Creating Culturally Safe Learning Spaces and Indigenizing Higher Education

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The Indigenous Nations Library Program's hallmark mission involves advocating and creating culturally safe places for Indigenous people at the University of New Mexico. This article highlights why there is a need for creating culturally safe learning spaces. It also discusses why indigenizing higher education through spatial autonomy is a successful tool for integrating Western-academic thought with Indigenous livelihood.

Preparing the Planting Fields

The Indigenous Nations Library Program (INLP) is a unique library program within the University of New Mexico College of University Libraries and Learning Sciences. Founded in 2004, INLP developed a specific Indigenous library service strategy focused on contextual information literacy and culturally sensitive services (Brown, 2017). In the beginning, INLP was situated in a hard to find location on the second floor of the historic west wing of Zimmerman Library. This location was small and inhibited INLP from offering a variety of learning spaces (Brown 2017). Related, INLP Librarians at the time were not afforded the flexibility to design a library space for Indigenous students. Furthermore, specific places for learning were not available as the program space was one large room containing one large table for both research consultation and studying. It was comfortable, warm, and unfortunately cramped. A new space that would satisfy the ambitions of the librarians working there was needed.

In 2011, INLP was rehoused in a highly visible section of the Zimmerman Library. The new location, still on the second floor, was formerly the office suite of the Dean of University Libraries. This place allowed for a prominent display of indigeneity with a beautiful entryway mural entitled, *Planting the Seeds of Knowledge,* emphasizing that this program space is a unique location for Indigenous studies, people, communities, and knowledge. In other words, indigenizing the space with this specific art publicly stated this place was INLP's. The murals were painted by Sixtus and Susana Dominguez, together known as Ansulala'. This space unlike the previous one has drop-in study rooms, a computer lab space, conference and meeting rooms, and a social gathering area. This is profound for Indigenous students, especially because they are yearning for spaces and places that reflect their Indigenous considerations. This

yearning for a connection to the essence of Indigenous personhood and its relationship to the physical environment - *land*. Similar to planting, cultivating learning is paramount in this place as plants are for the livelihood of Indigenous existence. Moreover, this space allowed for the development of learning spaces devoted to the consciousness of Indigenous presence and learning (Brown 2017). This relationship is unique at the University of New Mexico because many of the students are living and learning on the ancestral lands of their people. INLP attempts to break down physical and social barriers Indigenous students face in western academic environments. This is tenuous because INLP resides within western-academic spaces. It is the integration of Indigenous pedagogy along with western academic knowledge disciplines are where INLP finds its true purpose, to advocate and intellectually orient Indigenous knowledge in a culturally safe space.

Indigenous Students on the Racial Battle Lands

There is no place in the Western Hemisphere where Indigenous people have not lived. This acknowledgement is crucial because an Indigenous student on a university campus may feel alienated and unsafe due to the current built environment and interaction with non-Indigenous people. The constructed university environment overlays the memories of Indigenous people and at times erases, ignores, and subdues Indigenous existence (Lipe 2018).

Indigenous students must contend with this relationship of a colonially fixed learning environment on the surface of a multifaceted and dynamic perspective of Indigenous landscapes. This is a complicated balance because land in Indigenous existence is dynamic. (Goeman 2015). In the minds of students, they are, "deconstructing the discourse of property and reformulating the political vitality of a storied land" (Goeman, 2015, p. 74) as well as reconciling their existence in an academic environment. Brayboy (2015) suggests that Indigenous students are, "in the racial battle lands" in colleges because of the alienation and

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discrimination students face in a western academic environment (p. 45). Goeman states that the land that was once Indigenous now accommodates colonial government policies of land ownership and negotiating property boundaries with a restriction of Indigenous bodies on reservations. This colonial-imposed mindset of segregation due to the reservation systems which isolated Indigenous people to occupy "strict gender and racial hierarchies." (2015, p. 83). Related, Brayboy verifies the racial battle land that Indigenous students face because long held views of Indigenous people in America as either extinct or should be bounded within reservation limits are prominent tropes Indigenous students face on university campuses.

Due to these circumstances, Indigenous students huddle close to culturally familiar places because it reinforces their identity but also enacts a reconstitution of Indigenous lifeways. There is a connection to culturally safe places that reminds them of home, a place to be comfortably themselves. Indigenous students at universities often occupy cultural centers or student service areas, (Shotton, Yellowfish, Cintrón, 2011) asserting that these places are necessary for the persistence of students to graduate (p. 57).

In these culturally safe places on university campuses, Indigenous students shed their academic anxiety and become their true selves. For instance, native specific centers are the refuge areas for success in colleges and universities. D.L. Brown (2005) prescribes to the notion that, "having a place where Native American students feel like they belong and feel comfortable is extremely important to their success in higher education (p. 93). The strength of students should be celebrated because they are negotiating these spaces because, "Indigenous identities are internally questioned" and making decisions based on how culturally safe spaces are for them is a survival skill (Windchief and Joseph, 2015, p. 269).

Academic performance is the biggest consequence of this negotiation upon Indigenous students, partly due to the divergence in cultural values and norms. Stephen Sawyer in a unique study, *Investigating Policies and Procedures of the University of New Mexico on Native American Student Persistence* (2001), details a situation where, "traditional values of cooperation and group harmony often conflict with the value placed on individual achievement and interpersonal competition in academia, versus European-Christian values" (p. 51). Related, students often face potential conflicts with community obligations and the will to academically succeed. Sawyer discusses a bicultural identity of Indigenous students, "upon entering school, students are caught in the crossfire between the forces that seek to push them to succeed in the dominant system and those that seek to pull them back into the traditions and culture of their families of origin" (2001, p. 52).

Students' success at the university level is due to Indigenous faculty, staff, and programs situated in native spaces. In an empirically supported study Rebecca Covarrubias and Stephanie Fryberg surveyed Indigenous students about the representation of self-relevant role models and their academic success. Their study revealed that, "exposing underrepresented Native American students to a self-relevant role model significantly increased school belonging relative to role models that are self-irrelevant or ethnically ambiguous" (Covarrubias and Fryberg, 2015, p. 13). Students who have had a close family member graduate from college significantly contributes to success as well because they view their family members' success as attainable to theirs (Covarrubias and Fryberg, 2015, p. 15). Potentially, each student who graduates scaffolds academic success to their kin and children, supporting the need for culturally safe learning spaces for Indigenous students to establish among themselves, supportive academic and cultural links. This interaction among Indigenous peers creates an ecological vehicle to manifest spiritual growth, information capture, and academic success.

Spiritual Ecology & Built Pedagogies

INLP's foundational mission was to provide a specific place for Indigenous critical consciousness. The program architect, Mary Alice Tsosie, envisioned a place for Indigenous learning (Brown 2017). She commissioned a painting in the conference room and computer lab that focused on the "interconnected web among the tribal nations of New Mexico…together, water, mountains and stars create an integral spiritual ecology and promote Indigenous critical consciousness" (INLP Mural Handout). The muralists, Sixtus and Susana Dominguez collectively known as *Ansulala*, invoked an ideological position developed by Santa Clara Pueblo Professor, Gregory Cajete, called spiritual ecology.

Spiritual ecology and its relationship to Indigenous learning, "at its innermost core, is education about the life and nature of the spirit that moves us" (Cajete 2004, 42). In Cajete's view, the 'spirit' is actively situated in the environment; understanding these forces enables a deeper and fuller meaning of life (2004,43). It is the spiritual ecology that an Indigenous person is enveloped with a deeper level of awareness of the environment, the movement of energy between ecological channels, an intimate understanding of their existence not in the moment but of the continuity of their ancestor's presence. The murals represent a visual thesis of this awakening of the spiritual dimensions of the environment in a graphical illustration.

The learning environments of large university campuses are often fast paced and alienating. This alienation of the body is also related to the possible replacement of

Indigenous values and knowledge by Eurocentric discipline-specific courses. Alejandro Lopez and McClellan Hall (2007) recognize this dilemma in their study of Native students in the Bureau of Indian Affairs school system. They write, "it is common knowledge that native children who are placed for long periods of time in school environments that lack any sign of their culture are prone to fare poorly academically, not because they are mentally sluggish, but because they are emotionally depressed and sensorially deprived" (Lopez and Hall 2007, 32). The INLP Murals were the first concrete changes to this space once it was transferred to INLP librarians, illustrating that your ways of knowing and your ways of existing have a place here. Further, it demonstrates the capacity of students to become malleable in their learning process, with a simple acknowledgement that Indigenous ways of knowing is intersecting with Western higher education concepts.

INLP's creation of a physical space allows for the intersection of Western academic knowledge systems with Indigenous knowledge systems on a daily basis. Martin Nakata calls this palimpsest of knowledge systems a "cultural interface" of information (2002, 285). He further states that both knowledge systems are "not strictly about the replacement of one with the other, nor the undermining of one by the other. It is about maintaining the continuity of one when having to harness another and working the interaction in ways that serve Indigenous interests, in ways that can uphold distinctiveness and special status as First Peoples" (Nakata 2002, 286). INLP is a living embodiment of Nakata's cultural interface model that requires consistent staffing and a dedicated space for this model to work harmoniously.

Built Pedagogies

Libraries are meant to be public spaces and hail from Western concepts of literary learning which contrasts with Indigenous learning traditions. Indigenous learning is done in two interrelated ways: apprenticeship and orality. In apprenticeship the learner is paired with a skilled and knowledgeable person, most likely an elder, who activates the information taught through demonstrations and interaction (Findsen et al. 2017). This intergenerational transmission of information reinforces the reverence of elders in a community. They are the living libraries of a community. Through them and their knowledge lies the key for transforming ideas, formulating identity, thinking critically, and supporting community morality (Findsen et al. 2017). Another key component of Indigenous learning is the need for oral communication to convey rich information such as tonal emphasis on words, emotion and feelings. In a comparative study between orality and literacy, Walter Ong detected in oral cultures, the reliance on memory recall,

repetitions, and information is closely aligned to their lived world (1988: 34-41). Compared to the library system of storing knowledge on a literary compendium such as books and databases, oral based knowledge is deeply integrated with intergenerational communication; elders in a community are deeply important in that process. Literary knowledge requires a full understanding of writing mechanics, grammar, writing styles, and an individualized process of learning (Ong 1988). It is through this learning process that libraries have designed its own buildings and facilities to support this learning tradition. INLP in this process makes it a unique case study in learning spaces as it looks to blend multiple learning processes in one place.

Architecturally, libraries reflect the philosophies of the designer. Torin Monahan refers to this as "built pedagogy" or the "architectural embodiments of educational philosophies" (2002: 5). This type of pedagogy reflects an understanding that social settings constructed in a space, within the structure of a larger space allows for some designer choices which greatly influence learning (Chism, 2006, p. 2.5). Learning spaces can exist for quiet and isolated contemplation or to bring people together through collaborative learning. The drive behind the selection of learning environments is motivated by the learning style of the learner. In the early designs of libraries, most spaces were highly specified with physical spaces designated for library collections with rows of shelving units dominated most of the architectural designs of libraries (Turner, Welch, and Reynolds, 2013).

When the internet revolution occurred, libraries had to compete with information being widely accessible through powerful search engines, such as Google, and popular compendiums like Wikipedia. Library spaces shifted to incorporate digital learners with emphasis on book storage decreasing with the advent of e-books. Libraries shifted the physical space to include other novel and attractive spaces such as maker spaces and learning commons (Turner, Welch, and Reynolds, 2013). This movement also shifted away from traditional teaching methods centered on "teaching culture and toward a culture of learning" (Bennett 2003, 10), meaning that a full understanding of learning pedagogy centered on social learning rather than teaching the mechanics of literary culture. Maker spaces and learning commons complimented the socialization of learning, where students manage the spaces depending on the learning purpose (Bennett 2003, 38). Although books and other library resources are still a priority of a library core service areas, institutions are balancing the needs of students while supporting the curriculum of the academic programs within the university (Turner, Welch, and Reynolds 2013).

A Gathering Place

Mary Alice Tsosie envisioned a space for Indigenous students that she simply called A Library-Gathering Place [It was later renamed The Gathering Place.] (A Library Gathering Place for Native American Students at the University of New Mexico). This simple gathering of Indigenous students and people was a novel idea centered on Indigenous existence in a western focused built pedagogy:

"…As a one of a kind program – located at a library – students will have flexible access to a space that reflects their culture and language while providing them with tools and resources to excel in their chosen academic fields – without barriers and hardships they have historically faced in the past – barriers that have kept many Native American Students from completing their college education" (A Library Gathering Place for Native American Students at the University of New Mexico, 2).

In an earlier article I provided additional information on the nature of library services through INLP contexts such as Indigenous librarianship, contextual information literacy, advocating and supporting Indigenous knowledge, and collection development (Brown 2017). However, the true nature of INLP's success is its physical learning environment in that it is the one place on campus where students can fully absorb ideas and information in a culturally safe environment. Mediated spaces such as INLP facilitate the cognitive process of reflection, thoughtful discussion, and active participation in rationalizing ideas. INLP provides this environment with one specific caveat, to acknowledge cultural learning and manufacture spaces in which to learn comfortably.

INLP provides study rooms designed for communal learning with easily moveable furniture that students routinely reconfigure as the need arises. This type of flexible study space allows different learning styles to be acknowledged and allows for learning to be a communal act of creation. Self-selection is crucial in this environment because most other university learning spaces, specifically instruction classrooms, are fixed towards a built-in hierarchy of professor/lecturer as the focal point. Deborah Bickford and David Wright (2006) advocate for a community focus to learning that should be a primer for designing learning spaces (4.1). They both lean toward social cognitive learning where, "in a community, the learners…are enriched by collective meaning-making, mentorship, encouragement, and an understanding of the perspectives and unique qualities of an increasingly diverse membership" (Bickford and Wright 2006, 4.2, 4.3). INLP prescribes to this learning theory as well because Indigenous learning traditions are

communal and discussed rather than instructed (Findsen et al. 2017). Learning in this context is experienced and shared. For instance, students often compare course notes and/or content with each other and discuss meaningful topics, as in *How does this information differ from my Indigenous existence*, for example. Naturally, a unique information ecology is formulated by students critically discussing academic content related to their Indigenous experiences.

Indigenous librarian, Loriene Roy, recognizes this phenomenon and theorizes this social behavior as Indigenous Ecology (2015, 385 & 394). Unlike Cajete's spiritual ecology which is an understanding of the spiritual forces of life and the environment as a *learning process*. Roy proposes an Indigenous Ecology model of an "effective *learning environment* that not only reflects Indigenous worldview but also provides a centering point for understanding comparable LIS [Library Information System] and social justice ethics, values, epistemology, methods, technique, service and practice. (2015, 385). Roy defines Indigenous ecology:

"…as both a space and a system that confirms a connection to land through the process of story. Story is the life of the individual set within the history and traditions of the community. Story documents the past while adding new actions to the record…Specifically, the Indigenous ecology is the place where learning takes place. Within this Indigenous ecology, the "ideal" process of this learning is "a dialogue and political negotiation (consistent with the notion of diplomacy) of diverse perspectives and interests, rather than the idea of intervention in a mechanical system of feedback loops…" (Morrow, 2009, p. 29).

Consideration of an Indigenous ecology is beneficial even in locations far removed from tribal homelands. Thus, the Indigenous Ecology as learning space can be effective even if the learners are living far from Native communities." (2015, 394)

Learning spaces, specifically INLP group study rooms are drop-in, unlike study rooms in other UNM libraries, which are reservable for up to 2 hours. Limiting the amount of time a student may use for a study room interrupts the learning flow but in the case of INLP, students discuss and study with other students throughout the day. INLP librarians have observed students using the study rooms all day for studying and relaxing. The study rooms are large enough for up to 10 students, 4-6 students are the average per study room. An added bonus is privacy, each of the drop-in study rooms are equipped with doors so conversations within the rooms are kept between the occupants. In addition, this barrier enables students to be comfortable and learn without

being accosted or harassed. Another positive of a drop-in study room model is that students can request permission to study with other students rather than an exclusive reservation model, students in INLP have the potential to engage with other Indigenous students outside their academic network, which facilitates community relationship building. Students use the drop-in study rooms 35% of the time as they visit INLP (Figure 2).

Other spaces in INLP include a conference room that holds up to 20 people. Unlike the drop-in study rooms, this room can be reserved for to 2 hours. This room is reservable due to greater demand for the room. For instance, this room is designed for communal instructional learning and collaborative meetings. Native American Studies courses have been taught here, students have given and practiced presentations in this room, student organizations regularly hold meetings in this space, and faculty reading groups are held here. This room is also accessible to outside organizations and class groups. To accommodate everyone and mediate scheduling concerns, this room benefits from a web platform scheduling calendar called LibCal. . This room has technological accommodations including a drop-down screen, projector, and computer monitor. The system is integrated with a Crestron signal controller so visiting patrons can sync their personal device or use the base computer. Finally, this room has beautiful cabinets embedded in the wall structure that INLP recently made available to student organizations to house their memorabilia, archives, and historical items for display and safekeeping. They are known as the INLP Community Cabinets, so far seven student organizations have reserved a community cabinet. The community cabinet program is designed to establish community in the space by giving a piece of the program space to the students.

As INLP spaces evolves to meet the changing needs of its users, the computer lab has been reevaluated and repurposed. Originally, the goal of the computer lab was to provide technological accommodations to students who do not have access to a computer. However, head counts and login sessions statistics show that the computer lab use has dropped significantly within the past couple of years (Figure 2). Today, this room has been converted into a multi-functional learning space which includes lounge furniture, a large study table, and computers. This decision was ultimately decided upon because the program requires more study and learning spaces. Operationally, INLP was nearing full capacity.

Community Statistics

During the nascent stages of INLP's program history, operational statistics were rarely recorded and detailed records of INLP's impact on student learning and academic success was only verified through anecdotal comments. Today, INLP program statistics are recorded and calculated, this priority of numerical tracking is crucial for creating an institutional memory and understanding the program impact upon Indigenous students at UNM. An added benefit of collecting data is its use in grant applications, program priorities, strategic planning development, and evaluating the growth of the program.

One of the largest sets of data recorded is headcount data. Headcount entries are significant because they record hourly use of INLP spaces, rather than gate counts, which record total entries into INLP. Simply, headcount statistics are records of patron use of a space for a duration of time within a specific time frame (Gerke and Teeter 2017). INLP has been recording headcount statistics since 2012 with results showing a general rise. For the first time in program history, 10,000 headcounts were recorded during the academic year 2016-2017. Unfortunately, INLP does not collect race or identity information so the actual number of Indigenous students visiting INLP is not known, but through casual conversation, personal information was discussed by Indigenous students. Results show that intimacy of the INLP program allows for personal interaction daily where conversations other than academic topics are normal. Topics of discussion include homesickness, cultural responsibilities in ceremonies, community politics and government issues, as well as family and kinship topics.

Headcount data was further evaluated when INLP hosted an Open House on March 23, 2017 to gather information for strategic planning. INLP was interested in information related to the frequency of visits, awareness of INLP programs and services, as well as satisfaction with learning spaces. INLP also wanted to be aware of students' perspectives on INLP contribution to college success and whether INLP provides a safe and inclusive learning space. (See figures 1-3.)

Survey results reflect a special relationship between students and INLP learning spaces, with 32% of students visiting INLP every day and 48% of students visiting every week (Figure 1). Related, 35% of students use the drop-in study rooms and 33% of students use other study areas that are not the drop-in study rooms, while INLP Conference Room (rm. 230) is preferred 17% of the time (Figure 2). Combined with the rate of returning visitations compared to the overall Indigenous enrollment data, this study shows that places of cultural safety are important for student learning. It is also further testimony to the adage, if you build it, they will come, especially Indigenous students in places of racial isolation will gather to places of cultural familiarity.
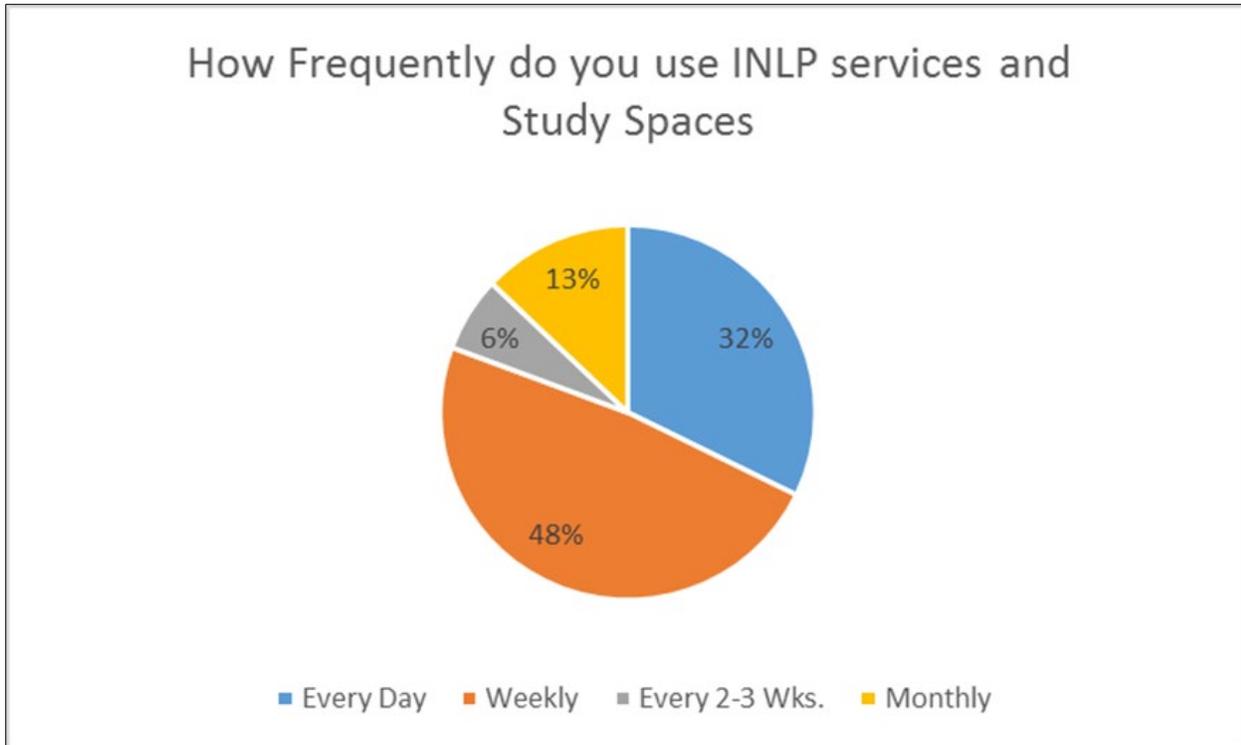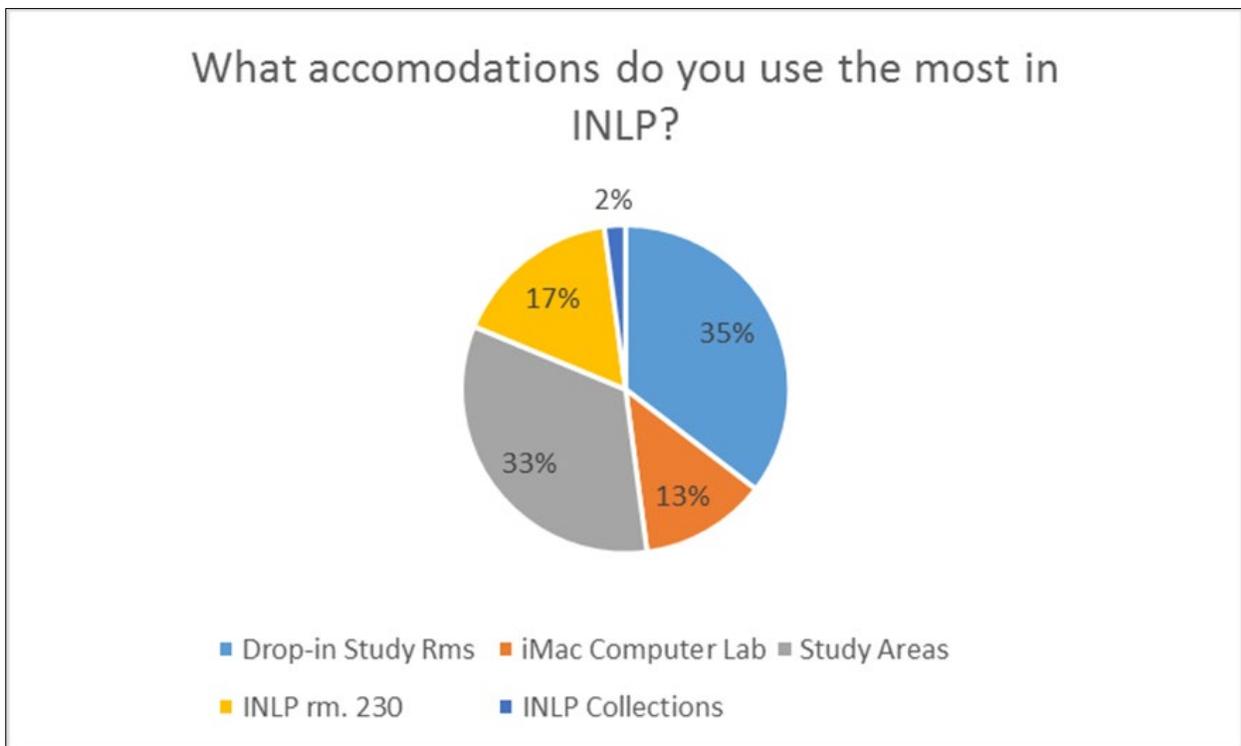
Figure 1. **Frequency of Use of INLP**

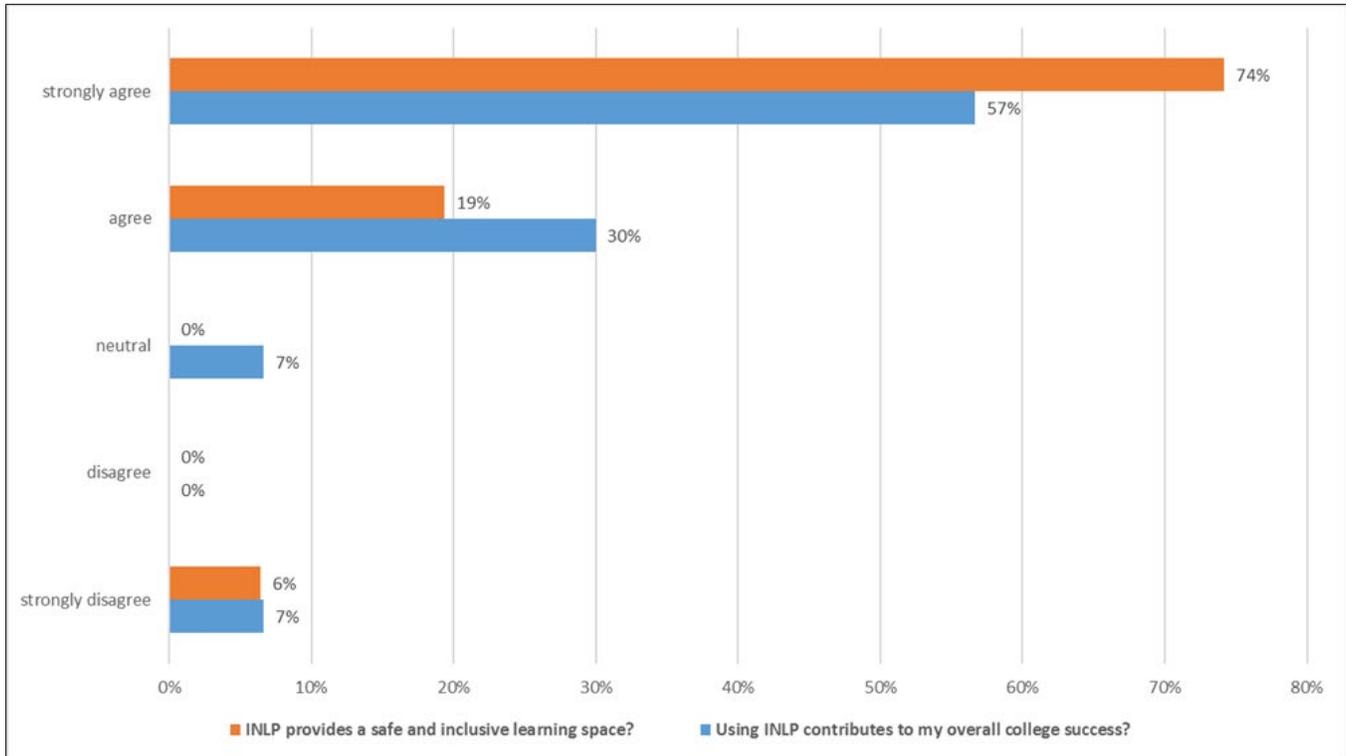*Figure 2.* **Frequency of INLP Learning Space Use**

Figure 3. **INLP Impact on Student Success**

This cultural familiarity is important for overall student success as students agree (30%) and strongly agree (57%) that INLP contributes to their overall college success, while 74% of students strongly agree that INLP provides a safe and inclusive learning space (Figure 3).

To sum up, students use INLP for the drop-in study rooms and other study areas every day and they feel that INLP provides a safe and inclusive learning environment that ultimately helps them succeed college. The success of INLP learning spaces is related to the freedom and autonomy to create spaces of learning.

Indigenous Spatial Sovereignty

A degree of sovereignty of Indigenous spaces in its pure form is the ability to self-direct and design spaces to connect Indigenous people to culturally familiar spaces. INLP as a program had the greatest luxury of autonomy in part because of University Libraries leadership. They enabled INLP to self-govern; Mary Alice Tsosie took full advantage of this ability to experiment with INLP's programmatic role. True self-determination came when INLP was transferred from its original location to its current location (Brown 2017). The ability to respond to student needs is the greatest benefit of an autonomous learning environment, meaning it enables a quicker response to student needs and concerns without bureaucracy and authoritative processes. Creative control to

indigenize this space is the greatest benefit of allowing distinct programs to flourish and experiment with learning spaces.

Mary Alice Tsosie indigenized the office suite with murals and created a community learning environment. This program space design was emphasized by changing the norm of library spaces. The idea of this space was eloquently written as it says, "[INLP Learning Spaces] will change the institutional patterns by providing Native American students with an environment that acknowledges and builds upon their skills and abilities, reflects their cultural context of learning…ALGP will be student-focused, affirm tribal identity, while igniting their creativity in their course of study, where it be engineering, science, art, music, medicine, law or education" (A Library Gathering Place for Native American Students at the University of New Mexico, 6). INLP librarians, past and present, were looking to reinvent how learning spaces can be designed for Indigenous students. The theoretical lens of built pedagogies, spiritual and Indigenous Ecology, as well as cultural interface are all intertwined in INLP learning spaces while the spatial sovereignty allows for these paradigms to be activated. It is important that the physical environment enables other activities to flow through it. Tim Ingold, an anthropologist states that, "Environment is a relative term – relative, that is to the being whose environment it is…. Thus, my environment is the world as it exists and takes on meanings in relation to me, and in that sense it came into existence and

undergoes development with me and around me" (2000, 20). In this instance, Mary Alice Tsosie recreated an Indigenous environment for students to manifest their cultural practices of learning and construct an Indigenous community in the middle of racial battlegrounds.

Furthermore, this point cannot be overstated because this relationship is not merely having a place to be Indigenous but having the ability to connect to Indigenous land. Mishuana Goeman (2015) discusses the powerful relationship of land as the foundation to Indigenous existence. She says, "land as meaning-making place because that is at the heart of Indigenous identity, longing, and belonging… Indigenous peoples make place by relating both personal and communal experiences and histories to certain locations and landscapes — maintaining these spatial relationships is one of the most important components of politics and our identity" (2015, p. 73). INLP negotiates this by being inviting for Indigenous people and philosophy. You come as you are, and we cultivate you in your growth. Each student entering INLP is metaphorically planting seeds of knowledge.

Acknowledgements

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