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Indigenuity of Indigenous Knowledges and Community Conversations

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Beginning in 2015, Indigenous Knowledges and Community Conversations, a virtual platform, has held a constant, nurturing environment at the heart of sociopolitical challenges and change, the University of Washington Tacoma (UWT), and the American Indian Studies (AIS) minor, and it continues to develop an increased awareness of Indigenous people's cultures, experiences, and histories. The AIS minor identifies and articulates critical questions and approaches that respect and utilize Indigenous paradigms throughout the Pacific Northwest region and beyond. In collaboration with community partnerships, the focus of the platform has been to uplift and empower the voices of Indigenous peoples' sovereignty, exemplify decolonization, and promote Indigenous Knowledges (IK). The contributions of a webinar platform continue to develop a safe space for IK and communities to dialogue about Indigenous peoples' cultural and traditional lived experiences (i.e., climate justice, traditional food sovereignty, cultural and traditional practices, education, language retention and revitalization, and human health), while utilizing IK as a means to ask the question—What does justice demand

(Montgomery and Blanchard 2021; Montgomery 2022)? Utilizing a traditional leadership approach, the platform has hosted multiple community conversations with multigenerational, diverse Indigenous Nations. The vision is to embolden an interdisciplinary platform for critical Indigenized ideologies that upholds a deep respect for the relationship, respect, and reciprocity of IK and its traditions as well as a thorough understanding of the current political realities of Indigenous communities.

For this reason, it is important to sustain a welcoming virtual, safe space for articulating critical questions through dialogue and personal stories to unveil superficial, institutionalized approaches that do not demonstrate decolonized settler-colonial narratives for “who” decides for “whom” the meaning of open spaces for Indigenous peoples’ perspectives and knowledges. Indigenous Knowledges and Community Conversations created a culturally distinctive sociopolitical platform to bring together multi-interdisciplinary insights from sovereign Nations, IK, and Indigenous languages that through authentic representations uplifts the more-than-often-erased, marginalized bodies and voices of Indigenous peoples. Participants engage with the following concepts and content: (1) cultural and traditional ethical interrelationships between humans, more than humans, and the ecosystems within place-based environments; (2) Indigenous identities to place; (3) Indigenous theories and methods utilized to conduct inquiry-based research and evaluation that respond to the needs of Indigenous peoples to promote self-determination; (4) valuable communication between Indigenous and non-Indigenous multi-interdisciplinary audiences; and (5) fostering of approaches to cross-cultural understandings.

Throughout history, the legacy of colonial and epistemological forms of racism has erased IK and frequently addressed Indigenous issues in the past tense. The oppressive historical relationships with Indigenous people are intentional acts of cultural extermination (Child 1998; Minthorn, Montgomery, and Bill 2021). From a lens of reciprocity of place-based IK, Gregory Cajete (1994) explains that within Indigenous epistemologies, land/water often provides our learning curriculum; it becomes the central reference point for how we relate to the earth, to each other, and to the very act of creation. Likewise, maybe more than anything else, the land/water is what connects Indigenous peoples to our ancestors and what connects our responsibilities to land/water and our ancestors are our voices—the stories

(Menziés 2006; Kimmerer 2012; Shilling and Nelson 2018). As Indigenous peoples, we are constantly reminded of Indigenous ways of knowing: respect, deep listening, reciprocity, and mutual gratitude.

As a result of a deep cultural and spiritual connection to the land/water, Indigenous people are the first to experience climate change and are the people who intensely feel the unspoken destruction, given our close relationships with the natural world. These challenges have drastically affected Indigenous peoples' culture and traditional lived experiences, including spiritual wellness. A promising solution is to expand place-based Indigenized education that infuses Indigenous epistemologies for student success in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) curricula. To decolonize harmful STEM pedagogical research training about the natural world, an Indigenous-guided approach is an essential first step to rebuilding a healthy relationship while acknowledging all relationships come with an ethical responsibility. One such approach is Tribal Participatory Research (TPR) and how it places emphasis on sociopolitical change and empowerment, which in turn are grounded in underlying principles that guide the relationship between Indigenous Nations and other entities, including governments, governmental agencies, researchers, tribal self-governance, tribal self-determination, and tribal consultation (Fisher and Ball 2003; Thomas et al. 2011). Tribal Participatory Research approaches require additional steps that acknowledge and respect the unique sovereign status and self-determining authority of Indigenous peoples and the cultural context of their communities. Therefore, the Indigenous Knowledges and Community Conversations virtual platform is synergistically similar to TPR as an Indigenous-community-guided method for sharing IK for long-term solutions.

Informed by climate justice, environmental health inequalities, and IK, as well as Traditional Ecological Knowledges, the webinars have drawn from the principles of respect and reciprocity of IK as living research through engaged, place-based conversations. The platform prioritizes building on strengths, resources, and relationships of Indigenous communities while acknowledging tribal sovereignty and land-water-based interconnectedness to identities. In this way, the voices and stories become an increased political and social power that uplifts rather than co-opts narratives from Indigenous peoples.

In January 2020, in collaboration with the Native Environmental Science Faculty at the Northwest Indian College, Nez Perce Campus, Ciarra Greene

(Sapóoq'is Wiit'as Consulting), the webinars have continued to expand with Indigenous communities. We (including community partnerships) expanded the platform to become acknowledged as the Indigenous Speaker Series (Series). Multiple community partnership collaborations beyond the UWT have provided a platform for speakers locally, nationally, and internationally with varying backgrounds to share their cultural, traditional, and academic lived experiences in modern society, while honoring their long-standing relationship and responsibility to their homelands, communities, and ancestors. From a decolonized and Indigenized lens, the platform uplifts living research and stories that are developing through the conversations among the presenters and participants. The Series has drawn in over 1,900 participants from across the world to engage in discussion with speakers about cultural and traditional practices with foundations in sustainability, resilience, and dedication to future generations.

The expanded initiatives from Indigenous Knowledges and Community Conversations cultivate a long-term goal to continue building collaborative partnerships with Indigenous communities, academic institutions, centers, and foundations to respond to the question—What does justice demand? Alongside community partnerships with Rising Voices (RV) and the Salish Sea Research Center (SSRC), a living research approach and IK will continue to build the support for Tribal College and University (TCU) students as well as Indigenous students attending non-TCUs to participate in the annual RV workshops. The purpose is to provide inclusive mentoring opportunities, cultural and traditional appropriate peer-to-peer learning, and STEM educational training and place-based ways of knowing. The Series has also included Indigenous discussions about living (working, studying, and educating) in a modern society. It infuses the moral nature of how IK, when put into practice, creates a safe space for virtual conversations among the presenters, participants, and facilitators. Set in motion in early 2022, the Series continues as a monthly webinar, which includes a collaborative partnership with the SSRC (<https://www.salishsearesearchcenter.com>), Clean Up the River Environment (<https://www.cureriver.org>), and RV (<https://risingvoices.ucar.edu>). The Series has featured over thirty-six webinars since January 2020. Most of the webinars were recorded with permission of the speakers and can be found on our current website, <https://www.indigenousspeakerseries.com>.

As the virtual platform evolved, we developed our evaluation through Zoom polls and Continuing Education Units (CEUs). Responses have been overwhelmingly positive:

- 94 percent “Strongly Agree / Agree” the Series fostered Indigenous wellness, political sovereignty and self-determination, cultural revitalization, and cross-cultural understanding;
- 86 percent “Strongly Agree / Agree” the Series provided effective communication between multiple audiences, including Indigenous communities, policy makers, scientific communities, and the general public;
- 93 percent “Strongly Agree / Agree” the Series provided concepts and applications of the value the interrelationships between people and the environment;
- 85 percent “Strongly Agree / Agree” the Series provided grounding and applications of concepts and methodologies to place;
- 86 percent “Strongly Agree / Agree” the Series included Indigenous theories and methods utilized to conduct inquiry-based research and evaluation that respond to the needs of Indigenous communities and serve to promote Indigenous self-determination;
- 83 percent “Strongly Agree / Agree” they can apply what they have learned during the Series.

Quotes from CEU evaluations when participants were asked, “How has your engagement in the webinar advanced your understanding and vision for reflection, action, and perpetuation of the concepts previously mentioned?”:

“The presentation given during this webinar really grounded me in thinking about ways to collaborate and network within my own work. Just hearing the work being done by the speakers was inspiring in itself. It really got me brainstorming ideas to implement actions of decolonization within the work that I do.”

“[The webinar] gave me information that I can use when interacting with the tribal communities I serve.”

“This webinar has helped me as I continue to better understand my role as a student and an educator in the environmental field. I have been inspired to read Dr. Wildcat’s book [Wildcat 2009] and I can’t wait to read the second one.

I will also continue to learn about the Indigenous Peoples Climate Change Working Group.”

“This webinar showed sovereignty in action and how to utilize traditional knowledge systems in everyday practices. The implementation of IAK in existing Indigenous spaces to progress toward indigenizing practices and holistic healing is a necessary step toward furthering resiliency efforts and sovereignty.”

“Environmental data and its representation have become a vital contribution to preserving tribal lands and sovereignty. The many hoops and obstacles laid upon this path may seem incredulous but are actually more time laden. There is an array of methodologies and data analysis applications available to improve representation of data, i.e., mapping flood waters/plumes, models, drought monitoring, and other forms.”

“Learning about the Sustainability model is a powerful way to consider relationships in decision making.”

“I am more aware of the connection between the environment and our culture. More action is needed in Indigenous communities to protect the environment.”

“This webinar has been incredibly helpful for me as an educator to rethink how I teach these topics.”

The platform has been grounded and influenced by the voices of its presenters to preserve a commitment to Indigenize and decolonize narratives to uplift through two common and related aims: (1) make known the equity and inclusion barriers of the political, social, and environmental inequalities of Indigenous peoples as land-water-based interconnectedness to identity; and (2) include efforts to ensure that Indigenous peoples and knowledges from diverse backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives are empowered. Since 2015, these aims were immersed into all levels of the expanding platform, and collaborative partnerships call attention to the importance of acknowledging the responsibility of knowledge and, in turn, unlearning and relearning the spiritual and emotional connections to acquire knowledge.

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