

USU-GEO (Utah State University + Weber State University_Session 4_Working With Communities of Color

Previous interactions between USU Geosciences and communities of color

Utah State University is Utah's sole land-grant university. Given the demographics of the state and the predominantly rural populations served by USU, the community of color with which the Department of Geoscience interacts most frequently is our state's indigenous communities. USU Geoscientists often conduct field work on native lands (both on ancestral homelands and on tribal lands currently administered by tribes), teach Native American students in the classroom, and facilitate Native American involvement in research through the university's Native American Summer Mentorship Program (NASMP). Most senior faculty regularly engage in field research on the ancestral homeland of indigenous Americans, and every departmental employee works in USU buildings located on ancestral tribal homeland, including ancestral lands of the Northern Shoshone and Bannock people (USU's Logan main campus) and the Northern Ute people (USU-Eastern in Price and USU-Uintah Basin in Vernal). Geosciences faculty also have undertaken overseas field work in countries populated by communities of color, oftentimes with the acknowledgement of and cooperation with the indigenous peoples of those lands.

What worked well in these interactions?

Native American Student Mentorship Program (NASMP): Since 2014, USU has sponsored 25-30 Native American students from the USU Blanding campus (a USU satellite campus that predominantly offers 2-year programs and serves a largely indigenous student population) to spend four weeks at USU's main Logan campus and engage in STEM research in the lab and field with USU faculty. A majority of USU Geosciences faculty have participated in this program, which has encouraged over 60% of student participants to transfer to a four-year program at another campus (40% to the main USU campus in Logan).

Fieldwork with indigenous communities on indigenous land: Experiences of USU faculty conducting fieldwork on indigenous land and working with indigenous leaders have taught us that learning something about the customs and culture of the lands we hope to work on is as important as understanding the geological history. A "culture of acknowledgement" is a prerequisite for constructively engaging with indigenous communities, and our faculty have drawn inspiration from frameworks for indigenous engagement in other countries, particularly in Australia and New Zealand where Maori and Indigenous Australian impact statements and engagement plans are a prerequisite for grant applications involving fieldwork.

What did not work well, and how can this be better addressed in future plans?

Native American Student Mentorship Program (NASMP): Several years of experience in the department working with Native American summer interns has taught that the challenges faced by those volunteers stretch far beyond a lack of experience in scientific research. These students are in many cases outside of their tribal communities and cultures for the first time, and thrust into a culture which has a history of mistreatment of their ancestral culture – a history that they of course are very aware of. Of particular relevance is the shameful history of "re-education" campaigns, continuing up to the 1960s, in which children were taken to boarding schools along

the Wasatch Front and taught western values and forbidden from speaking their native language. This lost generation is now the eldest generation, and many have negative views of western education because of this experience of separation from their families. For indigenous students participating in NASMP today, the experience is often daunting, and USU faculty should respect the courage it requires and the anxiety it is likely to trigger. NAMSP mentors commonly misinterpret indigenous students as “reserved,” or “introverted” or even “disengaged” when in fact they are taking a big leap in volunteering for program that equips faculty mentors with little appreciation for cultural differences, and offers minimal indigenous community cultural infrastructure to ease the transition. Furthermore, outstanding indigenous students who are involved in USU are sometimes “oversaturated” with outreach efforts from the university. Faculty mentors should respect the lived experiences of these students which are often very different from their own, and give space to adjust and for students to engage on their own terms.

Fieldwork with indigenous communities on indigenous land: The state of Utah is located on ancestral land of several indigenous tribes, and what remains as tribally-controlled land is a small fraction of their traditional homelands. The history of that loss of tribal land is one of bloodshed, colonization, assimilation campaigns, and deceit on the part of the colonizers. This history needs to be respected during interactions between USU faculty and the present-day tribal leadership of what remains of native lands. Of paramount importance is to respect that tribal leadership – experience has taught us that often, because of their experience with outsiders (particularly white, government-supported outsiders), there is a strong tendency for tribal leadership to deny permission to enter and perform research on tribal lands unless there is some tangible, immediate benefit to the tribes. The indigenous leadership’s right of exclusion from their own lands must be respected and proactively addressed in planning for field investigations.

Are there ways to improve the outcome of interactions between USU Geosciences and communities of color?

We recommend that any research product (thesis, publication, etc.) that uses fieldwork on ancestral homelands include a statement of land acknowledgement, similar to the following (adapted from a USU MS thesis in Anthropology): “The data collection and excavations at [field location] were conducted on an ancestral Indigenous archaeological site that occupies lands of the Absaalooke (Crow) Nation, and the bands of the Eastern Shoshone Tribe. The Utah State University Logan campus, where I studied and conducted the majority of this research, occupies the traditional homeland of the Northwestern Band of Shoshone Indians. I acknowledge these Indigenous communities and their ancestors as the stewards of the land and keepers of knowledge from time immemorial.” USU’s Anthropology Department already has guidelines for land acknowledgement statements, which could serve as a model for similar requirements in the Department of Geosciences. The department may recommend that a similar acknowledgement should be required for Field Trip Authorization forms in the future.

Additionally, USU Geosciences faculty can make more conscientious efforts to foment an awareness of the needs and cultural reference frames of indigenous and other students of color as well as tribal organizations in our interactions with them. This should include developing a greater awareness of the culture, customs and knowledge frames of our students, and building stronger connections with campus community organizations that serve students of color. To better serve

indigenous tribes in regions where we perform our research, USU Geosciences faculty should incorporate proactive field plans for engagement with native communities, consider potential overlap with native community needs that might be prioritized in research questions (that then might be included in more meaningful Broader Impacts goals of funded research), and resolve to share data and findings from our research with tribal institutions.