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# Sweats, Pow Wows, and Indian Tacos: How My Year Out in the Middle of Nowhere Makes Me a Better Librarian

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**Abstract:** A reflection of the author's work with American Indian students on a reservation, and how they draw on those experiences in their career as an academic librarian. With the diverse demographics that compose the student bodies in universities and colleges, academic librarians are consistently trying to reach and help students from a variety of different backgrounds and levels of academic readiness. It is one of the responsibilities of academic librarians to reach students who are struggling with adjusting to the standards of higher education. By working on the reservation, the author discovered that feelings of safety, support, and representation were all key factors in reaching students who were hesitant with classwork. Diverse representation in collections and establishing a non-judgmental environment encourages college students to use the library as a resource in their education. The library should provide familiarity and comfort to encourage students to utilize it during their college years, and cultivate the concept of lifelong learning.

**Keywords:** *academic libraries, underrepresented populations, representation*



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The summer after I graduated college, I packed my bags and flew to Ashland, Montana to spend a year volunteering on an American Indian reservation. Ashland consisted of a bank, a movie rental store, a grocery store, and the post office, all of which were located on one street. It was two hours from the nearest city, and it was literally in the middle of nowhere. It also had the kindest and most generous people I have ever met.

Ashland is located on the border of the Northern Cheyenne reservation, which is next to the Crow reservation. The tribes were always willing to give, even when they had little, and they always made sure my fellow housemates and I felt welcome in a place we stood out in. They invited us to their Pow Wows, made sure we always had plenty of food, and let us participate in their Sweats (a ceremonial cleansing process). Still, we lived on the borders of a reservation, and the reality of that was everywhere.

I found myself in Montana by volunteering with the Jesuit Volunteer Corps Northwest. I was a dormitory assistant at St. Labre Indian School, where I spent the year mentoring and tutoring 6th-12th grade students from the Crow and Northern Cheyenne reservations who lived in the school dorms during the week. While there, something I never expected to happen, happened: I found myself called to be an academic librarian.

### **Respect Goes a Long Way**

I was not sure what to expect when I met, for the first time, the students I would work with that year. I was working with children from ages eleven to eighteen, all with different stories and pasts. I was prepared for the normal challenging of authority, the hormones, and the moodiness that normally accompany puberty. While that was true to an extent, I was pleasantly surprised by how positively the students responded to respect and non-judgement.

This does not mean it was easy: work had to be put into these relationships. While some of the students were willing to open up right away, many were hesitant to interact with me. However, I quickly found that students were more willing to seek help when people did not act like they were unintelligent for not knowing something. I saw how far a mutual respect could go, and I often think of this in my interactions as a research librarian with college students.

Libraries do more than provide resources to their patrons--they aim to create a safe place for everyone, but especially for those who feel like they are in the wrong place when they walk in.

According to the American Library Association (2004), one of the core values of librarians is a social responsibility toward their patrons, which includes being accessible, helpful, and supportive. Another part of this responsibility is to promote a sense of social justice, to fight for change and equality for libraries' diverse demographics.

Academic librarians interact with students with a variety of academic ability. To assume everyone enters college with the same background and level of education sets the library up to fail its students. It should not matter if a student knows how to use a library catalog or search a database. The students in Montana were much more receptive to patience and respect, and were more likely to return for help when they felt that they were in a safe environment. The same mindset applies to academic libraries.

### **Representation Matters**

School is challenging for many children on American Indian reservations. Academics may seem insignificant to the more serious and pressing matters in their lives. Yet there was a time I did not have to push the students to finish their schoolwork. Sherman Alexie's book, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian*, was assigned for a class reading and the students enthusiastically read it.

People feel valued and important when there are materials they are reflected in or they can relate to; it makes them feel less alone. Representation is critical in all things, but in particular for the underrepresented. The students read this book and saw a story about poverty, alcoholism, and abuse, but they also saw a story about the strength, resilience, and love found on reservations. They enjoyed reading *Part-time Indian* because it gave them the feeling of comfort that often accompanies familiarity.

When the sexual harassment accusations against Alexie came out (Schilling, 2018) during the #MeToo movement in early 2018, the need for more representation in literature became even more glaring and obvious than it already was. Alexie has one of the most recognizable names for American Indian writers, yet the accusations change how people view him. Library collections are filled with an overwhelming amount of authors and themes that reflect the dominant Eurocentric culture we see everywhere in the United States. More often than not, there are very few American Indian writers you will find in a library collection. The need for other prominent American Indians names apart from Alexie is desperately needed to help the underrepresented feel that they matter.

When I view collections in libraries and consider resources to add, I think of the students in Montana, and their excitement over seeing themselves in a story. I think of the importance of having writers that have not abused their power. Selecting the right resources can change a person's worldview and introduce them to topics they were not always aware of. In order to help create an environment of familiarity, a library's collection needs to include resources that are familiar or representative of all backgrounds and demographics.

### **After High School**

At the end of the school year at St. Labre Indian School, I watched the senior class graduate, a typical ceremony accompanied with tribal drumming and prayers in native tongues to remind me of where I was. The year I was at St. Labre, all of the seniors graduated. A number of them were going on to college, and some to non-tribal schools off the reservation. I was proud of them, but I also knew how many challenges would be coming their way.

Many of these students would enter their college careers with financial aid, scholarships, and the support of family and friends. They had successfully completed the path to get to college, but I wondered what would happen once they arrived on campus. They would be far away from their support systems, many of them would be first-generation students, and they would encounter very few people who truly understood what it is like to live on a reservation. I wondered if they would they find their library a welcoming place or yet another obstacle to overcome.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2016), the higher your education level the more likely you will find a job and earn more. For students who come from places where poverty is common, college is the chance they have to break free of that cycle. However, support and resources are needed to make that happen, and the library can be a place to make that happen. Many students walk into the library, or even college, with the thought "I don't belong here" simply because no one has told them that maybe they do. Librarians have the ability to show that by becoming role models and mentors to all students.

### **Conclusion**

Libraries are powerful. They not only provide tools to information and lifelong learning, they have the ability to make someone feel safe and welcomed. When feelings of safety, representation, and understanding are combined, the potential to reach multiple people is immeasurable. For some

students, this might be their first time in a library. It is our role as librarians to make sure it is not their last time.

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