
Essential Understandings of Native Americans in Oregon

Introduction

Learning about American Indian tribes in Oregon is important for all students. American Indian people have lived in the area now known as Oregon since time immemorial. Each tribal nation has a distinct origin story, worldview, and timeline of its history and contemporary context. However, much of that information has been presented to the general public from a non-Native American perspective and is filled with clichés, misconceptions, and falsehoods.

Put simply, the media, popular culture, and academic and political institutions of the United States have often sought to suppress the ugly truths of white European colonization of the North American continent. That history has been marked by genocidal practices, the spread of disease, the forced removal of Native children to boarding schools, cultural suppression, religious persecution, and federal policies aimed at the destruction of lifeways, including termination of tribal nationhood and sovereignty. Unfortunately, the U.S. education system has been complicit in this destructive and dehumanizing process. Many Native people still bear the physical, emotional, and psychological scars of having attended Indian Boarding Schools, while even in contemporary times Native students find themselves—their cultures, their identities—almost entirely missing from the school curriculum.

These nine Essential Understandings have been created to serve as an introduction to the vast diversity of the Native American experience in Oregon. Native American existences and experiences in this country, while painful and appalling, are also filled with beauty, resiliency, determination, and strength. These Essential Understandings seek to demonstrate this and to validate the inherent power and sovereignty of Indigenous nations. Through the thoughtful selection of overlapping and shared areas of concern, effort, belief, and existence, educators will have a collective foundation from which to teach, with honesty and integrity, the truth of tribal peoples. In doing so, the correct narrative will move forward for future generations.

As educators engage with this material there are two important things to consider. First, although this resource provides a general statewide and, at times, national view of the topics, it is important to be tribally specific whenever possible. Second, keep in mind that the terms American Indian, Native American, Tribal, First Nations, Native, Indigenous, and Indian are all acceptable in varied settings and can invite important discussion.

Essential Understandings of Native Americans in Oregon *(Continued)*

Essential Understanding: Identity

American Indian identities are complex, vibrant, and diverse. There is no single, homogeneous American Indian identity.

All human beings need to have a sense of pride and integrity in order to develop self-esteem and self-confidence. Too often, American Indian people have been misrepresented or left out of the historical record entirely. Native identity is complex and is marked by resilience. Tribal people continue to be impacted by historical trauma, including the theft of land and the suppression of Native languages, cultural traditions, and lifeways. In addition, as members of sovereign tribal nations, American Indian people have a unique relationship to the U.S. government. There is no other racial or ethnic group in America that has this political status.

American Indian identity can be an extremely complex and politically sensitive topic. For example, some tribes use blood quantum to determine membership. This method was initially forced upon tribes by the U.S. government. Blood quantum is a term used to quantify the degree of Native American blood and to define bloodlines relating to ancestry.

Another complex aspect of American Indian identity is the issue of tribal membership. The majority of Native people are enrolled members of at least one tribe, but others are not. There are many reasons a Native person may not be an enrolled member of a tribe, including but not limited to: failure to meet enrollment criteria, U.S. government termination of tribal sovereignty, blood quantum, politics, family decisions, and an unwillingness to align with a governance structure created by a non-Native American entity (the U.S. Bureau of Acknowledgement that requires proof of Indianness).

In the United States, Native Americans are members or descendants of nearly 600 individual tribal communities. While it is never appropriate to say that any cultural or ethnic group should be lumped together, the list below can provide some sociocultural and political context of Native American communities:

- Not all people who identify as Native American live on or near a reservation.
- Not all people who identify as Native American are enrolled in a tribe or tribal nation.
- Some people who identify as Native American are multiracial.
- Not all people who identify as Native American can be easily identified by their physical appearance.
- Native American identities are shaped by many complex social, political, historical, linguistic, and cultural factors.
- Native American tribes maintain a unique status as sovereign nations within a nation.
- Some people who identify as Native American will have limited or no contact with their Native American heritage and traditions.

Essential Understandings of Native Americans in Oregon *(Continued)*

The important thing to understand is that Native American youth are not homogenous. They are—like all youth—complex and whole individuals. There is no single universalizing experience of Native American youth. However, there have been inconsistent and pervasive myths and stereotypes that saturate K–12 education systems, media, social networks and more that lead people to believe one-dimensional ideas and stereotypes about Native American youth. Common stereotypes include:

- A majority of American Indian people are alcoholics
- A majority of American Indian people live in abject poverty
- American Indian people living on reservations have almost no economic opportunity
- Many American Indian people live in food desert areas (i.e., areas in which it is difficult to buy affordable or good-quality fresh food)
- Many American Indian people lack education

While there is truth that Native Americans are disproportionately impacted by alcoholism (and other stereotypes above), what is missing from the context is the systemic racism and continuing colonization that create these unhealthy circumstances. Further, policies like relocation and termination perpetuate and continue to threaten the cultural health of Native American communities. Yet, in the face of these conditions, tribal nations have been embodying their own sovereignty and cultural strengths to find ways to counter the harmful impacts of these policies.

Tribal websites

Burns Paiute Tribe

<https://www.burnspaiute-nsn.gov/>

Confederated Tribes of Coos, Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw

<https://ctclusi.org/>

The Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde Community of Oregon

<https://www.grandronde.org/>

Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians

<http://ctsi.nsn.us/>

Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation

<https://ctuir.org/>

Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs

<https://warmsprings-nsn.gov/>

Coquille Indian Tribe

<https://www.coquilletribe.org/>

Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians

<https://www.cowcreek.com/>

Klamath Tribes

<http://klamathtribes.org/>