

# Episode 72: University relations with the tribal nations of Minnesota

Megan and Ava team up with campus administration reporter Hana Ikramuddin to examine the current state of affairs between University of Minnesota leadership and the Tribal Nations of Minnesota following a letter from the Minnesota Indian Affairs Council, which was sent to President Gabel and the Board of Regents over the summer.

**Ava Kian, Megan Germundson, and Hana Ikramuddin**

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INTRO MUSIC

AVA KIAN: Hey everyone, I'm Ava Kian.

MEGAN GERMUNDSON: I'm Megan Germundson.

HANA IKRAMUDDIN: I'm Hana Ikramuddin, a campus administration reporter.

KIAN: And welcome back to "In The Know," a podcast by the Minnesota Daily.

GERMUNDSON: Last July, in the midst of protests against police brutality, the Minnesota Indian Affairs Council, or MIAC, sent University of Minnesota leadership a series of specific requests. They asked the University to partner with the 11 Minnesota Tribal Nations and establish a system-wide tuition waiver and create an American Indian Policy Review Task Force that would review the University's past and present policies, along with other requests.



KIAN: So, in today's episode we look into those requests with the President of the Prairie Island Mdewakanton Dakota Tribe and Vice-Chair of MIAC, Shelley Buck. We hear the University's response from Senior Director of American Indian Tribal Nations Relations, Tadd Johnson, to get a better understanding of the University's current relationship with the Tribal Nations of Minnesota.

IKRAMUDDIN: One request in MIAC's letter was that University leadership, including the regents and the president be required to take a Tribal-state and Tribal-University relations course and be required to meet with the Tribal leaders at least three times per year. They also pointed to the University's failure to teach about Tribal economies and their history as a land-grant institution.

NAT SOUND: ZOOM CALL TONE (FADE OUT)

SHELLEY BUCK: Yep. My name is Shelley Buck.

We made these requests because we've been making these requests as individual tribes, for years, but we're making this collective request. Cause it's the time. It's time. it's past time. We are done being forgotten. We're done seeing things happen to our people and finding that it comes back to education. Everything's education. And my tribe learned years ago that the only way we were going to succeed as a tribe was to educate our people in the dominant society's way.

And if we truly want to be one Minnesota, then I think it's time we start making these changes. And, I know for me, I'm a fighter, so I'm ready to make this happen. And, I'm pretty stubborn too. And I think we have a lot of tribal leaders like that in this state right now. So it's time.

It's time to get this done. It's time that they work with us. We're not asking for anything outrageous. We really aren't. We just simply ask that past wrongs be righted. And, we work together. We're willing to work with them on this.

GERMUNDSON: As the Vice-Chair of MIAC, Buck was involved in the writing of the letter and resolutions that MIAC sent to the University. Last August, a month after MIAC sent the letter, President Gabel met with them to discuss their request. But Buck said it's important for MIAC to hear directly from the Board of Regents, since they hold a lot of power within the University.

Is there something specific that you would like to hear from the Board of Regents themselves?

BUCK: I think I need to acknowledge the wrongs that were done to the Dakota people, especially in a state — first acknowledge that our land was stolen from us.

And the university has profited from that land — still, quite nicely. And have them acknowledge the fact that is Dakota land that they're on.

IKRAMUDDIN: Among the Board of Regents, there was some confusion about MIAC's letter. Originally, it was sent to Brian Steeves, who is the Executive Director and Corporate Secretary of the board. Some of the regents I tried to get in contact with didn't know much about the letter at first. But, I ended up getting ahold of Regent Micheal Hsu, who told me MIAC's letter was never forwarded to the regents until this week, almost five months after it was originally sent. The letter wasn't forwarded until Tuesday.

Other members also said that they didn't receive the email until Tuesday. I was able to talk with Regents Darrin Roshia and Randy Simonson who also confirmed that information. Both of whom said they would like to see conversations on the letter going forward.

The reason Brian Steeves sent out the letter this week, informing some board members of its existence, was because I asked Regent Hsu for a comment about MIAC's request. Other University administrators have been more responsive.

KIAN: Tadd Johnson is the Senior Director of American Indian Tribal Nation Relations, and also a professor of American Indian Studies, and a member of the Bois Forte Band of Chippewa.

As the figurehead for University-Tribal Nation relations, we asked him about his initial thoughts regarding MIAC's letter.

JOHNSON: Well, actually I think it probably, it's the beginning of a very constructive dialogue that has long been needed between the Indian tribes of Minnesota and the University of Minnesota. And, I think there's a lot of history there.

President Gabel not only met with the 10 tribes that are members of the Minnesota Indian Affairs Council, but on November 4th, she and I met on Zoom with, the one tribe that's not a member of the Minnesota Indian Affairs Council. And she wanted to make sure that she met with all the tribes. And so, it's not easy to schedule a tribal leader or an entire tribal council, and it's really not easy to schedule a president, but she wanted to do it. And so, we did it and she's going to appear in front of the tribes again on December 18th.

KIAN: In response to some of MIAC's requests, Johnson said the University plans to conduct their own research into some of the tragic historical events MIAC referenced.

JOHNSON: Daniel Patrick Moynihan said, "we're all entitled to our own opinions but we're not entitled to our own facts." And so, when President Gabel was meeting with the tribes, she agreed that let's work together to get to the bottom of these issues that the tribes have had with the University over the years. And so, we're seeking grant funding for the tribes to do their research. And we're seeking grant funding for the University to do research and we want to work together hand in hand with the Tribes on creating, you know it's the beginning of truth and reconciliation. And I think the first thing we need to do is fact-finding.

They see the benefit; the Tribes see the benefit. And I worked for Tribes for years. They- as a Tribal member and as a former Tribal attorney, the utility of working with one of the world's great universities is a real obvious.

KIAN: We asked Buck if there's a plan for MIAC to conduct their own research or collaborate with the University as Johnson mentioned. Buck had a different attitude than Johnson about who should be conducting the research.

BUCK: That I don't know for sure, but I don't know why we need to do it when it's the university that's the one that caused the problem. They should be the ones that have to figure it out.

GERMUNDSON: One recent change within the University was their announcement of MPact 2025. It's an entire university-wide plan, which one part of it is targeted toward strengthening relations with Minnesota's Tribal Nations. In an email that shouted out Native American Heritage Month, President Gabel said that the University had "collaboratively developed goals and metrics" with MIAC for this plan. However, Buck wasn't familiar with the MPact.

BUCK: I don't know if I know, I remember hearing about it, but I don't know. I remember actually getting a copy.

KIAN: Yeah. I guess we're wondering if that plan was ever discussed with MIAC? Was there a partnership in creating those goals?

And I mean, we saw this email as we were thinking of where the story would go and it was just shocking to see her mention it, but not really provide much elaboration on.

BUCK: And unfortunately that's what we have gotten throughout the years from not only places like the U, but other areas where we work with people on and there's a lot of talk.

And there's a lot of good things that people say, but it's the, follow-through, it doesn't come. And, it's pretty frustrating. And I think we have the set of Tribal leaders throughout the state that are just fed up with it all. And we're ready to make sure those changes get made regardless of what that means we have to do.

GERMUNDSON: We went back and forth with Buck about MPact before sending her a link to the University's 35-page plan.

BUCK: Yeah. I have not seen this.

KIAN: So it's sounding like there might not have been consultation with MIAC prior to creating it?

BUCK: Unless, they did a presentation and I don't know if I actually no, I don't remember this at all. No, this doesn't look familiar at all.

But that doesn't mean others haven't seen it. I just haven't seen it.

GERMUNDSON: In light of the clear miscommunication surrounding MPact and collaboration with MIAC, we also asked Johnson why it's difficult for the University to establish and maintain communication with the tribes.

JOHNSON: It takes awhile to do stuff around here. So, they- the previous administration kind of dip their toes into Tribal consultation.

President Gabel is diving in full, head first and really wanting to get in and have a true, meaningful conversation with the tribes.

And I feel that there's a forward momentum in the state, because of Governor Walz and Lieutenant Governor Flanagan, and then kind of the whole new, number of Native American, largely women, that have gotten elected to office, appointed to the bench. And so, there's a great deal of leadership, by women on reservations, several Tribal leaders are now women, which when I began my career, that was very unusual.

KIAN: Buck expressed a similar sentiment to Johnson when asked about the change in leadership at the University.

GERMUNDSON: You know obviously this has been a long time, coming and you've had brief discussions or discussions before about changing University/Tribal relations, but you said that you, you felt hopeful still, so I'm wondering, what makes this, why is it different now?

BUCK: Well one, the university now has a female in charge and I think, as females, we listen a little differently. We think a little differently. I think we're more open-minded. In general. you can't put us all in the same group, but, but I think that helps.

And also, I just think the whole atmosphere around us, not just for native people, but for all people, Black, indigenous, people of color, there's just a different change that feels different. It's no longer something that we're just trying to do. It's something we are doing and we will do. And there just seems to be such a unique will to make things change finally. And not just oh, let's get our voice out there. Let's get this done. And it's no, let's, this will get done. There's no more, let's try, it's let's do. And I always say, when we're done asking, we're starting to demand.

GERMUNDSON: Although both parties are excited to have established a communication with each other, Buck says MIAC needs more than just dialogue.

BUCK: We'd like a clear plan on where we go from here. We always as tribes get a lot of lip service and I know we're all, especially the 11 tribes in this state. I know we're tired of the lip service and we're ready for some action. Tribal consultation is more than just, coming up with something, sending it to the tribe, saying, okay, we have our Tribal consultation. No, true tribal consultation involves tribes at the seat, having a seat at the table from the very beginning and as being part of that creation of those policies, those procedures. And we hope that there's some clear pathway into that from this meeting and the meetings to follow.

KIAN: Johnson agrees that Tribal consultation requires more than a simple meeting, but he maintains that the University is on the right track.

JOHNSON: It's simply this: it's meaningful consultation. When I was a young lawyer, we would do a meeting with the Bureau of Indian Affairs or local County. And then it was kind of the pat the Indians on the head meeting. And it's like, okay, sure. We checked the box where we talked to the Indians. That's not the way it is anymore. Now most Tribal leaders have Amy Klobuchar, Tina Smith, Tim Walz, Keith Ellison on speed dial. And that happened because the tribes, people started recognizing the tribes as sovereign nations, which is what they are, and started listening to their problems and their issues.

And now that the University has started going down this road of listening to tribes when we are developing programs, or policies that impact tribes even remotely. I think the best thing we can do is have meaningful dialogue, meaningful consultation where they talk and we listen. The tribes talk and the University listens and it's as if that might be an overly simplified statement. But, it's the only thing that works as far as Tribal relations and I've seen things change, over the last 30 years.

GERMUNDSON: As it stands now, President Gabel is planning to meet with MIAC again in December, which Buck says she's looking forward to.

KIAN: It's clear that President Gabel is making Tribal Relations a priority more than other University leaders in the past. But it remains to be seen how the University will fully respond to MIAC's requests and move forward with a plan of action.

GERMUNDSON: Thanks to Hana Ikramuddin for helping us report on this.

IKRAMUDDIN: You're welcome!

FADE UP & UNDER OUTRO MUSIC

PALMER: In other U news: the Malcolm Yards affordable housing project in Prospect Park is moving forward after securing money from Hennepin County; Student Legal Services is working on cases for students who were kettled on I-94 during the post-election protests; and a new popcorn shop has opened in Dinkytown. We'll see you next week.