

Native American History: The Need for a Comprehensive Curriculum

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The history of Native Americans is incredibly long and significant, dating thousands of years and persisting after the pre-Columbian Era. Learning this past is essential to understanding not only the current state of Indigenous peoples, but the state of our country as well. Unfortunately, a large number of Americans remain ignorant to this history. K-12 learning standards, which require a complete Native American history and a curriculum developed in part by Native groups, are essential to combat this ignorance.

Although Native Americans make up around two percent of the US population, rampant misrepresentation and our failure to educate students about Indigenous peoples has ensured that the vast majority of Americans remain ignorant about Native American history and complexity (“American Indians and Alaska Natives - By the Numbers”). This perpetuates harmful stereotypes, influences public policy, and creates conflict between Native and non-Native communities. To erase our national ignorance, we must adopt comprehensive learning standards ensuring that all students are taught the complexity of American Indian culture, and Native American history up until the modern day.

Archaeological evidence establishes that Native Americans have occupied the American continent for approximately 24,000 years (Rutherford). From that time to the present, many varying Indigenous cultures and civilizations have taken root. Estimates have put North American native populations at many millions prior to Western contact (Denevan). After

European colonizers arrived in North America, a series of resultant events led to a massive drop in population among American Indians (Than). Those who survived suffered from forced assimilation, suppression of religion and culture, racism, and discrimination.

The legacy of American Indian oppression still persists today. But while modern-day America continues to alter Native American life, Native Americans have found their own way to shape America. Native American culture has found ways to prosper and thrive, and Native Americans have served as leaders in business, politics, science, humanities, and the arts. Unfortunately, all of these realities are too often ignored.

Despite the massive amount of known Indigenous history and its being integral to the history of the US, most K-12 public schools relegate it to only a small portion of social studies; current educational standards place little importance on promoting understanding of Native Americans. In a survey of 28 states with federally recognized tribes, only 43 percent required Native American history to be taught in schools (“Becoming Visible”). 27 states do not even mention a single Native American individual in their K-12 curriculum (“Becoming Visible”). To make matters worse, even when Native American history is included, it is all too often generalized and incomprehensive. Native Americans are excessively portrayed as a monolith, although there are 574 federally recognized Nations, all with different cultures, traditions, and histories (“Federal and State Recognized Tribes”). Furthermore, Native American history is often whitewashed, intentionally concealing American Indian suffering. Perhaps the most infamous examples of this are Thanksgiving lessons, which have frequently been portrayed as a symbol of goodwill in which colonial settlers and Native Americans happily united for a feast. In reality, the native Wampanoag Indians were not invited and rather joined the pilgrims after the feast began. They intended to promote a strategic alliance, but it later failed and spiraled into war with the settlers (Dion).

Accurately sharing the history of Native peoples with all Americans is crucial. When we learn the historical facts, we see that the current problems American Indians face are not the result of just or excusable actions. History explains the present, but when the past is palliated, the origins of contemporary issues become arcane. This is why it is not only important to accurately portray the start of our country, but also the recent history of American Indians.

Worse, the role Native Americans have played in the American past since the nineteenth century is repeatedly ignored. 87 percent of state history standards do not cover Native American history after 1900 (“Becoming Visible”). Students subsequently develop an antiquated

view of Native Americans. When schools fail to educate students, the media can dominate our understanding of American Indians. This is especially problematic because Native Americans are either portrayed as historical figures from before the 20th century or poor, addicted, and uneducated in the present (Qureshi). Since most Americans don't interact with American Indians on a daily basis, they don't have the experiences to counter these stereotypes.

Unsurprisingly, the failure to properly educate Americans on the history of their Indigenous counterparts has led to a false and minimal understanding of Native Americans in the US. 78 percent of Americans admitted that they know little to nothing about Native Americans (EchoHawk). Even more troubling, many Americans are not sure if American Indians still exist, an unfortunately understandable reality when most school standards deem Native American history beyond 1900 irrelevant (EchoHawk). The lack of knowledge regarding native Americans in the present day is a testament to the dated and colonial lens by which current American history lessons perceive Native Americans.

American Indians do indeed exist, and their situations can be greatly affected by how other fellow Americans view them. Education, or lack thereof, has real-world implications. When modern Native American history isn't taught, non-Native Americans become susceptible to ignoring modern-day problems facing the Indigenous population. Well past 1900, Native Americans continued to suffer from forced cultural assimilation through boarding schools, government attempts to dismantle tribes and relocate their members, destruction and looting of cultural resources, and other attacks on their ways of life. Native Americans weren't even granted citizenship until 1924 ("Congress Enacts the Indian Citizenship Act"). The legacy of marginalization has left its mark. Today, Native Americans remain the most impoverished minority group in the US with the least educational attainments (Muhammad et al.). Suicide rates and alcohol-related disorders among Native Americans are also higher than any other minority group (NICOA). In 2017, approximately three-fourths of Native Americans believed Native Americans faced discrimination (*Discrimination in America: Experiences and Views of Native Americans*). Significant numbers said that they personally experienced violence, threats, slurs, offensive comments, harassment from police, and discrimination in employment because of their heritage (*Discrimination in America: Experiences and Views of Native Americans*). In some cases, more than a third reported such treatment (*Discrimination in America: Experiences and Views of Native Americans*). This is a disheartening and unacceptable level of injustice faced by the original occupants of our country.

Non-native Americans have a responsibility to confront the problems that have been forced upon American Indians. However, an issue can't be addressed by those who don't believe it exists. As of 2018, a study found only about a third of Americans believed that Native Americans face discrimination ("Research Reveals America's Attitudes about Native People and Native Issues."). When compared to Native views mentioned previously, this massive discrepancy shouts a lack of understanding on behalf of non-Native Americans. These differing attitudes demonstrate why Native American perspectives must be incorporated into history lessons. Even more disturbing, the study reported that a significant amount of Americans believe that Native Americans receive "free rides" from the government. This dangerous assertion, lacking in a factual basis, compounds misunderstanding and can lead to conflict between Native and non-Native communities. Lawmakers have admitted that the "invisibility" of Native Americans has impacted public policy ("Research Reveals America's Attitudes about Native People and Native Issues."). In other words, ignorance is manifesting itself in the law.

One of the most blatant examples of the implications of ignorance is the estimated 2,000 teams, most of them schools, which have Native mascots (Davis-Delano et al.). Mascots of Native Americans have been shown not only to be a symptom of inequality, but a cause of it as well. "Depressed self-esteem, community worth, and future achievement-related goals, and increased negative feelings of stress, distress, depression, dysphoria, and hostility" have been found to be effects of Native mascots (Davis-Delano et al.). However, defenders of Native mascots claim that they honor American Indians. The white, non-Native owner of the Washington Redskins football team (now Washington Football Team) defended the name as "honor," "respect," and "pride." ("What Redskins Owner Dan Snyder Has Said about the Team's Name"). Many American Indians disagree. A UC Berkeley study found that around 52 percent of Native Americans with federally recognized tribal affiliation were offended by the "Redskins" (Anwar). Only amidst racial justice protests arising from the death of George Floyd did the name change.

Opposition to changing mascots has gone so far as to become law. Amidst calls for the University of North Dakota to drop its "Fighting Sioux" mascot, the North Dakota Senate approved a bill ordering the school to keep the mascot. The bill was signed into law (Barrett). While the University of North Dakota eventually changed its mascot, hundreds of others across the country still remain. Each one represents a lack of understanding with regards to Native Americans that must be addressed in education.

The need for adopting teaching standards on Native Americans is clear given the divide created between non-Natives and Natives. But while the lack of in-depth teaching on Native American history is discouraging, it is hopeful that the vast majority of Americans want to improve. 78 percent of Americans want to learn more about Native American history and culture and 72 percent support changes to the K-12 curriculum to incorporate teaching Native American history (EchoHawk). We must act to capitalize on this overwhelming support for such an important measure.

But what would Native American history look like? Fortunately, the concept of updating the curriculum on American Indians is not uncharted territory. Native Knowledge 360° (NK360), an education initiative of the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, was designed in 2018 to tackle shortcomings in the way in which Indigenous history is currently taught and offer new perspectives on the Indigenous past. The initiative outlines 10 essential understandings for students that elaborate on the complexity among Native Americans and their culture. Among these are the individuality, diversity, culture, technology, power structures, and civic ideals of Native Americans before and after European arrival. It also provides needed resources to teachers who are willing to teach their students a more profound Indigenous history ("Framework for Essential Understandings about American Indians"). NK360 is an essential step towards providing better education regarding Native Americans.

Some states already recognized the need to integrate education about Native Americans into their curriculum. California has taken steps to broaden its curriculum and add a Native American studies class (Jones). Washington requires Indigenous history to be taught with the help of American Indians (Janzer). Oregon also started teaching Native history in early 2020, with a curriculum developed in part by the state's nine federally recognized Native American tribes (Brown). Indigenous tribes have recently sued the state of Montana for failing to follow its own laws' requirements to teach Native history (McCullough). The importance of these states' and tribes' efforts cannot be overstated. The framework they have provided can serve as an aid to all schools in the country, and their willingness to take action has proven that this is a problem that can be addressed. Each state, and ideally each school district, should adopt a unique curriculum based on the perspectives of local tribal nations.

Ignorance about America's Indigenous population has resulted in prejudice and policies that have harmed Native Americans up to the modern day. To address this critical problem, states must adopt mandatory standards for teaching comprehensive Native American history, including their contributions since 1900, and highlight the diversity among Native Americans.

These standards and lessons must be designed in part by local Native organizations because of their unique perspectives. Only by taking this step can we effectively address our shameful national failure to know the true history and culture of Native Americans.

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