



Native American Indian Association

# **21 things you can do to be more respectful of Native American cultures**

(Adapted from Nonprofit AF blogpost)

Revised 7/24/2020

I hope that at the very least, this would be a start for all of us to be more thoughtful in our interactions with our Native colleagues and community members.

1. **Understand that being Native means different things to every person.** “To some people, it means being Indian. To some, it means being Native. To some it means being American Indian. Native American. Indigenous. Alaskan Native. First Nations. The preference is the tribal nation name, for example, Tongva, or Lakota.

2. **Find out whose land you are on, and honor it.**

“Remember that every inch of the US land was acquired illegally, so that’s the deficit that organizations need to understand as they begin working with tribal people and entities.” If you don’t know whose land you are occupying, Jimi Castillo, Tongva Pipe Carrier and Spiritual Leader has given these words for acknowledging the people whose land we are on:

We acknowledge that the land on which we are gathered here today is the home and traditional land belonging to the Tongva Nation. Today we come with respect and gratitude for the Tongva people who still consider themselves the caretakers of this land. It is through their examples that we are reminded of our greater responsibility to take care of Mother Earth and to take care of each other.

Here's an awesome [map https://native-land.ca/](https://native-land.ca/) where you can enter in your city in the US or Canada and it'll tell you, along with links so you can learn more about the Nations or tribes whose land you are on. *CSUDH has the (above) Honoring the Land wording you are welcome to use. For questions, check with the American Indian Center/Institute in WH 105 or email cmcknight@csudh.edu*

**3. Never ask anyone if they're an "enrolled member."**

There is so much complexity to this question. "You may be 100% eligible and not enrolled." Many people are from multiple tribes. Some people may not have their paperwork for a variety of reasons. *This question also objectifies Natives. We never ask blood quantum or "How much \_\_\_ (put any ethnicity here) \_\_\_ are you? Asking this about anyone else's ethnicity would be considered rude, so why is it ok to do this to Indian people?*

**4. Do not lightly claim that you have Native American heritage.** Don't lightly say things like you have an uncle who was a shaman or your grandmother was a Cherokee princess. "No one is a Cherokee princess. No tribes had that term in the history of Indigenous people so just stop with that non-sense. Along with this, you don't become Native just because your DNA test says you are." *Also, do not disparage people of mixed ethnicity or assume someone is not Native because "they don't look Indian."*

5. **Avoid sayings that diminish or disparage Native culture.**  
As mentioned above, don't say things like "let's have a pow wow," "lowest person on the totem pole," "too many chiefs, not enough Indians," "Indian giver," "circle the wagons," etc. These phrases are disrespectful, and we still use them every day. "Spirit animal" is another one; some colleagues suggest using "Patronus" instead (that's a reference from Harry Potter.)
6. **Don't "play Indian."** As this [article](#) states, "While minstrel shows have long been criticized as racist, American children are still socialized into *playing* Columbus Day celebrations, Halloween costumes, and Thanksgiving reenactments stereotype Indigenous Peoples as one big distorted culture. We are relegated to racist stereotypes and cultural caricatures." Avoid treating Native communities and members as logos, mascots, costumes, caricatures, etc.  
<https://indiancountrymedianetwork.com/news/opinions/playing-indian-and-color-blind-racism/>
7. **Be where people are.** Go to the reservation and Native community organizations. Visit your local Native cultural center. Learn about the culture and history. ***Our American Indian Center/Institute at CSU Dominguez Hills is at WH 105 and has a wealth of information.***
8. **Support Native artists and businesses by [buying Native.](#)**  
<https://indiancountrymedianetwork.com/culture/thing->

[about-skins/buy-native-a-campaign-to-buy-native-american-made-gifts-this-holiday-season/](#) Buy art,

jewelry, clothing, and other items made by Native people and communities. Do not buy “Native” items that are not made by Native Americans and that are just taking advantage of Native culture to make money; be aware of [scams](#) by non-Natives who claim that proceeds from sales are benefiting Natives. These scams are illegal according to the Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1990 and should be reported. <https://www.thentvs.com/blog/support-native-american-artist-and-businesses>

9. **Invite an elder or tribal leader to do an opening prayer or invocations** at large events. This is a way to honor and to bring attention to the tribes whose land the event is taking place on. But do your research first so you do it right. And make sure you honor people’s time, culture, and expertise by providing an honorarium to the leader or organization. *Our local(CSUDH) Spiritual Leader is Jimi Castillo, a Tongva/Acjachemen Pipe Carrier.*
10. **Understand that there are over 550 Federally Recognized tribal affiliations in the US and several hundred more that are seeking Recognition.** They are extremely diverse and have different languages and cultural customs. This is why it is important to do your research. Do not lump everyone together. A colleague mentioned, foreexample, being asked to<sup>5</sup> represent the tribe on whose land the organization was trying to honor, even though she is not a member of that tribe simply because she is Native.

**11. Don't assume that tribal people get money from casinos.**

“Out of more than 560 Federally recognized tribes, and several hundred more petitioning for recognition, only 224 operate gaming facilities, not all casinos are even making a profit. About three-fourths of those tribes reinvest revenue in the community. In 2006, only 73 tribes distributed direct payments to individual Tribal members.”

**12. When disaggregating data, make sure to include**

**Natives.** Even if they are a small percentage. “I mean, think about it,” says a colleague, “They are such a small percentage of the overall population BECAUSE of the injustice done by colonization and ethnic cleansing.” It does not help to further minimize people's existence by excluding them. To leave Natives out of demographic data is devaluing and invalidating not acknowledging them on their own historical land. This is one reason Natives receive the least amount of government support of any ethnicity and don't have a seat at the table when legislative and community decisions are made. Universities count a very small percentage of Natives because of the way they collect the data.

**13. Don't expect every cultural custom will be explained to**

**you.** For example, when you are at a cultural event. As a colleague mentioned, “We don't want to feel like an exhibit and have to explain everything going on.” Also, there might be times when people are required not to talk about

something. If you work with kids, for instance, be sensitive about forcing them to share their culture. “Some things are not meant to be shared.” *This doesn’t mean you can’t ask, but be sensitive.* There have been many cases when Native American children were punished for refusing to put on cardboard feather headdresses to celebrate Columbus Day or Thanksgiving, so it’s important to look at things from the other person’s perspective.

14. **If you’re at an event, be thoughtful and patient around time.** Events may not start or end on time. This does not necessarily mean that people can’t be punctual. They may just value other things more highly, such as creating space to build relationships, or to be inclusive of everyone’s stories.
15. **Be sensitive during meal times.** Food is a significant part of many communities and cultures. A colleague mentioned that in her tribe, elders eat first, and those who are **able-bodied are expected to get plates for the elders or for mothers with small children.** Be aware when you are at an event and not just jump directly into the food line.
16. **Don’t say costume when referring to native dance outfits and traditional wear.** Costumes are worn at Halloween. A dancer’s outfit is called regalia. As mentioned in this [article on pow wow etiquette: http://powwow-power.com/pow-wow-etiquette/](http://powwow-power.com/pow-wow-etiquette/) “Often pieces of the regalia are family heir<sup>7</sup>looms. Regalia is

created by the dancer or by a respected family member or friend. The feathers in particular are sacred and highly valued and cared for. The beadwork may take a very long time to complete. Sometimes years have gone into the final completion of a dancer's regalia."

17. **Do not assume Native Americans have high rates of alcoholism.** Actually, Native Americans have "the highest rate of complete abstinence. When socioeconomic level is accounted for in a comparison group, alcoholism rates are no different for AI/ANs than for other ethnic or racial groups." Adds a colleague, "But alcohol WAS used to obtain illegal signatures for treaties and access to lands and resources that belonged to tribal people. So maybe don't invite Natives to do 'business' in a bar without checking in first."
18. **Do not tokenize people.** As with other marginalized communities, they'll know if you are only trying to look diverse, or to look good for a grant application or something. Spend time building actual relationships, and ensure people and organizations are equitably compensated.
19. **Ensure the voices of Natives are amplified.** We've seen when non-Native journalists are paid to tell stories about Native communities and their struggles. Let's ensure the people whose stories are being told are the ones telling

them. However, we all need to do our own research and reflections so our Native colleagues are not always having to educate us.

20. **Don't bring up the land bridge theory.** Many communities are very sensitive to the theory that Native Americans came over from Asia through the Bering Strait. You can read a couple of articles from Native perspectives [here](http://www.nativecircle.com/bering-strait-myth.html) <http://www.nativecircle.com/bering-strait-myth.html> but it may be best not to bring it up.
21. **(Update). Use the present tense.** Many of us make the mistake of using the past tense when talking about Native communities, and according to this [article](https://zinnedproject.org/2015/11/manifesting-destiny/), <https://zinnedproject.org/2015/11/manifesting-destiny/>

“A staggering 87 percent of references to American Indians in all 50 states’ academic standards portray them in a pre-1900 context.” Many kids believe that Native Americans only exist in the past; they have no understanding of current Native cultures and challenges, and we adults often inadvertently contribute to this. As a colleague states, “the use of only the past tense contributes to the genocidal narrative that we’re anything but still here.” I know this is a simplistic list that can’t possibly cover hundreds of communities and cultures, but I hope it’s a start. Thanks again to all my colleagues. Please let me in the comment section anything I missed or got wrong, or other things it would be important for us all to know.

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