

SOME GUIDELINES FOR WORKING WITH NATIVE COMMUNITIES

**ZOLTÁN GROSSMAN,
Faculty, Geography and Native Studies,
The Evergreen State College, Olympia, Wash.**

These Guidelines were developed for the Spring 2012 Student-Originated Studies (SOS)-Revitalizing Community program's group internships with the Squaxin Island Tribe to prepare for the Tribal Canoe Journey arrival in Olympia. They are taken from faculty, staff and student experiences, cultural respect educational materials, tribal canoe journey codes of conduct, as well as internship guidelines from the Center for Community-Based Learning and Action (CCBLA) at Evergreen.

Keep a good heart and good mind with you in your work. Be kind and considerate, and keep a humble and positive attitude. Express thanks and show appreciation, courtesy and respect. Act as a "team player"--being thoughtful and working together makes a better experience for everyone, including yourself. If you see that someone needs help, take the initiative to help out before being asked to.

Behave as a guest in a Native community at all times, and listen more than you speak. Allies are in the outer circle as observers, and do not intrude on the community's decision-making process. This internship is not a time or place to offer unsolicited advice, ask overly personal questions about an individual or family, and get involved in gossip or internal tribal matters. It is a time and place to listen respectfully, reflect, and get to know who you are, and why you are acting as an ally (Native or non-Native). You are representing not only yourself, but The Evergreen State College, and your behavior will either help or hurt future students. Faculty will be making decisions with an eye to building lasting relationships with our host communities.

Realize that being in Native communities is being in another nation that just happens to be close to home. Mentally stamp your "passport" to understand that you are entering the territory of another culture. Leave any personal troubles or conflicts behind, until you return back home. Harassment, unconstructive personal criticism, abusive or disrespectful behavior toward others in the program or in the host community will not be tolerated.

Elders are highly respected and looked up to, and are listened to without being interrupted or imposing a time limit. They are always first in line for food, or should be served a plate separately. Even when you are not asked to, help make sure that elders (as well as small children and special-needs people) are always cared for with food and drink, kept warm, helped in walking and getting a place to sit and see, etc. Do not talk, eat (if others are not eating), or disrespectfully crinkle bags while an elder is speaking. In Western society, elders are often marginalized, but they are at the center of Indigenous societies as the bearers of knowledge and experience, and we should always be very attentive and respectful to them.

No alcohol, drugs or weapons will be permitted in any form or under any circumstances. Possession will be grounds for immediate dismissal from the program—no kidding. This rule is not only for legal reasons. Substance abuse and violence brought by colonialism have ravaged Indigenous communities, and tribes are putting tremendous efforts into eradicating them. Do not dramatize or dwell on these historic traumas facing Native communities, but stress the positive measures that tribes are taking. Never make any

inquiries about alcohol use by individuals or families, or assume that people who oppose alcohol abuse do not drink in moderation. If absolutely necessary, tobacco should be used at a distance; it is also frowned upon for health reasons. Do not wear clothing with violent, offensive or gang-related words or images.

Native cultures are legally and morally the “intellectual property” of tribal members themselves. It is not our role as temporary visitors to interpret cultural values, events or rituals (such as tribal canoe journey preparations) for a public audience or readership. Any reporting on this internship is to be kept internal within our program. It is against the rules of this internship to publish, blog, or post videos or photographs of any events that are not specifically defined as public by the tribe (the canoe journey arrival is public). Tribes may ask us to sign confidentiality agreements on their cultural and intellectual property, so we promise not to reveal plant gathering sites, historical or sacred sites, family art designs or songs, personal and personnel information, and much more.

If students wish to conduct research, they need to go separately through the tribal research review process. If students wish to cover an event as media, they need to go separately through the tribe’s media accreditation process. Ask before taking any photos for personal memories or your in-class presentation. In other cases, just take a picture with your heart.

Bring food to share and pass at a community event (even if you're not able to cook a dish), and eat food if it is offered (even if you're not hungry). In Native communities, food is not just a material commodity, but carries strong cultural and social meanings. It is important that we accept and show gratitude for food, and only (nicely) turn it down if we have specific health, dietary or religious restrictions--not just personal tastes or preferences. A meal is not a place to criticize or express distaste for certain foods, whether traditional or conventional foods.

Gifts and gifting follow a much different protocol in Indigenous societies than in Western society. One’s wealth in Northwest tribal communities has always been based not on how much one acquires, but how much one shares—the principle of reciprocity in the potlatch or giveaway. If you give something, you are eventually given something back (such as a t-shirt for volunteer work), and if you are given something, you should give something back. When you stay in a community, or even visit, it may be appropriate to bring small gifts, particularly if they’re handmade. If you compliment a Native person’s possession, they may give it to you, and you may be expected to reciprocate. Similarly, we are reciprocating in our work itself—giving something back to the community that has hosted us that serves its interests and goals.

Relax and be flexible, not in your work ethic, but in your interactions with others. Tasks may change quickly, and communication may not always work as planned. Always be on time yourself, but understand that the clock is a Western import. Things may not happen on a tight schedule; they will happen when they happen, so leave enough time in your schedule. Bring a book if you have to wait, rather than using technology; this work is a chance to unplug from electronics and get to know people. What you may think of as menial “grunt work” may end up being an opportunity to meet people. Keep an (appropriate) sense of humor, and don’t be worried if you are tested--and welcomed--through a little teasing.

Learn culturally proper terms: canoe not boat, regalia not costume, spiritual leader not shaman. People may prefer different terms for “Native Americans,” but agree that tribal nation designations are just as important to learn. Remember that race and racism are not the only issues in Indian Country. Native nations were here long before their lands were colonized and racism was constructed and imposed on them. Their goal is not to assimilate into the dominant North American society, but to remain culturally and politically distinct. Although tribes cooperate in pan-tribal events (such as powwows), diverse Native cultures should not always be lumped together into a singular racialized American Indian identity. Native peoples have very distinct nations, languages, and traditions—learn about them.

We come from a highly racialized society, and should always be aware of the lenses we use. Do not assume a person’s cultural identity from their skin color, or from their appearance, dress or behavior. Indigenous peoples have needed to exercise caution, and in some cases hostility, in order to be able to have the power to determine their own lives. Do not get defensive, but learn from the words you hear. Remember that racism is an institutional system based on the power of the dominant community. Indigenous peoples may express individual prejudice, but do not have the power to impose a racist system on the majority.

Avoid romanticized views of Native peoples that glorify “exotic” or “cool” peoples who are always “close to nature,” and often omit the history and present realities of oppression. An outsider should leave preconceptions and judgments behind, and learn about the people’s own views of their culture, without adopting or trying to become part of the culture. Non-Native people have their own rich cultures and traditions to study and learn. We will not act as “wannabes” trying to learn guarded traditional knowledge, or appropriating Native art forms for our own personal curiosity or commercial use.

Avoid overly secular views of Native peoples that criticize “superstitious” peoples who have irrational religious values. Do not equate the deeply held beliefs of Indigenous peoples with imported ideas of religious fundamentalism, which have different roots and carry an attitude of superiority. Respect any expressions of spirituality even (or especially) if you do not understand them. Do not handle any sacred items or intrude on sacred space, or participate in a dance or drumming, without being specifically allowed by the host community, on its own terms.

Dress appropriately. Clothing should be neat and modest. You are a guest in someone else’s home, not spending a day at the beach. Displaying one’s body (for men or women), flirting, or expressing attraction is frowned upon, and can unknowingly disrupt personal relationships within the community. The College has rules about establishing sexual relationships with local people while involved in an academic program. We are not visiting another community to “hook up” with members of that community, but to learn without attracting attention to ourselves.

In working within any communities or organizations that are not your own, reflect on these CCBLA guidelines for positive internships. Interns who are learning and are helpful to the community organization are genuine in communications with organization about expectations, and are communicative and clear about their time commitments, including specific days and times during those days when they are available. They take these commitments seriously and are honest about them. They are where they say they will be,

when they say they'll be there, and if they are not, they have communicated it clearly as much ahead of time as possible. They are self-directed and self-starting, assessing what work needs to be done on their own after they get into the swing of things and asking what needs to be done. They are aware of their appearance and nonverbal cues and general stance and attitude, to best fill the needs of the organization and respect the people whom that organization is serving. They consider the socio-economic or cultural messages that are sent by their stuff, such as jewelry and electronic devices, and think about when it is and isn't appropriate to use a device like a cell phone or iPad. They are thoughtful about the history and experiences of people of different socio-cultural backgrounds and situations. They don't judge others simply by comparing their lives to their own – they realize that they likely cannot understand where everyone is coming from, and they are sensitive to this and don't take it for granted.

The CCBLA also has identified negative experiences in community-based internships. Actions that get in the way of mutually beneficial connections for students and organizations include a lack of communication—not calling or showing up, without letting the right person know (as soon as you know). Simply feeling bad or down is not a reason to skip work; absences are only extenuating for health, family, or career reasons. It is not helpful to wait around for someone to tell you to do something. Other acts to avoid are answering texts or calls while working, using inappropriate or marginalizing vocabulary, lecturing people about their issues, or getting into personalized debates. Interns need to pay attention to different personalities, work styles, and others' needs, and to educate themselves about the people and community they are serving, rather expecting that community or organization to educate them.

Native nations have many of the same problems as non-Native communities, including crime, drugs, poverty, pollution, prejudice, corruption, internal political conflicts, etc. Traditional cultures do not make Indigenous peoples immune from these problems; it offers them different tools to respond to these challenges. Do not hold Native communities to a higher standard because of images of what is culturally “authentic.” Avoid stereotypes of “rich tribes,” and learn why and how tribes are able to use casinos for economic development. Native nations have living, evolving cultures, not ones frozen in the past. Traditional values may keep their substance while taking on different forms and appearances, so avoid talking about Native Americans in the genocidal “past tense.”

Part of interacting with another culture is finding balance. Be self-aware and cautious, but don't be fearful or walk on eggshells. Sometimes it is respectful to be quiet and formal, and sometimes it is respectful to talk and be informal. It is important to be attentive both to differences and to similarities with people at the same time. Use your “indoor voice” indoors, and also outside in an Indigenous community. Smile, laugh and have a good time without being rowdy, or drawing undue attention to your group. Absences or tardiness can be interpreted as profound discourtesy to your hosts. In interacting with cultures that are not our own, flexibility and humility is of supreme importance; impatience is not a virtue.

Take to heart these guidelines from a tribal canoe journey code of conduct, and think of your internship work as a journey we complete together: *“The gift of each enriches all.... We all pull and support each other.... The journey is what we enjoy.”*