

Native American Heritage Month and the Importance of Refocusing the Narrative

History is one of our greatest weapons, if for no other reason, because it reminds us where we came from and what we're capable of. Take, for example, the story of Sequoyah. A Cherokee silversmith and teacher, in 1821 Sequoyah invented a system for reading and writing in the Cherokee language. It only took five years for the Cherokee literacy rates to "far surpass" that of surrounding white communities, according to the Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture. Sequoyah's syllabary would go on to influence the creation of 21 new scripts and more than 65 languages, not just in the United States, but in Canada, throughout countries in West Africa, and even as far as China.

To let our traditional American narrative tell it, the story of indigenous people is all war with white settlers. People like Sequoyah, who managed to literally influence the world in spite of the genocide, are obscured, if not completely erased in favor of familiar narratives that center whiteness and make indigenous people the supporting actors in their own stories. That is why Native American Heritage Month (NAHM) is so important. With white supremacist forces throughout the country working as aggressively as they have in years to silence indigenous voices, loudly affirming this history and culture in itself is a revolutionary act.

NAHM is officially observed throughout the month of November. It originated in 1915 as American Indian Day and was celebrated on the second day of May until 1990, when President George H.W. Bush approved expanding the celebration into a month. NAHM is an opportunity to recognize and honor the rich history, culture, and contributions of American Indians and Alaska Natives. It is also a chance to take a critical look at the challenges indigenous people face today, the role history plays, and how we can tackle these issues as a campus community.

For example, we are a little over a year removed from the Dakota Access Pipeline protest at Standing Rock, the largest indigenous rights demonstration in over 100 years. Many UO students, staff, and faculty organized initiatives to support the peaceful protesters fighting for their water rights. While the dominant images of the demonstrations are those of police beating, tear gassing, and arresting protesters (all of which deserve our continued vigilance), the larger impact of the protests often goes understated. Mainly, the momentum and sense of interconnectedness fostered by Standing Rock has helped power the grassroots energy we've only seen grow throughout the country since.

Likewise, recent indigenous accomplishments and contributions in Oregon deserve their proper recognition. Tawna Sanchez, for example, recently became the second Native American to serve on the Oregon Legislature and the first to represent Portland. Here on the UO campus, Sapsik'walá Project Tribal Advisory Council Chair Angela Bowen recently won the 2017 University of Oregon College of Education's Distinguished Alumni Award. Meanwhile, organizations like the Nations Longhouse, which is the Northwest's oldest continuously operating longhouse on a college campus, and the UO's Native American Student Union continue to do essential work on campus advocating for the indigenous community and educating others about their wealth of history and culture.

Nonetheless, the work of these dedicated students, staff, and faculty coincides with the decrease in indigenous students at the UO in recent years. According to data compiled by the UO Office of Institute Research, the percentage of Native American undergraduate students decreased from 1.2-0.5% between 2006 and 2016 while the percentage of graduate students

remained steady at 1.2%. Between 2005 and 2015, the percentage of Native American faculty remained at 1% of placements.

Clearly, there is plenty of work to do. The UO offers a plethora of resources to help improve equity for our indigenous community. These include the Diversity Excellence Scholarship, the Northwest Indian Languages Institute, internships and job opportunities through the Pacific Northwest Tribal Climate Change Project, and culturally specific, professional teacher development through the aforementioned Sapsik'walá Project. The UO Connections advocacy program and Bridge of the Gods Summer Academy also offer early campus engagement opportunities for high school students.

Throughout November, the UO will be hosting a variety of events, including lectures on the history of American Indian women and a play, as well as lecture on sovereignty, by Mary Kathryn Nagle. We invite all in our campus community to come enjoy these and other fun, informative activities being offered during the UO's celebration of Native American Heritage Month!