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Better Together: Partnering With NDN Country A Guide

Are you interested in being a better partner to Native nations and communities across NDN Country? This guide provides guidance on creating better partnerships within Indian Country by sharing steps to take towards meaningful action and offering tips for initiating relationships. When done well, these partnerships have a positive impact on NDN Country and beyond.

In this guide, we will use NDN Country and Indian Country interchangeably. We use and define Indian Country both as legally designated areas (like Native reservations), but also the broader presence and impact of Native nations and communities across Turtle Island. For more language information, check out our organizational Terminology Style Guide.

Introduction

This is a continuation of a past event and guide from 2024, which focused on Partnering with Native Nations in a Good Way. Some key lessons learned from that conversation include moving beyond past harms, avoiding emotional labor and optical allyship, the importance of protocol and reciprocity, helpful mindsets, and more. We encourage you to use our past event guide and recording in collaboration with the information presented in this guide. This summer, we hosted a mini action series to revisit and expand upon the topic. In revisiting this important subject, we held conversations to discuss specific partnerships across NDN Country with Native leaders serving in areas of higher education, health, and governance.

Artwork by Holly Young (Thizáptan̄na/Wičhíyena Dakota)

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We are so grateful to the Native women leaders who contributed their knowledge and expertise to these conversations. We appreciate all of our series speakers!

Higher Education Session:

- Moderator: Dr. Robin Zape-tah-hol-ah Starr Minthorn (Kiowa/Apache/Nez Perce/Umatilla/Assiniboine)
- Panelists: Athena Rilatos (Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians) and Kiara Tanta-Quidgeon (Mohegan Tribe)

Health Session:

- Moderator: Dr. Alayna Eagle Shield (Húŋkpap̃a Lakhóta, Isáŋyathi Dakota, Bdewákhant̃hunwaj Dakota, P̃haláni)
- Panelists: Dr. Courtney Claussen (Mnicoujou na Oohenunpa Lakota), Katie Lynch (Citizen Potawatomi Nation), and Tara John (Navajo Nation)

Governance Session:

- Moderator: Melanie Benjamin (Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe)
- Panelists: Amira Madison (Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head Aquinnah), Angelina Serna (Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians and the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin), and Ashley Hemmers (Fort Mojave Indian Tribe).

Recordings of each event are available on our website and social media. In addition to the knowledge and experiences shared by event speakers, we used our own experiences and practices to inform this guide.

Why Does Building Meaningful Partnerships with NDN Country Matter?

Developing intentional partnerships with Native nations and communities is different from working with other groups; when done well, it inherently uplifts sovereignty. Sovereignty can be a unique aspect of working across Indian Country, and it should be carefully considered and upheld.

Partnerships have always been a part of Indian Country, with historic government partnerships between Native nations and trade relationships, for example. This continues both within Native communities and with non-Native partners now. Today, we need everyone to support sovereignty, with issues being multifaceted and interconnected, the best way forward is together.



In 2024, after decades of work and ongoing community advocacy, the largest dam removal project in the U.S. was completed on the Klamath River. This was led by the Karuk, Yurok, Klamath, and Hoopa Valley Tribes, working together in their shared responsibility. These Native nations also partnered with conservation groups, state and federal agencies, and local stakeholders. In removing these 4 dams, all people, plants, and animals in the region benefit from a healthier river. This process centered Indigenous knowledge and honored sovereignty. We are already seeing beautiful outcomes from this work, including salmon runs restored, ecosystems revived, and cultural revitalization in the form of Tribal citizens canoeing on the Klamath River. Meaningful partnerships like this one have real material, cultural, and environmental impacts that ripple across Indian Country.

Preparing to Partner / Make an Impact

Every day, we see folks looking for ways to include Native voices and cultures in their work positively. Often, these ideas are developed rather quickly with hopes for immediate action to follow. While Native voices should always be heard and incorporated into these initiatives, good partners are intentional, and meaningful action requires preparation. While every situation is unique, there are common practices that support strong relationships across different sectors.

Here are some of our tips for getting started in a good way:

Do your research and build relationships. Take time to learn about the Native nation or community you want to partner with. Learn more about the community's history, culture, and current initiatives. Doing this research can help you understand more about the people you are looking to partner with, their priorities, and how you might be able to support. Partnerships should grow from listening and understanding what matters to the nation or community, rather than bringing in a fixed agenda. Have you visited with the community in a non-work-related capacity? Take the time to get to know the people before proposing anything. First impressions matter! This is also true for Native people, especially those of us working in communities outside our own. Building genuine relationships and doing your research first shows respect and makes collaboration stronger.



Recognize community strengths. You might want to partner in a specific area based on the work you do. Does this particular nation or community have goals or current initiatives related to that topic? Do they have needs elsewhere that might be more of a priority? Understand what's already happening in the community and where support is most needed. Always enter a partnership with an open mind and prepare to learn rather than lead. Don't assume your partnership idea is a priority. Communities are already leading powerful work in education, health, governance, and more. Effective partners support existing initiatives, align with local values, and contribute in ways that build capacity without overshadowing Native leadership.

Approach engagement thoughtfully. Consider your own positionality and recognize that you likely are not the expert. Avoid coming in with a fixed mindset or agenda; be ready for the community's vision to inform and co-create the work instead. Sometimes it is best to make the resources you have available and accessible to Native nations and wait—if the community has a request or need, let them decide to come to you, and when they do, respond and give support.

Avoid an over-reliance on Native labor. While Native voices should always be central in partnerships, it is not appropriate to expect or request that Native people do all of the work. Be careful to avoid issues of emotional labor and optical allyship, which can often be performative and tokenizing to Native people. True partnership means shared responsibility, resources, and commitment.

Respect sovereignty, process, and protocols. Native nations are sovereign governments with their own decision-making systems and timelines. Successful partnerships honor sovereignty in practice—by respecting treaties, Tribal law, research approvals, and cultural protocols, whenever possible. Be prepared to work at the speed of the community, respecting consultation, discussion, and consensus. Good partnerships respect timing, process, and protocol.

Elements of Positive Partnerships (Best Practices)

Partnerships in Education

Too often in spaces of higher education, there is an emphasis on institutions relying on Native students, faculty, and staff to create any tangible change on campus. This community can range from big to small; however, the emotional labor that leading something like that carries is heavy.

“I feel like, truly, I have really seen Native students and Native staff be the spearheads of a lot of this work. The whole time I was a student, I was also juggling a job. I was also juggling making sure that other Native students were feeling heard and if there were harms being done within their programs, that they were being addressed. And it's exhausting and it's incredibly wrong to be having all of that work fall on Native students and staff.” - Athena Rilatos (Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians)

If a university wants to partner with a Native nation but is unsure of how to get started, Native leaders on their campus are likely the group they are going to lean on. In some cases, Native students, faculty, and staff may be eager to lead the change or provide support in some ways. While we always encourage folks to involve more Native voices in their efforts, it would ultimately be considered a bad practice to task your on-campus Native community with such a labor-intensive effort as initiating partnerships with Native nations and/or relying on them as consultants.

“There are instances, especially in my experience, where I have pushed myself in a way that should not be celebrated. And so for me, if the process was a lot more collaborative, like we have said, I think it would have been a lot easier on my mental health, on my grades.” - Kiara Tanta-Quidgeon (Mohegan Tribe)

Institutions must have and undertake a level of responsibility to their Native community on campus and beyond if they wish to build relationships with Native nations.

“...from the institution's perspective. They need to have that sense of responsibility because if they don't have the sense of responsibility, then they won't be committed to the funding. They won't be committed to hearing and understanding like how they build relationships, whether or not they see the Tribal nations as being current or ancestral connections and how we think about that.” - Dr. Robin Zape-tah-hol-ah Starr Minthorn (Kiowa/Apache/Nez Perce/Umatilla/Assiniboine)

Today, more and more institutions are realizing that for true partnership and collaboration, they have to take the time to build trust and relationships with native nations, communities, and individuals. For example, when a university introduces the idea of a partnership to Tribal leadership, they will likely ask what they are currently doing to uplift Native nations, the presence of Native students on campus, etc. If the answer is essentially “nothing,” that is not going to strike much interest in joining your initiative. Evaluate your current commitments, relationships, and practices before taking action or proposing partnerships!

Partnerships in Health

Across NDN Country, Native nations are reclaiming their health systems. This includes nations choosing to go through the 638 self-determination process, to take control of their IHS facilities and design health services that reflect their community needs and values.

“Humbling yourself and acknowledging that this is a new space and they are the experts and you are there just to collaborate.” - Tara John (Navajo Nation)

There is also a huge resurgence in traditional wellness practices from food sovereignty movements and language revitalization to land-based healing. These efforts are not separate from health—they are health. Partnership must recognize that wellness is broad and interconnected. There is also a growth in positive representation of Native people in health and wellness fields. Native leaders are changing what care looks like from the inside out—as clinicians, researchers, educators, policy makers, and healers. Support Native-led health initiatives and recognize traditional and cultural wellness as integral to health.

“...as a researcher, as a Ph.D. student, it can feel like maybe you're the one that holds the knowledge. But in reality, the community members are the ones that know what's best for them. And especially in our communities, we don't see knowledge as a right. It's a relationship.” -Katie Lynch (Citizen Potawatomi Nation)

Partnerships that support local healers, trainings, and community health representatives tend to see greater trust and better outcomes. Instead of imposing outside models and priorities, honor and support current practices, initiatives, and capacity building within communities.

“Coming in with the mindset that the community will lead and that you're there to make sure that you're a support in whatever way that you can be to help push forth community priorities. A lot of times, folks will come in with an idea of I'm so excited about increasing the intake of omega-3s, but the community might have a different idea of what they're wanting to look at, what priorities are happening within their community, and current and critical day-to-day experiences that are happening. So just kind of reflecting on that and making sure that you're being a good advocate and helping push forth community priorities.” - Dr. Courtney Claussen (Mnicoujou na Oohenunpa Lakota)

With health being such an important and sensitive area, special consideration should be paid to following protocol and ethical partnership practices. Ethical partnerships require transparency, benefits to the community, shared control over data, and respect for protocols. Before research or health projects, follow tribal approvals, including IRB / tribal IRB processes, cultural protocols, and data sovereignty.

“It's a responsibility for you to find out who your people are, and practice your languages and your ceremonies. Don't ever let anybody tell you you can't. Partners who are non-Native, to give us that space as we're figuring out how we show up in these places. Because there are so many non-Natives who are very eloquent and could write up an RFP or a proposal and pull a Native team together, but then they are the ones holding it. I encourage all of you to take a step back and think about why you're doing this. Or pass it on to a Native person and encourage them to apply for these things. Or encourage folks to make sure, look around at your table and in your office and your board and your surroundings. And make sure that there are people there. Because it's not for lack of us wanting to be there. It's this systemic oppression who has told us that we shouldn't be there, or we don't deserve to be there.” Alayna Eagle Shield (Húŋkpap̄ha Lak̄hóta, Isáŋyathi Dakota, Bdewákhant̄hunwaŋ Dakota, P̄haláni)

Partnerships in Governance

Tribal leaders are elected by and accountable to their citizens. They make policy decisions, manage intergovernmental relationships, steward tribal resources, and much more. These leadership roles are rooted in both cultural values and political systems. A lot is expected of Tribal Leaders; they are essentially working 24/7 because, unlike other elected leaders, their communities often know who they are, they know their families, they might have your cell phone number, etc. Tribal Leaders are responsible for their communities in many ways. In one day, they could be travelling and meeting with the US government to discuss the management of Tribal resources, and then when they get home need to visit an elder to check in on them.

“Thinking about community, and family, and land -- all of these things that are so important. They exist because we understand the roles and responsibilities that all those things play in our lives.” - Amira Madison (Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head Aquinnah)



Leadership terms and election processes vary by nation—governance is not one-size-fits-all. Tribal nations have their own election laws and processes, separate from U.S. federal or state systems. Today, many nations blend traditional governance practices with contemporary systems, including constitutions, codes, and courts. Many nations are using constitutional frameworks drafted post-U.S. Indian Reorganization Act (1934), while others use customary governance rooted in oral tradition and community consensus. Some nations hold annual elections, while others follow longer cycles. Participation in tribal elections is a direct exercise of sovereignty.

“Our leadership wasn't just about having these titles, having this big name, having a bonnet. It was about the responsibility to our people, to our land, to our water, and to our future generations. When you think about it, this work is very selfless work. You have to think about other people. And you come last... Leadership means listening. Rather than speaking and being the first one to be up there on a podium. It means checking in with your community, holding them accountable, holding yourself accountable, even when it's hard.” - Angelina Serna (Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians and the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin).

Recognize that Tribal nations are sovereign governments, not stakeholder groups. Successful collaboration happens when power is shared, sovereignty is protected, and Indigenous leadership is centered.

“We use a ceremonial responsibility of who we are as people to structure our government. So we used the federal government, which the federal government used an Indian government to structure their separation of powers. We call it the division of powers. We use that structure, executive, legislative, and judicial. But we incorporated the Big Drum Ceremonies. There are people that all carry a responsibility. And so the chairman at the time, Art, he said, I'm dividing up all this power. Normally they gave it all to the tribal chairman. He says, I'm willing to give this to the legislative branch and this to the judicial branch. And we've been operating under that structure since the '80s. And it's been very successful for us. And also, helped us to be successful in economic development.” - Melanie Benjamin (Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe)

There's no "one way" to build a partnership; follow the lead of the Nation you hope to work with. Understanding Tribal governance is essential for building respectful, lasting partnerships. Partners should seek to support sovereignty in practice through following treaty or legal obligations specific to Native nations, support self-governance initiatives, data sovereignty, and Tribal law.

"I've helped to build capacity with my team, especially with our nonprofit or other partners who seek relationship-building with us that we're -- we need to be equipped and ready to come to the table with our ask, understand what our needs are so that when we need someone, we can identify whether or not this will be a good partnership and they're able to meet our needs and they're on board with it. Now that I say it out loud, it sounds like dating. You have to be your whole self if you want to meet a whole partner. We've been in this toxic environment for so long that now we need healthy relationships." Ashley Hemmers (Fort Mojave Indian Tribe)

Good partnerships respect protocol, process, and timing. Tribal governments have their own decision-making structures, and partners should be prepared to work at the speed of the community, allowing time for consultation, discussion, and consensus-building. After learning specifics about a Native nation, partners should then build on what that nation is seeking, whether it's capacity, funding, infrastructure, skilled support, etc. Ideally, there should be an alignment between partners on core values as well. While much harm has been caused historically, we are seeing powerful, forward-looking partnerships today that center sovereignty, respect, and shared goals.

Key Takeaways

If you're looking to partner with Native nations or communities, start by learning, listening, and understanding sovereignty. Reflect on your own positionality, capacity, and readiness to do the work. Move slowly in a way that builds trust and understanding, and remember that some of the best partnerships are rooted in reciprocity and shared values. Partnerships with Native nations and communities must go beyond collaboration to acknowledge sovereignty, nourish relationships and trust, and create sustainable change for the next seven generations.

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Additional Native-Led & Partnered Resources

We've included a list below to get you started. We also encourage you to research our event speakers, many of whom have their own published research, books, art, and more to learn from. Between the brilliant work of the speakers and other talented changemakers, we cannot include it all; this list is not exhaustive!

Health

- National Indian Health Board (NIHB) – Advocates for Tribal sovereignty in health and provides resources on Tribal health policy, self-determination, and wellness initiatives.
- Tribal Epidemiology Centers (TECs) – Regional, Native-led organizations supporting Tribal public health data, research, and capacity-building.

Education

- American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC) – Represents Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) and supports Native-led higher education.
- National Indian Education Association (NIEA) – Promotes Native sovereignty in education and supports Native students, teachers, and communities.
- National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition (NABS) – Supports education around the history of boarding schools and their ongoing impacts while centering Native voices in truth-telling and healing.

Governance

- National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) – The oldest, largest Native-led organization advancing Tribal sovereignty and governance.
- Harvard Project on Indigenous Governance and Development – Research and case studies on Native nation rebuilding and self-determined governance.
- Indigenous Data Sovereignty Network (USIDSN) – Advocates for Tribal sovereignty over data and research, crucial in governance and self-determination.