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Blurred Identities: Collection Management in Tribal College and University Libraries

Introduction

Similar to other academic libraries, libraries at Tribal College and Universities, also referred to as TCUs, are primary access points for their communities. They hold academic and reference collections for general scholarly or academic program use, localized special collections, and memberships to major databases, all of which may be utilized through physical holdings in the library or online access via library computers and personal devices. However, TCU libraries' communities include many more than the students in the immediate vicinity. While college students are the primary target demographic, most of these libraries also act as the main library for local reservation(s) which expands their user population range from toddlers to seniors. This also means that the TCU libraries are serving as public libraries, tribal special collections and archives, and/or community centers – often the only one of its kind in the area. Catering to a broad, specialized population – particularly one that is historically underserved – has a unique impact on TCU libraries that trickles down from their identity to the challenges they face, and the solutions that tribal librarians execute within their limitations.

The Tribal College: An Overview

Tribal colleges and universities are located on or near reservations across the United States, including Alaska, as well as Canada. Chartered by the local tribes, these institutions provide affordable and accredited higher education and broader

opportunities to students while remaining connected to their culture and community. This is significant due to the lack of resources available to many American Indian and Alaskan Native (AI/AN) communities which are typically geographically isolated and suffer from information and financial poverty.¹ TCUs must meet three criteria: be tribally chartered, have a board with a Native American member majority, and a majority of Native Americans in the student body.² In 1994, federal legislation conferred TCUs with land-grant status, increasing their visibility and allowing them to share resources with other land-grant institutions such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).³ Limited funding compounded by rural locations means that there is a high faculty/staff turn-over and TCUs are often behind technologically.⁴

More Than Just a College, More Than Just a Library

Despite historic and ongoing struggles, TCUs and their libraries are important beacons in their communities. They enable students to seek affordable higher education without a full disconnect from their heritage where they may be taught by role models who look like them whether these instructors are local elders or AI/AN faculty who have pursued advanced degrees themselves.⁵ TCU curriculum and operations are an intersection of cultural values and philosophies with western education standards and practices. But curriculum is just one important intersection. The libraries are the major access point for entire reservation communities. They serve primary and adult education, safeguard tradition and culture – particularly language, preserve materials in

¹ U.S. Census Bureau, “2013-2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates (My Tribal Area).”

² “About Us | American Indian College Fund.”

³ Tribal College Research and Database Initiative, “Tribal Colleges: An Introduction.”

⁴ Tribal College Research and Database Initiative.

⁵ Littletree, ““Let Me Tell You about Indian Libraries”: Self-Determination, Leadership, and Vision: The Basis of Tribal Library Development in the United States” ; Tribal College Research and Database Initiative, “Tribal Colleges: An Introduction.”

collections and archives, and act as general community centers where tribal members can gather to meet or to use the available technology.⁶

Collection Scope and Development

Like any library, TCU libraries must be mindful of their scope and budget. Their particular intersection of academic, special, and public means tribal librarians are encouraged to rely on their collections policies⁷ and communities of users for guidance. Just as each tribe is unique, each TCU library has a unique set of needs based on the founding Native culture's history and current users.⁸ Despite cultural differences, the academic purpose and nature often requires that teaching needs are fulfilled first.⁹ Both the Dr. John Woodenlegs Memorial Library at Chief Dull Knife College in Montana and the Medweganoonind Library at Red Lake Nation College in Minnesota specify their curricular needs based on the academic programs, followed by significant collection areas for the larger community of users. These include general periodicals, non-fiction, and fiction, with special attention paid to career guides, toddler/preschool literature, and young adult literature.¹⁰ As these libraries serve the AI/AN populations who have been historically subject to cultural appropriation, acculturation, and erasure,¹¹ TCU libraries prioritize and search for materials that represent their community through AI/AN

⁶ Littletree, "'Let Me Tell You about Indian Libraries': Self-Determination, Leadership, and Vision: The Basis of Tribal Library Development in the United States"; Tribal College Research and Database Initiative, "Tribal Colleges: An Introduction."

⁷ Patterson et al., "Tribal Library Procedures Manual 3 Rd Edition Tribal Library Procedures Manual."

⁸ Patterson et al.

⁹ "Medweganoonind Library Handbook of Policies"; "Collection Development Policy Dr. John Woodenlegs Memorial Library."

¹⁰ "Collection Development Policy Dr. John Woodenlegs Memorial Library"; "Medweganoonind Library Handbook of Policies."

¹¹ Littletree, "'Let Me Tell You about Indian Libraries': Self-Determination, Leadership, and Vision: The Basis of Tribal Library Development in the United States."

authors, characters, and scholarly content.¹² This may even include space for local elders who regularly spend time at the library to provide oral histories or hands-on lessons in traditions that cannot be found and/or learned from physical collections. Diné College in Arizona has a high level of elder participation surrounding the library for these purposes.¹³ This may be what western educators call cultural programming, but TCU educators and librarians understand that this is an important part of Native systems of knowledge and teaching AI/AN students about primary sources that are considered outside the western research paradigm.¹⁴

This also pertains to special and archival collections that are necessary for filling the large gaps in written history and scholarly explorations of Native culture and history, particularly language. While TCU students often pursue Native studies in addition to more vocational coursework, external researchers also seek out the specialized Native works within TCU collections as the libraries may hold most, if not all, of a reservation's historical collections.¹⁵ These holdings include photographs, maps, correspondence, pamphlets, cultural items, and audiovisual recordings, particularly oral histories of elders and specialized craft practitioners. Again, the United States' problematic history with the Native American Sovereign Nations has meant that many resources or mentions of tribal history and culture lie outside of tribal collections and

¹² "Collection Development Policy Dr. John Woodenlegs Memorial Library"; "Medweganoonind Library Handbook of Policies"; Sorrell, "From JSTOR to Jiní: Incorporating Traditional Knowledge in Teaching Information Literacy at Tribal Colleges."

¹³ Sorrell, "From JSTOR to Jiní: Incorporating Traditional Knowledge in Teaching Information Literacy at Tribal Colleges."

¹⁴ Cooper et al., "When Research Is Relational: Supporting the Research Practices of Indigenous Studies Scholars."

¹⁵ Littletree, "'Let Me Tell You about Indian Libraries': Self-Determination, Leadership, and Vision: The Basis of Tribal Library Development in the United States"; Sorrell, "From JSTOR to Jiní: Incorporating Traditional Knowledge in Teaching Information Literacy at Tribal Colleges"; Peterson, "Collection Development in California Indian Tribal Libraries."

knowledge. Tribal librarians often look to periodicals and university presses¹⁶ – past and present – to cultivate these collections. Creatively, they also rely on crowdsourced material through community gifts, training the community on collection scope as well as how to save clippings to build vertical files.¹⁷

Funding Impact

Due to government structures and federal funding procedure, tribal college libraries may not have strong or reliable funding and support like other mainstream institutions. As sovereign nations on federal trust territories, states are not obligated to support the TCUs as they do mainstream community or state colleges, such as utilizing property tax revenue.¹⁸ Due to the relative isolation and aforementioned financial pressures AI/AN communities already face, TCUs also cannot rely on substantial gifts or endowments as many private institutions do. Funding is the root of many issues tribal librarians face on the job including, but not limited to, constraining budgets for materials and resources, outdated facilities and technology, and understaffing.¹⁹ In a study about working in TCU libraries, Dilevko and Gottlieb found that 46.9% of surveyed tribal librarians had trouble with funding, some spending inordinate amounts of time on grant writing to keep operations afloat.²⁰ In this same study, there was a hypothetical question about spending a one-time gift, given multiple answers to the question, where 62.1% would spend it on general collection development and 27.6% on Native American/tribal

¹⁶ Peterson, “Collection Development in California Indian Tribal Libraries.”

¹⁷ Patterson et al., “Tribal Library Procedures Manual 3 Rd Edition Tribal Library Procedures Manual.”

¹⁸ Tribal College Research and Database Initiative, “Tribal Colleges: An Introduction.”

¹⁹ Dilevko and Gottlieb, “Working at Tribal College and University Libraries: A Portrait”; Littletree, “‘Let Me Tell You about Indian Libraries’: Self-Determination, Leadership, and Vision: The Basis of Tribal Library Development in the United States.”

²⁰ Dilevko and Gottlieb, “Working at Tribal College and University Libraries: A Portrait.”

collection development.²¹ Limited budgets for building and maintaining collections necessitates that TCU librarians look elsewhere to provide materials that their diverse user population needs or requests.

Consortia and Other Resource Partnerships

It may come as no surprise that tribal libraries are involved in consortia in order to meet demands. Despite their focus, TCU libraries may be partners with other academic institutions in their state, such as Dr. John Woodenlegs Memorial Library's membership in Treasure State Academic Information and Library Services (TRAILS)²² and the Outreach Montana: Networked Information (OMNI) group, which allows DJWML to afford a shared management system and participate in resource sharing.²³ As previously mentioned, land-grant status enables TCUs to further participate in the American higher education landscape with other established land-grant university libraries such as those at HBCUs.²⁴ While there are resources such as the American Indian Library Association (AILA)²⁵, an action group for AI/AN library needs, there are other existing partnerships specific to helping tribal librarians face challenges unique to TCU environments. The Tribal College Librarians Institute (TCLI) is an annual institute hosted at Montana State University to bring together librarians from across North America to address needs, provide education and mentorship, and build partnerships nationally and internationally.²⁶ Librarians from Australia and New Zealand have also participated in TCLI, which usually includes 35-60 tribal librarians each year.²⁷ As more

²¹ Dilevko and Gottlieb.

²² "TRAILS Montana | Treasure State Academic Information & Library Services."

²³ "Collection Development Policy Dr. John Woodenlegs Memorial Library."

²⁴ Tribal College Research and Database Initiative, "Tribal Colleges: An Introduction."

²⁵ "The American Indian Library Association (AILA) | About AILA."

²⁶ Hansen, "Library Guides: Tribal College Librarians Institute (TCLI), Montana State University Library: Home."

²⁷ Hansen.

than half of tribal librarians are non-Native,²⁸ it is important that the institutions and the librarians themselves connect with others to get the access, tools, and support they need to operate and provide for their communities.

Conclusion

Blurred boundaries between a diverse user population, often isolated settings, and academic purpose create a complicated identity as a public-special-academic library and archive; TCUs are a league of their own. With such broad user populations who in turn, likely overlap or shift throughout their lifetimes, it is no wonder that TCU libraries rely so heavily on their individual collection needs and community relations to determine needs and allocate appropriately. This is further complicated by the larger community's history of cultural suppression and erasure that yields greater need for representation in collections and execution and provision of Native systems of knowledge. In spite of all this, inherent Native cultural values means that tribal librarians and institutions have been working collectively or building new communities with like-minded institutions to form consortia and networks of support to face challenges and fulfill needs unique to their communities.

²⁸ Hansen.

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