular issue. This strategy tends to work only among those already concerned; among broader communities, a focus on disparities alone often leads to compassion fatigue and, worse, can often lead to associating a specific community with the disparity, thus further cementing negative stereotypes. While attention must be given to racial inequalities, framing disparity data mindfully is key to galvanizing support for solutions and policies that have potential for long-term impact.

6. Transformative narrative frames show promise.

Four new narrative approaches share a common theme of avoiding the current focus on deficits or disparities as the presumed catalyst for change, but they differ in emphasis.

- Asset framing acknowledges the deficits while simultaneously emphasizing the assets of a community.⁴ By leading with the humanizing qualities of a group, this approach reframes the dominant narrative to be more holistic, expansive and representative of its people.
- Hopeful/efficacy-based frames focus on framing narratives that emphasize the possibilities of positive change and hope in solving societal challenges, moving away from the hopelessness that can color deficit framing.⁵
- Positive, likable frames are a go-to narrative approach to bringing marginalized stories into the mainstream fold and boosting the likability of a group.⁶ Examples include a series of webisodes called *Halal in the Family* and a Canadian television series, *Little Mosque on the Prairie*,

that were shown to reduce explicit and implicit bias and increase positive attitudes by challenging stereotypes and allowing viewers to become involved with members of the group — in this case, Muslims.

7. Research on positive frames is nascent, and risks exist.

The literature assessing the efficacy of the various approaches to transformational change is still nascent, and a number of significant questions remain unanswered. Accordingly, while recognizing the potential positive impact of these frame approaches to counter the clearly identified harms of purely deficit-focused frames, it is important to note potential pitfalls or unintended consequences, such as the following:

- **Exceptionalizing/assimilation.** Asset frames, or “positive frames,” may assimilate an individual or community within a society’s framework of “normal” rather than challenge the status quo. This then runs the risk of exceptionalizing those within the group whose behavior is consistent with the dominant group and of maintaining the sense that those whose behaviors differ suffer from deficits.
- **Risk of false equivalence or historical erasure.** Some efforts have been made to develop narratives that humanize both the affected group and the group in power. Although these are favorably received by dominant-group audiences and also promote more solution-focused reactions, this approach can promote a form of false equivalence and historical erasure of violence, whereby the marginalized group and the dominant group are treated as equals in terms of power and societal positioning.

8. Reclaiming Native Truth is a significant step toward closing the research gap.

Continued empirical testing of narratives may be an important component of narrative change as we work to better understand how individual and systemic processes operate, as well as how they are disrupted. The paucity of extant research highlights the significance of the *Reclaiming Native Truth* project, which will be an important step forward in addressing the gap in the literature around Native peoples’ lived experiences and in transforming dominant narratives that reinforce negative stereotypes.

3 Fryberg, S. A., Markus, H. R., Oyserman, D., & Stone, J. M. (2008). “Of warrior chiefs and Indian princesses: The psychological consequences of American Indian mascots.” *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 30: 208–218.

4 Burton, D. O. (2015). “Creating a campaign for Black male achievement: Building a collective impact strategy to support Black male achievement in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.” Doctoral dissertation, Harvard Graduate School of Education, Cambridge, MA. <https://dash.harvard.edu/handle/1/16645009>.

5 Ganz, M. (2010). “Leading change: Leadership, organization, and social movements.” In *Handbook of leadership theory and practice*, edited by Nohria, N., & Khurana, R., 527–568. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Publishing.

6 Joyce, N., & Harwood, J. (2014). “Improving intergroup attitudes through televised vicarious intergroup contact: Social cognitive processing of ingroup and outgroup information.” *Communication Research* 41 (5): 627–643.

Pipestem Law

pipestemlaw.com

The research team is led by Wilson Pipestem (Otoe-Missouria), founder of Pipestem Law and Ietan Consulting, and Mary Kathryn Nagle (Cherokee Nation), partner, Pipestem Law. The firm is dedicated to advocacy on behalf of American Indians and tribal governments. Mr. Pipestem's advocacy in the federal courts led to the largest settlement in U.S. history between an Indian tribe and the federal government in Osage Nation v. United States. Ms. Nagle's work focuses on the restoration of tribal criminal jurisdiction over non-Indians who commit domestic and dating violence crimes against Native women.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Confidential interviews were conducted with “elites,” meaning highest-level decision-makers, in the three branches of federal government, including federal judges, members of Congress and executive branch officials, both Democratic and Republican. Although this qualitative research project interviewed a small sample of elites, we believe the opinions, perceptions and attitudes of these respondents are important to report on and reflect larger patterns among political elites.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Admiration of Native culture is nonpartisan.

Among political elites with direct experience working with tribal nations and in Indian Country, both Republicans and Democrats in our study expressed great admiration for Native resilience, survival, heritage and connection to Native identity. The association of individual Native peoples with the collective and with their respective tribal nations was consistently identified as a strength of tribal communities.

Those interviewed believed that tribal identity is strong and that Native peoples are more community minded than other Americans. They said that despite a tragic history, unfair treatment and loss of languages, Native Americans today continue to have a self-awareness of their individual relationship to tribe that helps explain their resilience and strength.

2. The absence of Native judges and Native law clerks serving in the federal courts contributes significantly to federal court decisions that harm and undermine tribal sovereignty.

According to respondents in our study, federal judges and their clerks are particularly ignorant about tribal nations, Indian law and sovereignty. Although the U.S. courts routinely render significant decisions that have huge impacts on the health, welfare and self-government of tribal nations and their citizens, the majority of the individuals who render these decisions have little to no experience with tribal nations or Native Americans and know little about tribal sovereignty or federal Indian law. This issue is exacerbated by the historical and present absence of Native Americans as judges on the federal bench — with the single current exception of the Honorable Diane Humetewa (*Hopi*) — or of law clerks in the judges' chambers.

This creates a situation in which judges' perceptions of Native peoples are often formed by limited experiences in the form of criminal cases in which Native Americans have been charged with crimes such as murder or rape. Yet these judges consider their perceptions of Native identity to be the full and ultimate truth.

Some of the judges interviewed perceived it as a factual reality that Native Americans commit more crimes per capita than non-Natives. In addition, several described the incredible poverty on all reservations, despite the fact that they had only visited one or two reservations in the jurisdiction where they serve; the majority of these visits were to reservations that are situated in the lowest 10 percent in terms of resources, employment and economic vitality.

3. Congresspersons and administrative officials agree that invisibility, stereotypes and narratives set by others affect policy.

All interviewees agreed that perception and invisibility are problems and that the U.S. public would be “appalled” if it knew the state of life in some areas of Indian Country. They said that tribes do not do enough to educate Congress on the realities of reservation life and how much each tribe contributes to local communities and states. In the absence of tribes’ telling their own stories of how they contribute substantially to schools, fire stations and other public entities that serve both Native and non-Native communities, congressional and administrative perception is shaped by a narrative most often created by others.

Standing Rock was identified as an example of media portrayal of Native Americans that ultimately proved to be harmful to the desired outcome. The tribe fell into a narrative of environment-loving Indians versus environment-hating oil companies that doomed the effort when President Trump was elected; a complex issue was reduced to a stereotype. The tribe embraced environmental allies that it later could not escape.

The narrative is one of a deficit frame supported by numerous stereotypes, including that Native professionals are less smart than non-Native professionals; Native Americans are poor, alcoholic or lazy; and tribes that are well off have assimilated into non-Native society outside of Indian Country. It is important to note that people interviewed from both parties did not believe stereotyping was a significant problem in Congress; this was attributed to direct advocacy by tribal leaders.

4. Officials serving in the executive branch share strong support for tribal sovereignty and tribal self-determination but differ substantially regarding the appropriate role of the tribal-federal relationship, the efficacy of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and whether tribes should continue to receive federal benefits.

While most federal officials outside of the BIA and the Indian Health Service know little about Native Americans and tribal nations, the administration officials interviewed for this study were experts with strong, often divergent views. All agreed that sovereignty and self-determination are the foundation of Indian Country success.

However, interviewees differed strongly on the role and value of the BIA, whether tribes should be treated the same, and the relevancy of federal protection and the federal trust responsibility. Conservatives argued that the BIA plays far too strong a role in the daily lives of tribes and Native Americans, and many tribal leaders prefer keeping the BIA to “play the blame game” for the problems in Indian Country rather than taking over BIA functions.

Some believed that federal programs and dependency stymie entrepreneurialism in Indian Country. One view is that tribes should be given the right of self-government, similar to Puerto Rico — full right of law enforcement, prosecution and education authority over the Native Americans and non-Natives who live on their reservations.

Progressives argued that the Congress should better fund the BIA so it can carry out treaty and trust responsibilities more effectively; tribes should determine when and how federal programs should be administered. They said that the “weird embrace” that tribal leaders engage in with the BIA — described as a love-hate relationship — maintains a federal role in management of tribal lands, resources and programs but keeps tribes on a slow path to self-determination.

5. Members of Congress defer to a few “expert” members on Native issues, unless the issue implicates larger partisan matters, such as climate change or labor relations.

According to the interviewees, most members of Congress have little knowledge of Native issues. A significant majority do not have tribes in their districts, so most defer to the members with tribes in their districts. Some see Native Americans as “somebody else’s problem” and do not prioritize tribal issues because they have not been directly confronted with them. Two of the 535 elected members of the House of Representatives and Senate — or 0.37 percent — are tribal citizens, a historically high number and percentage for Indian Country.

The fact that tribal leaders are active in direct advocacy in the Congress and are attending political gatherings has broken down barriers. Ignorance, however, rears its head on occasion. One congressperson said that another asked him whether “Indians still live in teepees on the reservations.” A senator was surprised to learn that tribal issues extend beyond the propriety of Native-themed mascots. Tribal issues generally are considered bipartisan unless the specific issue implicates larger contentious issues, such as climate change or labor relations.

6. Native political influence exists in Congress.

Political engagement by tribal nations is seen and felt in Congress. Some view Native peoples as having an “outsized influence,” especially compared with other minorities, while others believe that Native Americans do not have the same power as other groups or that they do not have a cohesive message. Gaming has provided tribes with the resources to engage the political and legal system to protect their interests.

Congresspersons agree that tribes have significant political influence but disagree as to the degree. Tribes are seen as having moral authority, expertise and influence on matters related to natural resources and the environment. On issues such as taxes, housing, education and health care, however, tribes are perceived to be an “afterthought.” On criminal justice matters, tribes have very little influence at all. One congressperson said that tribal leaders are the only representatives of political or racial minorities that do not speak out strongly against those in federal government who make ignorant or hateful statements against them.

**One congressperson
said that another asked
him whether “Indians
still live in teepees on
the reservations.”**



Lonnie and Amelia, *Eastern Band Cherokee*
Photo source: TONL

Acknowledgments

RECLAIMING NATIVE TRUTH PROJECT CO-LEADERS

First Nations Development Institute,

a Native social/economic justice nonprofit organization and Native American grantmaker, brings to the mix 37 years' experience of building assets — in myriad forms — in Native communities, providing support through strategic grantmaking, capacity-building training and technical assistance for Native nonprofits and tribes. First Nations Development Institute is the only Native American-controlled nonprofit dedicated to building healthy economies in Indian Country based on putting Native American communities in control of their assets.

Echo Hawk Consulting,

led by founder Crystal Echo Hawk (*Pawnee*), advises tribal and philanthropic clients and partners on strategies to support Native-led solutions and investment in Indian Country that can improve the health, well-being, rights and future of Native children, communities and tribal nations. Areas of focus include grantmaking, program development, communications, strategic partnerships and policy-change strategies.

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