

# New UB department connects Indigenous history to the future

Monday could have been called Sorry We Stole Your Land Day.

Or perhaps too bad. We Tried to Strip You of Your Culture Day.

Or maybe this is what happens when you don't secure your borders.

But it's appropriate that Oct. 9 be called simply Indigenous Peoples Day.

That designation reflects the unconquerable dignity of America's pre-colonial inhabitants in the face of systemic efforts that blight their way of life. And despite the atrocities inflicted on them, the day also serves as a reminder of how much the Indigenous community can teach non-Natives about living with each other and with the environment.

That educational effort is getting a major boost as the University of Buffalo ramps up its new Department of Indigenous Studies.

Created with the help of a \$3.2 million grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation in 2020, the department is following a four-year road map that has already included hiring a chair, 11 faculty members, and offering amino acids in Indigenous studies. Officials are awaiting state approval of undergraduate and graduate degree programs.

The departmental effort builds on a more than 50-year legacy at UB that dates to the 1972 founding of the university's Native American Studies Program by the late Seneca scholar John Mohawk. He and others, such as the Onondaga Nation's Oren Lyons, pressed Indigenous causes globally, including before the United Nations, and were instrumental in the UN's 1977 adoption of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People –which the U.S. voted against, but has since endorsed.

Against that backdrop, the creation of the new department at one of the state university system's flagship campuses represents a recognition of this field of scholarship as "critical to the understanding of the Americas" and of colonialism internationally, said Jolene Rickard, a program alumna who formerly directed Cornell University's American Indian & Indigenous Studies Program.

Though such departments are common in Canada and some other Commonwealth nations, UB's is one of the few in the northeastern United States, Rickard said, adding that a recognition of Indigenous history and the "profound dispossession that took place" is not just part of the past but has relevance going forward.

"This is part of what is needed in the intellectual toolkit of the citizen of the future," said Rickard, a Tuscarora Nation member who is associate professor in Cornell's History of Art and Visual Studies Department and its American Studies Program.

More than one discipline

A key to providing that toolkit is the interdisciplinary nature of UB's effort, said Mishuana Goeman, chair of the new department. As one example, she said, a pre-law student can get exposed to federal Indian law and questions of sovereignty versus self-determination.

That can be a lot to learn, especially for non-Natives. For instance, federal Indian law is really meant to govern non-Natives and how they deal with Indigenous people, not Native people, because "we have our own laws," said Agnes Williams, a Seneca and coordinator at Indigenous Women's Initiatives with a long history of working on Indigenous issues here and elsewhere. She said the new department's role in advancing such knowledge is one reason it won the Mellon grant.

Another example of the department's interdisciplinary approach is that those interested in environmental studies will delve into how the six Native American nations that comprise the Haudenosaunee confederacy have managed the landscape.

"How do you have two disciplines, or more, that complement each other and provide the tools to answer specific questions?" said Goeman, explaining how the new department will augment what existing departments are doing.

There will be a lot to teach. For instance, how many non-Natives know the origins of Orange Shirt Day, commemorated recently in area schools to recall the boarding schools that stripped Native children of their heritage, as symbolized by the little girl who was forced to give up the new orange shirt she had bought for the first day of school?

Or today, how many know the significance of white sage, a plant Indigenous people have used for generations but which critics say now is threatened as a result of its appropriated use in popular culture? As part of commemorating Indigenous Peoples Day, UB's new department is co-sponsoring a screening of the documentary "Saging the World" on Thursday at Hallwalls Contemporary Art Center with a reception at 6 p.m. and the movie at 7 p.m.

Though white sage grows only in Southern California and Baja California, Mexico, Western New York has its own connections to the environment. That means land-based learning will be a foundation of the department's curriculum, said Goeman, a Seneca who came to UB two years ago after teaching gender studies and American Indian studies and serving as a special adviser to the chancellor on Native American and Indigenous Affairs at UCLA.

For instance, she said, Seneca assistant professor Jason Corwin takes students out in canoes to watershed areas or other natural settings to learn about the environment and Indigenous sustainability practices as part of his popular Introduction to Land-Based Learning class.

"The students really love that class," she said, adding that it has a waiting list.

From a program to a department

Efforts to transform the program into a formal department began taking shape around 2017 as a result of a confluence of several factors, said Theresa McCarthy, associate dean for inclusive excellence and director of Indigenous studies, who was instrumental in obtaining the Mellon grant. Those factors included the formation of a Haudenosaunee-Native American Studies Research Group to keep alive the intellectual culture of the program begun in 1972, UB's location on traditional Seneca land and close to most of the Haudenosaunee territory, and the rising interest in diversity, equity and inclusion.

So the question became, "How are we going to translate the acknowledgement of our location into meaningful action?" McCarthy said, adding that this is "one of the key goals of the department itself."

Part of that effort involves Indigenous people reclaiming the right to assert who they are, and not letting a colonial narrative define them, as has too often been the case.

"We should be the experts on who we are, not outside anthropologists," said McCarthy, who also directs UB's Haudenosaunee Hub, which helps link the new department with other university departments as well as with Indigenous communities throughout the Haudenosaunee nations.

Part of the effort also involves preserving Native languages, including by teaching Mohawk, Tuscarora and Seneca, as a start. While some might question the modern-day utility of that, they would be missing an important point.

"There's a lot of knowledge held within languages that we're losing," Goeman said. "A word is not just a word, it has an intellectual association with a history ... It also provides a different thought basis and way of looking at the world."

No doubt, some will also question the very existence of the department itself. But if learning how Indigenous people survived everything America inflicted on them isn't enough in itself, that attempted annihilation planted the very seeds for the department's practical value.

Goeman noted that Indigenous Studies will really benefit those seeking jobs because there is so much need in the Native community. She mentioned potential employment in engineering, government and museums as just a few examples, dispelling any idea that it might be a "frivolous" major.

"It really isn't," she said. Those who know and understand the languages, culture and traditions will have an inside track in filling those jobs, just as they would seeking work in any other nation.

Of course, it's more than a little ironic that the new department will prepare students to meet needs created, in no small measure, by the very policies of those who tried to destroy Indigenous culture. But irony is a staple in a nation of immigrants now fighting over immigration policy.

At the very least, UB's Department of Indigenous Studies will produce a new generation of scholars who understand that whole dynamic. It also will produce scholars who know how to respect Indigenous nations that for too long have gotten too little respect.