ABSTRACT

In this essay, I describe three characteristics that Indigenous Business and Public Administration should aim to develop to be a distinctly Native journal. The journal should not be contained by dominant stereotypes of Native Americans. It should reflect the adaptability and innovation that Native Americans have shown in surviving the continuing colonial endeavor to erase us. Finally, the relationships between members of this community should be prioritized at least as much as the content. I developed these characteristics by reflecting on my experiences in higher education along with the ideas of other Native scholars.
INTRODUCTION

I hit the ground running in the next paragraph, so let me briefly introduce myself here. I’m Larry Chavis, a Lumbee, and an economist in the business school at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I was born in Baltimore and raised in Lumberton, NC. I grew up with other Lumbee folks. My mom is a descendant of German and Irish immigrants. My dad met her in Baltimore, home to the largest concentration of Lumbee outside of North Carolina. Visiting my grandparents in Baltimore helped me learn to walk in two worlds or ‘talk white,’ as my sisters would say. That said, I pride myself on not quite fitting in here in Chapel Hill. My mom’s father mopped floors overnight at a Baltimore supermarket, where they locked him in so he wouldn’t steal anything. So, my frequent journeys from North Carolina to Baltimore weren’t quite as far as the distance the Fresh Prince traveled from West Philadelphia to Bel-Air.

As an economist, I’m a little lost without a data set to interpret. Maybe you picked that up in the first paragraph? What I try to lay out below is how Indigenous Business and Public Administration can strive to be a distinctly Native journal. I urge the editors, authors, reviewers, and readers to strive to build a community that isn’t constrained by the all too prevalent stereotypes of Natives in the dominant culture. At the same time, we (I’ll include myself in the previous list) should create a different kind of journal and a different kind of community that reflects the adaptability of Indigenous people to defy the odds and escape the continuing colonial endeavor to erase us. Finally, it is essential to value the ‘we’ in this endeavor. The relationships between us are at least as important as the content of this journal. Certainly, the content will be far less impactful if we don’t nourish the relationships.

WE ARE BUILDING NATIVE CULTURE

For many months, I considered how to write about Indigenous ways of knowing. There were a few immediate roadblocks; the first is that I’m an economist with training in international development. I have graduate training in anthropology, history, and political science, but my area of focus in those programs was the Caribbean and Southeast Asia. There was also the challenge that I would have difficulty writing an essay on my tribe, the Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina, and ways of knowing. How could I ever say anything summarizing hundreds of other peoples around the world?

Thinking about powwows helped move me beyond this impasse. I had an unquestioned idea in the back of my mind that powwows were some kind of ancient expression of Native American culture. I felt a little less Native, given that I only recently began attending powwows and because our southeastern peoples were borrowing something from the ‘real Indians’ out on the Plains. I’ve asked a number of Natives over the years if powwows were a Lumbee tradition or what would traditional Lumbee regalia look like. Despite being a critical thinker in so many ways, I had a simple vision of pre-contact powwows on the Plains looking pretty much like they do today, including RVs and a portable sound system. In reality, my ideas were handed down largely unchanged from the dominant stereotypes of Natives as existing only in history.

In one of my frequent deep dives of exploration into the world-wide-web, I came across historian Clyde Ellis’ article “‘My Heart Jumps Happy When I … Hear That Music’: Powwow Singing and Indian Identities in Eastern North Carolina.’ (Ellis 2013). While I didn’t know Clyde, although we are now Facebook friends, I knew many of the people he quoted on the history of the powwow among North Carolina tribes, including my high school art teacher, Mr. Joe Liles. Not only was he the educational ally I knew him as, but he played a key role in bringing the powwow to our area. Here’s one of the many passages from the article that open my eyes:

Joe Liles notes that “the powwow is a thoroughly modern practice that from the beginning was stamped with local customs. There is no one way to do a powwow. Powwows don’t erase or eclipse or replace local customs, in fact they often amplify them.” Well suited to an intertribal ethos, powwows have contributed to the creation of a supra-tribal identity that nonetheless maintains room for tribally specific expressions and values (Ellis 2013: 9).

This was amazing. My elders, my friends, and my teachers were creating Native American culture stamped with their own personal and tribal flare. I understood that culture was alive and constantly changing, but my own insecurity about my identity prevented me from seeing our culture through this lens. My question all along should have been, how have our people contributed to the evolution of the powwow?

What was most surprising about Mr. Liles being so deeply involved with Natives in North Carolina was that he wasn’t my teacher in Lumbee country, where I grew up. He was my art teacher at a public residential high school in the Triangle area, two hours away from my home. Before he retired, Mr. Liles was also a keeper of traditions and stories for our school. He maintained the collection of photographs that chronicled student life and turned them into slideshows
for graduations. They also became the highlight of reunion weekends. This was well before the digital age and thus was a labor of love. At my 20th high school reunion, an image I had completely forgotten appeared. There I was in front of a chalkboard, dressed in regalia (Figure 1).

I never was part of the building of the powwow culture described above. The regalia, which consisted of a bustle, loincloth, beaded harness and medallion, headband, and straps of bells down each leg, was borrowed from my aunt, and I must have coordinated with my family and my teacher to arrive at the point of someone taking that picture in our history class. Today when I introduce students to Natives in North Carolina, I prepare a presentation with maps, photos, and key dates. I explain the difference between state and federal recognition. I talk about family, community, tri-racial segregation under Jim Crow, and the long and (so far) unsuccessful push by the Lumbee for federal recognition. There are a few photos of powwows, but in 1988 dressing in regalia was the only way I knew how to introduce my classmates to my Lumbee identity.

Only now, in writing this essay, does it strike me that my cousins had been involved early in the development of the powwow in the Southeast. My oldest first cousins had grown up in Baltimore, where there has been a vibrant Lumbee community for over fifty years now (see Spiegel 2020). The regalia must have been quite an investment for my aunt in the late 1960’s at a time when my grandmother was likely still a sharecropper. I wish I could ask my two oldest first cousins about that time in their lives and what it meant to them. Unfortunately, they both passed away well before my aunt, in deaths that would fit seamlessly into the plot line of Tommy Orange’s There There or similarly haunting works of Native American literature. I imagine that these were investments in children with the hope of avoiding that kind of fate.

Coming back to our main story, the only way I had to express my culture to my classmates was based on stereotypes that we all held of what it means to be Native American. One friend commented on my reunion photo how ‘anachronistic’ my glasses were. My regalia was not a representation of modern Natives. It evoked, as I had intended, a tie to a historical image of what a Native person should look like. In that regard, the beads should have been seen as somewhat anachronistic as well, but we accept them as part of a proper representation of Natives stuck in history.

Like the powwow and even my borrowed regalia, Indigenous Business and Public Administration is a pan-Indian collaboration. It seeks to create a space where Indigenous people and their allies can address the needs of communities. While it expresses Native American cultures in a new form, it is part of a long tradition of exchanging ideas.

**WE SURVIVE BY ADAPTING TO STRENGTHEN OUR COMMUNITIES**

I am at the very beginning of my career as an Indigenous Scholar. I have been a Ph.D.-trained economist for seventeen years, and I have been Indigenous longer than that. What has become clear to me during my time in the academy is that many of my values and priorities are fundamentally different from the Western academic
endeavor that I find myself a part of. When I moved from the tenure track to the teaching track, I largely accepted my dean’s view of me as having a value significantly less than my tenure track colleagues. My nearly four years as director of the University of North Carolina American Indian Center helped me to see my value in a new light. When I stepped down, I was honored with eagle feathers from my own tribe and our neighbors, the Coharie, for my support of students and community.

Those eagle feathers represent a high-water mark not only in my professional career but in my life as a whole. My only comparable honor is being asked by our Native undergraduate student group to be the keynote speaker at their annual banquet. They all represent a deep connection with our communities. Unfortunately for my deans, they can’t see any value in those eagle feathers. The complete disregard that my ‘superiors’ have for these symbols helped me realize how far apart our worldviews are. A lot of lip service in our business school is paid about being a ‘flagship’ public school with a dedication to the people of North Carolina, but supporting community goes unrecognized.

If my community thought that highly of me, maybe I had done a few things right, and the business school wasn’t the only authority on ‘academic impact.’ I also collected five teaching awards, primarily for teaching economics, was inducted into UNC’s oldest honor society, and had been awarded a fellowship for emerging administrators through the American Council on Education. However, until only recently, my inflation-adjusted salary had not changed since I began here in 2006. I was pouring myself into others in a way that nearly everyone appreciated, except for the small cadre of people that controlled my salary. The irony was, especially as an economist, that my teaching and work with MBA students created a surplus that was captured by this same group of tenured professors.

In the Fall of 2021, I had time while on leave for the ACE fellowship to begin reading the literature on Native Americans in higher education. I had hoped this would help prepare me for a role in academic administration, but rather it helped me to see how my own experiences were so similar to other Native faculty. I also began to see exactly why my worldview differs so much from other academic leaders. I could relate to descriptions of ‘persistent institutional barriers and burdens that marginalize,’ as well as feelings of ‘isolation, alienation, and racism/discrimination’ (Brayboy et al. 2015: 171). There was also a discussion of the need to view the experiences of Native American faculty within the context of ‘settler colonialism’ (Walters et al. 2019). A fellow Lumbee and author, Bryan Brayboy, whose work in this area has changed the way I see the world went as far as saying that colonization was ‘endemic to society’ (Brayboy 2005: 429). I was starting to see that the lack of respect and resources I faced as a community-first teaching professor was not a ‘Larry problem’ but rather a deficiency of the academy. I started emailing my deans copies of this research, including one that highlighted the quote, ‘Institutions may need to rethink fundamental notions of merit, of belonging, and of what it means to be responsible to and for Indigenous peoples’ (Brayboy et al. 2015: 155).

That email didn’t get me a raise, tenure, or even a response, but it helped reorient my thinking. Having assumed that colonialism ended somewhere around the passage of the Civil Rights Bill was less logical than assuming that RV’s and food trucks were a staple of eighteenth-century Native gatherings. There is a certain fundamental violence associated with settler-colonialism that ‘is not temporally contained in the arrival of the settler but is reasserted each day of occupation’ (Tuck & Yang 2012). I had let ideas that had formed the core of the colonial enterprise decide on the worth of my contributions to the academy. I began to see how the institutional values that defined the tenure and promotion process were intimately tied to ‘settler colonial individualism’ and were anything but neutral or normal (Walters et al. 2019: 614) compared to my way of engaging with my students and our communities. My elder-reviewed eagle feathers were just as important a part of my portfolio as my peer-reviewed journal articles.

In the work of Bryan Brayboy, I came to see that I was doing so much more than merely surviving in the academy. Bryan cites the work of Native American scholar Gerald Vizenor, who laid claim to the word ‘survivance.’ Vizenor emphasized that Native Americans not only survived but we also resisted (Brayboy 2005: 435). Bryan goes on to describe this as ‘adaptation and strategic accommodation in order to survive and develop the processes that contribute to community growth’ (ibid). This was an acknowledgment of what I had wanted to believe about myself all along. My continued existence in the academy, regardless of rank, wasn’t accomplished by standing still. It was accomplished by creating my own path through a largely hostile environment.

Indigenous Business and Public Administration is also a symbol that we have survivanced. We are strategically adapting to enhance our community of Indigenous scholars and the communities we serve as scholars. Creating and publishing in this journal are acts that exist outside of the colonial culture. For my senior associate dean of faculty and research, this essay doesn’t even exist. This is not worth his time, like anything else not published in a narrowly defined set of top business journals. He did share with me ‘that our best journals are indeed moving to consider topics that I think have long been underappreciated’ (personal correspondence November 22, 2022). I am sure
he is correct to the extent that ‘top journals’ will increase the diversity of articles they publish. However, the chasm between our worldviews will still exist, and thus Indigenous Business and Public Administration is needed for us to have a place to exchange ideas without the constraints of longstanding colonial structures.

**RELATIONSHIPS ARE ESSENTIAL TO ANY INDIGENOUS ENTERPRISE**

To be an Indigenous journal, Indigenous Business and Public Administration must also stress the importance of relationships throughout this endeavor. Building relationships between scholars, broadly defined, between Native peoples engaged in managing organizations, and between scholars and Native communities has to be at least as important as the journal’s content. It is the individualized and competitive nature of the academy that has left me questioning my career choices. A lack of support for other members of the academic community is common, and often, people are just mean. Here are three stories that sum up the challenges I’ve seen as a Native person working in higher education.

In economics, the job market for new PhDs is coordinated through the American Economics Association (AEA). At the annual AEA conference, job seekers may meet up to a dozen or more schools for 20 to 30-minute interviews. Schools may also interview candidates continually for a few days, selecting a small number to visit campus. I had a rookie group interview with the Business, Government, and International Economy group at the Harvard Business School in 2006. I was excited about the interview not only because of the institution’s prestige but also because not many positions focused on the political and historical context of global business. Similar to most of the interviews, this was me interviewing with a group of several professors. After introducing myself and my research, an associate professor mentioned one of my articles and said that she had not read it, but she didn’t believe it. I never really recovered from that comment, and the interview was all downhill from there. Sometimes I imagine a different path for my career that included a friendlier interview followed by better support with colleagues with whom I had more in common.

Why this professor felt the need to prove her academic prowess on the only Native American economist she may ever meet—there are less than ten of us—is beyond me. It would be more than fair to push me to explain my findings, but a basic level of humanity seemed too much to ask. That said, she was sunshine and rainbows compared to one of my UNC colleagues. Lots of us get the comment, ‘You don’t look Indian’; however, a senior professor and head of our tenure and promotion committee at the time told me in the hallway how happy he was to have a colleague who was ‘nominally Native American.’ I had to look that one up with the help of Google. Maybe my unrefined vocabulary was holding me back. Google gave me something along the lines of ‘in name only.’

With nominally, he went further than saying I didn’t ‘look Indian’ but that my claim was false. To him, there seemed to be nothing Native about me other than my claim of Native heritage. I didn’t meet his standards of Native identity. This is a common theme in the history of our colonization. To erase the Indigenous people of this land is to deny the genocide and theft that took place. He continued a long history of others attempting to construct Native identities. The Kansas City Chiefs and Atlanta Braves do so every time they take the field.

I’ve retold and analyzed this interaction many times. The person has never apologized. They just put their head down when they pass me in the hall. For a long time, I had hoped that I was taking literary license and running with this comment. In the spirit of the new year, I sent him an email on January 5, 2023, asking him to be more critical of the ideas he was expressing when discussing identity, and to err on the side of being safe and not use ‘nominally’ at all in reference to another person’s identity. I tried to even end on a positive note that a mutual friend of ours always spoke highly of him and that I didn’t consider him the villain of my time at our business school. I have yet to receive a response, so maybe they aren’t even nominally sorry.

One more short example almost perfectly captures the meanness of the academy. Indigenous anthropologist and fellow Lumbee, David Shane Lowry, received the following comment as part of a journal submission: ‘there are hundreds of Native academics who write and publish on the topics the author writes about.’ The comment from a reviewer, likely another professor, was passed to David as part of feedback on his article from the journal editor. (LinkedIn post and personal correspondence on November 23, 2022.).

David pulled his article from this process after the editor wouldn’t push back against the reviewer’s ludicrously false statement. Given the family nature of this essay, I can’t include all of the words I sent to David after seeing his social media post on this exchange. I would love to live in a world where hundreds of Indigenous scholars exchange thoughts on a given topic. Out of the 530,940 tenured and tenure-track professions in the United States, only 1,858 identify as American Indian/Alaska Native, less than 0.4%.
To me, each of these stories expresses how the goals of many professors are something other than building up their fellow academic travelers. I expected a community of professors working together to support students and generate new knowledge, but that hasn’t been my experience. Having spoken out forcefully in support of students, especially Native students, and against discrimination on my campus, not many of my colleagues stop to talk with me in the hallway anymore, even to disparage my identity! They aren’t very impressed with unspoken truths showing up on CNN (Kaur 2021), Indian Country Today (Boysel 2021), or our campus newspaper (Chavis 2022).

I share those stories as a contrast with an Indigenous way of being that Native American economist Ronald Trosper describes in his new book, Indigenous Economics. Dr. Trosper writes to define an Indigenous approach to economics and business that is fundamentally different from our traditional models of economic development that emphasize the maximization of monetary wealth. He proposes a beautiful definition and gives examples of Native peoples, focusing on Living Well.

Living well consists of pursuing actions that strengthen humanity's relational goods created by relationships with nature and with each other. The added value of improved relationships can include additional material goods and services, so long as the additional material income is shared with all beings in the relationships. The aim of good living is to increase the value of all relationships without harming them (2022: 4–5).

As Dr. Trosper notes, the definition of relationships is key to understanding the meaning of Living Well. The focus of a people in a relationship is ‘creating and sharing relational goods that allow them to act in their mutual interest’ (Ibid.: 5). He defines relational goods as ‘trust, cooperation, peace, and similar primarily subjective things that contribute to sociability’ (Ibid.)

I recently sent Dr. Trosper a note that teaching this concept to a group of Indigenous MBA students is my definition of ‘Living Well!’ What he has done is capture the best ideas from both economic theory and Native scholars on indigenous ways of knowing and relating to the world, particularly in the realm of economic interactions. This new work has already impacted how I think about and teach economics. I hope to write more about how his work can be applied in teaching management students and Indigenous leadership. For this essay, I introduce the idea of Living Well as a guide for those of us engaged through Indigenous Business and Public Administration.

Just as Native peoples aren’t stuck in history, neither are we all the same. Nor do we always seek to maximize the strength of relationships with those around us. There always have been, and will be, Natives that focus on benefiting themselves. That said, as Indigenous scholars, we can aspire to Live Well. We can strive to create a journal that seeks to advance our academic community and the Native communities we are connected to so that we move forward together. There are plenty of journals for those who wish to maximize their own individual careers at the expense of others. Indigenous Business and Public Administration can be so much more.

CONCLUSIONS

In the call for papers for this special edition, Dan, Joseph, and Deanna laid out their motivation, in part, as follows:

Although Native American scholars often refer to Native business and public initiatives as being couched in traditional native knowledge systems and framed as ‘Indigenous ways of knowing,’ it is not clear whether and how Native practices differ from mainstream models in business and public administration. That is, academia could use more clarity on how the Native context or Native actors and agents change the action of decision makers and business leaders in the world.

My answer, acknowledging that there can be many ways to provide this clarity, is that we, as Indigenous scholars, are part of the process of defining and refining ‘Indigenous ways of knowing.’ In our effort to impact Native decision makers and business leaders, we can start by building a distinctly Indigenous journal.

For me, an Indigenous journal is one that meets the following three criteria. 1) The content and ideas expressed in the journal are not bound by stereotypes of Native Americans that are ‘frozen in time.’ 2) The community engaged with the journal is willing to innovate and reflect our ability as Native people not just to survive but to survivance. 3) Finally, the ideas of Living Well, supporting each other, and simply being nice are at the heart of this journal’s ‘way of being’ in the world.

I hope that these ideas, although borrowed and patched together, can be seen as my own theory of the basic principles that a Native organization should strive for, if not wholly possess. Some folks who consider themselves theorists may quibble with both my use of the term theory and my method of arguing in favor of this particular theory.
Here again, I will follow Bryan Brayboy, who once had a colleague tell him that people like him ‘told good stories’ and later added that because he told good stories, he may never become a ‘good theorist’ (Brayboy 2005: 426). He told this story in a foundational article where he contracts a set of tenets to help educational institutions better understand Indigenous people and vice versa. The tenet I will evolve here in support of my methodology is ‘Stories are not separate from theory; they make up theory and are, therefore, real and legitimate sources of data and ways of being’ (Ibid: 430).

My stories are a product of my experiences and my reflections on the stories of others. They are indeed shaped by the way ADHD continually pushes me to make connections that are sometimes tangential to the subject at hand. Using stories feels comfortable to me, and I hope they make at least most of this essay accessible to anyone with interest in Natives and business. If anything isn’t clear, please follow up with me, and I’ll try to find another story to clarify my point. My personal email that will not change to help each of us to live well. (At this point, I should probably add nerdy as a characteristic of most Native undertakings, certainly this one is.)

NOTES

1 Actually, the last book I read cover to cover is Tommy Orange’s There There. I even work a reference to the book into my story below. I kind of fancy myself as a nerdy older version of Tommy Orange. I’m trying to get up the momentum to write a memoir. I already know I would like to have an alter ego in that memoir and I even work a reference to the book into my story There There. Actually, the last book I read cover to cover is Tommy Orange’s There There. I even work a reference to the book into my story below. I kind of fancy myself as a nerdy older version of Tommy Orange. I’m trying to get up the momentum to write a memoir. I already know I would like to have an alter ego in that memoir called Red Falcon who goes around to people in red face at chiefs and braves tailgate parties and teaches them a lesson or two.

2 I know Bryan, although I know his dad much better. I have bought a few bolo ties from his dad at various pow wows. I thought of using the academic convention of using his surname there, but that seems odd. Also, he’s about my age, so no need to address him as an elder or anything like that. It would also seem odd in an essay that is about challenging dominant norms to adhere to all of those norms with regard to writing style.

3 Based on my calculations from 2020 data from the National Center for Education Statistics. These numbers represent the sum of Professors, Associate Professors, and Assistant Professors.

4 I am borrowing the phrase from the title of an article by Leavitt et al. 2015.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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