



# **Beyond the Land Acknowledgement:**

College "LAND BACK"  
or Free Tuition for  
Native Students

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**By Megan Red Shirt-Shaw  
University of Minnesota**

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## INTRODUCTION

Land acknowledgements have become a powerful introduction to convocations, graduations, and conferences in higher education. As defined by The Guide to Indigenous Land and Territorial Acknowledgements for Cultural Institutions “an Indigenous Land or Territorial Acknowledgement is a statement that recognizes the Indigenous peoples who have been dispossessed from the homelands and territories upon which an institution was built and currently occupies and operates in.”<sup>1</sup> The key word in the definition of a land acknowledgement is dispossession. Settler colonialism is an ongoing process and system of power that perpetuates the loss of land by Indigenous people.<sup>2</sup> The settler colonial educational institution built on Indigenous lands revolves around the denial of Indigenous rights and the erasure of Native people. The truth is – if it were not for the loss of land by Indigenous peoples, American colleges and universities would not exist. Institutions must challenge themselves to move away from encouraging acts that are performative, into commitments of transformative change.

This policy brief explores the concept of “land back” in higher education. I begin by problematizing land acknowledgements without land based reparations. I then discuss and present two options for institutions:

1. Return institutional land back to Native nations.
2. If institutional land cannot be returned to Native nations, provide free higher education to Native students on their traditional homelands as land-based reparations.

<sup>1</sup> Garcia, F., & Anderson, J. (2018). Guide to Indigenous Land and Territorial Acknowledgements for Cultural Institutions. <http://landacknowledgements.org/>

<sup>2</sup> Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (December 2006): 387–409, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623520601056240>.





## LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS WITHOUT LAND BASED REPARATIONS ARE EMPTY

While postsecondary institutions are increasingly recognizing Indigenous peoples, there are performative aspects of land acknowledgements to critically examine. These statements often perpetuate an erasure of Indigenous communities because they acknowledge the historic dispossession but do not accept them as modern-day participants. Many Native students attend institutions that occupy their territorial homelands; land that was and is culturally, spiritually, and emotionally theirs. Their oral traditions, medicines, and ways of knowing are connected to place. Land acknowledgements admit the existence of truth but fail to live up to the reality that those Indigenous peoples whose lands their institutions are built on are still here. They provide a fleeting feeling of satisfaction for admitting guilt for the taking of the land, but it is only that: a momentary feeling, experienced only by students who know their own histories of dispossession.

American colleges and universities are morally obligated to acknowledge the educational needs of Indigenous peoples and to face their ongoing system of power that perpetuates the repression and erasure of Indigenous peoples and their knowledge systems. This policy brief will focus on the first land grant institutions, which are celebrated as being the foundation of “affordable” higher education.<sup>3</sup> Created through the first Morrill Act of 1862<sup>4</sup> these original institutions must come to terms with the awareness that they have profited and benefitted from the sale of stolen Indigenous land.<sup>5</sup> As Asher, Curnow, and Davis asserted,

<sup>3</sup> Nathan M. Sorber, *Land-Grant Colleges and Popular Revolt: The Origins of the Morrill Act and the Reform of Higher Education* (Ithaca: Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> I also acknowledge that the 1890 and 1994 Morrill Acts contributed to the founding of Historically Black Colleges and Universities as well as federal funding for Tribal Colleges and Universities, adding to the complicated history of land-grant institutions. However, an exploration of these institutions’ relationship to land expropriation is outside of the scope of this brief.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Lee and Tristan Ahtone, “LAND-GRAB UNIVERSITIES: EXPROPRIATED INDIGENOUS LAND IS THE FOUNDATION OF THE LAND-GRANT UNIVERSITY SYSTEM,” *High Country News* 52, no. 4 (2020): 32–45. <https://www.hcn.org/issues/52.4/indigenous-affairs-education-land-grab-universities>





territorial acknowledgments often served as a move to innocence, via containment and using decolonization as a metaphor, and did not lead to relationships of solidarity or decolonial action such as the repatriation of Indigenous land, language, and lifeways...we argue that territorial acknowledgments are, at best, a tiny part of decolonial solidarity pedagogy, and must be part of a broader decolonial praxis.<sup>6</sup>

Rematriation is an approach to return fields of study, such as higher education, to decolonial ways of knowing, which includes land based ways of knowing.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, this policy brief contends that if institutions of higher education—particularly those that benefitted from the first Morrill Act—are going to standardize land acknowledgements as practice, their practice must be accompanied with one of the following two options.

## OPTION 1: RETURN THE LAND

According to a study conducted by Robert Lee and Tristan Ahtone, the U.S. government expropriated 80,000 parcels of land which totaled 11 million acres from more than 250 tribes to create the American higher education system through the first Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862.<sup>8</sup> In their report “Land-grab universities,” the authors presented extensive history and data on how the often celebrated first Morrill Act of 1862 advanced this nation’s imperialist “Manifest Destiny” ideology. Signed into law by Abraham Lincoln, the first Morrill Act facilitated the sale of public domain land to fund new institutions of higher education in every state. Western history identifies that the conquest of the West served as the needed context for the Morrill Land Grant Act and for furthered federal support of higher education.<sup>9</sup> However, institutions aren’t

<sup>6</sup> Asher, L., Curnow, J., & Davis, A. (2018). The limits of settlers’ territorial acknowledgments. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 48(3), 316–334. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03626784.2018.1468211>

<sup>7</sup> Mihesuah, D. (2000). Repatriation reader: Who owns American Indian remains? Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.; Eve Tuck, “Rematriating Curriculum Studies,” *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy* 8, no. 1 (January 2011): 34–37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15505170.2011.572521>.

<sup>8</sup> Lee, R., & Ahtone, T. (2020, March 20). Land-grab universities: Expropriated indigenous land is the foundation of the land-grant university system. *High Country News*, 52(4), 32–45.

<sup>9</sup> L. Goodchild et al., *Higher Education in the American West: Regional History and State Contexts* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2014).





pushed to understand the impact Western expansion truly had on Native nations. Land was seen as a resource to extend access to higher education.<sup>10</sup>

What this history does not account for, is the land-based education that was taken from Native communities. Indigenous languages, cultures, and ways of knowing depend on access to land. Our ways of knowing are grounded in place, in star knowledge, and in kinship to one another.<sup>11</sup>

As Daniel R. Wildcat observed,

Human cultures until very recently were emergent out of places; they were literally grounded in the experience of nature in particular places on the planet. If we indigenize or re-indigenize self-determination, then it will entail a re-ordering of values and signal an effort to live in a manner respective of the power, places, and persons surrounding us.<sup>12</sup>

Native scholars in Higher Education understand that Indigenous ways of knowing are centered on land, living beings, the cosmos, and the responsibility to these relationalities that is central to making meanings of our surroundings.<sup>13</sup> Many institutions in American education continue to see land as property instead of for the deep spiritual connection it has for Indigenous communities. This highlights the critical importance that the first option presents, to be considered by institutions of Higher Education, is to return that land back to the local Native nation that land was taken from.

## **OPTION 2: NATIVE STUDENTS SHOULD ATTEND HIGHER EDUCATION ON THEIR TRADITIONAL HOMELANDS FOR FREE**

As of 2015, 86% of Native student attending colleges and universities were

<sup>10</sup> Goodchild et al. p. 257

<sup>11</sup> Vine Deloria Jr. and Daniel Wildcat, *Power and Place: Indian Education in America* (Fulcrum Publishing, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 140

<sup>13</sup> H.S. Shotton, S.C. Lowe, and S.J. Waterman, eds., *Beyond the Asterisk: Understanding Native American College Students* (Stylus, 2013).





receiving financial aid, with 46.5% who identified as first-generation and low income. In 2012, 57% of American Indian/Alaska Native men pursuing higher education and 71% of American Indian/Alaska Native students with postsecondary aspirations reported that the availability of financial aid was very important to their higher education goals. In exploring financial aid through a Native Nation-Building lens, which examines the intersection of tribal sovereignty and Native student's college experiences, financial aid for Native students is different than for any other cultural group.<sup>14</sup> As Dr. Amanda R. Tachine expressed in a recent interview with the Lumina Foundation strategy officer Dr. Katherine Wheatle,

As national conversations about debt forgiveness and free college ensue, we owe it to Native communities—the first people of this land—to make sure they are visible and included in national conversations. We're still here, and we are not going anywhere.<sup>15</sup>

While studies confirm that financial aid is a barrier to college persistence for many populations of students, there is a gap in the literature that focuses specifically on how and why financial aid—or lack thereof—impacts Native students in higher education persistence and decisions.<sup>16</sup> However, institutions profit from the sale of land that belonged to Native nations and homelands, Native students should be given free tuition to challenge the loss of land and knowledge they've lost access to. Some institutions historically created by the first Morrill Act already offer tuition waivers to Native students, such as The University of Minnesota at Morris and Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colorado. Colorado State University is starting to examine how it

<sup>14</sup> Nelson, C.A. "The Intersection of Paying for College and Tribal Sovereignty: Exploring Native College Student Experiences with Tribal Financial Aid." *In Reclaiming Indigenous Research in Higher Education*, edited by R.S. Minthorn and H.J. Shotton, 146–161. Rutgers University Press, 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Wheatle, K. (2020). Honor the treaties: Deliver on promises to educate Native Americans. Lumina Foundation. <https://www.luminafoundation.org/news-and-views/honor-the-treaties-deliver-on-promises-to-educate-native-americans/>

<sup>16</sup> Cary Michael Carney, *Native American Higher Education in the United States* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1999).; J.P. Mendez, P. Mendoza, and Z. Malcolm, "The Impact of Financial Aid on Native American Students," *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education* 4 (2011): 12–25, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0021202>.; Nelson, C.A., 2018.





benefitted from the first Morrill Act beyond its own land acknowledgment which states, “a dire cost to Native Nations, whose land this University was built upon”<sup>17</sup> and a furthered commitment to recruit more Native students to campus.<sup>18</sup> A new initiative through South Dakota State University called the Wokini Program, provides financial aid assistance for Indigenous students through land grant taxes.<sup>19</sup> This model has also been seen in the same form with reparations for descendants of slaves at Georgetown University.<sup>20</sup> With these types of models for descendants of those who lost for the creation of Higher Education already in existence, the possibility of land based reparation in the form of tuition or housing waivers, can be a reality for institutions of higher education. That is, if they’re willing to move towards what happens beyond the land acknowledgement.

## CONCLUSION

As an educator, I see Native students struggle to surmount the odds against them in their own homelands at colleges and universities, and often it is emotionally challenging. As a Lakota person, I feel my own strength when I am “home” in the lands that were my ancestors, and no one can take that feeling away from me. It is the same for all Indigenous peoples and it is something that an empty land acknowledgement, without commitment to Native nations, fails to express. This is why returning institutional land to Native nations to rebuild futures is critical, and through models of success that already exist - why the move towards land-based reparations in the form of tuition assistance is possible. While tuition or financial assistance is not the sole solution– we know there are many other systems of change that have to happen for students to be successful.<sup>21</sup> However, colleges and

<sup>17</sup> <https://landacknowledgment.colostate.edu/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://admissions.colostate.edu/nativeamerican/>

<sup>19</sup> Dunn, Barry H. *The Wokini Initiative: A Strategic Investment to better serve the Dakota and Lakota Residents of South Dakota*. (2017, January 2). <https://www.sdstate.edu/wokini-initiative/wokini-initiative-white-paper>

<sup>20</sup> King, Noel. *Georgetown University to offer Slave Descendants Preferential Admissions*. (2017, April 28). <https://www.npr.org/2017/04/28/526085106/georgetown-university-to-offer-slave-descendants-preferential-admissions>

<sup>21</sup> Shotton, Lowe, and Waterman, *Beyond the Asterisk: Understanding Native American College Students*.





universities, especially those that benefitted from the first Morrill Act of 1862, must acknowledge and represent the true history of dispossession as a form of rematriation, by giving stewardship back to Indigenous communities. What better way to do so, than by empowering its next generation of leaders to graduate debt free on their traditional homelands? Your rent is due, Higher Education.







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