



How can UNC make space for Indigenous Students & Professors?

Geography 435

By: Kathryn Greene, Salem Cartner, Lenya Schmidt-Neuhaus, and Delaney Patterson
October 18, 2022

1. Historical Context

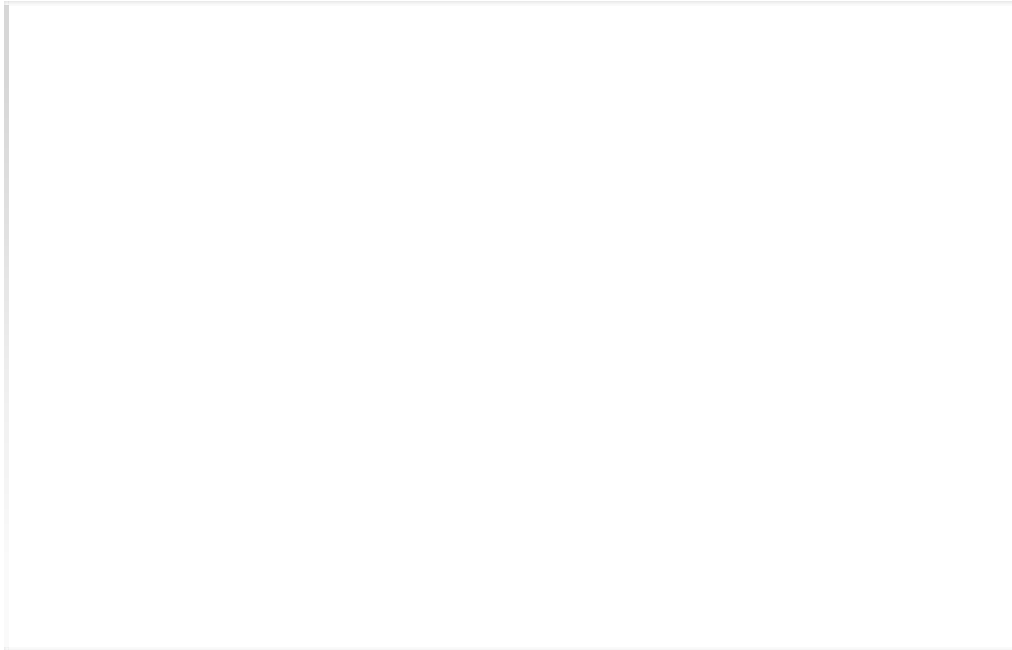
Blood, cruelty, and oppression often coincide with discussions about the histories of settler colonialism. And education is no different. Dating back to the 15th century, dominant religious groups and wealthy-colonizer nations took it upon themselves to educate Indigenous groups (Juneau, 2001). Although different countries utilized unique practices, ideologies, and systems to subjugate native groups, education was frequently weaponized and used to “rationalize” native exploitation. Perhaps the most infamous embodiment of this oppression was the Spanish

encomienda system (Juneau, 2001). With roots dating back to feudalism, it was legally permissible for Spanish conquistadors to impose forced labor conditions on Indigenous people (Cartwright, 2022). In return, the conquistadors taught Native people about Christianity (Cartwright, 2022). By teaching Indigenous groups the basic tenets of Christianity, Europeans hoped to “civilize” native people (Cartwright, 2022). But by viewing Native people, their land, and their resources as merely things to be exploited, the true “savages” in question were the colonists. Because of their commitment to fame, riches, and domination, colonizers set very dangerous precedents as to how marginalized populations could and (in their eyes) should be treated. Hence, our racist education system in the United States was born.

2. Tribal Colleges and Universities

Although Indigenous students were “technically” allowed at prestigious universities as early as 1617 at places like Dartmouth College and Harvard, it is no secret that access to these universities was extremely inaccessible for most Indigenous people (Juneau, 2001). In 1968, Navajo Nation made history by instituting Diné College, which is famously recognized as the first tribal college, or TCU (Carlton, 2021). TCUs are higher educational systems established by Tribal governments, which offer associate degrees, bachelor's degrees, and master's degrees across the nation (Carlton, 2021). Since 2004, over 31,000 students have graduated from TCUs and each year TCUs serve approximately 70,000 members within the surrounding area who partake in workshops, events, and committee meetings (Bull, 2015). Hence, TCUs not only serve Indigenous students by offering them inclusive and affordable spaces to learn, but they also support local Indigenous communities (Bull, 2015). TCUs also provide sanctuary for Indigenous staff. Approximately 46% of TCU faculty members and

71% of TCU administrators are Indigenous, compared to Indigenous educators who make up less than 1% of professorships nationally (Bryant, 2021).



Above is one of the original photos of America's first TCU, established by the Navajo Nation. Many of the trees and surrounding nature is clearly kept intact, showing the balance of education and respect for the land. Source:

https://www.dinecollege.edu/about_dc/history/

3. Current Overview

Nationwide, Indigenous students make up less than 1% of undergraduates and graduate students (“Native American Students,” 2021). Furthermore, while 42% of Americans over the age of 25 have an associates degree or higher, only 25% of Indigenous people have attained similar levels of higher education (“Native American Students,” 2021). Conversations about inclusion are especially pertinent in North Carolina, home to the greatest share of Indigenous people east of the Mississippi River (“American Indian Students at Carolina,” n.d.). In total, more than

122,000 Indigenous individuals and eight Tribal nations reside in North Carolina (“American Indian Students at Carolina,” n.d.). Currently, 87 undergraduates and 39 graduate students at UNC-Chapel Hill identify as Indigenous, which is a decline relative to previous years. According to a study conducted at UNC in 2012, the rates of enrollment for Indigenous students were lower than any other racial or ethnic group, accounting for a 2.5% decline. If these numbers continue to decrease at their current pace, Indigenous students will be “nearly nonexistent” in eight to nine years (“American Indian Students at Carolina,” n.d.). Rates of Indigenous professors are no better, accounting for only 18 instructors campus-wide (“American Indian and Indigenous Studies,” n.d.).

4. Room for Improvement at UNC

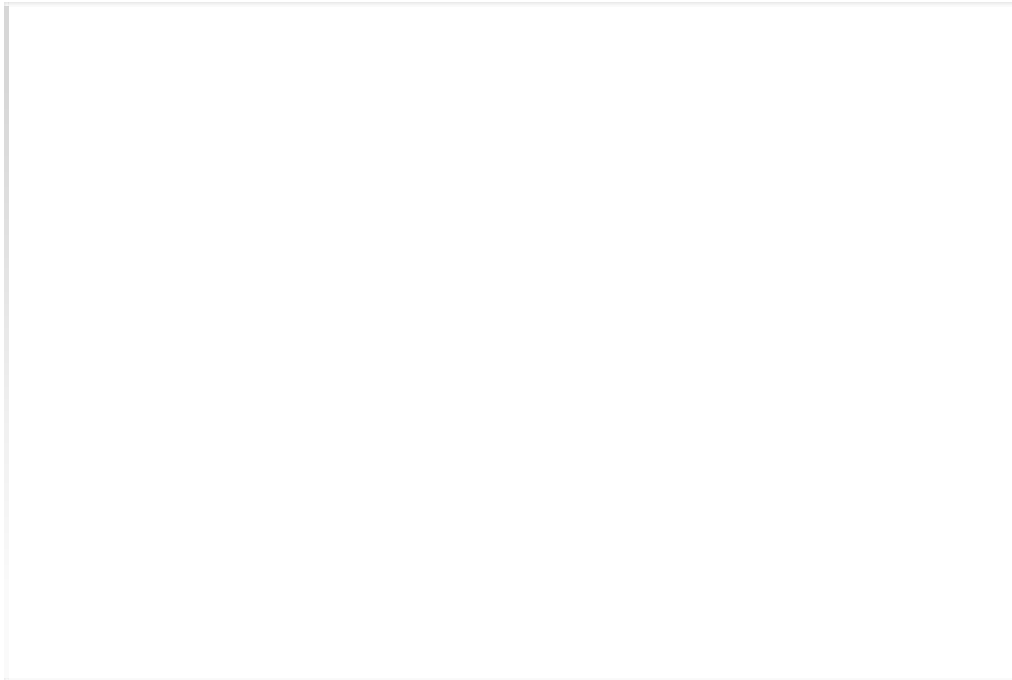
Along with a wide range of other Southern institutions as land grab institutions, UNC-Chapel Hill has a long history of poor treatment towards Indigenous groups, and there are still many missteps made by the administration.

Two decades after the creation of the concentration, the administration tried to remove the American Indian and Indigenous Studies (AIIS) major and minor, making it impossible to declare this as a field of study (First Nations Graduate Circle, 2022). Although the decision was recently reversed, a significant portion of funding was cut, and the importance of the curriculum remains limited in the institution (First Nations Graduate Circle, 2022). The majority of classes in the AIIS concentration are taken by Indigenous

students, representing
a small fraction of university students.

The current percentage of Indigenous students and faculty is on the decline, with Indigenous faculty at 4 of 1005 in total. There used to be more Indigenous faculty and faculty of color at the University, but recently 8 chose to leave citing mistreatment by the University, and better pay elsewhere (Schlemmer, 2021). Malinda Lowery is but one of them.

Malinda Lowery



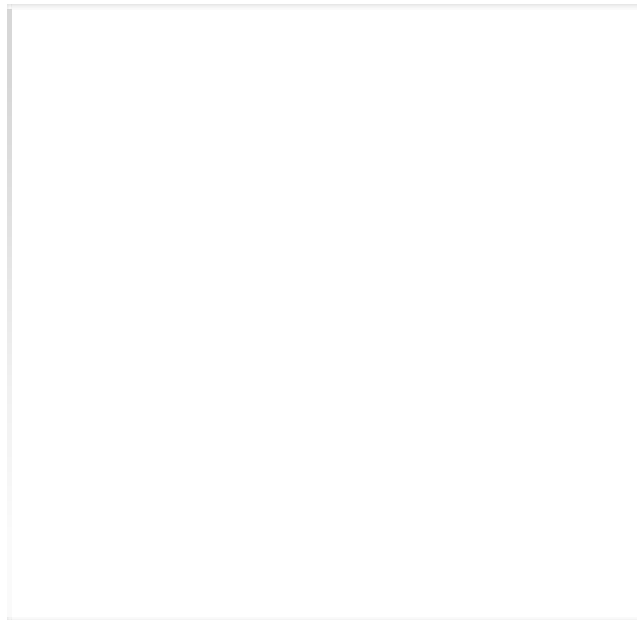
(Killian, 2021)

Malinda Lowery is a member of the Lumbee tribe. After completing a masters and doctorate degree at Chapel Hill, she became the director of the Center for the American South (Killian, 2021). As someone with a strong connection to the institution for years, she was able to speak about the repetitive issues of the University that pushed her to leave early in 2021. After years of witnessing conservative and white-supremacist behavior from the UNC administration, her decision to leave was necessary.

Examples are numerous, ranging from the Silent Sam statue to the denial of tenure of Hannah Nikole Jones, or the decisions to bring students back to campus for a week mid-pandemic (Killian, 2021).

Lowery explained that what all these issues had in common was the politicization of issues from the decision-makers at the University. Repeated missteps were made and nobody attempted to listen to experts and outside opinions or to apologize, explained the Emory Professor (Killian, 2021). This is what made her feel the climate had shifted at the school. Lowery is now a Professor in American History at Emory (Hunt, 2021).

UNC Board of Trustees



(Koonce, 2010)

This image shows the members of the Board of Trustees from 1901. A few names can be recognized from building names at UNC-Chapel Hill. The UNC board of Trustees conservative stent is well known and so is its lack of diversity.

The Board of Trustees is responsible for overseeing large

institutional decisions, the tenure of professors, and giving other administrative validations. The makeup of the decision-makers has resulted in repeated discriminatory decision-making and has left a bitter feeling for many students and faculty, as well as harming the University's reputation (Ingram, 2021).

After the Hannah Nikole Jones scandal, the Board has been slightly diversified with a Black man and an Asian-American man. The majority of the Board remains white men, with only one white woman and one woman of color out of a total of 13 members (Ingram, 2021). Still, this slight diversification offers no sign of change in the political climate of the Board. Nor does it offer any hope that there will be changes or apologies for previous actions that lead to Lowery leaving amongst others.

Faith Hedgepeth

The tragic murder of UNC student Faith Hedgepeth marked a pivotal time for Native American students on campus for nearly a decade. Hedgepeth, a member of the Haliwa-Saponi Native American Tribe, North Carolina's third-largest, was a junior when she was murdered in her off campus apartment in September 2012 (Boyle, 2012).

As a Gates Millennium Scholar, Hedgepeth was considered an exemplary student who also put her family and Tribe first, according to numerous reports. When it took years for details of the case to be released, many Indigenous students found that it was hard to be on UNC's campus and even more difficult walking the streets knowing Faith's killer was potentially among them.

It wasn't until 2021 when police made an arrest for Faith's murderer, Miguel Enrique Salguero-Olivares, and people were finally able to begin the process of releasing years-worth of tension and distress.

While the case is now closed, many Native students believe that Faith deserved better from the University and called for a memorial in her honor, saying it is the least the University could do to honor Faith (Perchick, 2021).

Zianne Richardson, a student at UNC-Chapel Hill told ABC back in 2021 that the University needs to put in more effort connecting with Indigenous students. "I think that that's something that the university could work on is making better relationships with our natives and making more spaces and saying, 'we hear you and see you and acknowledge you're on the campus. Not just to check the diversity box, but because we feel like you're a vital part of the Carolinacommunity.'"

Need for Improvement

Some of the University's actions claimed to support Indigenous peoples are under this label of "diversity" and "inclusion" to try to overlook the history of wrongs that have been done to Indigenous groups and people of color (Smith, 2018). Yet, the cultural and assimilative exclusion at Chapel Hill remains constant and can take many forms.

There is no official standard for how to talk about Indigenous people so there is a lot of offensive language used, especially in history classes. For example, consistently referring to all Indigenous people under the label of "Native Americans" without the understanding that there are hundreds of different Tribes with different histories and cultures can often present a reductive view.

A mix of academic decisions, student and faculty inclusion, and political polarization within the University continues to propagate an environment that is not welcoming to Indigenous students and faculty. UNC-Chapel Hill must take the steps to truly limit exclusion, and approach decisions from the people concerned, not

just the conservative Board of Trustees.

5. The Good at UNC-Chapel Hill

Frankie Bauer

During my conversation with Frankie Bauer, member of First Nations Graduate Circle and the Choctaw Nation, we discussed a few examples of UNC-Chapel Hill's commendable steps. Last spring, the school hosted its 35th Annual Carolina Indian Circle Powwow. At this event, Native American dancers and vendors shared parts of their culture with anyone who attended, all in the name of "reclaiming their space," (Annual). In the fall of 2020, the Undergraduate Research Consultant Team created a garden inspired by D'Arcy McNickle, one of the most influential American Indian writers of the twentieth century (Experimental). In this garden were interpretive posters and various edibles and flowers, and the legacy of this temporary project lives on through its virtual tour online (Experimental).

Dr. Cobb

Dr. Cobb is one of UNC-Chapel Hill's American History professors and has been here for 13 years. Within this time period, he has witnessed as UNC-Chapel Hill's response to Indigeneity has continually changed. When the University proposed the collapsing of American Studies into a single major and minor, resulting in the erasure of Indigeneity, students took action. As a result of student-led movements, American Studies experienced a return of investment and representation. The university began to take action towards greater representation for Native Nations on campus. Since then, a cluster hire for professors specializing in Indigenous Studies has been authorized (Cluster). Furthermore,

the Dean of Arts and Sciences has created a group to chart the vision of the future of these studies. This group will address and redesign the curriculum in place, and consider the additional needs of the American Indian community (Cluster).

6. Connections to Class Themes

By taking a step back from the different practices that have been exercised by UNC Chapel Hill and looking at things on a more broader scale, it is evident that there are intersections between this information and our class themes. While we have had the opportunity to discuss topics ranging from injustices within infrastructure to conservation to water, there are two themes that are prominent when discussing UNC and how they have treated Indigenous students and professors in the past. The themes of racial capitalism and the idea of land as a resource can be used to understand the historical and current behavior of UNC as a university, how they have hurt Indigenous populations, as well as how they have made reparations to reconcile the relationship between UNC and Indigenous students and professors.

Racial Capitalism

The idea of racial capitalism is derived from the fact that racism predates the formation of capitalist ideas and the belief that “racism was a structuring logic

This is a digital copy of a Cherokee land salesbook for land in Macon County, North Carolina. This image showcases how land was taken from Indigenous populations, with little to no incentive for the people whose land is being taken from. This is a strong example of both racial capitalism and how land can be viewed as a resource

to some. https://finding-aids.lib.unc.edu/01966/#folder_1#1

for capitalism” (Pulido, 2017). In short, economic processes within a capitalist society are rooted in racism. Pulido goes into detail about the difference between appropriation, which is when land is taken from native populations and commodified in some way, and access, which is a concept that arose after land appropriation took place (2017). Beginning when the university was chartered, UNC began appropriating large amounts of Cherokee and Chickasaw land, which is now a part of Tennessee (Kelly & Wright, 2020). The University first received major push-back from the Indigenous populations that inhabited the land as they fought for their land ownership rights, however in 1818 a treaty was passed that formalized all appropriation of Chickasaw land in Tennessee (Kelly & Wright, 2020). This gave UNC rightful ownership to this land as well as the financial benefits that came with it (Kelly & Wright, 2020). This is a prime example of racial capitalism in UNC Chapel Hill’s past that shows how the University not only took advantage of the land and people where the university is located, but also how they affected Indigenous populations in another state, all for financial gain.

Land and Nature as a Resource

This theme ties in well with the concept of racial capitalism, except it focuses on the land being commodified. From the time that colonizers arrived in the Americas, Indigenous land has been taken to be used for a profit. In Andrew Curley’s chapter, “Resources Is Just Another Word for Colonialism,” he explains that to the colonizers, nature and land were just things that they could call their own and make use of them as resources (Curley, 2021). This idea was in blatant disregard for the Indigenous people that lived on that land and they were just seen as something in the way of the colonizers’ profits (Curley, 2021). The forceful taking of this land left many Indigenous populations without a place to call home, but for several groups who had strong relationships with

the land, this also severed those ties. The experience of Indigenous groups losing their land to other groups of people who wanted the land solely to make a profit was not isolated as UNC also went down the same path during the building of the university. The land that UNC is built on was seen as nothing but land that would be profitable and suitable for a university of this size to be built upon and have room to grow. There was no regard taken for the Occaneechi, Shakori, Eno, and Sissipahaw populations that first inhabited the area and as their land was appropriated to be used as resources, their ties to their home and their connection with the land was severed with no sort of reparations to come for centuries (Shih, 2022).

7. Our Next Steps

UNC-Chapel Hill's work towards creating spaces for Indigenous students and professors is not over, yet. There are many more steps that the university can take to do their part. The most important first step is establishing a Land Acknowledgment for the Native Nations that owned this land prior to the University's construction. The next step is the University creating more visibility for its Indigenous students and professors. Examples would include increasing funding for the American Indian Center, expanding projects such as the D'Arcy McNickle garden, and gaining more publicity for events such as the American Indian Circle Powwows. We must begin to understand that Indigeneity is different. As Dr. Cobb explained to me, non-Native individuals tend to approach diversity in a way that flattens difference. To avoid this, we must pursue a form of inclusion that recognizes what is different about Indigeneity. Furthermore, the University can create curricular structures and anyone can create support networks that both cultivate a sense of belonging for Indigenous students and staff.

“Unraveling the horrific legacy of colonialism among our educational institutions will require more than symbols and good intentions – it will take hard work and heavy lifting. Colleges and universities have no business inviting Native people to such ceremonies on campuses where they are otherwise unseen, unwelcome or unsafe. The real test is not whether our institutions are willing to acknowledge the sins of the past, but whether they are willing to commit to avoiding those sins in the future” (Bryant, Jr., 2021).

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