Language and Learning Resource for Non-Indigenous People
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About Native Americans in Philanthropy and this guide

For over 30 years, Native Americans in Philanthropy (NAP) has promoted equitable and effective philanthropy in Native communities.

We support several communities of stakeholders that work together to build knowledge, community, and power in the philanthropic sector. These networks include Native professionals in philanthropy, elected Tribal leaders, Native youth leaders, and Native nonprofit leaders.

Together with this community of partners, NAP increases the visibility of Native people and communities, educates funders, establishes meaningful connections, and increases funding to Indigenous-led organizations, movements, and Tribal Nations.

As we take stock of our work, we recognize that inclusive and culturally informed language can effectively articulate our mission to amplify Native voices, respond to the growing needs of Indigenous peoples, and dismantle the systems of oppression that make philanthropy necessary.

To put it simply, examining and advancing how we communicate with each other helps us all nurture authentic and beneficial relationships between Native communities and the philanthropic sector.

We hope that by reading and understanding this guide, you will join us and create the changes needed for philanthropy to better reflect the peoples it was intended to serve.
Language matters; the words we use carry power. Language is also personal, regional, constantly evolving, and responsive to the world around us. The terms below are intended to be a starting point to a longer educational journey, and please be aware that definitions may adjust over time. Familiarizing yourself with the terms below before engaging with Indigenous communities or organizations is the first step. You will need to take the initiative to learn more.
Identity terminology

Above all, allies and partners must understand that Indigenous identity is nuanced. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to Indigenous identity, and individual preferences may vary from person to person. According to the 2020 Indigenous Futures Survey, "Most Native American participants identify themselves to others using their Specific Tribe or Tribal Nation, while some prefer to identify themselves as Native American, Native or Indigenous. Notably, American Indian, which used to be a common term for Natives in North America has generally fallen out of favor."[2]

Note: Many of the terms listed below are legal terms that are used in treaty documents, the United States Constitution, modern case law, and more, and thus require continued use today even though some Indigenous communities do not prefer these terms.

Pluralization: When referring to Indigenous Peoples and cultures, you should use the plural form to note the diversity of these communities. For more information, see the section titled “Indigenous cultures are distinct, not monolithic.”

- Aboriginal: Aboriginal (with a capital ‘A’) is generally not used to describe the Indigenous Peoples of what is now known as North America and is more widely used to describe the Indigenous Peoples of what is now known as Australia. However, the appropriate language and terminology used to name Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is a nuanced issue that is NOT explored in this guide and we encourage you to seek out additional resources.

- Alaska Native: Alaska Natives are the Indigenous Peoples of what is now known as Alaska.

- American Indian: A term that refers to the Indigenous Peoples of what is now known as the contiguous United States and usually excludes Alaska Natives and Native Hawaiians. This term is more commonly used in academia and as a demographic label, and are codified legal terms used in treaty documents. As noted in the 2020 Indigenous Futures Survey referenced above, this term has generally fallen out of favor for self-identification.

- First Nations: A term that refers to the Indigenous Peoples of what is now known as Canada.

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1 https://ippreport.nativephilanthropy.org/
- **Indian**: Some Indigenous Peoples use “Indian” or “NDN” as a colloquial or slang name for each other, but this term should never be used by non-Indigenous people to refer to an Indigenous person or Peoples. However, the word “Indian” is also still used in the following contexts:
  - Federal agencies such as the Bureau of Indian Affairs or Indian Health Services.
  - Names of federally recognized Tribes.

- **Indian Country**: Among Native peoples, this term is used as the collective name for Native communities in what is now known as the United States. It is also used as a legal term to classify the lands in which Native peoples can practice tribal self-governance.

- **Indigenous**: The original inhabitants of a geographic location. It is often used as an umbrella term for Native Peoples no matter where they originate from. When referring to Indigenous Peoples, be sure to capitalize the word.

- **Native**: A term growing in popularity that many feel is more appropriate than “Native American” as a descriptor for Peoples whose ancestry predates America as a country. It is also used as a synonym for Indigenous. The “N” should always be capitalized.

- **Native American**: A term that refers to American Indians and Alaska Natives and usually excludes Native Hawaiians.

- **Native Hawaiian**: Native Hawaiians or Kānaka Maoli, are the Indigenous Peoples of Hawai‘i. It is considered both inappropriate and inaccurate to address Native Hawaiians as Native Americans since the Kingdom of Hawai‘i was overthrown in a coup led by American businessmen with the help of U.S. troops. In 1993, the U.S. Government officially apologized in a resolution that acknowledged the coup as illegal and “further acknowledges that the Native Hawaiian people never directly relinquished to the United States their claims to their inherent sovereignty as a people over their national lands.”
Terms to use with caution

Philanthrospeak

Philanthrospeak is when mainstream philanthropy uses jargon and complicated terms to refer to basic concepts. These terms often have Eurocentric, capitalistic roots and may be used to intentionally or unintentionally exclude marginalized communities from mainstream philanthropy. These terms do not necessarily need to be avoided all the time, but it’s important to be aware of the additional meanings they can carry.

- **Partner:** Philanthropic giving among Indigenous communities are reciprocal. The key principle of keeping reciprocity at the core is established by building trusting relationships and viewing one another as equal partners.

- **Stakeholder:** This term comes from the colonial practice of claiming land with a stake and removing Indigenous Peoples, the rightful land holders. In a corporate context today, the term is used to describe someone who has a vested interest or whose support is required for an organization to exist. This term is transactional in nature and implies that the stakeholder is in a position of power. Instead of using this term, consider using a word that offers more clarity on who you are in relationship with (collaborator, supporter, audience, funder, etc).

- **Capacity building:** The term capacity building uses deficit-focused language and often reinforces harmful power dynamics. The phrase implies that funders know best, rather than the communities who are closest to the issue, and can perpetuate white-dominant norms of effectiveness.³

³ [https://nonprofitquarterly.org/should-we-cancel-capacity-building/](https://nonprofitquarterly.org/should-we-cancel-capacity-building/)
Terms to avoid

This list of terms to avoid is not exhaustive; we’ve chosen to focus on words or phrases that we have seen in the philanthropy sector.

Dehumanizing & Offensive Language

The terms below are based on offensive and harmful stereotypes of Indigenous Peoples and should not be used at all.

- **Savage:** An extremely offensive term, it is never okay to use this term in any context. This term is used often in modern context with a positive connotation; however, this word is disrespectful to Indigenous Peoples and should be avoided in any context.

- **Civilized/Uncivilized:** Since colonial contact, these terms have been used by European colonizers to characterize everything from land ownership practices to religious beliefs of Indigenous Peoples. The belief that Indigenous Peoples and their practices were “uncivilized” postulates that Europeans, being civilized, were superior and therefore had an inherent right to do with land and Indigenous Peoples as they pleased. In the early 1800s, the new United States government began codifying these terms to justify harmful policies developed for the forced removal of land, children, and cultural practices.

- **Wild or re-wild:** Using either term reinforces the idea that the land here before colonization was a wild uninhabited paradise. The truth is that this land was carefully and intentionally stewarded by Indigenous Peoples through practices like controlled burns, propagation and cultivation of crop plants, and responsible harvesting techniques. The assumption that Indigenous Peoples did not use the land properly, because they didn’t use it as Europeans would allow white people to use the term ‘wild’ to keep Indigenous Peoples off their land. The use of the term “re-wild” to refer to restoring a natural uncultivated state of wilderness perpetuates the belief that the land was not cared for prior to colonization, and serves as erasure for traditional ecological knowledge of land stewardship.
Stereotypes & appropriation

The terms below either have Indigenous origins or have been mistakenly thought to come from Indigenous cultures. These terms are often used in business settings and within the philanthropic sector and should be avoided because they are culturally insensitive.

- **Off the reservation**: This phrase is sometimes used to describe someone who is acting irrational. It stems from the late 1800s when Indigenous Peoples were violently punished or murdered if they left the reservation. Using this phrase implies that Indigenous Peoples are inherently irrational and deserve to be confined to reservations.⁴

- **Too many chiefs, not enough Indians**: This phrase is typically used when referring to a hierarchy. It’s inappropriate to use because it wrongly stereotypes Indigenous Peoples as lazy and incapable of making decisions.⁵

- **Discover**: In 1493, Pope Alexander issued a proclamation claiming that any land not inhabited by Christians was available to be “discovered.” In a historical context, the term continues to be used as if Indigenous Peoples were never living on the land. There was no discovery of land, only acts of colonization.⁶

- **Powwow**: Many non-Indigenous people use the term for almost any event or gathering, disregarding the importance of these sacred ceremonies and the struggle that Indigenous Peoples faced when these ceremonies were forbidden by law. Indigenous Peoples use this ceremony to celebrate their heritage, art, and community, not for a casual office meeting.²

- **Spirit animal**: People will use this term as a means to reference themselves as a person, thing, or animal that best represents them. However, using “spirit animal” in that context both misinterprets sacred relationships with animals and misrepresents the various spiritual ceremonies that many Tribes practice. While not all Indigenous Peoples share these beliefs, for those that do these practices are sacred and can be very private.

- **Low man on the totem pole**: Some people may use this phrase to refer to an unimportant person with a low rank, but totem poles are sacred objects in many Indigenous cultures. This phrase diminishes and misrepresents the symbolic meaning that totem poles have. In some cultures, the carvings at the bottom of the totem pole are actually seen as the most significant.²

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Language around place & land

Philanthropic giving often happens locally, with a focus on a specific city, region, or landscape, which is why it’s important for philanthropists to remember that Indigenous Peoples have been stewards of this land since time immemorial. The following points highlight things to keep in mind when talking about places across this land.

- Many monuments and places have names that are either offensive to Indigenous Peoples or celebrate people who have spread bigotry and racism.
- There are healing efforts underway to rename these places both to remove offensive terms and honor Indigenous Peoples history and presence as the first Peoples of this land.
- Indigenous Peoples have an emotional and spiritual relationship to certain monuments and pieces of land. There is a need to respect their land with the same respect one has for a church, temple, or synagogue.
The term philanthropy is often viewed through the lens of settler colonial framework. As Indigenous Peoples, we have been practicing philanthropy since time immemorial; as it is inherent to our ways of living, it has not had one name. The idea of indigenizing philanthropy is different from mainstream philanthropy because it is relational, reciprocal, and non-hierarchical. Below, we explore how we at Native Americans in Philanthropy think of giving. We invite non-Indigenous people and organizations to reflect on how this relates to mainstream philanthropic practices.
Indigenous Peoples value the importance of giving.

Our culture at Native Americans in Philanthropy is rooted in generosity, respect, responsibility, partnership and reciprocity. These values hold true to this day and are what inspire our continued philanthropic work as Indigenous Peoples. Although Indigenous acts of giving may look different from what Western society refers to as 'philanthropy,' our philanthropic roots must be respected and acknowledged. Within formal Indigenous philanthropic institutions, examples include Indigenous-led foundations, tribal enterprise giving, community development financial institutions, and pooled funding collaboratives, as well as nonprofit funds. Our communities have generations of knowledge that the sector can use to strengthen their practices, but funders must be willing to treat us as equal partners in this work.

Giving is relational.

For Indigenous Peoples, giving is about taking care of our families and our relatives. Indigenous Peoples view giving as a moral responsibility to support each other and ultimately maintain our sovereignty. It is often said that 'Indigenous existence is resistance.' Our existence would not have been possible without the support and resources that have been and continue to be shared between Tribal Nations. Under the framework of Indigenizing philanthropy, funders must understand that giving is about much more than a simple exchange of resources. It is about building authentic relationships that aim to support the existence of different cultures, values, and languages.


Giving is reciprocal.

Indigenous Peoples believe that reciprocity is critical for giving because it creates a culture of generosity and long-standing relationships. Giving is more than just a two-way exchange of resources. To create an authentic, reciprocal relationship, we must first acknowledge each other’s needs and cultures to create a mutually beneficial plan. When we view giving as a mere transaction, there is no investment being made in the communities we are trying to help. Indigenizing philanthropy means building meaningful and long-lasting relationships to better serve all of our communities.

Giving is intergenerational.

Indigenous philanthropy understands that the problems of today will not be solved tomorrow. We aim to distribute wealth now to better serve our world for generations to come. We all have a collective responsibility to establish a sense of security for future generations. This means guiding the path forward so we are celebrating short term results while pacing toward the long term goal. The Seventh Generation principle, which is based on a Haudenosaunee philosophy, can be a guide for funders when considering the impact of today’s decisions: the Seventh Generation principle asks us to ensure that our actions today will result in a sustainable world for our relatives seven generations in the future. Intergenerational thinking is not just looking forward, but looking back as well. Funders need to understand that eliminating generational trauma is a long and strategic process, and that we are progressing toward a society where children will no longer suffer from systematic failures.

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10 https://www.haudenosauneeconfederacy.com/values/

11 https://americanindian.si.edu/nationtonation/
Giving is generous.

Indigenous Peoples know that generosity is not the same as charity. When we give, we give freely and abundantly. We give without any expectation of praise or credit, but rather the hope for others to practice generosity in their own lives. Indigenizing philanthropy means giving without strings attached. It means avoiding harmful stereotypes that position funders as the saviors and Indigenous Peoples in need of saving. Instead, it uses an asset-based approach to invest in Indigenous community strengths and leadership.

Giving is respectful.

Indigenous Peoples ground our giving in respect. We recognize that for authentic giving to happen, both parties must view each other as equals and have a mutual respect for one another. When working with Indigenous Peoples, philanthropy often tries to define these communities by their needs and deficits. It's important for funders to see and acknowledge the important resources and strengths that Indigenous Peoples draw from their cultural power and bring to the table. Both funders and Indigenous communities should feel that their voices are heard and valued in these relationships.


Addressing misconceptions
Tribal sovereignty is inherent, not conferred.

Tribal sovereignty is the right of Indigenous Peoples to govern themselves. These rights are inherent and predate the existence of federal governments. Tribal sovereignty has been recognized by Congress, the Constitution, statutes, and treaties and has been affirmed and reaffirmed by U.S. Supreme Court decisions for over 200 years. It is critical to understand that the government of what is now known as the United States recognizes these rights rather than grants them to Tribal Nations. These rights exist and will always exist regardless of acknowledgement or involvement from colonial governments.

Indigenous cultures are distinct, not monolithic.

Currently in the U.S., there are hundreds of unique and distinct Tribal Nations, each with their own body of government, set of laws, written and verbal language, and way of living. As of 2022, there are over 175 Indigenous languages spoken throughout what is now known as the United States. The government also acknowledges this distinction by co-signing over 300 treaties with various Tribal Nations, each treaty complementing the set of rules and regulations established by the Tribal leaders. These languages and treaties serve as an indication that Indigenous Peoples are not a monolithic population.

In fact many Indigenous Peoples identify themselves first as a member of their Tribe, then as an Indigenous person because each has their own historical and cultural identity. There are hundreds of examples of the rich and unique cultures of individual Tribal Nations; one example lies in origin stories. From the Ojibwe People’s Wenebojo story to the Cherokee Water Beetle story, origin stories offer an explanation for how our People arrived on this land – but there is no singular truth. There are many other different creation stories throughout every Tribal Nation, and even variations of the same origin story in the same Tribe. It is important to understand the cultural differences and distinctions between every Tribal Nation and Indigenous person.


16 https://study.com/academy/lesson/native-american-creation-myths.html#:~:text=Lesson%20Summary,-A%20creation%20myth%20is%20a%20symbolic%20story%20told%20by%20a,different%20creation%20myths%20throughout%20history
Offering land acknowledgements as non-Indigenous individuals and organizations.

A land acknowledgment recognizes the Indigenous Peoples who steward or have traditionally stewarded the land your organization occupies. These statements allow you to acknowledge both the history and current presence of colonialism. Land acknowledgements should be intentional, well-researched, and respectful. Before creating a land acknowledgement, ask yourself why you are doing so. Is a land acknowledgement relevant to the gathering you’re hosting or the material you’re presenting? Are you planning on pairing that land acknowledgement with meaningful support for Indigenous communities?

While land acknowledgements can allow for greater understanding and relationship building, they also have the potential to come off as performative. Authentic allyship means going beyond simply checking a box. While it’s important to learn about basic facts like the name (including pronunciation) and cultures of the Indigenous Peoples to whom the land belongs, it’s critical to pair a land acknowledgement with significant action and support for Indigenous communities.

If you choose to invite an Indigenous person to participate in a land acknowledgement, make sure to compensate them properly and respect their right to say no if they do not wish to engage in what is often emotionally taxing work for Indigenous Peoples.

Land acknowledgements are the first, but certainly not the last, step that philanthropy organizations can take to support Indigenous Peoples. Organizations must move beyond land acknowledgements and take concrete action to support Indigenous communities and build authentic relationships with them.\footnote{Land Acknowledgement Guide. (n.d.). Retrieved June 30, 2022, from https://vyvffsf9t8kvkg7cidtcma-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Land_Acknowledgement.pdf}
Indigenous Peoples and Tribal Nations represent a range of socioeconomic statuses.

Despite data from the National Financial Capability Study indicating that Indigenous Peoples are receiving lower incomes and experience higher unemployment than other groups, only 1 in 3 Indigenous persons are living in poverty. While Indigenous Peoples statistically receive lower incomes than other population groups, evidence confirms socioeconomic status disparity across all other groups.18

Furthermore, not all Indigenous Peoples receive the same volume of federal funding, and a large portion do not receive anything at all. Only 39% of Native Tribes have casinos, and only 8.9% of the total Native population profits from this gaming. Native populations that profit from casinos and gaming use these benefits to support community services, local schools, access to health care, and more — and come with strict federal oversight and regulation.19

Many times the misconception of socioeconomic status stems from bias and inadequate data practices. Wealth data is available from the US government and there is very limited data on Indigenous Peoples overall.17

Forming authentic, trusting, and reciprocal relationships with Tribal Nations takes time and will not be successful if rushed.

There is historic distrust between the U.S. government and Tribal Nations. To restore trusts with Tribal Nations, philanthropists must first acknowledge their own bias and understand the range of cultural practices and identities amongst Indigenous Peoples.20 Specifically in regards to philanthropy, funders need to work to understand what protocols, if any, have been established by individual Tribal Nations for engaging in philanthropic partnerships and then follow them. Tribal Nations have options in forming charitable organizations as part of tribal governments. The 7871 organization is the most popular, but there are other alternatives that provide Tribal Nations the opportunities to better manage philanthropic grant funds.


Additionally, there is no “list” of Tribal Nations in need that any Indigenous person or organization can provide to funders. Rather, we encourage funders to learn about individual Tribal Nations’ strengths, challenges and needs independently and open a dialogue with those they seek to form reciprocal partnerships with.\(^{21}\) Tribal Nations have varying levels of experience and familiarity working with the philanthropic sector. Funders should focus on meeting each Tribal Nation based on their prior experience and unique needs. Philanthropy can assist with a range of economic development from education to the arts, anything that can support community development and is important to Indigenous communities.\(^{20}\)

Philanthropists also need to be aware of the principle of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC), which refers to the right of Indigenous Peoples to give or withhold their consent for any action that would affect their lands, territories, or rights.\(^{22}\) Indigenous Peoples have a plan for their Peoples, and are not in the position of needing saviors, rather open to reciprocal relationships of giving, where each party involved has the authority to do what’s best for them, while also helping the other.

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Additional resources

The following resources can help you expand your knowledge as you begin your educational journey.

**Be a Myth Buster (Illuminative):** This document addresses common misconceptions about Indigenous Peoples that are often presented in pop culture.

**History Through a Native Lens (Investing in Native Communities):** This interactive timeline provides an overview of historically traumatic events, settler colonial policies, and Native resistance movements from 3000 BCE to present day.

**A Guide to Indigenous Land Acknowledgement (Native Governance Center):** This resource provides a more detailed list of considerations for crafting and sharing land acknowledgements.

**All My Relations Podcast:** A podcast that talks about what it means to be an Indigenous person in real time.

**A Guide to Changing Racist and Offensive Place Names in the United States:** This resource explains the significance of place names and offers a step-by-step rename places that have names that are offensive to Indigenous Peoples.

**How Racism Against Native People Is Normalized, From Mascots to Costumes (Teen Vogue):** This article discusses how harmful stereotypes of Native peoples show up day-to-day and includes a list of terms and phrases that are offensive to Native peoples.

**Indigenous Futures Survey Report (2020):** This is the first ever study conducted for Indigenous Peoples and led by Indigenous Peoples aimed at understanding the priorities and needs of Indigenous individuals and communities in what is now known as the United States.
Diversify your feed

Visit the organizations below to learn more about Indigenous Peoples and cultures. For more information, feel free to explore additional digital channels (such as their website, Instagram, and LinkedIn).

- Illuminative (@_IllumiNatives)
- The National Congress of American Indians (@NCAI1944)
- National Indian Child Welfare Association (@NativeChildren)
- Native American Rights Fund (@NDNRights)
- Association on American Indian Affairs (@IndianAffairs)
- Urban Indian Health Institute (@TheUIHI)
- First Nations Development Institute (@FNDI303)
- National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition (@NABSHC)
- Native Governance Center (@NativeGov)
- Center for Native American Youth (@Center4Native)
- Protect ICWA (@ProtectICWA)
References


