Changing the System While You Are in the System Is Not Easy: Creating Cultural Safety for Native American Students on Campus

Turquoise Skye Devereaux and Laurie A. Walker

Abstract: As a Native American social work student and practicum supervisor, we describe a program evaluation at a campus Native American student services site and share insights on integrating Indigenous ways of knowing, cultural practices, and a justice orientation into identities and practices. We describe disseminating findings and student efforts to work within systems to make policy changes; however, changing a system—that constantly tells you that you (and who you are) are not meant to be there—while you are in the system is not easy. We describe key engagement concepts including microaggressions, stereotype threat, tokenism, resiliency, and survivance. We—as decolonizing social work scholars—provide a vision for how to move forward together in creating culturally safe classrooms, campuses, communities, and social work practices grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing and being.

***Keywords*:** culture, higher education, Native American, resilience, worldview

I (Devereaux) stand in the middle of a room in the Native American Center on campus. The tables are full, and I can hear the hum of voices. I recognize the feeling of safety in the laughter of my peers. I can see and feel the connectedness happening around me. I know that I am meant to be here, in this room, with the sweetgrass and drum sitting on a table owned by the University of Montana – Missoula, in which we are trying to transform.

The campus Native American enrollment varies between about 5 to 6 percent (577 to 802 students) depending on the year, which includes 7 to 8 percent of social work students (17 to 48) between 2013–2021 (University of Montana, 2021). The social work program includes a 2+2 program with students from tribal colleges across the state enrolled in primarily online social work courses from their home communities. The social work program has had at least three Native American tenure track faculty in the last five decades; however, I did not experience Native American instructor representation during my bachelor's program. Native American student experiences within the program are mixed due to the fact that values and policies do not always align with day-to-day procedures and processes rooted in the way people think and act.

My roots run deep where this university stands as someone who is Salish and Blackfeet. My ancestors' origin stories describe our connection to this place since time immemorial with archeological evidence to back up our stories dating to at least 12,500 years ago (Wilson et al., 2019). The campus library has archival photos, often used in land acknowledgements, with the teepees of my kin in the spaces that campus buildings now occupy. The teepees sit in front of the same mountains with distinguishable crevices and tree patterns in the background. Consciously, I use this same archived photo during my introduction of every presentation I do to represent where I come from. Today, it is very common to see university students and employees zigzag up that same steep terrain for exercise off in the distance, and within the view

of this room where we gather, on the trail carved into the side of the mountain, you can see the M representing our university on the hillside.

My great-great grandparents' generation were forcibly marched from the Bitterroot Valley and through Missoula by the United States Army to the Flathead reservation—where I grew up—with the St. Ignatius Mission boarding school awaiting their arrival just 16 months before when the third state assembly selected this land for the public university where I stand today. My Blackfeet father and Salish grandmother attended boarding schools designed to assimilate our family to a Euro-western way of thinking and being (Hunt et al., 2020; Wilson et al., 2019). Boarding schools, and the policies and practices of this newly formed state, worked together to attempt to strip us of our languages, kinship networks, religious practices, food systems, and ways of being together in community (Hunt et al., 2020; Pon, 2009; Stanton, 2014). My relatives needed a pass to travel to the town of this campus despite living less than 50 miles away (Ross, 1998). Our presence was generally limited to practicing our treaty rights when gathering bitterroot in our usual and accustomed places near campus.

I could sense the sacredness of this place standing in the present moment. I could feel the possibility of change. I could sense our ancestors' dreams allowing our stories to come alive and rebel against this system we were never meant to be a part of. Yet, we were always destined to be where our roots originated and continue to take place despite systemic efforts to disrupt our ways of knowing and being in this place (Ross, 1998; Wilson et al., 2019; Wilson & Hughes, 2019). This ground I stand on, this building I am in, all of it was made so that I could hear these students' raw experiences and strategies of navigation (Wilson et al., 2019). I stand here blessed, honored, and humbled that these students trust me with their sacred stories, but I also know that this moment will change me forever and impact so many people to come. We are one piece, a part of a whole, and we will always be in this together (Wilson & Hughes, 2019). We are the living and breathing parts of our ancestors, here to make a change in a place where our existence is the revolution (Hunt et al., 2020; Stanton, 2014).

Wilson et al. (2019) describe relational approaches to Indigenous research, "challeng[ing] Eurocentric conceptions of what research is, who it is for, and who gets to do it" (p. xi). The event I described above was a component of my Bachelor of Social Work practicum at a Native American student services office. I was leading the research design, data collection, data analysis, and dissemination efforts on behalf of my student peers. I was a young Native American student at a Predominantly White Institution when I designed this project, so it is not surprising that I received pushback for my efforts from both the Native and non-Native student and faculty communities on campus. One alumni response to my Facebook recruitment efforts included asserting the work has already been done and presuming no one would participate and that the efforts would not result in any changes. Faculty asserted that an undergraduate student did not have the training to conduct the project and questioned whether I had appropriate faculty supervision. In essence, with the exception of my co-author who served as my practicum field instructor, I received a lack of support in the design and data collection phases from places within the institution designed to provide these skills such as research courses and the departmental diversity committee.

I became interested in macro social work practice with the help of my co-author who instructed my Small Groups and Communities course and served as my field instructor at my practicum. The curriculum of the course was appealing to me, but lacked relevance to someone who grew up on a nearby reservation (Hunt et al., 2020; Kirkenes & Barnhardt, 1991; Stanton, 2014). What do these urban case examples have to do with my wanting to serve my very rural community? I needed "culturally responsive teaching," which was rare on campus (Stanton, 2014, p. 2). I wanted to apply what I was learning, but I had to do a lot of work to translate the course concepts into serving rural Indigenous communities—the context I knew I was going to practice social work within. I was already tired from juggling my three part-time jobs, my fulltime course work including this summer course, and my community and family responsibilities (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008).

My instructor luckily had some familiarity with my experiences, and we were able to advocate together to establish a relevant practicum site that enabled me to integrate my academic and practical knowledge. Programs that support Native American students are an important component of persistence in higher education (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008), and I was grateful to be a part of this program. I became extremely passionate about systemic change for Native American students within higher education based on my own experiences in the classroom, on campus, and in the community. My passion led me to perform a program evaluation on Native American student experiences.

Program Evaluation

The focus of this reflection is not on the traditional reporting of research methods and results. The priority of this article is to use a critical-theory oriented approach to analyze the insights generated from my time evaluating Native American student experiences during my undergraduate practicum. My leading the program evaluation process in 2016 overlapped with required competencies and skills from my social work coursework focused on research (facilitating focus groups, qualitative data analysis, and institutional dissemination) and small groups and communities (community organizing, student recruitment, and cultural adaptations in practice). The truth is, however, that my program evaluation methods to uncover Native American experiences in higher education were more so informed by my instinctual knowledge of what Native American students needed in order to feel safe in academic spaces than by what I learned in my courses.

Utilizing input from Native students, I was able to ensure a culturally safe space for the data collection process. Cultural safety, which was developed in nursing fields in New Zealand and Australia in the 1980s, includes "no assault, challenge, or denial of identity, of who they are and what they need. It is about shared respect, shared meaning, shared knowledge and experience, of learning together with dignity, and truly listening" (Williams, 1999, p. 213; see also Muir-Cochrane et al., 2014). The processes of my research were deeply entrenched in Native cultural practices to ensure that Native students' experiences and cultural knowledge were valued and prioritized as much as Western research practices. I was less interested in "validity or reliability" and aimed instead for "authenticity and credibility" (Wilson & Hughes, 2019, p. 15).

I learned to trust my own ability to serve my community. The students I was trying to help rarely get the validation that their experiences are worthy of being addressed or changed. I wanted Native American students to know they deserved not to experience the commonly reported instances of racism specifically tailored towards Native identities. I wanted them to know they had a right to have their identities and experiences represented in institutional policies and practices. I wanted students to feel validated as individuals and as a community, and I wanted students to enter a space where the process of how we do things matched their various learning styles and outlets for sharing stories. We share a collective worldview where we were taught how to take care of people and how to incorporate genuine, trusting, intuitive, and caring relationships.

I hosted focus groups for two days with different groups of students and alumni attending each day. All students identified as Native American but were comprised of a very diverse array of tribes, majors, departments, ages, level of education, and professions. I set the room, described above, with four groups sitting around tables visiting about four specific topics associated with their experiences in higher education in a reciprocal manner for 20 minutes (Hunt et al., 2020). The groups then rotated to another table based on a symbol on their name tag, to ensure they mix and mingle with different students. I know some of my peers are more reserved and some more outgoing, so I created an opportunity to reflect and privately write a story or experience on a piece of paper they dropped into a decorated shoebox and/or talked about and shared with the group at the table. As a visual and hands-on learner, I used shoeboxes and had the questions posted as visual prompts on the wall. I designed this process to create an opportunity for students to move around the room and expand their support network (Hunt et al., 2020; Sue et al., 2019).

I developed questions based on four academic concepts relevant in my social work and general education coursework. First, *racial microaggressions*, which are "commonplace verbal and behavioral indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 278; see also Hunt et al., 2020). Second, *stereotype threat*, the idea that preconceived notions about your group have an impact on your academic performance (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Third, *tokenism*, a non-meaningful representation meant to take the place of respectful and accountable relationship (Sabzalian, 2019; Wilson et al., 2019). And fourth, *resiliency*, the individual or collective ability to have strength and growth in the face of adversity (Saleebey, 2006). Each table had a different topic including (a) What microaggressions have you experienced? How did it make you feel? If you did respond, how? (b) What stereotypes have you heard? How did it affect your academic performance? (c) Have you experienced tokenism? and (d) What does resiliency mean to you? What attributes of yourself make you resilient?

The shoe boxes, where participants dropped their handwritten replies to the questions, came from my part-time job at a department store, as did some of the incentives for student participation that I arranged into gift baskets (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008). I was able to receive over $1,500 worth of incentives from different departments within the university and the local retail store because of my community involvement and part-time job. My relationships

were the source of the participation incentives (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991; Wilson et al., 2019).

The Native American undergraduates, masters, doctoral students, and alumni who gathered described their experiences with culturally unsafe environments including microaggressions, non-Native assumptions, tokenism and invisibility, the emotional toll, the impacts on their academic performance, and how we are resilient like our ancestors. I had several campus-level opportunities such as presenting to the academic officers of the institution and several departments to share what we learned from the focus groups, which also helped inform some changes to campus policy and on-campus student support staff (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008). I described our engagement processes with students, as well as campus departments, colleges, committees, the administration, and faculty through common Indigenous values described in higher education settings including relationships, respect, reciprocity, relevance, responsibility, reverence, and responsiveness (Archibald, 2008; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991; Wilson & Hughes, 2019). However, much of the way we understand and implement these values in higher education settings do not reflect our current reality.

Unsafe Environments

Westernized institutions have promoted their success in serving Native American students but do not sufficiently provide culturally safe environments that acknowledge the deep historical problems institutions have had with Native American students and their communities (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Muir-Cochrane et al., 2014; Pon, 2009). Gray et al. (2013) assert that, “the dominant social work model of education largely socializes students into Western norms, values, and ways of thinking” (p. 486). Many of our efforts at inclusion are like swimming upstream, as we “try to move things forward, but with the recognition that other forces are at play that are moving things back” (Wilson et al., 2019, p. xiii). Many disciplines like social work, education, and religious institutions need to acknowledge that we are formed within colonization processes and are a part of those systems and structures by design. Social workers “must confront the continuing effects of colonialism and the ways in which the profession has been, and continues to, participate in colonial projects” (Yellow Bird, 2013, p. 281).

As Native Americans in the classroom, participants in campus events, and even shoppers in the community, we experience racially motivated microaggressions on all three levels: micro-insult (insensitive and demeaning comments), micro-assault (attacks like name-calling meant to hurt), and micro-invalidation (discounting thoughts, feelings, and experiences) (Sue et al., 2007). We get called an “Indian savage” in the financial aid line, professors use “chief” as an identifier for us, advisors exploit our ceremonial events and the loss of loved ones as indicators of our inability to achieve a desired degree, and we are consistently followed in stores (Ross, 1998). Furthermore, microaggressions are not only experienced by comments or statements, but also through non-verbal communication.

Non-Native Assumptions

Native American students face assumptions and stereotypes pertaining to certain financial "privileges" and experiences of addiction, which challenge our ability to participate and succeed in academics. Non-Natives students on campus assume that we get "free money," "free college," and that we are "alcoholics by genetics" or that we drink ourselves "out of college." Non-Native stereotypes of Natives regarding alcohol impact our relationships, ability to attend social gatherings, and choices at departmental social gatherings with alcohol present despite numerous attempts to change the departmental and campus culture regarding alcohol. Non-Native assumptions and stereotypes degrade our identity, worldview, and cultural priorities while also impacting our ability to see ourselves as deserving of education and access to opportunities (Hunt et al., 2020; Ross, 1998; Stanton, 2014). Financial supports are an important component of Native American student persistence in higher education, yet Native American students must qualify and apply for scholarships and tuition waivers that are often merit- and need-based like most scholarships (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008). For many of us the stereotypes and assumptions confirm the feeling that we do not belong in this Westernized education system. However, despite the reality of stereotype threat, we are expected to navigate higher educational systems nonetheless, even though every part of us is challenged or denied within it.

Tokenism and Invisibility

Any Native topic that comes up in class, we get "the glances" from other classmates and professors expecting an "Indian expert" to contribute because we cannot escape representing our entire population (Hunt et al., 2020; Sabzalian, 2019). Hunt et al. (2020) describe:

> due to the lack of American representation and inclusion of American Indian culture and history in the curriculum, the participants were often expected to represent the American Indian population and provide a comprehensive knowledge of American Indian culture and history. (pp. 770–771)

Token Indians in classrooms are often stripped of place, context, and relationship and expected to participate in "oversimplified, pan-Indigenous understandings of Indigeneity [where] the result [is] more colonial paternalism" (Wilson et al., 2019, p. 3). Native students are not in higher education to be the educators of peers or instructors, they expect to receive an education (Hunt et al., 2020).

Yet, time and time again we see how higher education systems fail Native American students. Institutions do not know how to create a supportive campus climate, and they perpetuate oppression by not making Indian education a priority within curriculum. Decolonizing practices and critical thinking skills within the classroom can address systemic oppression and have many positive outcomes. Furthermore, decolonizing practices and developing critical thinking skills creates spaces that represent Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) experiences and prepares students to work within communities they do not belong to.

Social workers in particular, through decolonization practices, can then go on to change the systems they will work for in the future and go about their practice with humility (Wilson et al., 2019). As social workers, it is our ethical obligation to think critically, so we can provide the best services possible while addressing oppression and every "ism." However, it is impossible to fulfill our ethical obligation to the BIPOC community, and specifically to Indigenous peoples, if social work educators continue to teach that being competent in everyone's culture is a reachable goal (Pon, 2009). The social worker illusion of achieving competence in all cultures they might encounter allows for fear to be one of the biggest barriers to fully understanding client's experiences, including how they identify, as well as their cultural background (Pon, 2009). For example, instructors expect Native American students to know enough about entire Indigenous populations and to be able to teach this content to other students and the instructors. Social workers act as if cross-cultural work is a box that can be checked off as complete, which lacks ongoing self-awareness and ongoing attention to how we teach and function in the classroom and in social work roles.

Discrimination happens at all levels of our institution, yet students often feel invisible due to the lack of institutional responsiveness (Muir-Cochrane et al., 2014; Wilson & Hughes, 2019). We know "nothing happens" when we experience these things, because the administration does not make change happen, including designing committees and advisory groups without much power or decision-making authority. As a result, Native students and their ongoing experiences are being ignored and dismissed, which contributes to non-retention rates (Hunt et al., 2020; Sue et al., 2019; Tuck, 2011).

Social work educators need to find methods that create a safe environment where experiences can be shared in order to stop pushing policies that harm Indigenous students. Sue et al. (2019) encourages interventions that "make the 'invisible visible' … [that] challenge the stereotype… ask for clarification … express disagreement … educate the offender … [or] seek external intervention" (p. 135). Native students are constantly placed in positions of experiencing microaggressions in classrooms and in social work education. Students are forced to find ways to explain their experiences in a manner that is understandable to others who do not share their identities and experiences. Frequently, we find a wide gap between stated racial equity and justice values and actual practices within social work. Native American students have limited choices when faced with daily hassles such as hearing an instructor explain people having been on specific land for decades without acknowledging the Indigenous people there previously. Native American students who serve on committees may have a good experience collaborating to develop anti-racist and decolonizing content under the leadership of one faculty member. However, when that leader steps back from the role for a sabbatical, or other reasons, the committee often devolves to prior lower levels of functioning that render Indigenous perspectives unheard. As result, I and others often rotate off committees when we feel our emotional labor no longer results in implementing change.

Emotional Toll

Culturally unsafe environments, along with non-Native assumptions, tokenism, and the invisibility of microaggressions have an immense impact on Native students' mental health. Not

only are we experiencing the oppression, but also the guilt for not being able to overcome our emotional reactions in the moment and advocate for or provide education to non-Natives. As a result, we constantly have to respond with a filter. We act "less Native" to be taken seriously and we "beat [ourselves] up over not responding or educating others" or even not raising our hands because we do not want to "feel stupid." Native American perspectives being absent or misrepresented in the curriculum communicates that Native experiences, including Native history, are not worthy of recognition (Hunt et al., 2020; Stanton, 2014). Baltra-Ulloa (2013) describes Whiteness this way:

> [It is] an ideology, a silent mainstream, dangerously and pervasively setting invisible benchmarks against which everyone is measured. Whiteness eludes overt discussion while it nevertheless dictates how people should live, advantaging one way of thinking, one way of being and doing above all others. (p. 2315)

White mainstream education is challenging, as the curriculum directly negates us and continues the effects of colonization, which results in a crisis response to invalidation (Hunt et al., 2020). We are expected to do twice the emotional labor; not only are we supposed to earn a degree, but also defend our identity in a system that is not invested in Native success (Hunt et al., 2020).

Negative Impact on Academic Performance

Native students experience challenges and barriers that take on a much deeper meaning than just meeting requirements to get a degree; they also impact our belief that we can succeed in an academic setting. We question if we can perform to the Westernized standard of success (Steele et al., 1995). Students spoke about having to "earn" their space in the classroom and within the system, which entails the need to be "more prepared," feeling unworthy of support and acknowledgment, and having to consistently disprove how "poorly Natives do 'in general' in school." The experience of the lack of safety affects our "sleep" and "focus," which contributes to our "inability" to perform. We are required to invest additional energy and time that limits our emotional and mental stability when we are trying to contradict negative stereotypes in education (Hunt et al., 2020).

Resiliency

Native students prevail even though the curriculum, professors, administration, and community tell us that the betterment of our Indigenous community is not worthy of support. Sabzalian (2019) describes Native students experiencing what is called "survivance, a semantic combination of the words survival and resistance … survivance characterizes the everyday ways Indigenous people have reframed imposed narratives" (p. xv). Sabzalian (2019) explains survivance further as refusing "colonial scripts of reassurance or victimization, and instead creatively confront[ing], resist[ing], decenter[ing], and transform[ing] those scripts" (p. 4). We prevail, because everyone before us did. Our ancestors survived genocide so we could be here today (Gray et al., 2013). Our experiences not only give us unique challenges, but they also give us unique strengths and tools to survive systems that were not made for us (Sabzalian, 2019; Saleebey, 2006). We utilize our values of community, family, and spirituality as a means

to overcome obstacles within education (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Saleebey, 2006). Native students bouncing back, overcoming, and not giving up gives us even more leverage. Navigating the Indigenous worldview and the Westernized worldview simultaneously teaches us that we need to know both in order to make the most impact. Therefore, we stay resilient even though the Westernized education system does not acknowledge our values or beliefs (Saleebey, 2006). We embody resilience; survivance has become a part of how we function, but we transform indignities into positives (Hunt et al., 2020; Sabzalian, 2019; Saleebey, 2006). Indigenous support networks and the associated sense of community that is felt exceeds any expectation that you had when looking for a way to stay on your educational journey (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008).

Campus Opportunities and Successes

I can still feel what it was like to stand in a room again with my peers, sharing the findings of the program evaluation. Students were present and engaged even though we were tired, as the end of the semester approached. I am guessing I was not the only student in the room in this situation: I was relieved that I was somehow able to finish the data analysis without turning my computer off and losing the codes and associated themes that were exceeding the limits of the free student version of the software. I looked out into the room and could see my friends, mentors, and first-year student mentees sitting in rows and enjoying a meal they did not have to prepare or pay for. I could tell they could relate to the results and were hungry for change. We were fired up, and I was confident that I would not be alone in working towards institutional change.

I was invited to share the results of the study with the campus Academic Officers and the School of Social Work that semester, as well as the College of Education at their fall retreat the next semester. I have also shared these results at several other institutions. I do not know what happens in most of the meetings following my disseminating of results; however, I have experienced a few institutional changes that I believe were directly tied to hours of difficult conversations inside and outside of formal committee meetings. Baltra-Ulloa (2013) encourages dialoguing and working through conflict in organizations as a means to create change.

On our campus—like all contexts—change came in the form of ongoing organizing and demands for concrete and winnable solutions. Sabzalian (2019) describes, “drawing attention to the structures, discourses, and practices that sustain settler colonialism” (p. 7) and “the unexamined ways whiteness and colonialism surface in educational policy and practice” (p. xviii). Cultural and funeral leave is an example of an educational policy that our university lacked. I was told I could not be excused from class for a funeral unless my name was listed in the obituary purchased in a newspaper; however, Native American kinship networks define family in much more inclusive ways (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008). Our attendance at several wakes, funerals, and cultural ceremonies in a typical year are a protective factor in how we manage unexpected deaths; maintain our spiritual practices, family and community connections; as well as manage our traumatic grief (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Hansen, 2014; Saleebey, 2006; Swaney, 2016). Native students who are not permitted to participate in ceremonial events

and funerals may have long-term consequences for their academic performance, which result from unresolved complicated grief (Hansen, 2014; Swaney, 2016).

However, despite the adversity we manage, we are the means to the change we want to see in the world. For example, my first-year mentee at the Native American student services became the first student co-chair of our university-level Diversity Advisory Council (DAC) to the university president that previously was led by a faculty and staff co-chair team. Our Native American Student Advisory Council (NASAC) researched and successfully fought for a cultural leave policy change, which was modeled after another regional campus process. The cultural leave policy enables students to request excused absence(s) from their instructors, advisor, or chair when they will be missing class due to attending a cultural event, ceremony, or funeral (Muir-Cochrane et al., 2014). The policy also includes a clear appeal process if students experience issues with the policy implementation, as well as clear guidance on make-up work to ensure the student is supported in learning course materials and attending to their community commitments (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008). The DAC supported the NASAC in the process of getting the faculty senate to pass and implement a university-level cultural and ceremonial leave policy. The policy is an example of higher education responsiveness to accommodate a persistent request for Native American students with the potential to both increase retention and as a concrete means of supporting and respecting Native American identities (Archibald, 2008; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991; Muir-Cochrane et al., 2014; Wilson & Hughes, 2019). Our campus also created a Native American community advisory board, as well as two additional staff positions held by Native Americans with doctoral degrees including a tribal liaison and a student-facing diversity, equity, and inclusion role. The Native American staff roles are a way for them to serve as role models, who successfully navigated their higher educational experiences, and now give back to the wider community (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008).

We created these changes together, "we" including my co-author and I along with my mentee and other Native American faculty, staff, and students. My co-author collaborated with other faculty and co-chaired the DAC, which eventually created the DAC student co-chair role that my mentee was the first to hold. My co-author and mentee both played active roles in advocating for the student attendance policy and Native American staff roles. My role focused more on the direct work with Native American students, advocating for the Native American Studies (NAS) certificate, and running trainings for students, faculty, and administrators focused on historical and intergenerational trauma and Native American student experiences. Our other collaborators continue to manage the NAS certificate and continue to advocate for a Chief Diversity Officer role since we rotated out of these roles. Many programs continue to be under-resourced and require repeated advocacy to maintain staffing through university allocations, grant writing, and joint appointments to maintain momentum and manage programs such as the NAS certificate. We all remain in ongoing relationships; however, we all often take breaks to rest from the taxing nature of this systems change work.

Coda: Challenges Related to Changing the System

I am also in ongoing roles that enable me to give back to the community (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008). The community recognized and nurtured my gifts in speaking, training, and conducting program evaluations in Indigenous contexts. I completed my advanced standing Master of Social Work degree and launched a Native American women-owned social enterprise with university, school, conference, and Indigenous community contracts to speak, train, and conduct program evaluations.

I applied for a social work doctoral program with essays using the methods of my undergraduate program evaluation as a starting place for my proposed dissertation methods. I know what makes students feel safe. I know the feelings and the practice skills come naturally because they are grounded in Indigenous culture (Wilson et al., 2019). I was admitted to and accepted a place in a doctoral program where I completed my Master of Social Work degree and served on many committees focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion work. I learned the language and culture of academic settings, yet I continue to experience social workers and educators who are unaware of the systemic oppression I have faced throughout my educational and occupational career (Muir-Cochrane et al., 2014). Social workers should be taught Indigenous research and program evaluation frameworks and methods in the explicit curriculums. As I work as a program evaluation consultant in the community, faculty collaborators are often asking me for the resources that I utilize to guide research in Indigenous communities in a manner that values the way Indigenous communities function as they build trust, gain access, and interact in manners that are comfortable, safe, and flexible for Indigenous collaborators. Again, I continue to be tokenized even in my profession by the same professors who do not prioritize learning about Indigenous approaches to research. Indigenous communities often practice research in manners guided by ancestors and with the impact of future generations in mind, which rarely aligns with Westernized researchers and institutions. The University of Montana is currently in the process of proposing and developing a master's degree in NAS and an Indigenous Studies doctoral degree through an Interdisciplinary Graduate School program, which are both institutional efforts that can develop resources for Indigenous students.

Most of us go into social work because we want to help people and change systems, but we need to teach about structural oppression in order to make change (Stanton, 2014). We have an ethical responsibility to be educated and implement standards of professionalism in daily practices and professional development including decolonizing classrooms and curriculum to be allies to challenge and support Native American students (Muir-Cochrane et al., 2014). Ives and Loft (2013) explain:

> In designing curricula, educators need to move away from the assumption that Eurocentric knowledge and practice approaches "could and should be uncritically and universally applied to all peoples regardless of culture or political and historical circumstances" (Baikie, 2009, p. 42). An approach that seeks to liberate and heal must address colonialism directly, its past injustices and its present manifestations. (p. 5695)

To me, being a social worker is helping people regardless of where they come from, which entails understanding lived experiences without judgment and with humility. Unfortunately, in reality, I am often treated like my worldview is not a priority and sometimes like my presence or efforts do not matter (Wilson & Hughes, 2019). Changing the system while you are in the system is not easy. The system and the people within the system constantly tell you that you—that everything you are—are not meant to be there (Hunt et al., 2020).

Critique of the Profession of Social Work

My experience is one thing, but it is reflected broadly in the experiences of Indigenous students and people. Social workers can recognize and understand that we perpetuate oppression. Baltra-Ulloa (2013) explains:

> The contradictions experienced in my social work training have endured through my years of practice. We were trained to believe we were "the good guys": caring, sensitive, aware, competent, ethical, agents of social justice and change, and above all, capable of empowering ourselves and others. This seemed an ill-fitting cloak from the very beginning, uncomfortable and burdensome when, "in the job," I was essentially being paid to support and promote a new form of colonization—a "fitting in" to a system that values individualism, discourages collective issues, prefers to control, survey and judge people. I was to do this by managing risk, reporting my activities, withdrawing my services if people did not comply, and timing my availability. I was to know at all times what to do. I was to keep an emotional distance, avoid conflict, and never ever speak of befriending a "client." (p. 2290)

My Indigenous worldview and experiences as a social worker align with both Baltra-Ulloa (2013) and the Native student and alumni participants in the program evaluation I led. However, the invalidation and the micro-insults are minuscule compared to the sense of belonging and healing I gain when working with Native American students (Wilson et al., 2019). My undergraduate research ignited this feeling of belonging and purpose in giving back to my community, but the direct practice I do now encompasses the change I want to make (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008). I want to make sure that Indian education is systemically included in curriculum and that Indigenous worldviews, knowledge, experiences, and histories are held at the same value as a Westernized education (Hunt et al., 2020; Wilson & Hughes, 2019). Coates (2013) assert that we need to work on

> changing the language we use to describe another's experience: the "language of deficiency and dysfunction" does not fit Indigenous Peoples' "survival and resistance… to oppressive conditions" (Nadeau & Young, 2006, p. 91). Nadeau and Young (2006) use the term education instead of therapy or healing to shift the focus from the victim-oppressor relationship to resistance and survival: to restore "sacred vitality" referring to Indigenous Peoples' "feeling of energetic connection with [their] own sacredness, with the earth, and with others in the community, a feeling of being fully alive." Many First Nations Peoples use traditional ceremonies to restore "sacred vitality" while many non-Indigenous people may use strengths-based models. (p. 1924)

The students and alumni that participated in my undergraduate program evaluation project changed my trajectory as a social worker. The students, now alumni, are all working towards systemic change in their respective careers, as am I in my academic institutional role and consulting work. We are part of a global resistance, resurgence, revitalization, restoration, and reclaiming of Indigenous ways of knowing and being in the world (Hunt et al., 2020; Stanton, 2014; Wilson et al., 2019; Wilson & Hughes, 2019). The Native American participants in my practicum role gave me the power, the courage, and the passion to do the hard work. But in the end, I can only hope that as a social work profession, we can understand how much critical thinking and creating culturally safe spaces can maximize the impact we make (Muir-Cochrane et al., 2014). Social work is about helping people, but you can only ethically help people—who have less privilege than you—when you recognize your role in the system and how that system inherently supports you (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008). Stanton (2014) describes the moral agency of textbook authors and educators who can build "social and political consciousness-building, resistance, questioning, and reflexivity" (p. 4) that explicitly, rather than passively, describe colonization and current implications. Knowledge of systemic oppression has the potential to not only make an influence on a community or systems level, but also how we practice humility with each individual and group we engage with in office hours, the classroom, committee- or research-meeting.

Suggestions for the Profession of Social Work

I can imagine a social work academic- and practice-community where Native American students feel safe, whole, and connected (Hunt et al., 2020; Wilson & Hughes, 2019). However, first we as a discipline must develop an understanding of how we got here and where we are trying to go together. The values my Indigenous communities practiced before colonization can point a way forward together. Baltra-Ulloa (2013) describes an ethic of care in the context of reciprocal relationships in the context of community. The ethic of care and the associated relationality and reciprocity come naturally to me because it was developed in me by my grandmother and my community (Archibald, 2008; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991; Wilson & Hughes, 2019). Resmaa Menakem, an African American licensed social work therapist, trainer, and activist articulates something similar:

> consider Malcolm Gladwell's observation that it takes about 10,000 hours of practice to become highly proficient in almost any serious endeavor. By the time African Americans reach adulthood, many have spent 10,000 or more hours learning how to navigate the dangers, constrictions, and contradictions of white-body supremacy. They have done this not by choice, but as a matter of survival … white people who want to grow out of white-body supremacy now need to put in a similar amount of time and effort in order to change themselves and create a new culture … white Americans will need to expend considerable effort towards those goals, both individually and collectively, over an extended period of time. (2017, p. 267)

However, for those working within systems and structures designed for your benefit creating this change in your daily interactions might not flow as naturally. We all have unlearning to do, which can be done relationally, as we allow ourselves to be challenged and unsettled, as we

navigate in new directions (Wilson et al., 2019). Yellow Bird (2013), an Indigenous social worker, asserts, "social workers have the opportunity either to support Indigenous Peoples' rights or continue with practices that further erode them" (p. 292).

Social workers, wanting to change policies and practices that continue oppression and perpetuate problems, often communicate that the work requires more effort than they expected. However, how do we do the work and be a part of the solutions? Wilson and Hughes (2019) state, "to care is not enough, to be compassionate is not enough, to know the truth is not enough. We must use this awareness to guide our actions … the actual change work—is personal and relational" (p. 6). We need awareness coupled with action that are grounded in relationships with people that are accountable to a place with an ability to "persist through uncomfortable experiences of not-knowing… [which] requires a level of vulnerability… as well as a willingness to learn and grow and change, and take cues from the broader environment" (Wilson & Hughes, 2019, p. 10). Stanton (2014) describes decolonizing as "a curriculum that deconstructs the colonizing narrative and historical representation of Native peoples—may help teachers and students develop the critical habit of mind needed to effectively advocate for widespread change" (p. 7).

Wilson et al. (2019) uses the following relevant metaphor: "All you have to do is pick out the weeds. All you have to do is remove the barriers and provide the space and people will do it for themselves" (p. xvi). The roots of the weeds of colonization are still present in our academic spaces. We must go underground to identify and remove the sources of colonial structures and processes that reemerge time and time again as ongoing acts of injustice and cultural insensitivity. Students, staff, and faculty can provide leadership that finds and removes the roots of ongoing injustices. Weeds are embedded in our daily interactions, our curriculum, and our policies. We all know weeds seemingly pop up out of nowhere, even in places we weeded yesterday. Yet, if we have a willingness to acknowledge and continually pick the weeds in our implicit curriculum (daily interactions and practices) and our explicit curriculum in classrooms, then the seeds and plants intended for that place will grow and flourish. The literal roots have always been there, reengaging allows for an active replenishment of Indigenous knowledge systems and people. Our campus focus groups and the Native American students navigating their respective professional journeys are evidence that the balance, harmony, and equilibrium we seek in shifting our disciplines and practices to include and actively represent Indigenous perspectives with critical awareness are already embodied in our students as they are the future leaders of our communities (Stanton, 2014; Wilson & Hughes, 2019).

References

Archibald, J. (2008). *Indigenous storywork: Educating the heart, mind, body, and spirit.* UBC Press.

Baltra-Ulloa, A. J. (2013). Why decolonized social work is more than cross-culturalism. In M. Gray, J. Coates, M. Yellow Bird, & T. Hetherington (Eds.). *Decolonizing social work* [eBook edition] (pp. 2268–2686). Routledge.

Coates, J. (2013). Ecospiritual approaches: A path to decolonizing social work. In M. Gray, J. Coates, M. Yellow Bird, & T. Hetherington (Eds.). *Decolonizing social work* [eBook edition] (pp. 1694–2265). Routledge.

Gray, M., Coates, J., Yellow Bird, M., & Hetherington, T. (2013). *Introduction: Scoping the terrain of decolonization*. In M. Gray, J. Coates, M. Yellow Bird, & T. Hetherington (Eds.). *Decolonizing social work* [eBook edition] (pp. 321–875). Routledge.

Guillory, R. M., & Wolverton, M. (2008). It's about family: Native American student persistence in higher education. *The Journal of Higher Education*, *79*(1), 58–87.

Hansen, C. D. (2014). *Spiritual practices among Northern Plains tribal members as a protective factor in the relationship between unexpected deaths and traumatic grief.* (Publication No. 4382). [Thesis, University of Montana]. https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=5329&context=etd

Hunt, B. D., Locklear, L. A., Bullard, C., & Pacheco, C. (2020). "Do you live in a teepee? Do you have running water?" The harrowing experiences of American Indians in North Carolina urban K-12 schools. *The Urban Review*, *52*, 759–777. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11256-020-00563-1

Ives, N. G., & Loft, M. T. (2013). Building bridges with Indigenous communities through social work education. In M. Gray, J. Coates, M. Yellow Bird, & T. Hetherington (Eds.). *Decolonizing social work* [eBook edition] (pp. 5592–5946). Routledge.

Kirkness, V. J., & Barnhardt, R. (1991). First Nations and higher education: The four R's – respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility. *Journal of American Indian Education*, *30*(3), 1–15.

Menakem, R. (2017). *My grandmother's hands: Racialized trauma and the pathway to mending our hearts and bodies* [eBook edition]. Central Recovery Press.

Muir-Cochrane, E., Barkway, P., & Nizette, D. (2014). *Mosby's pocketbook of mental health*. Mosby/Elsevier.

Pon, G. (2009). Cultural competency as new racism: An ontology of forgetting. *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, *20*(1), 59–71. https://doi.org/10.1080/10428230902871173

Ross, L. (1998). *Inventing the savage: The social construction of Native American criminality*. University of Texas Press.

Sabzalian, L. (2019). *Indigenous children's survivance in public schools* [eBook edition]. Routledge.

Saleebey, D. (2006) *The strengths perspective in social work practice* (4th ed.). Pearson.

Stanton, C. R. (2014). The curricular Indian Agent: Discursive colonization and Indigenous dys(agency) in U.S. history textbooks. *Curriculum Inquiry*, *44*(5), 649–676. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/curi.12064

Steele, C. M., Aronson, J., & Kruglanski, A. W. (1995). Stereotype threat and the intellectual test performance of African Americans. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *69*(5), 797–811. https://doi.org/10.1037//0022-3514.69.5.797

Sue, D. W., Alsaidi, S., Awad, M. N., Glaeser, E., Calle, C. Z., & Mendez, N. (2019). Disarming racial microaggressions: Microintervention strategies for targets, white allies, and bystanders. *American Psychologist*, *74*(1), 128–142. https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000296

Sue, D. W., Capodilupo, C. M., Torino, G. C., Bucceri, J. M., Holder, A. M. B., Nadal, K. L., & Esquilin, M. (2007). Racial microaggressions in everyday life: Implications for clinical practice. *American Psychologist*, *62*(4), 271–286. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066x.62.4.271

Swaney, R. (2016). E*xperiences of American Indians in natural resource degree programs.* (Publication No. 10255643). [Doctoral dissertation, University of Montana]. ProQuest. https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=11961&context=etd

Tuck, E. (2011). Humiliating ironies and dangerous dignities: A dialectic of school pushout. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *24*(7), 817–827. https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2011.632785

University of Montana (2021). *University Data Office: Institutional Research.* https://www.umt.edu/institutional-research/enrollment/census-enrollment.php

Williams, R. (1999). Cultural safety – what does it mean for our work practice? *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, *23*(2), 213–214. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-842X.1999.tb01240.x

Wilson, S., Breen, A. V., & Dupré, L. (2019). *Research & reconciliation: Unsettling ways of knowing through Indigenous relationships*. Canadian Scholars.

Wilson, S., & Hughes, M. (2019). Why research is reconciliation. In S. Wilson, A. V. Breen, & L. Dupré (Eds.) *Research & reconciliation: Unsettling ways of knowing through Indigenous relationships* (pp. 5–19). Canadian Scholars.

Yellow Bird, M. (2013). Preface: United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples through Indigenous eyes. In M. Gray, J. Coates, M. Yellow Bird, & T. Hetherington (Eds.). *Decolonizing social work* [eBook edition] (pp. 225–302). Routledge.

***About the Authors*:** Turquoise Skye Devereaux, MSW is Student, School of Social Work, Arizona State University, Mesa, AZ (t.s.devereaux@gmail.com); Laurie A. Walker, PhD is Assistant Teaching Professor, Department of Native American Studies, Montana State University, Bozeman, MT (laurie.walker@montana.edu).