



Navigating Change in Indigenous Community Language Revitalization at a Land Grant Institution

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ABSTRACT

Land acknowledgement is a beginning. The restorative and reciprocal actions taken as a result of land acknowledgement are essential. Land grant institutions in the United States—a term many American Indians find problematic—have a particular obligation for institutional reflection and transformation. One example of such an effort in the College of Arts & Letters at Michigan State University lies in its role as lead institution to the Big Ten Academic Alliance (BTAA) Less Commonly Taught and Indigenous Languages Partnership funded by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Based on its initial success focused on less commonly taught languages (LCTLs), the second cycle of the grant (2019–2025) included a portion focused on Indigenous languages guided by an iterative Indigenous-led approach that resulted in multiple community projects and activities aimed at institutional transformation. In addition to funding for on-campus Indigenous projects, subawards funded the expansion of an existing website, and nineteen community language and culture subawards were granted across four US states and Canada. Overall, 43% of the Indigenous side of the grant has gone to community subaward activities. Now, in the last year of this grant iteration, this article provides an overview of the project process and positionalities, a recounting of the grant's successes, as well as a meditation on the strengths and hurdles encountered. Given the timing of the project (during the COVID-19 pandemic), coupled with the natural challenges of working with a multitude of partners, a goal throughout this article is to emphasize lessons learned.

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INTRODUCTION

It has become a practice across the country to read a land acknowledgement, a statement that draws attention to the Indigenous tribal lands that were forfeited with or without treaties with the US government signed under duress. Of great importance is not just the recognition of the land as the homeland of another, but the restorative and reciprocal actions taken as a result of that acknowledgement. Otherwise, the acknowledgement can perpetuate harm, functioning instead as a “rhetorical removal” (Ambo & Beardall, 2023). Michigan State University (MSU), as the self-proclaimed “pioneer” land grant institution in the United States—a term many American Indians find problematic—has an obligation for institutional reflection and transformation in this context. Indeed, the original buildings of the Agricultural College of the State of Michigan in 1855 stood not far from an Anishinaabe encampment on the banks of the adjacent Red Cedar River. Those very buildings occupy the lands of the Anishinaabeg—Three Fires Confederacy of Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi peoples ceded under duress in the 1819 Treaty of Saginaw. Following Goldstein et al. (2019) call for a “critical land-grant mission” (p. 673), the College of Arts & Letters, through its values-enacted approach, has committed to critically examining this challenging historical legacy, including through the principles of reciprocal and restorative community-engagement (Boyer, 1996; Creese & Frisby, 2011; de Finney et al., 2021; Dean et al., 2019; Poitra et al., 2021). This social justice and asset-based approach engages communities as equal, inclusive, and whole group partners who are valued for their different ways of knowing and diverse voices. It proceeds from a commitment to Kirkness and Barnhardt’s four R’s—mutual respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility—in relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and communities and the promise to hold oneself accountable to these ethical principles (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991). Indigenous reciprocity entails a centering of Indigenous knowledge, language, and cultural practices and practices of giving as well as receiving as essential to a shared future (Kovach, 2021). The relationship is additive on the part of the institution and non-Indigenous partners, restoring resources and/or funds to intentionally reverse past extractive practices. This approach is in alignment with the HuMetricsHSS Humane Metrics initiative’s commitment to “live our values” by holding ourselves accountable and working to “transform the academy” from within (Agate et al., 2020). The “our” here reminds us that the institution consists of thinking and acting human beings whose decisions must not replicate a past that perpetuates harm and instead need to engage in the practice of everyday transformative change. This

goal necessitates a continual vigilant practice of (self) reflection and a commitment to seek to repair and build relationships with Indigenous communities.

One example of such an effort in the College of Arts & Letters at MSU lies in its role as lead institution to the Big Ten Academic Alliance (BTAA) Less Commonly Taught and Indigenous Languages Partnership funded by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. The first iteration of this grant (2016–2019, \$1.2 Million, PI Christopher P. Long) focused on bringing together language specialists in a variety of less commonly taught languages (LCTLs) to develop sustainable models for language instruction, particularly at the upper levels (Long et al., 2017; Fritzsche et al., 2022). Based on its initial success, the second cycle of the grant (2019–2025, \$2.5 Million, PI Christopher P. Long) included a portion focused on Indigenous languages guided by an iterative Indigenous-led approach that centered and prioritized Indigenous leadership and decision-making that resulted in multiple community projects and activities aimed at institutional transformation. (Since Indigenous languages in the United States have not been classified as “foreign languages” by the US Government, federal grants have not historically funded their study, with some recent exceptions).

This article is organized to first highlight the positionality of not only MSU as an institution in the state of Michigan and the community partners with whom we worked, but also the personal positionality of those who worked directly on the grant. We then give context to this project with a description of the formation of the Less Commonly Taught and Indigenous Languages Partnership. Next, we discuss various points of Indigenous leadership on the grant team, the *Wewaawiindamojig* (the Indigenous Advisory Circle made up of key Indigenous Community partners), and in the subawards, which were fully under the direction of Indigenous community partners. Further, we outline intentionality regarding reciprocal practices among Indigenous and settler grant team members, in the *Wewaawiindamojig* meetings, in collaborations between the Indigenous outreach liaison, grant/project manager, and community partners, and communication reports of such practices to the funding foundation. Now, in the last year of the second iteration of the grant, this article provides an overview of the project process, a recounting of the grant’s successes, as well as a meditation on the strengths and hurdles encountered during the life of the grant. Given the timing of the project (during the COVID-19 pandemic), coupled with the natural challenges of working with a multitude of partners, a goal throughout this article is to emphasize lessons learned so that others might benefit from these observations.

Overall, the grant has accomplished its goals of supporting Indigenous language revitalization in the Great Lakes Region. The very first activity in Fall 2019 was a Treaty commemoration event on campus organized by

the MSU American Indian and Indigenous Studies (AIIS) Program, Native American Institute, and the Indian Law and Policy Center. Additional campus-related activities included funding for Indigenous language instruction and a forthcoming digital resource on the Indian encampment on the Red Cedar River that runs through MSU. Subawards funded work by various Anishinaabe authors and added resources through a partnership with the editors of Ojibwe.net (<https://ojibwe.net/>) and the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. Throughout the six years of the grant, a total of 19 community-language and culture subawards were granted across four US states (Michigan, Minnesota, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin) and two countries (US and Canada).

INDIVIDUAL POSITIONALITIES

We come to this grant from various positionalities and expertise in Indigenous Studies, second language acquisition, cultural studies, and/or in community-engaged work. The Indigenous language portion of the BTAA Less Commonly Taught and Indigenous Language Partnership was initially overseen by an Indigenous Co-PI who was a senior Anishinaabe faculty member of English (Henry, 5% effort). He was active in drafting the grant proposal, in all related grant team meetings, in Wewawindamojig meetings, including both the pre-award and post-award process. He stepped away in the third year of the grant and is now Professor Emeritus. He was succeeded by the new Director of AIIS (Arola), an Anishinaabe faculty member in Writing, Rhetoric, and Cultures. Both of these faculty members have established scholarly expertise in Indigenous Studies in higher education and in community-engaged work with and for tribal communities. Additionally, two Anishinaabe outreach personnel with deep commitments to their communities started in 2019, one with expertise in Anishinaabemowin language pedagogy (Chalykoff) and another a community member with expertise in community outreach and Anishinaabe culture (Mitchell). Both have been essential, leading partners in ensuring the overall success of this portion of the grant. Their pivotal roles and that of the Wewawindamojig in meeting reciprocity goals will be described in greater detail below.

Because of the expansive nature of the grant, covering not just Indigenous language but other LCTLs, the entire grant team includes a wide range of personnel. The principal investigator of the grant is a well-established professor of philosophy and now university provost (Long, 5% effort) who maintains a deep scholarly and administrative commitment to the public arts and humanities. He is one of multiple white settlers among the grant personnel that includes a co-PI, Associate Dean, and Professor of German Studies (Fritzsche, 5% effort), who assists in the overall grant management.

The Grant/Project Manager (Heidrich Uebel, 70% grant effort) also holds a PhD in German. Another co-PI is a German Professor of German Studies (Kronenberg) and is also Director of the Center for Language Teaching Advancement (CeLTA), where the grant is housed. These faculty members bring significant experience in second language acquisition, cultural studies, and a commitment to LCTLs. (The shared German expertise is coincidental.) The CeLTA Director focuses directly on the LCTL side with additional settler and international grant personnel who specialize in second language acquisition. The settler personnel brought a commitment grounded in radical humility (Modrak & Vander Broek, 2021) to hold themselves accountable to live their values through practices of respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility for Anishinaabe language and ways of knowing.

The authors of this paper represent the grant personnel dedicated to the Indigenous language portion of the grant. As such, each individual gives and receives differing contributions to the partnership. The Grant/Project Manager brings significant expertise in university grant and project management, gains full-time employment as well as professional development, especially in Indigenous knowledge and cultural practices. The Indigenous Community Outreach Liaison brings rich Indigenous cultural knowledge and gains part-time employment, which over time has become full-time with additional responsibilities elsewhere on campus, as well as an increased network across the Great Lakes region. This position was, in many ways, “the outward face of the grant” and essential to trust building, given her physical and virtual presence at countless tribal community events over the life of the grant. The Indigenous Language Liaison role was part of a full-time position, brought significant Indigenous linguistic and cultural expertise, and also provided an opportunity to connect with the local Indigenous campus and tribal communities. Similarly, the Indigenous Co-PI gains increased networks across Anishinaabewaki as well as knowledge of how land-grant institutions can support the communities on whose land our University sits. The Associate Dean Co-PI has gained invaluable large-grant oversight experience and trauma-informed approaches to community-engaged work. As a white settler, she is indebted to her Indigenous colleagues for their insights, patience, and hope.

INSTITUTIONAL POSITIONALITY

MSU's largely unexamined public land grant identity creates implicit mistrust and tension between large institutions and Indigenous tribal governments and communities, given the histories of settler colonialism in the state of Michigan, the Great Lakes region, and

throughout North America (Bao, 2005; Cleland, 1992; Danziger, 2009). Alternate phrases such as “land grab” institution (<https://www.landgrabu.org/>) or “critical land grant” institution (see Goldstein et al., 2019) highlight the need for an ongoing critical examination of the practice and legacy of federal land “gifts” that helped to establish the foundations of today’s higher education landscape in the United States. Today at MSU, the AIIS Program, the Native American Institute, Tribal Extension, the Indigenous Law and Policy Center, and a chapter of the North American Indigenous Student Organization represent key points of Indigenous led work.

As briefly mentioned earlier, the very first occasion funded by the grant was a multi-day event called *Edweying Naabing*, commemorating the 200th Anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Saginaw on September 24, 1819, organized by the AIIS program, the Native American Institute, and the Indigenous Law and Policy Center. The treaty, signed under duress by the Three Fires Confederacy of the Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi tribes, transferred the territory that includes the land upon which MSU sits. It is important to note that an Anishinaabe encampment existed on the banks of the Red Cedar River in 1855, when the Michigan Agricultural College was first founded (which would later become MSU). Over a 4-day period in 2019, over 200 representatives of a variety of bands and tribes from across the state of Michigan came to East Lansing along with MSU faculty and administrators for programming that included scholarly presentations, truth and storytelling, traditional Anishnaabe cultural ceremonies and activities, and “other critical discussions regarding treaties, displacement, survivance, sovereignty, and ongoing Indigenous-settler relationships” (Event Report, 2019).

While not directly related to MSU as an institution, additional historical and contemporary elements impacted the position of the grant in time and space. Very quickly in March 2020, the global pandemic arrived in the United States with grave implications for Indigenous communities in the Great Lakes region that revealed multiple gaps in health care and tribal economies (Fletcher, 2022; Givens, 2020). The pandemic not only resulted in a higher death rate, especially among cherished elders in these communities, but it also had significant economic and social repercussions, the impact of which will be felt for years to come. The pandemic shifted important grant trust and community-building activities among the grant management personnel and the Wewawindamojig to the virtual space. This “third” space was unfamiliar to both Indigenous and settler team members. While itself an extension of colonialist structures, virtuality brought with it greater access and equity, as well as artificiality and a lack of real human contact and in-person exchange.

An equivalent hurdle to the pandemic is certainly the continued presence of intergenerational trauma in Indigenous communities. This is an ongoing

phenomenon that has required an intentional trauma-informed approach to all grant activities. Both historical and contemporary trauma need to be acknowledged when using a trauma-informed approach (Bergier & Anderson, 2021; Bleau, 2022; Poitra et al., 2021; Thering, 2010). Here, history also refers to the longer history of removal of Anishinaabe peoples from their historical homelands, as well as recent past trauma from forced adoptions in the families of Indigenous grant personnel. One additional aspect became particularly acute during the life of the grant, namely, the impact of the recent international public discourse on Indian boarding schools on communities. While the legacy of residential schools in Canada was prominently highlighted for years prior through the Truth & Reconciliation Commission of Canada, the boarding school crimes in the US became generally known across the country during the grant period. This had long been understood and often personally experienced in Indigenous communities. Three such Indian boarding schools functioned in Michigan, the last one closing in the 1980s (Clark, 2021; Griswold, 2022). Most Anishinaabemowin speakers alive today attended boarding/residential schools, and most Native American families are impacted by the legacy (Griffith, 2017; Vaught et al., 2022).

PARTNERSHIP FORMATION

In its first phase (2016–2019), the LCTL Partnership focused on inter-institutional collaboration and proficiency-oriented instruction, strategic coordination, and professional development for instructors of LCTLs, without a specific focus on Indigenous languages. The initial group of collaborators primarily consisted of white settlers and international applied linguistics and second language faculty, all at BTAA institutions. The LCTL working group model developed in the first cycle of the grant proved very successful, bringing together inter-institutional working groups to develop open educational resources, instructional models, and communities of practice in their respective languages. This first iteration did not involve any community-engaged work and entailed the collaborative development of language courses at the intermediate and advanced levels in support of existing language and culture instructor personnel within the BTAA institutions. (see lctlpartnership.celta.msu.edu for more information).

At the end of the first phase, two co-PIs finished out their term on the grant. As a revised set of collaborators prepared to propose a second grant phase, it became apparent that the LCTL working group model would need to be altered to adequately address and engage with the unique historical legacies of Indigenous languages (see e.g., Drouin-Gagné, 2021). The shift in grant personnel included, first, the addition of the Indigenous faculty member in the Department of English as co-PI. This faculty

member helped guide the writing of the Indigenous language portion of the grant proposal. Consultative meetings to prepare for the second phase began with Indigenous university partners about eight months before the proposal was submitted. There were multiple meetings with MSU's Director of the AIIS Program and the Associate Dean Co-PI, as well as with the Indigenous faculty co-PI, who also consulted with members of AIIS, MSU's Native American Institute, and the Indigenous Law & Policy Center. Planning conversations resulted in the ideation of largely university-centric activities (e.g., bringing a variety of Indigenous students to campus for language and culture-related workshops or events, and the development of Indigenous language instruction within institutions of higher education). Much in the same way the first grant iteration was not language specific but rather was written to support the LCTL category as a whole, the second proposal did not initially determine which Indigenous language(s). The Mellon Foundation communicated the requirement of North American Indigenous languages. As a result, the AIIS Director, the Indigenous faculty co-PI, and Dean PI and Associate Dean Co-PI decided on Anishinaabemowin, given its concentration in the Great Lakes region among several Big Ten institutions and the otherwise very limited availability of additional Indigenous languages in the Big Ten. This choice came after multiple exchanges and learnings, particularly on the part of the settler members. The choice of Anishinaabemowin made the most sense in the context of the desire to strengthen existing programs and fill in gaps to build to higher proficiency levels, which had been the goal of the first iteration of the LCTL grant. Anishinaabemowin includes Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi, and is the name of the language shared by the Anishinaabe – People of the Three Fires Confederacy of the Great Lakes region. Those who are fluent speakers of Ojibwe and Odawa can understand each other, while Potawatomi less so.

Using the first grant cycle as a model, with the choice of language decided, we co-developed a four-year plan for the grant proposal: Year 1 was to focus on relationship building at the university and with Indigenous community partners to research existing models and strategies and identify needs. Year 2 was intended to be focused on continued relationship building to identify and start some initiatives in conjunction with Indigenous community partners, and to begin work on some Indigenous language materials. Year 3 aimed to have more initiatives run in conjunction with community partners, while Year 4 was intended to see continued initiatives and determine continuity plans for after the grant. Together, we proposed to approach the project in several ways, all woven together through the broad lens of language and culture:

- Language and culture as tools for promoting and involving Indigenous languages and communities
- Language as an evolving and flexible pedagogy
- Language and culture as a way to support the recruitment and retention of Indigenous students through a commitment to partnering in revitalization efforts
- Language as both a field of research and support for research endeavors

Thus, the project did not focus solely on educational materials development in Anishinaabemowin, but rather language use to achieve the goals of language teaching, building community and a greater sense of belonging at a large majority white settler institution for Indigenous students. Similar to the LCTLs, from the beginning our efforts have intended to amplify and help to build out work in the already established field of North American Indigenous language studies, including the Anishinaabe western Great Lakes region (e.g., [Chiblow & Meighan, 2022](#); [Freeland, 2021](#); [Lonetree, 2012](#); [Morgan, 2005](#); [Noodin, 2018, 2019](#); [Treuer, 2020](#)).

Following the guidance of the Indigenous partners and co-PI, in order to ensure input and involvement of the broader Anishinaabe community ([Poitra et al., 2021](#)), the initial proposal called for an Indigenous Advisory Circle “made up of stakeholders, including Indigenous university faculty, tribal college faculty, and tribal representatives associated with language and culture initiatives as well as grant personnel.”¹ This essential structure provided them the opportunity for input with the goal to create and nurture professional and institutional relationships. After the second cycle of the grant was officially awarded, existing grant personnel led by the Indigenous Co-PI Professor convened the initial Indigenous Advisory Circle, given the name Wewaawiindamojig. Wewaawiindamojig is an Anishinaabemowin (Ojibwe) word deemed an approximate equivalent of “Advisory Circle” by the Advisory Circle. The initial Wewaawiindamojig was comprised of the MSU Indigenous Faculty Co-PI, the Program Director of Nishnaabemwin Pane Immersion Program at Bay Mills Community College, the Program Director of the Inter-Tribal Council of Michigan, the Director of D’Arcy McNickle Center for American Indian and Indigenous Studies at Newberry Library, the Executive Director of the Cultural Pathways Group, LLC, Professor and Director of the Electa Quinney Institute at UW-Milwaukee, an Ojibwe Language and Culture Teacher at the Milwaukee Indian Community School, and two ex-officio settler grant personnel (the Associate Dean Co-PI and Project Manager) to help facilitate the work. Some stepped out of their roles, and other members were added later, including the Executive Director of the Midwest Indigenous Immersion Network, the Anishinaabe Science and Food Sovereignty Educator from Bay Mills Community College, Waishkey Bay Farm, and the Secretary of the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians.

- Language as a platform for collaboration, innovation, and strategic coordination

In addition to the (largely external) Advisory Circle, the grant also created two new roles for Indigenous personnel at MSU. The Indigenous Language Liaison role was created for a qualified language instructor to develop and teach Anishinaabemowin courses, as well as focus on making connections with other instructors of the language, both in the community setting as well as in other institutions. The Indigenous Language Liaison was also tasked with working with communities, speakers, and teachers to identify the gaps in the language materials that could be filled as part of this initiative. The second role, the Indigenous Community Outreach Liaison was tasked with leading community-based outreach efforts in reservation based and urban Anishinaabe communities, facilitating communication with Indigenous communities, establishing long-term relationships with the Anishinaabe communities, tribal colleges, and American Indian community programs and organizations, and working with community educators and language speakers to identify and support community language and culturally-based education programs, efforts, and needs. These external and internal structures aligned with the grant's goals of reciprocal and restorative community engagement to ensure that some community partners were not favored over others (Doberneck et al., 2010) and that they functioned as "active contributors to identify clear goals" that "address real-world issues" (Beaulieu et al., 2018, p. 11).

GRANT DESIGN AND PROJECT STRENGTHS

Major strengths of the grant include the diversity of the personnel, namely the inclusion of Indigenous scholars and community members, without whom none of this work would have been possible. The Indigenous partners at MSU were essential in helping to develop the initial flexible structure of the grant design that allowed an iterative approach to grant work and enabled the community-led, reciprocal, and restorative design. Post-award, the Wewaawiindamojig advised how to navigate the many complexities of setting up inclusive and equitable subaward selection processes that navigated cultural tensions that arose from white settler ignorance and institutional structures. Further trust-building proved key as we navigated the many intersections between Indigenous cultural practices and assumptions, land-grant R1 institutional policies and practices, and those of the foundation grantor. More will be said on this topic below.

COMMUNITY-BASED PROJECTS

The first meeting of the Wewaawiindamojig and the grant team took place at the yearly Shared LCTL Symposium,

held at the BTAA headquarters in Chicago. The first meeting involved lunch, introductions, individual storytelling, as well as an exchange of ideas on the initially proposed activities. The goals of the meeting were twofold: 1) to provide an opportunity for idea exchange, and 2) to listen and prioritize Anishinaabe voices and needs so that they might determine Indigenous language grant spending priorities. In the end, the group recommended a focus on the eastern Great Lakes Anishinaabemowin (specifically the western Ojibwe dialect and Potawatomi) and clarified that community-based language support was one of the most urgent needs in the regional Indigenous communities. The decision was then made – instead of allocating the majority of the Indigenous project money to support efforts bringing people to the relevant Big Ten institutions – the money would be used via subawards directly in regional Indigenous communities, tribal colleges, and other institutions of higher education in their own promotion of Anishinaabemowin. This shift also aligned with the rationale of the grant, which supported Indigenous language revitalization as community-building beyond the Big Ten. This meeting established the grant culture and practice to work together with the Indigenous co-PI and grant personnel, as well as the Wewaawiindamojig as full grant partners who determined and guided the work of the grant to ensure that "community voices were present throughout the project" (Poitra et al., 2021). A second in-person lunch meeting took place as part of the treaty commemoration activities. The Wewaawiindamojig quickly became the decision-making body for the Indigenous portion of the grant and an important site of knowledge sharing and feedback.

As a result, the Wewaawiindamojig reviewed and approved an initial proposal for funding to support the gathering and dissemination of existing Anishinaabemowin and Potawatomi resources, largely accomplished through an expansion of Ojibwe.net. The website was an existing project of one of the Wewaawiindamojig Advisory Circle members that already had a collection of Anishinaabemowin lessons and resources, focused primarily on the western Ojibwe dialect. The Ojibwe.net project has since tracked well over 8,700 unique page views of the updated resource page and collected numerous instances of unprompted, positive feedback from users of the website.

Aligning with reciprocity goals, grant personnel created a system for supporting subaward language projects in tribes and organizations across Anishinaabe communities, especially focusing on the Great Lakes regions. Meeting twice in person and then virtually, the Wewaawiindamojig helped us to establish a workflow and evaluation criteria for Anishinaabemowin Project Proposals. Initially, applicants submitted a 500-word "pre-proposal," which was meant to reduce the burden of developing a full proposal if the project would not be able to be funded. After the initial round of proposals, the MSU team and the Wewaawiindamojig made efforts to make

the proposal process more accessible and transparent, including providing a guide for hourly rates for translation and native speakers, extending effective due dates to allow for additional time (later moving to accepting proposals on a rolling deadline), and offering in-person and virtual meetings with the Indigenous Community Outreach Liaison, the Project Manager, and the grant's staff budget officer to support their success. We found that these meetings were effective in lessening anxiety of dealing with the bureaucratic nuances and helped proactively address possible issues.

The Indigenous Community Outreach Liaison played a large role here, by visiting tribal communities and language programs directly, meeting with language teachers and activists, cultural knowledge keepers, professionals working in various positions within their communities, and tribal leaders, in order to spread awareness of the available resources. This took place in a variety of ways, through direct meetings with language teachers, attending events such as powwows where the resources were announced, meeting with tribal leaders, and spreading the word via email and on social media. This position and the grant/project manager were key nodes of the reciprocal engagement between the institution and the communities, both serving as cultural interpreters at the interface between the Indigenous community and the institution. Both shared knowledge with others and with each other, working together to help encourage and support pre- and post-award projects that aligned with Indigenous community needs and institutional and foundation funding guidelines.

Over the course of the grant, it became increasingly clear that the type of grant money—namely from a private foundation—was also an inherent strength and allowed for institutional collaborations across many different types, including public institutions, tribal colleges, tribal schools, small private liberal arts colleges, tribal governments, tribal communities, and Indigenous businesses. In addition, the fact that it was overseen by one large research institution was a key strength. For instance, the existing grant management infrastructure and oversight at a public, R1 land-grant university allow for large foundation grants that rely on these resources.

All Anishinaabe community projects have been created, led, and implemented in, by, and for the communities themselves. The respective Indigenous community partners wrote their own proposals and managed their own grant subawards, which entailed a sizable effort. To date, a total of 19 community-based projects across four US states (Michigan, Minnesota, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin) and two countries (US and Canada) have been funded. These projects represent additional Indigenous community grant partners on the grant, where the major reciprocal and restorative work took place. The money allocated for Anishinaabemowin projects totaled approximately 43% percent of the overall spending on the Indigenous language side of the grant.

They have included the creation of a variety of language instruction materials, language instruction events, as well as cultural activities held in Anishinaabemowin or Potawatomi. For example, in order to expose more people to Anishinaabemowin in a variety of formats, Indigenous Enterprise, LLC, produced 700 short-form posts that were published on a variety of social media platforms ([YouTube](#), [Facebook](#), [TikTok](#)) on a daily basis beginning in 2022. Projects like the College of St. Scholastica's virtual language tables allowed language learners to engage with a first speaker when they were not able to be physically present at the college. One very unique project included an augmented reality app called Gaganoozh that allows Anishinaabemowin learners to voice digital hand puppets of characters from an Anishinaabe story. An estimated 15,000 students and teachers participated in the virtual event associated with the free app. Some of the projects were especially crucial in preserving the wisdom of elders and documenting their language. For example, Bodwéwadmimwen Êthë ték (The Center for Potawatomi Language) published a bilingual book for learners of Potawatomi *Yathmownen ga widmagoyan: Stories that I was told*, which is only the 4th Potawatomi-English bilingual book in existence. The book was based on interviews with Jim Thunder, one of the last remaining speakers of Potawatomi, prior to his death during this project time period.

Due to space constraints, we cannot describe every project in this article. However, highlights have included a series of instructional videos, translations of books, online language tables, drum feasts, language events during annual powwows, social media posts, documentation of elders' stories, and more. See summaries of projects at <https://lcltpartnership.celta.msu.edu/ongoing-projects/>.

INSTITUTION-BASED PROJECTS

The grant funds for Indigenous work at MSU focused on MSU Indigenous communities. First, the grant funded a number of projects in support of AIIS in the context of language and culture. In addition to the Treaty commemoration event in 2019, the grant has also helped to strengthen Anishinaabemowin instruction. The addition of a full-time Anishinaabe language and culture faculty member at MSU during three years of the grant was partially grant-funded. During the pandemic and after, the grant supported professional development activities for regional Anishinaabemowin language instructors as well as a virtual language circle for Anishinaabemowin learners. Further, the AIIS program employed a graduate student to create a centralized website (<https://native.msu.edu>) about academic programs, Indigenous student and employee organization information, community resources, and the history of Indigenous people on the land where MSU now resides. While this grant effort will help to educate the broader MSU community and local

area about the Anishnaabe encampment on the banks of the Red Cedar River, it also contributes to continuity of place-making and community, work that is ongoing both at MSU and by the Nokomis Cultural Heritage Center, an Indigenous community resource in the Lansing area.

BUREAUCRACY AND NAVIGATING MULTIPLE INSTITUTIONS

While there have been a number of successes during the grant, it has also faced a number of hurdles, ranging from bureaucratic issues to personnel turnover, impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, and continuing impacts of generational trauma. For example, grant personnel had to navigate layers of bureaucracy within MSU itself, as well as the differences across structures and cultures of US institutions of higher education, the Canadian legal system where many Anishinaabe communities are located, and the various tribal governmental structures and cultures. Initially, the shift to community-focused projects represented a steep learning curve for the grant team, as previous experience had been collaborations across Big Ten institutions only. The primary focus became developing the community project application process and developing online materials that supported reciprocity values with that process in tandem with the work of the project manager and community outreach liaison.

Trust building through the subaward application process was essential to the success of the grant as a whole, given the importance of a positive experience for the potential subawardees. Indigenous grant personnel provided key insights into understanding the specific Anishinaabe cultural practices that need to be recognized and honored in subaward applications. Through this collaboration and the commitment to an “Indigenous-led grant,” we were then able to advocate for cultural practices such as the predominance of family events and the importance of food and gift-giving within projects (Poitra et al., 2021).

Systemic issues continually threatened trust building, such as navigating two institutional systems for each Anishinaabemowin project proposal—the applicants’ own institution, plus university requirements. Even though the money for our grant was provided by a private foundation, MSU facilitates all grants following more conservative federal grant guidelines. This meant that projects which may have been allowed by the private foundation would not be allowed by MSU, because they were not allowable under federal grant guidelines. In practice, for example, despite its cultural significance for Anishinaabeg and presence at many community gatherings, tobacco (*semaa*) could not be purchased. Conversely, on the Indigenous language side, the community partners, whether it be an individual tribe or non-profit organization, had different requirements to

move project approvals through their own processes. This was particularly evident when working with tribes that required multiple levels of approval; some tribal collaborators quickly received approval from the relevant departments within their organization, while others required approval from various offices, lengthening the time needed to obtain required signatures.

LASTING COVID IMPACTS

Perhaps the biggest hurdle faced during the time period of our grant was the COVID-19 pandemic. While the grant team was able to adjust to the experience of working remotely and interacting in exclusively online contexts, the uncertainty surrounding the pandemic and its variants took a toll. The human impact, including those impacted by economic and mental and physical health challenges, was great; we especially saw the impact on the Anishinaabemowin projects, with many of the projects needing adjustments or extensions to complete their activities and fewer project proposals being submitted. Indeed, the abrupt changes to almost all daily activities, including the halt of all community gatherings, compounded by the stress and uncertainty of the times, were not only devastating to the Indigenous communities themselves, but also resulted in an almost complete stop of all of the Anishinaabemowin projects that had been started. The timing of the pandemic was particularly hard, as the Indigenous phase of the grant had started only the summer before and the initial, time-intensive start up work and in-person community reciprocity building was just beginning to build momentum and plans were starting to fall into place. One example was the multiple-year cancellation of an Indigenous language conference that we had hoped would be a key outreach opportunity to bring together grant personnel with Anishinaabemowin language instructors. Another recurring hurdle was the capacity of tribal collaborators; outside of pandemic times, many Indigenous people work over capacity, carrying responsibilities that in academia would be split between multiple personnel with support staff to aid administrative work. The pandemic exacerbated this to the point that many tribal collaborators simply burnt out.

CONCLUSION: LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE

The pathway of the critical land grant institution continues to be one of vigilant institutional reflection and transformation. While it is essential for tribes to lead their own initiatives on their own terms, it is also incumbent upon US institutions of higher education to commit to supporting regional Indigenous communities through

reciprocal and restorative Indigenous-led partnerships. Such institutions must make a commitment to Indigenous language education to create a place of belonging as one important step in increasing the Indigenous student pipeline to 4-year degree completion, graduate work, and tenure-system positions.

With a great many universities focusing on diversity, equity, inclusion, justice, and accessibility initiatives, it is imperative that Indigenous voices are equal partners in these conversations. Along with leadership seats at the table, institutions must also ensure that resources are allocated to initiatives that support Indigenous students, staff, and faculty on campus. For example, initiatives for Indigenous language revitalization needs to happen across many programs, not just focused in world language departments. Language is woven into all areas of Indigenous life, ranging from land management to food and water sovereignty, all of which can be studied in various academic homes.

In general, it is important to acknowledge that some hurdles are bigger than a single grant. For instance, some of the personnel turnover was due to ongoing conversations in the academy about who counts as Indigenous that were external yet impacted relationships within and around the grant. Still, through this article, it is our hope that the knowledge shared here will help others, including the granting agencies themselves, in addressing barriers systemically. We all must work toward a shared vision, and at the same time, we cannot be so strict about the original project timeline or goals that there is no room for adjustment. Truly collaborative and equitable work involves alleviating some of the burden on already overburdened community members.

Finally, as Indigenous faculty, Indigenous community grant personnel, and white settler faculty, the co-authors of this paper shared our reflections and insights into five years of such efforts as one way to hold ourselves accountable in our own ways and according to our own positionalities as employees who work at an institution that continues to benefit from the displacement and genocide of Indigenous peoples. As authors, we recognize that the relational work in this area, while profoundly rewarding, is generational and never truly done.

NOTE

- 1 While we have consciously substituted the word “stakeholder” throughout this article with the term Indigenous partners, this is a quote from the original grant proposal. It is indicative of the learning that took place throughout the grant that included changes in terminology for reasons of linguistic justice.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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