



**Issue 17, Volume 1 December 2024**

# **Native American Belonging in the University of California**

**Anaya N. Cambridge and Robin M. DeLugan, PhD**

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This research was supported by the UROC-H and SOAR program. Anaya Cambridge would like to thank Dr. Robin DeLugan, UROC staff, student mentors, UC organizations, and the interviewee participants for their support.

## Objective

### Background

In the United States, Native Americans have one of the lowest enrollment and graduation rates of all racial and ethnic minority groups that seek out higher education.<sup>1</sup> A 2023 report from the University of California website indicates a 11.6% increase in admission offers to American Indian students since 2022, resulting in a current representation rate of 0.7% throughout the UC system.<sup>2</sup> This is largely due to the Native American Opportunity Plan (NAOP) now being available to all federally recognized tribes. The NAOP covers in-state tuition and student service fees for all Native American, American Indian, or Alaskan Native students who are apart of federally recognized tribes.<sup>3</sup> With time, we hope to see an increase in enrollment rates from the Native American population.

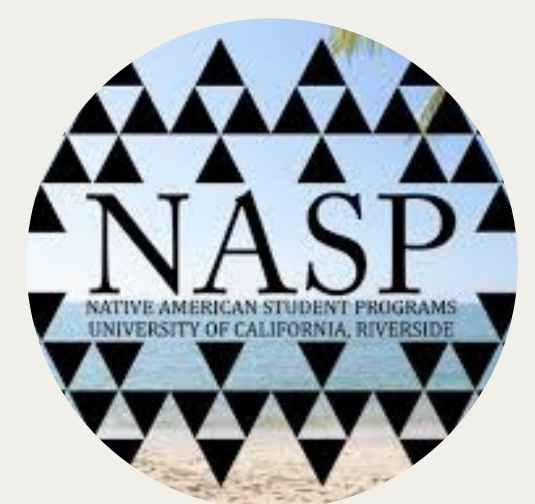
### Research question

Do Native American students, faculty, and staff at select University of California (UC) campuses feel that their interests are recognized and represented within the UC system?

## Methodology

The research methodology included an annotated bibliography, 15 interviews, and ethnographic participant-observation amongst Native American population at 4 UC campuses. In addition, Native American community events were attended for a first-hand experience of the festivities. Statistical and secondary data provided by the UC websites and other information sources were also utilized. The results of the research provide information about what is working, what can be improved, and potential solutions to enhance the academic experience of Native Americans in higher education.

## Resource centers across the UC System



**UC Riverside**  
Native American Student Programs



**UC Irvine**  
No Center: American Indian Student Association



**UC Los Angeles**  
UCLA American Indian Studies Center



**UC Santa Barbara**  
American Indian and Indigenous Cultural Resource Center



**UC San Diego**  
UCSD Intertribal Resource Center



**UC Merced**  
No Center: Native and Indigenous Student Coalition



**UC Santa Cruz**  
American Indian Resource Center



**UC Davis**  
Native American Academic Student Resource Center



**UC Berkeley**  
Native American Student Development

**Figure 1.** Showcases nine UC campuses and their designated Native American Centers or Programs.

Note. UC Merced and UC Irvine do not have a Center but student run clubs.

## "Native American Events Attended from Fall 2023-Spring 2024"



**Figure 2.** UC Merced's Toloma 5k Fun Run  
 Note. Photos from @ucmerced and @ucm\_ejie on Instagram.



**Figure 3.** City of Berkeley Powwow



**Figure 4.** UC Santa Cruz's Indigethankx Dinner



**Figure 5.** UC Davis: Native American Student Union meeting held at the Native American Academic Student Success Resource Center (NAASSC)

## Ethnographic Experience

The purpose of the photos taken are intended to illustrate Native American community-building on campus, as well as the campus resources that support the campus's Native American community. By attending these events, I had the opportunity to engage with and observe the Native community located at each of the four locations.

For example, from Figure 2, I was able to attend the third annual Toloma 5k Fun Run at UC Merced. This event invites all of UC Merced, as well as the surrounding community in the central valley, to visit the campus and participate in a 5k marathon around the campus. Local Native American vendors were selling beaded jewelry and artwork while the campus provided food and Toloma 5k merch for those who came to the event.

Figure 3 showcases the City of Berkeley Powwow. Sponsored by the City of Berkeley, this powwow had multiple vendors, including the Native American Student Development from UCB, tabling, selling: jewelry, artwork, clothing, food, and educational material. In the center of the dance arena, multiple dancer participated throughout the entire duration of the powwow. This event felt very integrated and highly anticipated by the community with a large attendance of people.

Figure 4 depicts a full house of attendees from both UC Santa Cruz and the general public for their annual Indigethankx dinner. This alternative Thanksgiving dinner offered an opportunity for the AIRC to collaborate with the Cowell Coffee Shop to create a menu using local and native ingredients within the area. Several guest performers, students, faculty, and staff attended and had the opportunity to speak in celebration of the community's gathering.

Lastly, Figure 5 show the UC Davis's NAASSC, warmly referred to as the Native Nest. The Native nest is the head quarters of all Native related resources and engagement, including the Native American Student Union meeting and discussion in preparation for their upcoming annual Davis Powwow. UCD is also the only campus to have their own Native American Museum.

## Interview Questionnaire

A total of 7 questions were asked to Native American students, staff, and faculty. The purpose of these interviews was to offer an opportunity for the Native community on each visited campus to voice their experiences attending the UC, as well as express their stance on their representation within the UC system.

### Sample Questions:

1. Is there a place on campus where Native American students/faculty can gather and hang out, such as a cultural center of club?
2. Are there resources on campus for Native American students, faculty, staff members such as yourself that you can access? If so, how easy or difficult was it accessing them. IF not, what are some recommendations you might have for the UC to adopt?

## Results

A resounding response heard from each campus was the importance of a physical space and the impact that space has on overall sense of belonging for the Native community. Furthermore, there was recommendation for the UC to create jobs and positions that would support the Native American community. The following quotes provide perspective from Native voices within the UC system:

*"Yeah, first through the American Indian Resource Center (AIRC). I've been pretty connected with them since my first year attending UC Santa Cruz. I was also participating in the student organization, the Student Alliance of Native Americans Indigenous Peoples (SANAI)."*

— Ezekiel, Student, Naakai Diné, UCSC

*"There is lots of room for growth. I've seen schools where multiple people go out to every powwow and talk about the many programs available and the outreach they do. One thing the UC is doing as a system, which is really impressive, is we are covering full tuition and student services fees for any student who is enrolled in a federally recognized tribe. This program is the Native American Opportunity plan (NAOP)."*

— Professor, UCM

*"We're really trying to create environments where Native students aren't just "Surviving" right? We've been surviving for years, decades, centuries since colonization and I really think in these institutions we are seeing more and more students come into the UC. How we are creating an environment in which we can get passed the survive narrative, and ultimately get to "Thrive" and provide that environment in which Native students are thriving matters."*

— William, Associate Director, Oglala Lakota, UCD

Overall, this research experience revealed that a sense of belonging and ease of access to resources improved significantly when there was a physical space for the Native community to interact in. These findings coincide with the cultural practice of community connectedness found within the Native American demographic.

## Future Plans

As a undergraduate research project, the initial plan was to visit 5 UC campuses but was limited to 4 campuses given the time constraints. While this project was conducted on a smaller scale, the goal is to expand upon the project by including all 9 campuses and increasing the capacity for interviews. Ultimately I believe that this project offers the opportunity for Native voices to be uplifted and recognized by the UC system and hope more can be done to increase the sense of belonging and connection between the Native American community and the Institution.

## References



## Acknowledgements

IRB # UCM2023-78

Special Thanks to:  
 UROC Staff, Student Mentors, and UC Organizations  
 The Interviewee Participants  
 Primary Investigator: Dr. Robin DeLugan  
 The Mellon Foundation