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Looking into the Hearts of Native Peoples: Nation Building as an Institutional Orientation for Graduate Education

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In this article, we suggest that graduate programs in predominantly white institutions can and should be sites of self-education and tribal nation building. In arguing this, we examine how a particular graduate program and the participants of that program engaged tribal nation building, and then we suggest that graduate education writ large must also adopt an institutional orientation of nation building. We connect Guinier's notion of democratic merit to our discussion of nation building as a way to suggest a rethinking of "success" and "merit" in graduate education. We argue that higher education should be centrally concerned with capacity building and graduates who aim to serve their communities.

Several years ago at a dinner celebrating the graduation of a group of American Indian pre-service teachers, the graduates asked to address those in attendance—including other Indigenous graduates, program participants, families, university staff, and administrators. This was a moment for the graduates to reflect on their experiences, thank their families, and offer advice to another cohort of pre-service teachers who were completing the first year of the 2-year program. It was, in other words, an opportunity for graduates to both give back and look forward.

An Indigenous faculty member, working with others on the predominantly white campus, developed the program with funding from the US Department

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of Education in order to prepare Indigenous teachers to work in Indigenous communities. The initial iteration of the work had not been easy; there had been difficult conversations on campus about whether or not the students “belonged,” how to integrate students into campus life, whether or not culture was important in teaching, and if the graduates could “rise” to the expected levels of academic work. Complicating all of this were rumblings from a conservative legal foundation that had challenged the institution on the legality of the program by arguing that the program—which only admitted American Indian/Alaska Native students and required they sign a payback agreement to serve in schools educating American Indian/Alaska Native children—violated the Fourteenth Amendment’s equal protection clause and the Civil Rights Act of 1965.¹ In spite of these internal and external challenges, the program’s graduates successfully navigated the institution and were focused on going “home” to start their important work.

Many of the graduates spoke of why they wanted to be teachers and what it meant for their communities and tribal nations to have one of their citizens prepared to serve as an educator in their local schools. The speeches were raw, emotional, thoughtful, inspirational, and deeply intellectual. At the end of the evening, there were no dry eyes, and invitations to the annual event became even more coveted. On this evening, one Indigenous speaker in particular moved the audience. Joseph took the podium,² thanked those in attendance in his tribal language, recognized his spouse and their four children, acknowledged campus and tribal leaders, and said the following:

I am grateful for this program. . . . I came to this university, after being reared in a small town in [his home state] on my reservation. English is my second language. I don’t do well on [standardized] tests, and there are still some sounds in English that my tongue can’t make. . . . But this program . . . they knew that we needed teachers, and they knew that I could do this work. But, this university, they saw me as a number and a test. How could they [the university] look into my heart and know that I was more than a number and a test score? How could they see that my people need help and that I wanted to help them? . . . I

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will help them, because that's what we do. We help each other. They sent me here; they supported my efforts; they let me bring my children here; they knew I would come back. . . . But this institution, they saw a number and a test score. They can't see into my heart. But the Native people who started and ran this program, they understood. They knew what was in my heart, because they could hear me. What's in my heart is in their heart—we want the same things. All of us graduates want the same thing. We want our children to have teachers who can look into their hearts and know what they can be. We want teachers—like us—who understand what it means to grow up on the rez and face those mean white teachers and administrators so that we can help do the right thing. . . . This program did that for us—they looked into our hearts; they heard us; they gave us an opportunity when this university only saw a number and a test score. . . . How could the institution know that I would work as hard as anyone else and that what I didn't know, I could learn? How could this place—this university—know that I wanted to do things for my community that only people from there can do? Well, they couldn't until someone told them. . . . And, it took this grant—this money that [the project's PI] reminds us is blood money (our ancestors died for us to have these opportunities)—to make this university take the chance on us. . . . So, I leave this university knowing how to teach and how to make lesson plans. I leave here knowing how to pass a test. I already know how to serve others and how to be [a citizen of his Nation]. And, I leave here with a number that the university can understand: a 3.85 GPA. Most importantly, I leave here with the same reason for coming: to serve my people.

Joseph's words illustrate both the potential and the need for what we are calling a "tribal nation-building orientation for graduate education." It is beyond the purview of this article to talk about tribal nation building writ large; instead, we offer a discussion of the relationship between tribal nation building and graduate education.³ We suggest that graduate programs in predominantly white institutions can and should be sites of self-education and tribal nation building.

To build this argument, we examine how a particular graduate program and the participants of that program engaged in tribal nation building, and then we suggest that graduate education writ large must also adopt an institutional orientation of nation building. Tribal nation building is fundamentally about capacity and community building. Strong communities, strong Nations, strong community members, and strong citizens are the goals. Institutions of higher education have an opportunity and a responsibility to envision their work so that they are more closely aligned with the nation-building goals of tribal nations. The responsibility for this work can be traced back to treaties, executive orders, and legal cases. By orienting around nation building, insti-

tutions of higher education (and their graduate programs) would benefit every student and community. Faculty, students, and programs that embody respect, engage relationally, and practice reciprocity would necessarily produce a very different kind of knowledge, research, and product. This work must be driven by the need for strong and healthy tribal nations and the responsibility of graduate education to engage capacity building work and a nation-building agenda.

In the following pages, we begin by unpacking what we mean by tribal nation building and suggest that capacity building by, with, and for Indigenous communities is a central feature of tribal nation building. We then introduce readers to the teacher-preparation program to which Joseph belonged in order to illustrate how this program attempted to engage nation building as its institutional orientation. This work was not without struggle, of course, so we also highlight some of the barriers inherent in such a transformative orientation. Next, we fold Lani Guinier's notion of democratic merit into our discussion of nation building as a way to suggest a rethinking of "success" and "merit" in graduate education. We close by exploring some of the implications of a nation building orientation within graduate education, including that higher education should be centrally concerned with capacity building and graduates who aim to serve their communities.

Nation Building: By Whom, for Whom, and to What End?

Tribal nation building refers to the political, legal, spiritual, educational, and economic processes through which Indigenous peoples engage in order to build local capacity to address their educational, health, legal, economic, nutritional, relational, and spatial needs.⁴ In other words, it is an intentional, purposeful application of human and social capital to address the needs of tribal nations and communities (Akoto 1992; Blain 2010; Champagne 2004; Coffey and Tsosie 2001; Cornell and Kalt 1998, 2010; Native Nations Institute 2012). Tribal nation building is nestled in and based on epistemological, ontological, and axiological assumptions that the health and well-being of the nation and its communities is more important than any individual achievement (Brayboy et al. 2012; Coffey and Tsosie 2001). Individuals seek to serve the greater good and build the health and sustainability (what some might call survival) of the whole (or the tribal nation). Let us be clear: we are not suggesting that individuals are unimportant. On the contrary, we are suggesting that individuals—driven by the desire and need to serve their nation and community—are vital actors in the process and can, should, and often do have individual successes. Our point here is that the primary motivation for doing work should be to serve others, rather than to serve individual ambitions.

Nation building is a potentially fraught concept (Alfred 1995). We use the term to refer to the building of tribal nations, of Indigenous communities.⁵ This is different from the project of building the US nation-state, of the mainstream body politic, and of the colonial white nation. Nation building in the mainstream sense refers to a national project that privileges domination and power over citizens. In this frame, nation building has primarily been concerned with aspects of belonging (citizenship), national identity, language, and rights within in a larger global context (Dhamoon and Abu-Laban 2009; Etzioni 2009/10). Moreover, US nation building has historically prioritized the individual rights of citizens as the primary concern of its laws and elected officials (Honig 2001; Ong 2003). Graduate education has served an important role in this process of building the dominant white nation. Graduate institutions have traditionally been sites for the (re)production of professionals, Western/Eurocentric knowledge, meaning, and citizens (Brayboy 2005; Shumar and Canaan 2008; Smith 1999; Tierney 1992). Institutions of higher education are venues that produce and maintain power, the status quo, and the false ideologies of democracy and meritocracy. Through this production, the mainstream nation is built and reified. It may seem contradictory, then, to talk about how these colonial institutions can, and indeed should, engage in supporting tribal nation building, since it is in many ways antithetical and oppositional to their work as producers of the colonial, white nation. Indeed, asking graduate education to engage a tribal nation-building agenda is a tall order, but it is one that is both legally and ethically required.

Indigenous peoples and tribal nations have a unique relationship to both the United States and to institutions of higher education (Brayboy 2005; Deloria Jr. and Lytle 1984; Wilkins 2002). These relationships are centered on sovereignty and self-determination (Brayboy et al. 2012; Cornell and Kalt 1998; Deloria Jr. 1970; Deloria Jr. and Lytle 1984). As a result, students from tribal nations may engage, resist, and/or challenge the white majoritarian ideologies and practices espoused by dominant institutions of higher education depending on their relevance to the values and needs of their tribal nations. The nation-building model we are advocating for here is not one whereby Indigenous students enter an institution to assimilate and pursue only individual success. Instead, we suggest that there are certain skill sets and credentials that—when driven by a desire to serve the needs of Native peoples—can be used to engage in the process of tribal nation building. In short, assimilation—whether it be academic, colonial, cultural, or epistemological—is not a requirement of success within graduate education. Although certain accommodations on the part of individual students may occur, they can be done in the name of serving others and without adopting colonial mind-sets.

Nation building captures the ways in which tribal nations strengthen themselves and their people (Akoto 1992; Blain 2010; Champagne 2004; Coffey

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and Tsosie 2001; Cornell and Kalt 1998; Native Nations Institute 2012). This includes blending both community knowledge and knowledge obtained from institutions of higher education. Nation building is generally driven by a desire and commitment to benefit community, people, and the land over individual profit, success, or material gain. It is often manifest in a nation's various projects to build infrastructure or revive language and cultural knowledge. It can also include initiatives that improve tribal citizens' health and well-being, whether by pursuing a more active presence in agricultural and food production processes or by funding healthy community initiatives intended to promote active lifestyles (Akoto 1992; Blain 2010; Champagne 2004; Coffey and Tsosie 2001; Cornell and Kalt 1998; Lyons 2000; Native Nations Institute 2012). Tribal nation building, in short, is uniquely driven by the Indigenous community and includes policies that benefit the good of all. Nation building is also guided by an overall commitment to sovereignty and economic development. Thus, the promotion of government and economic processes grounded in Indigenous notions of justice and relationships is central.

Tribal nation building is a process and not a one-size-fits-all mandate. While it may be guided by the voices, practices, and worldviews of past generations and is focused on the well-being of present and future generations, it is important to remember that a great deal of diversity exists among Indigenous peoples. For example, there are over 560 federally recognized tribes in the United States and at least half that many state-recognized tribes (US Government Accountability Office 2012). Indigenous peoples live within the borders of these nations, in rural communities, in urban centers, and everywhere in between. Therefore the vision, goals, and needs of a community are likely to vary depending on their unique population and context. Nation building encompasses this diversity and so must be flexible and adaptive.

Capacity building within Indigenous communities is central to tribal nation building. If nation building is, in part, seen as a way to meet the needs of tribal nations, then it must necessarily take a long-term view and consider the ways education can be engaged from both bottom-up and top-down to better serve Native students and their communities. What we mean by this is that the effort is guided by an interest in thinking about how to gauge early childhood education, elementary and secondary schooling, and the ways that this agenda can meet the needs of young people. There is also a need to consider the ways we prepare Indigenous college and graduate students to become teachers and serve the needs of Native students. Simultaneously, it is important that state and education leaders, teachers, principals, and other members of the community be prepared to meet the ever-changing world in which tribal peoples find themselves. Building local capacity necessitates starting with both young children and teachers with the hope of meeting in the middle. In other words, it involves moving toward a place where children's

academic achievement improves under the guidance of Indigenous teachers, engaged in culturally responsive schooling, and that these young people will, themselves, eventually move into positions as teachers and guide the next generation of learners. As Joseph says, “All of us graduates want the same thing. We want our children to have teachers who can look into their hearts and know what they can be. We want teachers—like us—who understand what it means to grow up on the rez and face those mean white teachers and administrators so that we can help do the right thing.” Admittedly, some students may not go on to become educators but may instead develop business models and ideas or work to improve their local environments—these are also important contributions toward tribal capacity and nation building (Cornell and Kalt 1998). However, taken together, the idea is that this process will replicate itself over time, building the capacity to move toward self-determination through self-education (Brayboy and Castagno 2009).

Centering tribal nation building forces a conceptual flip on mainstream, dominant notions of nation building, democracy, and meritocracy. Thus, in addition to outlining what tribal nation building means and looks like in the context of graduate education, we seek to disrupt dominant ideologies of democracy, nation, and merit, and the dominant institutions of graduate education that rest on these ideologies. In order to do this, we draw on our experiences with Indigenous teacher-preparation programs and the program graduates who serve their communities and tribal nations through both program participation and upon graduation. Centering these programs and experiences of graduates, in particular, allows us to envision how graduate education might engage tribal nation building. The graduates of Indigenous teacher-preparation programs embody the notion of tribal nation building. Joseph pointedly articulates this and the ways tribal nation building stands in stark contrast to mainstream understandings of higher education, success, merit, and nation.

Cultivating Space and Growing Ideas within a Mainstream Institution

Over the past decade, we have been involved in a number of programs focused on the preparation of Indigenous teachers. The goal of these programs has been to prepare teachers so they meet the high academic standards necessary to be effective teachers (e.g., ensuring that pre-service teachers are well versed in content-area knowledge) and are culturally grounded in the place, people, and culture of where they are teaching. The programs aim to prepare a group of teachers who will assist young people in meeting high academic standards and recognizing the connections between schooling and their day-to-day lives, or what some people call “culture.” The initial program was developed by

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the lead author after he spent several years formulating the ideas, and it came to fruition only after completing several visits with tribal leaders of the state, who noted the importance of and need for Native teachers and extended their support for the project. This and subsequent programs were funded by grants written by, with, and for Native peoples and in conjunction with neighboring tribal communities. Their goal was simple: to prepare the best Native teachers possible so graduates could return to their home communities and serve as teachers.

These programs have been located in three different states, and about 80%–85% of the students in the programs have been “nontraditional” students—with an average age between 30 and 35 years old—and in some cases, even older than that. These students were mothers, fathers, daughters, sons, grandmothers, and grandfathers. Our comments in this article focus on the program to which Joseph belonged, but our ideas have developed over many years and in collaboration with many program participants and staff.

A Nation-Building Orientation in Course Work and Student Support Services

Part of the work to cultivate space for a nation-building orientation in graduate education must occur in the programs of study and course work. Two courses were incorporated into the academic programming that became vitally important to the success of our programs. First, the “History of American Indian Education” was taught as a course. This created the opportunity to outline a no-holds-barred history of Indigenous education in the United States—including its concomitant policies—for students unaware of this history. It also provided an environment to discuss issues related to sovereignty and self-determination and frame the grant as creating both an opportunity and a responsibility to serve Native communities for all who were involved with it. One student disclosed, “I feel both sad and angry that I wasn’t taught this history, and I’m just now learning it in grad school. . . . As someone who graduated from reservation schools, it is the least that could have been done.” Over the course of the semester, student comments during class discussion began to reflect increasing awareness that many of their ancestors were forced to assimilate into a different way of thinking, dressing, and behaving, as they were ripped from their families and places of birth to be “educated” while incurring significant emotional and physical abuses. Many Indigenous peoples have suffered and died in the name of civilization and for the right to utilize schooling in a productive way. This course helped program participants acknowledge that schooling for American Indians has historically been driven by a colonial desire for assimilation. Class discussion created a collaborative

space for them to create a framework and gather information to help recognize the role of schooling in the assimilation process and imagine ways to resist becoming complicit in this project. As another student noted, “Now that I know this, I can create strategies to reject assimilationist practices in my own classroom.” We knew that the history is the present, but we were also thinking about how to create a different future.

The history of Indigenous education course was followed with a course on Indigenous knowledge systems (IKS). This course attempted to disrupt the idea that there is only one kind of knowledge that is worthwhile in the academy and in schools. It provided an opportunity to expose students to Indigenous writers, thinkers, and theorists. At one point, in the middle of the semester, one of the students exclaimed, “I didn’t know there were Indian writers—this is really good stuff!” This statement was followed with an understanding that in our day-to-day schooling, students are rarely exposed to Indigenous authors. Additionally, the course emphasized the need for unpacking what counts as knowledge and theory and the connections between knowledge and power. This course allowed students to strip back the structures of schooling and explore the ways that Indigenous peoples have always contributed to the world as thinkers, theorists, and doers—irrespective of whether their contributions have been respected, validated, or included in institutions of higher education. The course culminated with students writing reflective papers and a policy brief that sought to reframe university or classroom policies through an Indigenous frame. These papers and policy briefs included calls for weighing community mindedness in the admissions process, restructuring university holidays around tribal ceremonies, and integrating IKS alongside dominant theoretical considerations in course work.

In addition to these two courses, the program’s in-house writing and academic instructors were well versed in IKS and the history of Indian education, and they could explicitly identify structures at the institution that might create barriers for students. They worked with students to identify these barriers and came up with strategies to avoid them or knock them down. In addition to addressing the gap in academic/intellectual resources, including the lack of culturally relevant courses available, our staff sought to address other colonial denial of resources. For example, we sought to provide opportunities for the creation and celebration of community/communal and spiritual resources. Alongside their rigorous course load, program participants were invited to participate in weekly social gatherings with their families, including movie and bowling outings and potlucks. Eventually a feeling of community developed among many program participants, and some even began looking after each other’s children.

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Nation Building among Students, within Programs, and against Dominant Frameworks

Embedded in the programs—and articulated to participants by program staff—was the notion that the programs are bigger than any one person—that those involved in/with them are working toward serving communities and children. The hope was that this philosophy and set of beliefs would largely take individualism out of the picture, although it certainly did not remove the individual from the process. This required the programs to be framed as addressing the need for capacity building in Indigenous communities. It also required graduates to view themselves as responsible for children having better opportunities than their teachers before them. In this way, we engaged in something larger and more important than the individual successes of participants (although we certainly honored and facilitated them). In short, it got to a point where those associated with the program saw themselves as part of a collective and used “we” many, many more times than “I” to describe any program accomplishments, goals, or struggles.

Joseph’s words in the opening vignette, “this program . . . they knew that we needed teachers, and they knew that I could do this work,” illustrate the need for more Indigenous teachers serving Indigenous children and communities. Joseph frames the need for teachers as a collective one while demonstrating that, as an individual, he can contribute and address, at least in part, the stated need. He goes on to demonstrate the epistemological, ontological, and axiological component of his community’s belief system when he says, “I will help them, because that’s what we do. We help each other. They sent me here; they supported my efforts; they let me bring my children here; they knew I would come back.” The statement “that’s what we do” offers a shorthand version of the belief systems and the action and values behind the belief that demonstrates the reciprocity in the process. His community supported his attendance at the institution because they knew he would return to serve them. What becomes clear is that, within a nation-building approach, there is a fundamental understanding that individuals play an important role in the collectivity of efforts and commitments needed to strengthen the nation. It also concisely illustrates the desire expressed among many Indigenous students to serve that collectivity. Although educational institutions guided by colonial notions of merit would frame Joseph’s academic involvement and individual achievements as evidence of personal success, a tribal nation-building approach rejects this concept of merit and achievement. Rather, Joseph’s participation and consequent success privilege the importance of building capacity for the community so that its children and citizens have improved opportunities and educational choices.

The commitment to tribal nation building in these programs is vital and

important, but we would be remiss if we did not note that it is difficult to pursue it as meaningfully as many of us would like. Taken together, the two courses developed for these programs were the only allowances received from the institution. We were otherwise constrained to existing institutional structures and programs, which meant that in addition to teaching the standard Eurocentric education courses required by the institution, the added courses were exactly that: added, extra, electives. Although we argued they should be required courses, the institution disagreed. Moreover, we struggled with the institution to address the lack of material resources available to students on an all-too-regular basis. For example, we regularly battled with financial aid over how much money students could make while enrolled as students and what pushed them into an “over-award” situation. We argued, with moderate success, that Indigenous students often support not only themselves and their immediate families but also other family members “at home” who need and count on that assistance.

One issue that became apparent from the experiences with the early teacher-preparation programs was that the grant’s principal investigators (the PI was an Indigenous man, while the co-PIs were scholars of color) focused on addressing a significant educational issue plaguing Indigenous communities. They were interested in preparing more teachers to meet the day-to-day schooling needs of Native children, and the programs were built to address pressing needs identified by the community. At this point the communities were not worried about transforming the institution of higher education; they were focused on transforming their community and its institutions. It was only later the PIs and other program staff came to realize there may be value in both addressing the issue identified by the community and attempting to change the way the institution serves Indigenous students. It is to this need for institutional transformation we now turn.

Rethinking Success and Meritocracy in the Context of Nation Building

These programs have taught us that in order for nation building to be rooted as a meaningful institutional orientation, notions of success and meritocracy must be reenvisioned. In contrast to mainstream understandings of merit and success, tribal nation building suggests that individuals seek to serve the greater good of their tribal nation and community rather than primarily serving themselves. In his graduation speech, Joseph calls into question colonial, taken-for-granted notions of merit as “a number and a test” (i.e., grade-point average [GPA] and GRE scores) and frames his reasons for both attending and succeeding in graduate school as rooted in a larger, political project. He alludes

to what we are calling tribal nation building by noting the importance of preparing Indigenous teachers as a strategy for creating local capacity and responding to educational challenges in Indigenous communities.

Joseph's comments remind us of Lani Guinier's notion of democratic merit, which turns common understandings of merit on its head. Rather than valuing, seeking, and rewarding individuals based on their achievement on standardized measures, democratic merit centers the capacity to engage in a larger project (Dodson 2008; Guinier 2005; Guinier and Torres 2002). Grading, grade-level advancements, standardized forms of assessment, and admission to selective schools (including the vast majority of graduate programs) all rely on the assumption that a level playing field exists and that individuals can and should be rewarded for their individual effort, ability, and achievement. As Guinier has pointed out, the admissions process to graduate programs also rests on this understanding of merit since applicants are evaluated based on previously earned grades, test scores, and other achievements (Dodson 2008; Guinier 2005; Guinier and Torres 2002). This is a rewards-based system. It is also an individually based system and a system based on what has already occurred. It has been well established that test scores are highly correlated to parental income and education level and that high grades and general "success" in the K–12 educational system are largely dependent on one's family background (Brayboy et al. 2007). This makes the "merit-based" system that currently forms the foundation for admissions to graduate programs similar to those that serve as the foundation for undergraduate admissions—they are a proxy to advance a wealth-based and opportunity-based system. In other words, what we call merit is "dependent on, or in some ways an enhancer of, those who are already privileged continuing to enjoy the benefits of that privilege" (Dodson 2008). Guinier offers a compelling rethinking of merit and how it is operationalized at both the individual and institutional levels.

There are both institutional and individual elements to fulfill the promise of democratic merit. At the individual level, democratic merit calls for an investment-based system whereby individuals are invested in (and, thus, "rewarded") based on their potential for contributing to the larger democratic project (Dodson 2008). Therefore, individuals who have promise and capacity for becoming leaders and for giving back to their communities, for creating good and sustainable relationships, are the ones who graduate programs should be recruiting, admitting, and investing in. Guinier suggests that rather than evaluating merit solely at the individual level, we ought to also evaluate merit at the institutional level. This is the difference between "selection effects" and "treatment effects" (Dodson 2008). An emphasis on the selection effects is what graduate programs currently do—that is, they emphasize a selective admissions process based on an individual's previous accomplishments on (mostly) standardized measures of achievement (Dodson 2008). Institutions are

rated highly (or not) based on the prior accomplishments of the individuals they admit. Instead, Guinier argues, universities should focus on and be held accountable according to treatment effects, which would be the value added that they invest in individuals and the larger society toward the democratic project. Under this system, an institution would be rated highly (or not) based on the degree to which their graduates are better off than when they entered the institution—with “better off” assessed by their capacity to contribute to a healthy democratic society (Dodson 2008).

Guinier’s work presents important considerations for discussions of graduate programs and higher education for Indigenous peoples and is important to our discussion of tribal nation building. The mainstream, dominant democratic project has not served Indigenous peoples and tribal nations. Democracy has been assimilative, genocidal, and colonial. The parallels here to the mainstream, dominant nation-building project are not coincidental. Democracy and nation building have gone hand-in-hand. Together, they have attempted to erase, eradicate, and invalidate Indigenous peoples’ rights of sovereignty, community, and nation. Thus, taken up uncritically and applied simplistically to the context of Indigenous peoples in higher education, democratic merit runs the risk of advancing an assimilationist, dominant mainstream nation-building agenda. But borrowing elements of democratic merit and adapting them through a tribal nation-building lens renders a richly nuanced institutional orientation from which universities might situate their work. Joseph notes: “How could they see that my people need help and that I wanted to help them? . . . I will help them, because that’s what we do. We help each other. They sent me here; they supported my efforts; they let me bring my children here; they knew I would come back. . . . But this institution, they saw a number and a test score. They can’t see into my heart.” In this statement, Joseph points to his responsibilities—as an outgrowth of his relationship to others in his community—to serve his community, because his “people need help.” He contrasts this line of thinking with the institution who has framed him in a colonial mode of merit that is rooted in a “number and a test score.” In this way, the framing of the responsibility is to serve others because they have “supported [his] efforts.” Within tribal nation building there is a deep sense of reciprocity rooted in relationships and responsibilities that suggests individuals serve their nation and communities while being supported by that same nation and its communities. These relationships, responsibilities, and reciprocity are components of a tribal nation-building agenda.

Unspoken in his comments is that the program had to petition and appeal his—and all but one of the 12 graduates’—grade-point averages and test scores to the graduate school. The students were admitted “conditionally” on the premise they maintain a 3.0 GPA over the first semester of the program. This was because their admissions “composite index,” a mix of GPA and GRE

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scores configured on a 4-point scale and used to “accurately” predict a student’s first-year GPA, was too low. For example, a composite score of 3.45 indicates that a student, based on her scores, will have a first-year GPA of 3.45. As a group, the program participants’ entering composite index was a relatively low 2.41.

But, as Guinier and others note, these measures of colonial merit are more often indicative of a student’s economic background than they are about a student’s ability to academically achieve within an institution of higher education. More important for us, standard measures of merit do little to predict a student’s ability to become a leader and contributor to his/her tribal nation and community. The students who were admitted conditionally graduated with an overall grade-point average of 3.84. In short, their composite index was not “highly predictive” of their final grade-point average. Joseph’s words reflect the frustrations many Indigenous students face around being seen as “a number and a test score.” Indeed, the notion of “looking into the heart” of someone is not typically part of the admissions process. We suggest that looking into the heart of people is not only an acceptable metric through which to view admission but an important and useful one. An individual’s “heart” offers the potential and possibilities of that individual’s contribution to society and provides a valuable and compelling understanding of merit. From a tribal nation-building perspective, looking into an individual’s heart is indicative of knowing how she/he will give back to her/his community and respond to emerging challenges. The relationship between an individual and his/her community is highlighted when Joseph noted, “I will help them, because that’s what we do. We help each other. They sent me here; they supported my efforts; they let me bring my children here; they knew I would come back.” This relationship is central to the tribal nation-building project and the role of institutions of higher education in that project.

Institutions of higher education have an extensive history of employing highly selective sorting mechanisms based on ideologies of individualism and merit (Dodson 2008; Lomawaima and McCarty 2006; Schensul 1985; Shumar 1997; Shumar and Canaan 2008). Looking to the experiences of Indigenous students in graduate education and the health of tribal nations around the country, we cannot help but ask whether these policies and practices are advancing the health, well-being, and success of Indigenous communities. We suggest it is time institutions strive to see what is in the hearts of its students—to stop seeing students simply as a number or test score. It is time graduate education explicitly orients itself and its admissions policies around a vision of education for community or capacity-building purposes—this is tribal nation building through graduate education.

Building Capacity and Serving Others

Nation building as an institutional orientation for higher education encompasses what we have elsewhere referred to as “self-determination through self-education” (Brayboy and Castagno 2009). Central to higher education toward nation building is the notion that individual students sacrifice and commit to earning degrees in the service of their communities and nations. In other words, individual development happens for the betterment of community. Within a nation-building orientation, institutions would recognize in what these students are engaging, why they are engaging, and what they hope to get from that engagement. This recognition would then translate into policies and practices that honor that engagement and facilitate success. It calls for a rethinking of the “numbers and test scores” that have previously guided institutions of higher education. Joseph asks, “How could they [the university] look into my heart and know that I was more than a number and a test score? How could they see that my people need help and that I wanted to help them?” Calling the institution into question for an overreliance on a number and test score, Joseph indicates that he is not driven by individual notions of success; rather, he is focused on serving the needs of others. In a display of oratorical genius, he answers his questions by responding, “This program did that for us—they looked into our hearts; they heard us; they gave us an opportunity when this university only saw a number and a test score.” By “looking into [his] heart” the program recognizes the epistemological, ontological, and axiological reasons for why an individual might want to become a teacher. Joseph, like other graduate students in our programs, is focused on earning a degree and licensure in order to serve others. And although it may seem counterintuitive to use institutions of higher education to fight for sovereignty and self-determination, or to promote tribal nation building, given educational institutions’ rich history perpetuating physical and cultural violence against Indigenous students, we believe there are connections between what formal schooling has to offer and tribal nation building.

First, a tribal nation-building institutional orientation encourages institutions of higher education to recruit and invest in individuals who demonstrate the potential and desire to engage in tribal nation building. However, prior to enrollment, graduate programs would promote awareness and knowledge of the emotional, financial, cultural, and psychological toll for Native students to enter into higher education and, for those who make it in, a recognition of the costs for them to remain—and graduate. Additionally, graduate programs would know what tribal communities can do to support Indigenous students and what the institution can do to support the tribal communities. This includes but is not limited to offering financial support to students, in-

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formation about how to access and prepare to be qualified to enter higher education and graduate programs, and information about how a college degree can (and to some extent should) add benefit and value to the nation. This requires a reorientation in how education is typically conceptualized, seeing it as a value-added model, and focusing on how the values of higher education can serve both the mission of tribal nations and the explicit goals of the institution.

Admittedly, and very much in line with Guinier's arguments around moving from traditional meritocratic ideals to the concept of democratic merit, identifying the potential for capacity building is virtually impossible when standard recruitment and admissions processes are employed. This is the equivalent of seeing students as "numbers and test scores" rather than as key contributors in building local capacity. Supporting individuals once they are in graduate programs and ensuring that they obtain high-quality and relevant education is virtually impossible when standardized and dominant knowledges, curriculum, and pedagogy are employed. Tribal nation building and Indigenous students' success are more likely to be realized when institutions support students academically, recognize the importance of "looking into the hearts" of applicants, and honor their potential to engage in the process of self-determination through self-education.

Second, a tribal nation-building institutional orientation insists that graduate programs work with and through tribal nations and Indigenous leaders to identify critical issues, problems, and opportunities facing their community as well as how they might be addressed. This work would be aimed at the creation of sustainable outcomes driven by the goals of tribal nations. Not only must higher education be relevant to the needs of tribal communities, it must also prepare its graduates with the skills and knowledge necessary to contribute to tribal communities. Consider Joseph's admonition that "the Native people who started and ran this program, they understood. They knew what was in my heart, because they could hear me. What's in my heart is in their heart—we want the same things. All of us graduates want the same thing." In this instance, Joseph makes clear that institutions must look into the hearts of Native peoples and nations and understand the Nation's needs as defined by the Nation. When this happens, Indigenous students become part of the university because it makes sense to them in the larger goal of serving their tribal nation. Although Indigenous students may be interested in going to college to gain skills and knowledge in areas that may benefit their nation, these skills are of little use if they lack firsthand knowledge and understanding of Native institutions, communities, and values. This is critical because not understanding how higher education can serve to benefit or advance their personal goals, Indigenous students may instead seek employment opportunities that offer immediate financial benefit but that do not serve larger goals of community

nation building. Alutiiq scholar Malia Villegas (2006, 9) clearly articulates this dilemma, writing:

Emerging research suggests that . . . Native students . . . may be being *lured out* of school by employment opportunities that offer clear pathways to training, development and success. Throughout Alaska, there are countless seasonal opportunities for employment (e.g., commercial fishing, environment clean-up) that appear to offer large paychecks for short periods of hard work and manual labor. Many students may opt out of school in favor of pursuing some of these opportunities only to find that they do not offer consistent financial support or that they actually require specific education, training, and certification to qualify (e.g., Hazardous Materials Training).

Therefore, institutions of higher education must ensure that their course offerings are relevant to the current struggles facing youth and aid in learning about policies, rights, and the status of Indigenous peoples and their nations (Champagne 2004; St. Germaine 2008). Without relevant courses, graduates may have a hard time finding work and/or applying the skill set they have gained.

Finally, in order for nation building to be effective, the educational goals of Indigenous peoples should coincide with the strategic political and economic objectives of their communities. Higher education can fold into a larger agenda of tribal nation building and vice versa—since nation building cannot be fully or adequately pursued without some agenda of higher education. An institutional orientation of nation building encourages graduate education to invest in tribal nations and Indigenous communities. This investment might be in individuals, issues, or programs, but it must be driven by the collaborative work and genuine commitment to tribal nation-building goals. Moreover, institutions and Nations ought to work together to identify, recruit, and encourage individuals for graduate programs. For example, working together, they can increase the numbers of Indigenous college graduates and licensed teachers, health care providers, nurses, and engineers as a crucial component of tribal nation building and building local capacity. Graduate programs can foster student involvement in learning heritage languages and participating in community social/cultural/political activities. Finally, institutions of higher education can help encourage students to believe that they do not have to choose between home community/culture and being a college student by building spaces where Indigenous students can engage in the day-to-day practices of being a college student without having to lose what it means for them to be a citizen of their nation.

Capacity must be built, developed, invested in, and honored on multiple levels. Capacity lies in individuals, in communities, in programs, in institutions,

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and in nations. These programs engage in tribal nation building through their recruitment and admissions procedures, the ways they integrate curriculum and pedagogy that is culturally relevant, and the choices they make about program location and logistics. At an individual level, looking to the experiences of Indigenous men and women, their tribal language expertise, the relationships and leadership opportunities they have in their communities, and the investments they have made in their families and nations all tell us something about their capacity for engaging higher education toward nation building. At a programmatic level, nation building is evident in the collaborative work between the programs and tribal leaders, in the ways the program foregrounds the needs of tribal nations, and in the decisions to bring course work and program resources to Indigenous communities. Embedding nation building at the institutional level is difficult work. We worry that these programs are at the whim of singular leaders who are often isolated in the work and commitments they engage. Indeed, in most cases, it seems that the programs come and go and little else within the institutions changes. This is why we suggest a transformative institutional orientation. If an institution was oriented around tribal nation building, then its policies, practices, curriculum, reward structure, and admissions process would all be shifted toward community health, sustainability, and growth.

Concluding Thoughts

Initially the courses offered through these teacher-preparation programs were on campus, which created some issues because in order to participate in the program, students were forced to leave their communities. In some instances program participants were leaders in their community, and their departure presented a significant loss in intellectual contributions and services to their community. Part of what we have done more recently is to take education and the courses to students into their home communities, engaging in face-to-face learning, and building and drawing upon hybrid modes of education using videoconferencing, webinars, and other kinds of media to offer courses. What we have found important—which has not necessarily been great for students—is that Indigenous students' presence on campus forced teacher education programs to rethink the ways they think about preparing all teachers. In the end, it was more important that the students' individual needs were met, without removing them from their communities, than it was to try to force change in the institution of higher education. These institutions have their own work to engage in around how to best prepare a diverse teaching force; this is not the work of students enrolled in these programs.

There have been some successes in these programs, utilizing (unknown to

us at the time) Guinier's notion of democratic meritocracy partnered with the concept of nation building. Over the past 10 years, these programs have graduated almost 110 Indigenous teachers, most of whom remain working in the field of education. While many have returned to teach in rural, reservation, and other highly populated Indian communities, others have remained teaching in less Native-concentrated environments, including urban public school systems. Some students who came to the program as residents of the rural spaces where the university was located ended up staying in those areas. In many cases, it was so their children could complete their schooling. Those who stayed in these urban areas taught in schools with Indigenous children. These educators regularly disrupt narratives that some of the children and parents have about Native peoples; they also serve important mentorship roles to the few Native students who may be enrolled in their classes. In this way, they contribute in interesting and important ways, albeit less directly, toward a project of tribal nation and local capacity building. Thus, it is important to consider where Native peoples live. As more and more Indigenous peoples migrate from rural and reservation areas to urban ones, this requires us to begin to consider what tribal nation building in the city could look like and how we prepare urban Native teachers. In places like Phoenix, for example, and its suburbs, we must consider how to meet the needs of community members who are coming into this metropolitan area from across the state and from multiple tribal nations.

More recently, one of the programs that the lead author developed has partnered with a newly created college at one of our institutions anchored in transdisciplinary studies. As a result, the degree-granting unit, by its very nature, is willing to think outside of the proverbial box and to be transformative. The program requires faculty to visit its partnered tribal nation's reservation lands and attend an orientation run by the nation. This orientation introduces university faculty to the history, organization, and cultural norms and mores of the Nation. Additionally, rather than requiring students to leave their tribal nations, university instructors travel to them to deliver courses. What is transformative about this model is that it rests on a partnership between the institution and tribal nations, and each is oriented toward transformation of both the lack of Native teachers in the Nation and the way that the institution offers its courses. It is also rooted in a fundamental understanding that the institution is engaging in a tribal nation-building agenda in conjunction with its tribal partners.

Tribal nation building is about building legal, political, cultural, economic, health, spiritual, and educational capacity among Indigenous communities. This notion is perhaps best captured by the philosophy of self-determination through self-education, which emphasizes the importance of Native peoples taking care of Native peoples and continuing that process. It is a project for

Indigenous communities driven by Indigenous communities. Pursuing education with a purpose to serve the larger community, rather than solely for personal benefit, yields higher success rates for Indigenous students and aligns nicely with the desires of Indigenous students, given that this population often reports a desire to serve Indigenous and/or diverse communities upon graduation. Again, Joseph's words are illustrative: "I leave this university knowing how to teach and how to make lesson plans. I leave here knowing how to pass a test. I already know how to serve others and how to be [a citizen of his Nation]. And, I leave here with a number that the university can understand: a 3.85 GPA. Most importantly, I leave here with the same reason for coming: to serve my people." When Joseph notes that he already knows how to serve others and how to be a citizen of his Nation, he recognizes his own foundation as a citizen of his tribal nation and as a contributing member. He also points to what he has learned at the institution, without losing the sense that he is leaving the institution with the same goal as he entered: "to serve [his] people."

Notes

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1. It is outside the scope of this article to address the charges of the legal foundation regarding the legality of the program. One of the authors of this article is currently working on a series of articles that fully outlines the interactions between the program, legal foundation, and the institution. In short, the argument is that because of its payback agreement (the program is not a scholarship) and the political standing of tribal nations, the program is not only legal but necessary under the trust relationships between the federal government and tribal nations.

2. The name "Joseph" is a pseudonym.

3. For a lengthy exposition on tribal nation building, please see Brayboy et al. (2012).

4. Nation building is defined by the efforts of tribal nations to promote the sovereignty and self-determination of their peoples. Sovereignty refers to the inherent right of tribal nations to direct their futures and engage the world in ways that are meaningful to them, while self-determination can be understood as the engagement, or operationalization, of sovereignty.

5. We take up "nation building" as an important term. We do want to be clear however, that this phrase not literally thought of as building a nation. Tribal nations have been around since before the introduction of the term "nation," and we are not suggesting that we build them. Rather, through the notion of local capacity building and the interactions between a nation-building agenda and institutions of higher ed-

ucation, we are really talking about the strengthening of nations. For a more thorough discussion on the history and long-standing presence of Indigenous cultures and societies, please refer to the work of Vine Deloria Jr. and Clifford M. Lytle (1984), as well as the work of David E. Wilkins (2001).

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