

Episode 75: With \$5 million grant, UMN seeks to change relationship with tribal nations

The University of Minnesota will use grant money for the recently announced Minnesota Transform Initiative to examine their historical relationship with Minnesota's tribal nations. The project will compile digital storytelling projects, research University/tribal relations and provide funding toward the school's Ojibwe and Dakota language programs. In this episode, we spoke with faculty leaders on the project and the Executive Director of the Minnesota Indian Affairs Council to learn more about the initiative and how it will mean for the University's relationship with the 11 tribal nations of Minnesota.

Megan Germundson and Ethan Quezada

INTRO MUSIC

MEGAN GERMUNDSON: Hi everyone, I'm Megan Germundson.

ETHAN QUEZADA: And I'm Ethan Quezada, and you're listening to "In the Know," a podcast by the Minnesota Daily.

GERMUNDSON: Last December the University of Minnesota applied for and won a \$5 million grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. The Minnesota Indian Affairs Council pressured the University to acknowledge and look into their historical relationship with the 11 tribal nations in the state. University faculty saw this grant as an opportunity for action and decided to apply. With this grant, the University hopes to change their relationship with the state's tribal nations. The grant will fund the Minnesota Transform Initiative, which will provide financial support and housing for students in the University's Indigenous language programs, create internship opportunities and compile a Dakota language digital storytelling project.

QUEZADA: But a large part of the initiative will be put toward an extensive research project that will examine the University's past and present relationship with Minnesota's tribal nations. We spoke with University faculty leading the initiative and the executive director of the Minnesota Indian Affairs Council, or MIAC, to learn more about how this funding will be used and what the research will look like.

NAT SOUND: TRANSITIONAL RHYTHM

GERMUNDSON: Before we get into the details of this new project, we want to give a glimpse into the long history the University has with Minnesota's tribal nations. In 1862, President Abraham Lincoln signed the Morrill Act, which seized millions of acres of Indigenous lands from tribal nations and turned it into endowments for colleges and universities across the country. According to data compiled by High Country News, the land was taken from almost "250 tribes, bands and communities, through over 160 violence-backed land cessions, a legal term for the giving up of territory." In 1868 the University of Minnesota was assigned 94,631 acres of land through the land grant — land that still benefits the University financially today.

QUEZADA: With this history in mind, MIAC presented University leaders with a list of things they wanted to see done by the U to fully acknowledge their obligation to the tribes. One of the resolutions called on the University to acknowledge their history as a land-grant institution and to conduct historical research into University/tribal relations. One of their concerns asked the University to acknowledge the medical research they did on the Red Lake Nation.

GERMUNDSON: In the 1960s University of Minnesota Medical School investigated bacterial infections and nephritis, a potentially fatal disease of the kidneys, in preschool-aged children at Red Lake Nation. The medical research, some of which was funded by the US Department of Defense, was to "monitor and and detail the progression" of these diseases. In an accompanying note to MIAC's resolutions, the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe said that during this process, the University did research without "informed consent" and that it "benefitted...the US military while harming American Indian children."

Here's Tadd Johnson, the University's Senior Director of American Indian Tribal Nations relations.

TADD JOHNSON: I know that the son of one of the people they experimented on, his name is Sam Strong, he's on the council of Red Lake. And when the President was talking to them, you know, she just said, well, let's get to the bottom of what happened together and find out, and you know, what does the medical school have? What do we have?



NAT SOUND: TRANSITIONAL RHYTHM

JOHNSON: Fond Du Lac has a big chunk of the University of Minnesota in the middle of its reservation. It's the Cloquet Forestry Center, and they do experiments, there and they have pesticides and they grow hybrid trees and Fond Du Lac is like, what the heck is going on there? We just want to know. And you know, it's in the middle of our reservation, and ultimately Fond Du Lac wants that back. And so every tribe had a different complaint with the University of Minnesota.

NAT SOUND: TRANSITIONAL RHYTHM FADE UP AND UNDER TRACK BELOW

GERMUNDSON: Early last December, Johnson said he got a call from a colleague, Professor David Chang, head of the American Indian Studies Department at the University, who told him about the Mellon grant. About 48 hours after their conversation, University faculty began the process of applying for the grant.

JOHNSON: I got my interns, and we wrote up something and it was like, but we didn't want the money to go to the University of Minnesota. We wanted the money to go out to the tribes.

GERMUNDSON: Johnson, who has spent most of his career representing tribal nations, said his first instinct is to still question the University's historic and current intentions when researching on tribal land.

JOHNSON: And so, I mean, I'm a fish out of water in this position, because I'm pretty much on their side. I'm like, what did happen? Why are they doing experiments on wild rice? For the Ojibwe people, they had a prophecy that if they followed these shells, eventually they could preserve their culture and eventually they found a place where food grew on water and the food that grew on water was Mahnomen or wild rice and so to them, it's sacred. The U of M is doing genetic experiments on wild rice, which really ticks off the Ojibwe. And so they want to know why are they doing that? What are they doing with it? You know, what's the end product? What's the point? And so, there's this, there's this wall of separation between the university of Minnesota and the tribes of Minnesota.

GERMUNDSON: I'm wondering if you think that the amount of money in this grant is enough money to, you know, finish the research for these specific issues that you talked about, like the Red Lake research and the Fond Du Lac research?

JOHNSON: Oh, I think it's enough to begin the research. I think, I think we, you know, I think we need to delve deeper. I think we need to spend decades on all the things that have gone wrong with Native Americans and.... is the University doing enough? Never. Is there enough money in this grant? No.

GERMUNDSON: This sort of grant and initiative is this, the University's action response to MIAC's letter and resolutions?

JOHNSON: This was the best my office could do. And my office is essentially me and to a certain extent, the American Indian studies department and... the best we could do is go out and, you know, take a tin cup, ask a foundation for some money and dole it out to Indian country.

NAT SOUND: TRANSITIONAL RHYTHM

GERMUNDSON: We wanted to know how the University was planning to collaborate with MIAC and the 11 tribal nations of Minnesota for their research. Our colleague Abbey Machtig helped report this episode and spoke with Shannon Geshick, the Executive Director of MIAC.

SHANNON GESHICK: My name is Shannon Geshick. I am an enrolled member or citizen of the Bois Fort Nation, Band of Chippewa and in Northern Minnesota.

GERMUNDSON: The resolutions MIAC sent to the University last July was not the first time they had called on the University to acknowledge historical wrongdoing. But this past summer of civil rights protests sparked MIAC's decision to seek institutional accountability from the University, yet again.

GESHICK: Tadd called me and he was like, hey, we have an opportunity for a heap load of funding and it'd be really great if it could work in partnership with MIAC.

And so now this project is hoping to do more of that historical acknowledgment and really put things out on the table that happened — good things, not so good things, horrible things, uncomfortable things that people don't want to talk about. It's not going to be an easy project, but it's one that needs to be done.

GERMUNDSON: Geshick says that with the funding from the grant, MIAC will hire a historian consultant to head up a research team across the state.

GESHICK: The historian consultant will get a chunk of funding to be able to do their share of the project. Each of the tribes are also getting a chunk of the funding to be able to kind of support an intern or whatever the tribe deems best to partner with our MIAC historian, in order to tell that tribe's story, in order to do the research and try to uncover what those historical relations were with the University.

GERMUNDSON: From MIAC's initial letter until now, this initiative has come together quickly since December.

GESHICK: I think that this, this will be developing. I think you're very, very right that the project came on quick. There was a deadline, the university applied for it, they got the funding, like it's moving super, super quick. So we will be kind of tweaking as we go.

QUEZADA: David Chang, the Chair of the American Indian Studies Department, helped write the proposal for the grant. He said while the project came together fast, the funding is there, and he's thinking big about how to use the funds to help the community.

DAVID CHANG: We teach Ojibwe and Dakota language, we have a lot of people in the community who want to take the class, the classes are expensive. And so we wanted to use some of that money to offset that cost. Part of that is that we have Ojibwe immersion housing so our Ojibwe students can get stronger in the language. We want to develop Dakota immersion housing. So... but housing is kind of expensive, as you know, student housing in Dinkytown is a little expensive, so maybe we can get a little money to offset the cost a little bit, and just kind of help people move into this more expensive housing.

QUEZADA: Chang said the research will culminate in a wide-ranging final report. After all, as he said, there's more than 150 years of University of Minnesota history to tell.

GERMUNDSON: What would you say to people who sort of see initiatives like this as sort of a performative action. How is this different from that?

CHANG: This is to understand the relationship of the tribal nations to the University of Minnesota, and from that can come an effort to make arguments that have some backing to them. It's one thing to say, 'We want change.' That is less convincing than if you have a history or documents that you can point to that says why we want change.

And this is not just for show, and it's not, if you mean by a performance, something to look like we're doing work, like the University is doing work, but not really mean that. That's not all what's going on here. This is a sincere effort.

QUEZADA: This report, like when we talk about having a document that's usable, usable for what exactly?

CHANG: My intention would be to come up with the report that is pretty thorough, pretty well documented and pretty solid so that if somebody wants to make an argument for what the future direction of the University's relations with tribal nations should be, they'll be able to point to something that has some authority behind it.

GERMUNDSON: So, for example, if somebody wanted to lobby for a tuition waiver on the Twin Cities campus, they could have this report and point to it as sort of evidence for that case? Just as an example.

CHANG: Yeah, suppose they want to talk about how the University has been funded, and they want to talk about what land grant means, they want to go back to the charter, they would have some documents there to deal with. Or suppose they wanted to talk about inappropriate research on wild rice, which is something that matters a whole lot to Ojibwe Nations here in the state, they would be able to point to something that compiles some information on that. It's not like information on that doesn't exist. History can't do work on information that doesn't exist, but it's so disparate. It's all over the place. It's hard to find. So, there are people who've written serious work on any of these topics.

So somebody's got to compile things at some point to make it usable.

NAT SOUND: TRANSITIONAL FADE UP AND UNDER TRACK BELOW

GERMUNDSON: With so much work to be done, Johnson said the \$5 million grant isn't enough money to reconcile past harms, but it is a start.

JOHNSON: And I mean, this is step one. This is, this is like half a step. It's enough money to start. It's not enough money to finish anything, but, we can start getting people's attention and hopefully start. Public opinion will never be on the side of the tribes, it never is. But I think people do understand that there's two original sins in the United States, one was enslaving African people and the other one was a genocide that occurred against Native American people, and part of the genocide was taking all their land. And part of the land that was taken was taken to build this university.

GERMUNDSON: The Minnesota Transform Initiative is a belated beginning to reestablishing the University's relationship with Minnesota's tribal nations. And Geshick says, with leadership at the University that is willing, and today's social climate, the time is right to begin doing the work.

GESHICK: This project gives voice to the tribal nations. And I think that the tribal leaders that elected tribal leaders really appreciate that it's long overdue where we can tell our story, and that's really the importance of this project. That, then the second part to me, that's super important is, not only the acknowledgement, but also the work, a kind of framework of how to move forward. I think that President Gabel is really on board with this project. I think her heart is open to doing the work, and it's just a really good time, the time right now is just, it really couldn't be more perfect with a focus on social justice. It's just like all of the dominoes are falling in line right now.

NAT SOUND: TRANSITIONAL FADE UP AND OUT

MEGAN PALMER: In other U news: the University has released a report based on Dr. Cedric L. Alexander's 2020 review on UMPD; regents are now considering allowing the UMN logo to be placed on alcohol products; and the U's budget request to the state legislature is the lowest it's been in 20 years. We'll see you next week.

PALMER: Music in Today's episode was provided by Setuniman.