

THE NORTHWEST ARCTIC INSTITUTE:
AN INDIGENOUS APPROACH TO PREVENTION

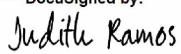
By

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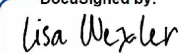
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THE NORTHWEST ARCTIC INSTITUTE:
AN INDIGENOUS APPROACH TO PREVENTION

A

PROJECT METHODOLOGY PAPER

By

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May 2016

Abstract

This paper will cover concepts of leadership in Indigenous contexts, Indigenous community development strategies, and Indigenous community healing and wellness, as they apply to the history and framework of the Northwest Arctic Institute (Nwai) program. The Nwai is a weeklong culturally based prevention program designed for Alaska Native peoples. The program incorporates Indigenous knowledge and pedagogy into the sharing of core teachings about resilience, adaptation, and cultural identity. It covers the impacts of rapid social, cultural, and political changes on the lives of Alaska Native peoples. The Nwai is for adults interested in furthering their own personal healing and in working on wellness within their families and communities. This paper explains an Indigenous approach to healing and the theoretical framework for supporting community level capacity building models among Alaska Native peoples. The paper also describes the Nwai planning process and methodology. In addition to the paper, which will meet completion requirements for the Masters in Rural Development at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, I will co-produce a documentary film on the Nwai to share our experience with the intention of raising awareness, fostering conversation, and inspiring others to action.

The analysis and descriptions are based on the my life experience as an Alaska Native leader. I have served Indigenous communities for twenty years in roles spanning ten unique capacities, including education administrator, tribal administrator, tribal chief, national tribal non-profit executive director, for-profit Alaska Native owned corporate chief executive officer, tribal renewable energy manager, tribal wellness manager, and as a board member to regional, national, and international Indigenous organizations. The theoretical framework for leadership selection is derived from my work in developing, planning, and leading facilitation of the Northwest Arctic Institute, which was based on Indigenous youth leadership development and prevention experience at the local, national, and international levels. This history is covered within the Introduction and Program History sections.

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Acknowledgements

It is important for me to begin by acknowledging those who have helped to shape and support the growth of knowledge and experience that led to success in implementing the Northwest Arctic Institute. This list includes hundreds of close friends, family, and mentors, too many to individually name. So, I will simply name a few in each area to help frame the importance of particular roles, relative to my work.

First and foremost, I must thank my immediate family, who are at the foundation of my support base and from whom I have learned so much. In short, I would like to acknowledge my late grandmother Katherine Peter, late grandfather Steven Peter Sr, mother Adeline Peter-Raboff, and life partner Enei Begaye Peter. Also my children Olav, Naniezh, Cheelil, and Anabah for understanding and accepting that their father is busy with a purpose that has their future in mind.

All the people of Vashraii K'oo (Arctic Village) for the love, guidance, and support I received from the time I was a small child, to this day. I would like to acknowledge a few who influenced my early thinking and perspectives, the late James Gilbert, late Isaac Tritt Sr., late Lincoln Tritt, late Moses Sam, late Peter Tritt Sr., late Timothy Sam, Naomi Tritt, Lillian Garnett, Gideon James, Trimble Gilbert, Sarah James, and Jimmy John.

Alaska Native leaders from across the state, such as the late Chief Peter John, late Chief David Salmon, late Jonathon Solomon, late Bernice Joseph, late Etok Edwardsen, Poldine Carlo, Will Mayo, Mike Williams, Heather Kendall-Miller, and Steve Ginnis to name a few.

National and international Indigenous leaders who chose to invest the time to help impart stories, knowledge, and guidance as I navigated the realms of Indigenous leadership at a young age. A few I will acknowledge here are Chief Oren Lyons (Faithkeeper of the Turtle Clan, Onondaga Nation), Tom Goldtooth (Dine / Dakota, Executive Director, Indigenous Environmental Network), Andrea Carmen (Yaqui Nation, Executive Director,

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International Indian Treaty Council), and Winona Laduke (Ojibwe, Executive Director, Honor the Earth).

Those who took part in the many retreats that substantially influenced the Northwest Arctic Institute, from around the state, nation, and world. A few who stand out to me now as I reflect are Coumba Toure (Mali), Shilpa Jain (India), Ocean Robbins (California), Puma Quispe (Peru), Nuttarote Wangwinyoo (Thailand), Tad Hargrave (Canada), Cathy Tagnak Rexford (Inupiaq, Alaska), and Earl Keggulluk Polk (Yupiaq, Alaska).

All those who took part in our work within the Bering Straits and Northwest Arctic regions, among whom are Lance Kramer, Adeline Aucha Kameroff, Ian Erlich, Lisa Wexler, Bridie Trainor, Marsh Chamberlain, Tanya Kirk, Aprille Shepherd, Jean Marie-Barr, Bobby Evans, Saima Chase, Cathy Tagnak Rexford, Jennie Johnson, Hannah Weinronk, Maggie Swanson, Lisa Ellanna, Marjorie Tahbone, Roberta Moto, Bree Swanson, and many others.

Thanks to the academic mentors and colleagues who have helped to guide and inform my work and studies, many of whom also served on my graduate committee at some point or another over the twelve years it has taken me to complete this masters program. They include the late Oscar Kawagley, Graham Hingangaroa Smith, Verna Kirkness, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Beth Leonard, Charlene Stern, Judy Ramos, Lisa Wexler, and Jenny Bell Jones.

Finally, I would like to thank leaders at the Maniilaq Association and Kawerak Inc., and community members for inviting me to become a part of this work in your regions. It has been an honor to learn from you and help however I could, in this work to improve the well being of our peoples and communities in Alaska.

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Orientation

In this paper I cover a broad and complex set of concepts, theory, and pedagogy, as well as pieces of history. The purpose of writing was to complete the methodology paper requirement for my masters degree program at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. A personal goal was to have the paper be relevant for use within the community and academic arenas, as well as be engaging to read. The purpose and personal goal were not in complete alignment, primarily because of the need to contain the length of the paper, so there are a couple limitations and nuances that I would like to highlight prior to readers enjoying the narrative.

First, there are some specialized academic terms, also known as jargon, that I use within the paper, but do not take the time to define at length. This may require some readers to research definitions, most of which are readily available online. Our Native elders remind us to explain what we are talking about, so that we bring others along on our learning journey. In the western context this is addressed by defining the intended audience (i.e. K-12, undergraduate, graduate, etc.) for the text and curriculum level being covered. In this regard, I feel that this paper is appropriate for scholars at the high school, undergraduate, and graduate levels. Each will garner pieces of insight that may be relevant to their studies. In a longer version, I would dedicate the time to define the words, concepts, and theories at greater length.

Second, I chose to write this paper largely in the first person, utilizing a storytelling format, which is an accepted Indigenous method for conveyance of knowledge and technically allowed by the degree program. My hope is that this translates into an interesting as well as informative academic analysis and overview.

Third, there are several theoretical and conceptual sections of the paper that I would have liked to expand on at length. The deadline to complete the paper was one inhibiting factor and the other was the desire to save some of my analysis for a future dissertation.

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In relation to the subject matter of healing that the Northwest Arctic Institute was developed for as a prevention model, I chose not to focus on describing epidemiological studies or data. The data and analysis are important, but not the focus of this methodology paper. Instead, I chose to share a story from my family's history and connect it to the broader historical context of health challenges facing many Alaska Native people and communities. I feel that this approach helps to achieve two goals. First, it provides a real life lens into the historic and contemporary dynamics surrounding health issues among Alaska Native peoples, beyond statistical analysis. And second, it lays the foundation for readers to understand my personal relationship to and experience with the subject matter.

Broad knowledge about the cultural and ethnic diversity among Alaska Native peoples is yet to be common knowledge, so I offer a brief overview of the term, as it will be used regularly throughout this paper.

Alaska Native peoples refers to a culturally, linguistically, and historically diverse group of Indigenous peoples that inhabit the State of Alaska. Alaska Native peoples can be most broadly categorized into nine distinct Indigenous populations: the Denaa (Athabascan), Inupiat, Yupik, Unungan (Aleut), Alutiiq, Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshian, and Eyak. It is important to emphasize the extent of diversity among these broad categories when discussing leadership in Alaska Native contexts. There are two hundred twenty nine federally recognized tribes and twenty distinct non-mutually intelligible languages (<http://www.uafanlc.arsc.edu/data/Online/G961K2010/anlmap.png>, 2013). The tribes' geographic span, when transposed over the continental United States, would spread them from Florida to California and up to North Dakota.

Yet, there are similarities among Alaska Native peoples and Indigenous peoples globally, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) points out, "imperialism frames the indigenous experience" (p. 20). In this regard, Alaska Native peoples share a common set of experiences with imperialism and colonization, first subjugated by Russia and later by the United States, following the Treaty of Cession in 1867.

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I cover some pieces of this history within the paper, as it greatly impacts the health of Alaska Native peoples. I will conclude this orientation with these succinct definitions of imperialism and colonization by Bagele Chilisa (2012) to reflect upon:

“Imperialism, in the more recent sense in which the term is used, refers to the acquisition of an empire of overseas colonies and the Europeanization of the globe. The term is also used to describe the “the practice, theory and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory” (Said, 1993)” (p. 8)

“Colonization, defined as the subjugation of one group by another, was a brutal process through which two thirds of the world experienced invasion and loss of territory accompanied by the destruction of political, social, and economic systems, leading to external political control and economic dependence on the West: France, Britain, Germany, Spain, Italy, Russia, and the United States.” (P. 9)

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Introduction

In the transference of Indigenous knowledge, adhering to an Indigenous pedagogy (method of learning) is just as important as the content of the curriculum. A lesson can be void of impact if not appropriately transferred from teacher to student. In small tribes, people know one another quite intimately. Each person's path of intellectual, emotional, and spiritual growth is witnessed by the community, often with interest to watch for the self-reflexive internalization and applied practice of life lessons. Over time people come to understand what they can expect from one another. It is common to know who carries or has mastered particular types of knowledge and skills, and can therefore be depended upon to lead/teach in any given area. In the harsh and unforgiving Arctic environment inhabited by many Alaska Native peoples, it is often a matter of survival and always an aspect of communal significance.

The written word is a relatively new endeavor, a new methodology, when it comes to the conveyance of Indigenous knowledge. To understand where the teaching is originating from, one must situate the self through life story. Thus I begin with a relative glimpse into my story. My intention is to set a context and invite the reader to garner insight about the experiences and ancestry that have helped shape my lens on life.

While writing this introduction, I was requested to offer federal testimony to a Senate Committee on Indian Affairs Field Hearing entitled "H.O.P.E. for the Future: Helping Our People Engage to Protect Our Youth" (<https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-112shrg74709/content-detail.html>). The focus was on my work and understanding in regards to Alaska Native youth suicide prevention, so much of this section mirrors the submission I provided as a part of my federal testimony, although citations are expanded to bring in insights from other researchers and scholars.

I was born to a Gwich'in (Denaa) and Koyukon (Denaa) mother and a Jewish father. I lost my father to divorce when I was five years old and did not see him again before he died. For this reason, I was raised as a Gwich'in person from my earliest memories. But

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this story begins further back, to the time of my grandmother. She was adopted at a young age after losing her parents to disease -- one of several epidemics that had caused a great number of deaths among Alaska Native people from 1870-1950. As a child, following the adoption, my grandmother was sexually abused by men in her new community and she did not realize until adulthood that this was not a normal part of what childhood was supposed to entail. This later weighed heavily on her relationship with my grandfather and their ability to raise my aunts, uncles, and mother in a secure and openly loving way.

My grandparents chose to send my mother away at a very young age to California to receive a better school-based education. At the time this was highly encouraged, if not forced during a time period in federal government policies that is now recognized as an era of tribal termination and forced assimilation. Assimilation policies attempted to strip Alaska Native peoples of their culture and identity, enacted through educational, religious, and political methods. It was in this same time period that the territory of Alaska was successfully desegregating; in our own homelands signs that read “no dogs, no natives” were finally being taken down from business windows. Few Alaska Native people were western educated at that time.

Stories of the treatment of American Indians in the continental United States made it clear to our people that we would need to learn the western ways better in order to defend our rights to our land and way of life against a dominant culture that had already shown our people great disregard. My mother returned to Alaska after only a couple years in California, but was then sent to the Wrangell Institute boarding school for a year and again to high school in Pennsylvania. Diane Hirschberg and Suzanne Sharp (2005) cover this era in their report on the impact of boarding schools on Alaska Natives stating, “the initial goals of formal education in the North were to Christianize and “civilize” Alaska Natives (Darnell and Hoem, 1996, p. 62). Over time, the federal, territorial, and state governments established a boarding school system to accomplish these goals” (p.1). Dine scholar Tiffany Lee captures the broader dynamic of the impacts of the boarding school experience on Native children:

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Boarding schools had an especially negative impact on Native children, as the primary purpose of these schools was to teach Native students how to become like white Americans. Native children were told that their culture, language, and identity were worthless. (Lee 2006 p.5)

Like many Alaska Native people of my grandmother and mother's generation, my mother endured the emotional, psychological, spiritual, cultural, and physical duress of a rapid transition from an Indigenous way of life on the land to the twenty-first century 'city life'. Federal policy and practices, implemented through schools and churches, enforced the assimilation of Indigenous peoples through the direct and indirect eradication of rights, language, culture, and philosophy. My mother's generation was born into a world that immediately told her, both in popular culture and in government policies, that she must change.

The policies and practices of colonization forced upon Alaska Native peoples brought with it the social illnesses of sexual abuse, alcoholism, and neglect, which can be passed from one generation to the next (Napolean 1991). This is referred to as historical trauma, which resembles an experience of post-traumatic stress disorder among many Alaska Native people. Each generation is born receiving pieces of the scars from assaults carried out on previous generations. This is why it was important for my story to originate at least two generations back, as the lived experiences of my grandmother and mother weighed heavily on my own lived experience. Joseph Gone describes the dynamics of Historical Trauma in his study on a Northern Algonquian reserve treatment program:

As the contemporary descendants of the indigenous peoples of North America, contemporary Native Americans have been shown to suffer from disproportionately high degrees of psychological distress (Zahran et al. 2004). Both researchers and professionals have consistently associated this distress with indigenous historical experiences of European colonization (Duran, 2006; Kirmayer, Simpson, and Cargo, 2003). ...In contrast to personal experiences of a

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traumatic nature, HT (Historical Trauma) calls attention to the intergenerational accumulation of risk for poor mental health status among Native peoples that purportedly originates from the depredations of past colonial subjugation, including ethnocidal policies and practices. (Gone, 2009, p.2)

The multiple layers of stress and pain associated with generations of assault, abuse, and loss often become cyclical in nature, moving from one generation to the next. My family has not been immune to this; my story, until recently, was not an exception to this cycle.

Shortly after my father left when I was five years old, we were living in Anchorage. My mother felt a calling to send me north to my grandmother in Gwichyaa Zhee (Fort Yukon) and my grandfather in Vashraii K'oo (Arctic Village). She felt it was important that I be raised traditionally among our people -- the reverse of her early experience being assimilated into the western ways. The following years, until I was a teenager, I moved from village to village and sometimes back into the low-income neighborhoods of Anchorage. I lived with grandparents, uncle, relatives, and my immediate family. Within those times, I faced hunger, sexual abuse, bullying, neglect, racism, confusion, exposure to heavy alcohol and substance abuse, and suicidal ideation. In retrospect I realize, that similar to my grandmother, I did not recognize the hardship I endured while growing up.

Simultaneously, I was immersed in an Indigenous worldview; I received a cultural education from the land, animals, and people. This shaped my understanding of what it means to be Gwich'in, to be human. I had to grow up fast and my grandmother later reflected to me as an adult, that she knew when I was thirteen years old that I was already an independent young man. Admittedly I was one who was unconsciously wounded, hurting, and naïve.

Just before my teenage years, our mother moved my brothers, sister, and I back together under one roof into the low-income area of Fairbanks. We ate food bank rations and I hunted ptarmigan and rabbits in the willows with my brother near our apartments, until the police intervened. My mother had made courageous changes in her life through her

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own healing process by that time. She expected success from us, her children, and kept our home free of alcohol and drug abuse. There is no one I respect more than my mother, her strength and determination demonstrated to us what was possible in the face of great adversity. She opened the door to this path that I now follow.

It was during this same time that Alaska Native youth began to die by suicide at an alarming rate. I remember being brought into a private room at Ryan Jr. High School with about twelve other Alaska Native boys, where we were lectured by a non-Native man about how we were far more likely to go to jail or die by the time we were twenty five years old than to finish high school. It was the early days of health prevention, with attempts made to scare us into following a different path. Within a year, one of us died by suicide and over the next six years, only two finished high school.

I was lucky to survive my teenage years. Then at seventeen years old, I had an epiphany and my consciousness awoke in a new way. I realized that I was not doing okay and neither were many of the Alaska Native people around me. I thought about how I would become a father one day, and that I had the power to choose the life path I would walk for my children. I knew that transforming my life would require a great deal of courage because I would need to acknowledge and face my problems. I chose to heal and develop myself as a person so that I could be there for my family and for my people.

After finding this clarity, my first interrelated steps involved pursuing my western and cultural education. First, I had to investigate the history of what our people went through that led us to our current condition. I was taking action on what Jeremy Garcia and Valerie Shirley would later refer to as the “first task in decolonizing the mind,” which is “rediscovering history from an Indigenous perspective and developing a critical indigenous consciousness of Indigenous peoples’ history with colonization and assimilation” (Garcia, Shirley, 2012, p. 83).

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It did not take long for me to find other young Alaska Natives who carried similar interests. Together we began what has become my lifelong work, the pursuit of truth, healing, knowledge, and self-determination among Alaska Native peoples.

The emphasis in my early work was on youth leadership development, with the first gathering hosted over twenty years ago. As we honed the process and approach to leadership development, we realized that a necessary first step in leadership development among Indigenous peoples was to provide space and time for healing.

We built a process that provided a confidential safe space, without judgment, for people to share what they had been through in life. For many it was a first time opportunity to sit in a safe environment among Alaska Native peers and realize that we are not alone in feeling the pain, pressure, and loss in our generation. There was relief in the affirmation of feelings and acknowledgement that much of what is happening on a social, political, and economic level is not okay and that anger, frustration, confusion, and depression are natural emotional responses to the experiences we are living with as Alaska Native peoples. Joseph Gone (2009) identified a similar experience as *cathartic disclosure*, one of four primary themes for healing in his Algonquin study, “In sum, a key component of the healing discourse in the counseling program was that painful burdens that were disrupting one’s life might be lifted, relieved, or released through verbal confession and emotional catharsis” (p. 6).

There are natural stages that follow as we deepen our awareness of what our past generations had to endure. We often feel forgiveness and compassion towards our parents and grandparents as we realize that they too must have suffered tremendously in their lifetimes due to great deaths from epidemics, boarding schools, racism, assimilation, abuse, and other traumatizing circumstances. It is not an excuse for unhealthy or harmful behaviors, but it provides for insight into how it came to be.

In sharing our stories with one another in a healthy setting we began the process of re-weaving the social, spiritual, and cultural fabric that once before sustained our peoples.

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We found support, encouragement, and guidance from each other and began making a commitment to ourselves to no longer live life as a victim, but to face our personal challenges and those of our people as compassionate warriors. This perspective led me to a new kind of work focused on the intersections of leadership development, self-determination, and healing.

Several years ago leaders from the Bering Strait and Northwest Arctic regions in Alaska asked me to expand the focus of my efforts to the prevention of suicide. Since that time I have worked with a number of compassionate warriors to develop approaches to suicide prevention and healing that are rooted in the cultural values, knowledge, and practices of our peoples.

I believe that we have the capacity and the knowledge in our communities to address the issues underlying suicide, however it requires people in each community to take a stand by committing to a path of recovery in their own lives and then taking the risk to apply healthy pressure within their families and community. In the past, our elders held such deep personal integrity and respect among the people that they were able to do this without risk, but with the understanding that they were fulfilling their role in sustaining a healthy foundation for their community. This healthy foundation is something that we need to return to, but which can only happen if enough people begin to hold themselves to a self-disciplined path in life.

Research shows that Alaska Native people are much more likely to go to their peers or a family member than to a western-based counselor, therapist, or psychologist when experiencing depression or suicidal ideations (Wexler, L. 2008). This preference makes sense because we know that other Alaska Natives will understand what we are talking about when we express our feelings about the experiences we are having as Alaska Natives. In the past few years, I have listened to the stories and witnessed the pouring of tears from hundreds of Alaska Native youth and young adults. I can attest to the fact that the current level of suffering and pain being felt by Alaska Native peoples today is staggering.

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The path to our recovery will require several factors to be acted upon simultaneously. All are rooted in the need for expanding control over our destiny as Alaska Natives through self-determination. Self-determination is something that we must take upon ourselves to practice as Alaska Natives, but it is also something that the federal and state governments can choose to support or not. This kind of decolonizing process is linked to decreased rates of suicide and substance abuse in tribal communities (Kirmayer et al., 1993; Kirmayer & Valaskakis, 2009).

In this paper, I cover the basic methodology we followed in planning, coordinating, and leading the Northwest Arctic Institute weeklong intensive program focused on supporting village based leaders from the Northwest Arctic.

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Program History

The Northwest Arctic Institute model was based upon twenty years of applied research in delivering culturally based leadership development programs within Alaska, nationally, and internationally. I share this history in acknowledgement of the many people who took part in helping to develop and refine components of what became the Northwest Arctic Institute over these years.

The first renditions of the model began in the mid-1990s with the Native Student Organization (NSO) at the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF), where I served as co-chair, and with a statewide organization called Young Alaska Natives Initiating Change (YANIC) that I co-founded. Through these groups, we hosted University based and statewide leadership development programs. They emphasized connecting young emerging leaders with elders and contemporary leaders to learn history and context to better understand the challenges our people face and to enter into dialogue to encourage broader perspective and bolder action. This group was, in part, a response to the lack of such content and dialogue being afforded to us as students within the University at the undergraduate level. It is important to note that these organizations and the work that was done to envision, organize, and implement the programs was fully led by Alaska Native people, although they were primarily based on Euro-Western academic structures and formats.

A few years later, while serving as the Chief for my tribe in Vashraii K'oo (Arctic Village), we launched the K'eejit Naii Khehkwaii (Young Chiefs) institute. This institute built upon and differentiated from the prior leadership development programs in two ways. First, we developed the program for junior high and high school students with the goal of creating a pathway into tribal leadership at a younger age. Second, we incorporated time out on the land in camp for the transference of Indigenous knowledge in a culturally relevant environment. In contrast to the earlier models, the K'eejit Naii Khehkwaii utilized an Indigenous pedagogy to convey both Gwich'in and western scientific knowledge.

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During these same years my wife Enei Begaye and I founded a non-profit organization called Native Movement, with a mission of advancing Indigenous peoples rights and offering youth leadership development programs. We supported the youth programs in Vashraii K'oo and later helped to organize regional and national youth organizing camps in the southwest, hosted on the lands of the Navajo people. These were large events that brought in more than sixty participants and required extensive partnership building and planning. In one event it would not be unusual to have former Chicano gang members from Los Angeles, urban African American community organizers from Chicago, and Native youth from the Pueblos of New Mexico. These camps focused on covering history, social justice concepts, and organizing tools for social and community change.

At the international level beginning in 2002, I served as a lead facilitator and later board member for a non-profit organization called YES! (<http://www.yesworld.org>) that, at the time, provided weeklong leadership development programs around the world for emerging leaders ages eighteen to thirty-five. Our program development and facilitation team during my time with YES! included representation from West Africa, India, Thailand, Peru, Aotearoa (New Zealand), and the United States. We used a dynamic leadership development model called a Jam (<http://www.yesworld.org/connect/jaminfo/>). The Jams integrated diverse curriculum and pedagogy from the unique cultural, academic, professional, and creative insights we each brought to the team. There were often participants from more than fifteen countries at the Jams. It was during this time that I began to clearly see that our work was functioning as a form of healing that was a critical first stage in leadership development among the people we were gathering.

A majority of the population we were serving fit the broad definition of what Bagele Chilisa (2012) refers to as the colonized Other, “those who suffered the European colonization, the disenfranchised and dispossessed...These people live in what has been labeled the third world, developing countries, or underdeveloped countries...Included among the colonized Other are Indigenous populations in countries such as Canada, the United States, New Zealand, and Australia” (p.12).

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In 2007, I founded the Indigenous Leadership Institute with Cathy Tagnak Rexford and launched an Alaska based variation of the Jams called the Arctic Institute for Indigenous Leadership. We focused on people ages eighteen to forty from across Alaska and secured funding to ensure that the opportunity was available for Alaska Native people who wanted to participate regardless of ability to cover travel, housing, and tuition. We designed the curriculum to address Alaska specific issues and experiences and incorporated cultural activities.

In 2008, Kawerak Inc. and Maniilaq Association invited me to help develop programming to address suicide in their service areas, in particular those young people most affected by the tragedy. These requests resulted in several years of effort to develop and implement variations of the previous models in the form of youth camps (Camp Igaliq: <https://vimeo.com/46599861> and Camp Pigaaq: <https://vimeo.com/46499143>), school-based workshops, community-based workshops, and weeklong adult programs.

One of the weeklong adult programs developed for Maniilaq Association was focused on building a regional support network and training for community-based wellness practitioners. The weeklong training program was called the Northwest Arctic Institute (Nwai). I chose Nwai to fulfill project requirements to complete the Masters of Rural Development program at the University of Alaska Fairbanks and to serve as the basis for this methodology paper.

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A Culturally Relevant Approach

Similar to many other Indigenous nations around the world, Alaska Native societies are grounded in a worldview centered on relationships. As Shawn Wilson describes in his research findings on an Indigenous research paradigm, “the shared aspect of an indigenous ontology and epistemology is relationality (relationships do not merely shape reality, they are reality)” (Wilson 2008, p. 7). Cultural constructs inform individuals about their place within the family, community, and universe. These non-western ideas of mutuality, holism, connection, past and future help to shape ones identity, sense of belonging, and societal roles; factors very important in the context of Indigenous well being. These cultural constructs are dependent on a foundational knowledge of social, physical, and spiritual beliefs and understanding, specific to each tribe. These underpinnings are referenced in the context of Indigenous knowledge in Liddell, Barrett, and Bydawell’s (2006) study on Indigenous beliefs and attitudes to AIDS in South Africa:

Indigenous knowledge and beliefs take shape around a culture’s unique understandings of the social and physical world. They are based on generations of folk wisdom and experience and help explain past events and predict future ones. Indigenous belief systems are based on one of a variety of different worldviews, from the rational to the animistic. Whatever their foundation, they shape a culture’s folklore, cosmology, rituals, childbearing practices, and patterns of social exchange between adults. (in Chilisa 2012, p. 87)

To work effectively in cultural contexts on issues that affect people’s health as well as their community’s wellbeing it is important to immerse into the experience of the people. The process of immersion takes time and many forms. If community members are approached with humility and respect, the trusting relationships that ensue can help affect change. Another critical outcome of engagement is a deepened comprehension of the nuanced dynamics people face in their day-to-day lives. This relationship-building is

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especially true for outsider researchers and health practitioners, but is also true for Alaska Native peoples working outside of their own cultural and/or geographic context.

To emphasize this point in the context of NWAI, being Gwich'in and Koyukon (Denaa) added a unique dynamic to my role in helping to develop and lead programs among the Inupiat of the Northwest Arctic. The Denaa people were historic rivals of the Inupiat. There are many stories of war between our peoples, with the last documented battles occurring in the late 1800s. Of course, there were also stories of trading partnerships and celebrations between the Denaa and Inupiat during times of peace as well. My invitation came through previously established relationships from my years as a student at the University of Alaska Fairbanks and while serving in statewide and national tribal leadership side by side with Inupiat leaders. They began the invitation by acknowledging my role as a leader among Denaa people and their understanding of what it meant to ask me to focus my work among their people for a few years.

There were two critical components in my approach to building partnerships and shared vision. The first was to be non-assumptive and humble as I approached the task of working with the people. I was not invited to help because I had all the answers to address the issue of suicide. I was invited because of my skill and life experience as an Alaska Native facilitator, administrator, and traditional counselor. One of the Inupiat elders made the point, in reference to hiring me, that they invited me there to help bring forward the answers from within their own people and to help put them to use.

The second was recognizing my limited knowledge about the unique dynamics and circumstances within the Inupiat communities of the Northwest Arctic. I was clear about my position as a cultural student to the local people. Many components of our cultures and belief systems emerge from the natural and spiritual environment that surrounds us. In this light, I knew that I had a lot to learn from the people of that area and that through their culture we could determine strategies to help address the issue of suicide.

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These two components and the dynamic of my involvement as an outside expert are summed up well by Laura Mannell, Frank Palermo, and Crispin Smith in their reflections on community based planning with First Nations in Canada:

The plan must incorporate local ideas, build on local knowledge, and develop local skills to address a community's needs. Community members know their communities best...While planning requires the involvement of the community, an outside perspective is also valuable. Professional planners, engineers, and architects; representatives from tribal councils or other communities; academics; and scientists bring with them new ideas, knowledge, and experience. (Mannell, Palermo, & Smith, 2013, p.133)

Their summary covers one additional aspect to the approach that I took when accepting the invitation to work in the Northwest Arctic. I knew my time there would be limited, so it was critical to begin with the idea of building local capacity to prepare for my eventual departure. Long-term value would be limited if I were to build programs that were dependent on me being there indefinitely.

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Bringing people together for a common cause

The leadership of Maniilaq was wise to bring me together with one of their long-term health research partners, Dr. Lisa Wexler of the University of Massachusetts, upon my first arrival into Kotzebue. They had not briefed either Dr. Wexler or myself about their rationale for bringing us together, but it became clear in listening to one another's thoughts and presentations to their board of directors that we had much in common and yet very unique complementary skill sets. Dr. Wexler's background included service as a former Maniilaq resident therapist and principal investigator on research programs focused on suicide prevention. Randy Stoecker elaborates on the benefits of bringing people with our unique backgrounds together in his analysis of participatory research, "the combination of academic expertise, emphasizing abstract broad-based knowledge, with community expertise, emphasizing in-depth experiential knowledge, is proving a powerful formula for success" (Stoecker, 2005 p.12). From that day forward, Dr. Wexler would play a key role in providing academic and research expertise as we developed the myriad of initiatives that were to emerge, including the Northwest Arctic Institute and Recovery Support Leaders theoretical framework.

My first step launching into work in the region was to review the history of suicide intervention and prevention conducted by Maniilaq, and inquire about other institutional and community leaders engaged in the efforts of youth intervention and development. I then reached out and was introduced to key community partners who would become my cultural teachers, collaborators, inspiration, and close colleagues. They included Lance Kramer, Aucha Kameroff, Michelle Woods, Roberta Moto, Tanya Kirk, Saima Chase, Jenny Johnson, and many others. For many of the programs we conducted in the Northwest, I also brought a long time colleague Earl Keggulluk Polk, a Yupiaq cultural counselor and trainer.

Importantly, one consistent characteristic of the people that came together to support this suicide prevention work in the Northwest Arctic is that they were involved because of a personal passion to help others and to be a part of the solution. Each and every one of

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them went far beyond the fulfillment of institutional workloads, if they were even employed at an institution at all. This personal commitment is one facet of the work that I view as critical in order to affect change. The dynamic is in part due to the nature of relationships that are built with the people we serve. If those we are working with know we are involved because we are passionate, truly care, and are invested for the long-term, they are more receptive to the support we offer.

While I would love to engage in a full telling of the stories for each program we developed and delivered, time and necessity require me to focus on NWAI. Still, it is important to note that many components of the methodology applied to NWAI are consistent among the other programs we delivered.

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Institutional partners

For NAWI we tapped into a broad network of partner organizations that spanned two Alaskan geographic regions, the public and private sector, as well as two federal funding agencies. Broad partnership enabled us to draw from a wide range of expertise, experience, and community based relationships that served to make the program possible.

The geographic regions were the Northwest Arctic, represented by the Maniilaq Association, and the Bering Straits, represented by Kawerak Incorporated. Over the preceding years, Maniilaq and Kawerak had led the formation of a joint initiative called the Northwest Alaska Wellness Initiative (NAWI). Key leaders bringing NAWI together included Bridie Trainor (Kawerak), Dr. Wexler (UMass), and myself (on behalf of Maniilaq). In addition, the NAWI partnership also included the Bering Strait School District, Norton Sound Health Corporation, and Northwest Arctic Borough School District. While I will not go into detail about NAWI it is important to note that we successfully secured a federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) grant that became one of the funding sources that contributed to the NAWI. While Kawerak and SAMHSA were not primary partners in the NAWI retreat, they played a key role in supporting participant engagement from the Bering Straits region.

Primary funding for NAWI came from the Indian Health Service (IHS) Methamphetamine and Suicide Prevention Initiative (MSPI) through a grant awarded to the Maniilaq Wellness program. The MSPI funding has been a critical and flexible source of federal funding available to tribes and tribal organizations in the fight against methamphetamine abuse and suicide across American Indian and Alaska Native nations.

At the time of the NAWI program development and implementation, Earl Keggulluk Polk and myself were being contracted through my company, Gwanzhii, LLC, which is a culturally based consulting firm focused on facilitation and leadership development among Alaska Native entities. We also contracted with Marsh Chamberlain of Crawl

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Walk Run LLC to support video recording and film production on the Nwai. Dr. Wexler managed the participant evaluation process through the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

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NWAI was derived from twenty years of applied Indigenous research in single day to weeklong retreat (including camp) programs designed for leadership development and youth intervention. As applied Indigenous research it did not follow standard Euro-western research paradigms in the development, implementation, evaluation, and reporting on the majority of programs. Still, most programs did require well-written proposals and reports to private and public funders, which met Euro-western theoretical frameworks and outcome standards, but this was completed out of necessity to secure funding as opposed to directly contributing to growth in the body of knowledge that has resulted in the NWAI methodology. According to Chilisa (2012):

Indigenous research has four dimensions: (1) It targets a local phenomenon instead of using extant theory from the West to identify and define a research issue; (2) It is context-sensitive and creates locally relevant constructs, methods, and theories derived from local experiences and indigenous knowledge; (3) It can be integrative, that is, combining Western and indigenous theories; and (4) In its most advanced form, its assumptions about what counts as reality, knowledge, and values in research are informed by an indigenous research paradigm. (p.13)

Among the program elements that I noted in the NWAI History section earlier, the majority fit most, if not all, dimensions of Indigenous research that Chilisa details. Although I was not fully cognizant of these theoretical underpinnings when I was involved in developing and implementing NWAI, these theories can be easily recognized in this work. This lack of self-awareness of academic relevance is likely the case for many bearers of Indigenous knowledge, who have amassed their knowledge over a lifetime of learning through methods of applied Indigenous research.

NWAI is dependent on several sets of dynamics being present and implemented to achieve consistent outcomes at the retreats. They broadly fit into the categories of leadership, pedagogy, and curriculum. I will cover each of these categories

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independently, although it is important to note that these components are intended to be practiced as a whole. I have witnessed people trying to mimic the program practices without the holistic approach and experience, resulting in negative outcomes for participants. This difficulty is most often the case when the facilitator does not understand or is not prepared to respond to the mental, emotional, and spiritual implications of opening conversations with people who may have experienced historical, communal, and personal trauma.

Some components and dynamics of the NWA process are similar to other programs used in a variety of settings within Indigenous and dominant cultural contexts. A couple years ago I participated in a hybrid Gathering of Native Americans (GONA) program hosted by Theda New Breast in one of the Northwest Arctic villages. The GONA curriculum and pedagogy were developed by a group of American Indian trainers, including Theda, with funding from the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (CSAP) and Indian Health Service (IHS). GONA mirrors many aspects of NWA, such as the duration, flexible agenda, and cultural framework. Ruth Sanchez-Way, former Acting Director of CSAP, and Sandie Johnson describe that “community healing of historical and cultural trauma is the central theme of the GONA approach” (Sanchez-Way & Johnson, 2000, p. 26). I theorize that the dynamics and outcomes made possible through the GONA and NWA programs, as well as other similar programs, are consistent with psychological, emotional, and spiritual aspects of fundamental human nature, although this query would need to be taken up in another independent study.

Leadership Team

I am going to situate the conversation of NWA leadership into a couple dimensions within the broader framework of leadership in Indigenous (primarily Alaska Native) contexts. A foundational concept in Indigenous leadership is self-determination, which espouses that Indigenous Peoples have the right to make sovereign social, political, and economic decisions in relation to their people, lands, and resources. This self

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determination, of course, runs counter to the colonial history of hegemony first by Russia and later the United States within Alaska. This is highlighted in my reflection on the colonization of Alaska Natives and its current implications (Peter, 2008):

The Indigenous Peoples were not allowed or were highly discouraged from participating in any of the colonial “freedoms.” These prohibitions included land ownership, business development, and even shopping in stores. There were signs that read “No dogs, No natives” on some buildings.

The United States was after control of our land and resources. They had to deal with what they termed the “Indian problem.” The U.S. had tried massacres, treaties, and reservations in the continental United States and those methods either didn’t work well or were politically unacceptable. So in Alaska, the U.S. worked hard to assimilate Alaska Natives; attempting to both legislatively and educationally convince us that we do not have the rights of sovereign peoples and nations. (p. 2)

Within Alaska this history fueled the formation and growth of a century old Alaska Native human and civil rights movement, which continues to this day. This movement is complex, broad, and iterative, as it encompasses decades of political and legal action and many organizations, such as the Alaska Native Brotherhood and Alaska Federation of Natives. In the earlier years, it was focused on attaining basic rights afforded to other US citizens, but matured into a self-determination movement in the 1960s era. A distinguishing factor was the pursuit of collective rights as Indigenous Peoples, which would firmly establish the recognized existence and rights of sovereign tribal governments. This social justice work was also connected to a national and international movement of Indigenous Peoples rights which I do not have time to go into here, but is critical to explore for historians of all backgrounds and for Indigenous scholars in particular (UNDRIP: http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf, 2007).

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One outcome of the national movement in the United States, that draws a parallel to a Nwai leadership attribute, is the Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act (ISDEAA) of 1975. I highlight this in my conversation on undermining Alaska Native tribal governments in the Alaska Native Reader (2009):

In particular, the ISDEAA paved the way for tribes, including Alaska Native tribes, to begin directly contracting with the federal government to manage programs that were intended for the benefit of American Indians and Alaska Natives. In a monumental speech to Congress supporting Indigenous Self-Determination in 1970, President Nixon stated:

“The first Americans- the Indians - are the most deprived... group in America...The condition of the Indian people ranks at the bottom. This condition is the heritage of centuries of injustice. From the time of their first contact with European settlers, the American Indians have been oppressed and brutalized, deprived of their ancestral lands and denied the opportunity to control their own destiny. Even the federal programs which are intended to meet their needs have frequently proved to be ineffective and demeaning.” (Williams, 2009, p. 181)

The philosophy underlying the ISDEAA was that American Indians and Alaska Natives know best how to manage programs for the benefit of their people, because they best know their people and the challenges being faced by their community. This philosophy is central to the Nwai leadership model. Leaders of the Nwai leadership team were selected based on what I refer to as reflective leadership. The concept of reflective leadership can be simply put as leaders who share sets of common experiences with program participants, such as:

- Being Alaska Native and growing up in a small remote village and/or from the same cultural group.
- Having similarity in gender, sexual orientation, age, religious or spiritual affiliation, educational background, and geographic heritage.

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For NWAI, I assembled a leadership team that consists of four lead facilitators and a single lead organizer. With such a small leadership team it is impossible to ensure that all of the diverse factors are covered, but the attempt is made to maximize diversity among the team. At minimum, I work to have at least one leader reflective of the cultural groups, genders, and spiritual or religious backgrounds present at the retreat.

In addition to reflective leadership, the leaders are selected because they possess certain attributes and characteristics. One of the attributes is based on the age-old adage “you can only guide someone along on the path as far as you have gone yourself.” In the context of Indigenous and culturally based wellness programs such as NWAI, this entails Indigenous leaders who have themselves moved through a process of healing and begun upon a path of decolonization. Wilson (2004) describes the concept and process of decolonization well:

A large part of decolonization entails developing a critical consciousness about the cause(s) of our oppression, the distortion of history, our own collaboration, and the degrees to which we have internalized colonialist ideas and practices. Decolonization requires auto-criticism, self-reflection, and a rejection of victimage. Decolonization is about empowerment---a belief that situations can be transformed, a belief and trust in our own peoples’ values and abilities, and a willingness to make change. It is about transforming negative reactionary energy into the more positive rebuilding energy needed in our communities. (Wheeler cited in Wilson, 2004, p.71)

Healing and decolonization can easily be interpreted as lifelong processes, but the idea is that NWAI leaders are far enough along on their path that they are ready to help others. When coupled with the concept of reflective leadership, the natural outcome is that all of the leaders on the NWAI team are Indigenous peoples themselves. This kind of leadership fits well into the broader context of self-determination among Indigenous peoples, with a particular focus on developing personal, family and/or community

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pathways to healing and wellness. We will reference the conceptual framework of decolonization in the following sections on pedagogy and curriculum as well.

Participant and Site Selection

Before we dive into an explicit conversation on Nwai pedagogy, it is important to state that in order for the pedagogy to be effective, it is dependent on appropriate selection of the leadership team and participants. We just covered key components of selection for the leadership team, so I will focus on outlining the participant selection process.

The approach to participant selection is rooted in tenets of a community-based participatory research model. In his 2005 analysis of research methods for community change, Randy Stoecker defines three common elements of community-based participatory research as:

- Focuses on being useful
- Employs diverse methods
- Emphasizes collaboration (Stoecker, 2005, p. 27)

The focus of Nwai is on being useful by helping to address the high incidence of suicide and substance abuse through culturally based prevention. The initiative, approach, and pedagogy employ diverse methods. But most relevant to participant selection, the Nwai emphasizes tenets of community collaboration.

Stoecker (2005) highlights the need for building community based relationships in what he calls the pre-research stage that enable the researcher to understand the dynamics of interpersonal integrity and influence within a community. This approach provides a lens through which to select participants that may best be able to help lead in a research project and eventually carry forward the work independently at a local level. Building upon this concept, earlier in the “A Culturally Relevant Approach” section, I emphasized

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a deeper level of community immersion that is necessary to not only understand interpersonal dynamics at the community level, but to also understand aspects of the local culture, worldview, and experience. These early stage processes help to build a foundation upon which successful research and interventions can be built through local partnership.

With a foundation of relationships and some local experience in place, I invited leaders and partners to assist in the selection process of the leadership team. Then the leadership team, all of who either lived in one of the local communities or who have established relationships within the communities, served as the selection committee for participants.

The close ties and extended family relations within the Northwest Arctic situated the selection committee with either directly knowing or being no more than a personal relationship separated from all of the applicants. Seeing that one goal of the program was to support leadership development among community members, so they can in turn help others, it served the committee well to know something about the applicants beyond what may have been conveyed through the written application process. This kind of specific personal knowledge is also generally important, as some residents have limited English proficiency, in particular those for whom English is a second language or who had limited access to a quality school based education growing up. The local committee members understanding of the applicants readiness is often equally important to participant selection as the written application itself.

We developed an application (see Appendix A) that specified the parameters for program qualification and an overview of the curricular content, as well as some about the Nwai values and conceptual framework. This particular Nwai was limited to Alaska Native peoples who were currently residing within the Northwest Arctic and between the ages of eighteen to thirty five, as the focus was on growing local capacity and support among the younger generation. The selection committee was particularly interested in accepting applicants who showed promise for taking on future leadership in the broader wellness movement occurring within the village and region.

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The application also covered dates and site. The site for this retreat was at a semi-remote lodge in Fairbanks, Alaska, which is far from the Northwest Arctic. I want to make note of two dynamics that resulted in the decision to host the retreat there, as it relates to the participant application process and pedagogy.

By the time we were in planning stages for hosting Nwai, I had already hosted programs at several locations throughout the Northwest Arctic region, including in the regional hub of Kotzebue, in a local village, and two out at the extremely remote camps of Sivunniigvik and Mavsigvik. While there were pros and cons to each of these locations, they all had drawbacks that hindered success on the scale we were hoping to achieve. For example, at the remote camps, we had more than half of participants back out within the last few days prior to the retreat (in one case, it was fifty degrees below zero and travel to camp required a two hour snow machine ride) and within Kotzebue, participants would leave and return during sessions for important medical appointments, shopping, and visits to make the most of their limited time in the regional hub. So, we chose to go with a proven method to secure participant commitment, which is to bring them into a larger urban community and to semi-isolate them at a retreat center.

I refer to this method as proven, because over my twenty years of hosting retreat programs, it has shown to provide for the most consistent results. The first dynamic I will cover here relates to the desire for many remote village residents to have time in an urban center. This time in a city provides the opportunity to connect with a broader range of friends and relatives, go shopping for cheap bulk foods, and access entertainment such as a movie theater. Just as important, it also presents the opportunity to take a break from isolated villages, where residents often experience a perpetual level of physical (hauling wood and water, keeping a fire going, hauling clothes, hunting and fishing, etc.) and emotional (work of maintaining balance in relationships with everyone in the community) challenge. Not to mention the price of buying a ticket to an urban community being as expensive as \$1,400 round trip in some cases. This last economic

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component is also the reason why we offer full travel support for participants in the programs, as it would otherwise not be affordable to many village residents.

The other dynamic, which is explicitly part of the pedagogy, is to locate a site that can support the development of a communal atmosphere among participants. The location we selected was the Taste of Alaska Lodge, just outside of Fairbanks. We were able to reserve the entire lodge, so that we would not be disturbed by other guests and could begin to make the space feel like our home for the week. The informal moments and evenings, when participants and institute leaders get to sing, dance, share stories, sew, eat, cook, reflect, and support one another are integral to forming bonds and to process thought and emotion from each day.

Pedagogy

NWAI pedagogy is complex, iterative, and dynamic. The overall description and concepts covered in this section are deserving of a thorough review and analysis, beyond what I have capacity to afford them in this paper. This section should be viewed more as a conceptual and pedagogical overview than a thorough description or analysis, perhaps the latter to come in a future publication.

Indigenous researchers Jeremy Garcia and Valerie Shirley, in their qualitative research analysis on performing decolonization, explain a foundational concept, critical Indigenous pedagogy:

Critical Indigenous pedagogy (CIP) is rooted in the discourse of critical pedagogy which is concerned with disrupting social injustices and transforming inequitable and oppressive power relations through a pedagogical process that empowers students and teachers to create social change in their communities. (Garcia, & Shirley, 2012, p. 80)

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CIP provides a framework that suicide and substance abuse prevention programs can utilize to integrate Indigenous ontology, epistemology, and methodology; challenge social inequity and injustice, recognizing that these are contributing factors to poor health outcomes; and empower leaders and participants to affect change in their lives and communities.

NWAI pedagogy is tailored to incorporate the concepts of decolonization and critical Indigenous pedagogy while providing the opportunity for personal healing and peer support processes to emerge organically. The pedagogy could be viewed as a form of contemporary cultural revitalization and ceremony. From this perspective, the pedagogy establishes a contemporary cultural practice to address a current challenge faced by the people, as our ancestors did before us when they faced significant challenges in the past. Although I will not elaborate on the pedagogy from this perspective, it is worth conveying the notion.

As mentioned previously the effective implementation of the pedagogy is dependent upon appropriate selection of the leadership team and participants, as well as selection of a proper retreat site to nurture healthy participant bonding. In addition to these factors, it is important to plan for an appropriate duration of four full days or longer. This length of time ensures adequate time to form bonds, cover the curriculum, process emotions, and adjust to real time group dynamics. With these foundations in place, the pedagogy is comprised of five core components:

1. Ceremonial opening

The ceremonial opening is critical to honoring traditions and helping people to begin to adjust to the space and one another. Shawn Wilson explains “spirituality is not separate but is an integral, infused part of the whole in the indigenous worldview” (Wilson 2008, p. 89). It lays down the foundation upon which the leadership team and participants can begin to feel the emergence of the institute as a safe space to be open to personal growth and healing. When people feel welcome, confidence in the leaders, and that they will be well cared for, it allows

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them to begin the mental, emotional, and spiritual shift to being fully present in the moment.

2. Co-creating a community of trust and shared learning

To build cohesiveness around the core pedagogical concepts, beyond the innate practicing of our cultural values and adhering to cultural protocols, we cover a set of intentions and agreements. We then drop into the first session that is designed to build the community of trust, presence people to the time together, and begin the therapeutic (healing) dimension of the institute.

We cover this set of intentions, to build upon the ceremonial foundation, that begin to shape our time together:

- *We hold the space together, co-creating our time together*

We begin by explaining that the institute is co-created space, meaning that we all share in contributing to the value of our time together. The energy and attention we put in will be reflected in the value we get out of it. The leadership team is not considered experts or teachers; we acknowledge that all are teachers, that all are leaders. The role of the leadership team is to help care for and facilitate the process.

- *Not about right or wrong*

Acknowledging there are many perspectives, beliefs, and opinions about our reality, history, and circumstance as Alaska Native peoples; that we are here to support one another to share our stories and thoughts in a non-judging context.

- *Not about convincing others*

Having more than one perspective on many topics is natural. We acknowledge that it is possible to have two apparently conflicting truths both hold merit, which absolves the need to try to convince others of our own beliefs. During the institute all perspectives and beliefs are respected, although we encourage depth in the

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conversations, so that deeper knowledge and understanding can naturally emerge.

- *Is about listening, patience, being very open*

Over the course of the institute we provide the space for every person to share. By listening well we honor them and increase the potential for us to learn through their stories. This will take a great deal of patience. While we are there, we work to be open in our sharing.

- *Asking questions and questioning our thinking*

We want the institute to be a safe space for us to ask tough questions. The kind we might normally be too concerned with how it may come across to others in our families and communities to ask. We also want people to challenge their own thinking about things, be open to growing and re-shaping our understanding and perspectives.

We then cover this set of agreements that firm up the parameters of the institute as a shared safe space for healing and personal growth:

- *Drug/Alcohol Free for the week*

While this may appear to be a given for an institute program focused on healing and personal growth, it is important to explicitly cover it. This provides the opportunity to acknowledge that this may be a challenge for some of the participants and to speak momentarily to why it is important for the institute process.

- *Confidentiality*

For participants to feel safe, there must be a commitment to confidentiality. If someone shares a story or teaching that you wish to repeat outside of the institute, then permission can be requested from the person who shared it.

- *Respect*

We honor our self and each other by carrying ourselves with the utmost respect for one other and the space we are gathered in.

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- *Bringing our knowledge and our full selves*

Every person has a unique set of life experiences and therefore unique sets of skill, knowledge, and understanding. All forms of knowledge are valued within the institute, so people are highly encouraged to share what they know and have learned as it relates to the topics we cover. This is a time to challenge our self to be fully engaged in both listening and sharing. There have been times when I have found working in groups, that when the group is stuck on a concept or decision, that someone has the answer to help us move forward, but may be too shy or nervous to speak up. Let the institute be a time where you take the risk to share your thoughts, because it may be the idea or insight most needed by the group or an individual among us.

- *Inclusiveness*

Some of us are naturally more talkative than others. Lets be conscious of the space and time we each take, so that there is space and time for everyone to be engaged. Important for us to check-in and encourage those who are the quietest to make sure all have the opportunity to share in the sessions.

- *Taking time to reflect before reacting to triggers*

We will be covering topics that carry emotional charge and a diversity of opinion among many Alaska Native peoples. We will likely hear thoughts and opinions that are different than our own or someone may struggle to clearly articulate a complex issue, which will result in an intense internal emotional reaction. We ask that if any of us feel this type of a reaction to something that is said, we take the time to sit with the emotion and reflect on why we are feeling so intensely about what we heard, prior to sharing a reaction. Often these are moments when we begin to understand ourselves better and can identify areas where we are in need of healing attention.

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Once there is clarity and embrace of the agreements we begin with an Opening Circle. The circle could be viewed as a practice of participant observation and focus group methods. Through this lens the focus group is in the form of a talking circle, which has become culturally accepted among many Native American and Alaska Native peoples as an appropriate method for hosting peer support groups, dialogues, and healing sessions. Participant observation, which is in many ways a natural method among Indigenous peoples to conduct research and to learn, is expected among all present at the institute.

During the Opening Circle participants are asked to follow cultural protocol by properly introducing themselves to the group, share why attending the institute is important to them, and to share anything that is heavy on their heart or mind that if released will help them to become more present with the group. This circle can often take the remainder of the entire first day session time, as many participants often begin the process of healing through releasing difficult pieces of their life story.

3. Cultural protocol, practices, and celebration

It is essential to integrate cultural protocol, practices, and celebration throughout the duration of the institute. This is especially important during the participant outreach, opening prayer and welcoming, and co-creation of community components. These elements lay the foundation for the remainder of the institute to be most effective.

An example of this integration comes in the form of Native food. Participants are asked ahead of time to bring Native food from their home communities to share at the institute, if they are able. On the afternoon of the first full day, the group spends time together making plans and then cooking the meal together. This collaboration creates a culturally relevant context (Indigenous pedagogy in practice) for participants to build relationships and share knowledge, as well as engage in plenty of laughter and storytelling. That evening there is a cultural

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celebration with the Native foods and dancing. Participants are encouraged to invite friends and relatives who live in the area to join us for that evening. This supports connection with the broader community and fills a desire most feel when coming within distance of close friends and relatives.

Another example is the use of the kiidhah zhee or maqiivik, which are Alaska Native variations of the Native American sweat lodge or Scandinavian sauna. There is no standardized term among Alaska Native peoples, so I use both the sweat lodge and sauna as comparisons so that most readers of this text can conceptualize some degree of what I am discussing. The kiidhah zhee is used as a form of ceremonial space to heal, purify, build relations, and share knowledge. Each tribe has a unique set of traditions regarding the kiidhah zhee, so we determine which traditions we will follow prior to the institute.

There is one substantial challenge, which is the extensive duration of time indoors, sitting and listening. In the most recent institute, we experimented with morning physical practices that are borrowed from Asian and Indian traditions, tai chi and yoga. Both received high marks on the evaluations.

4. Decolonization

Decolonization is both a concept and a process. Wilson's description of decolonization in the Leadership Team section captures many elements that are fundamental to the outcomes we work to achieve through the institute. In particular the development of a critical consciousness through expanded understanding about the history and effects of colonization and deepened self-reflective attributes.

The institute itself, from a holistic perspective, could be viewed as a process of decolonization. Alaska Native peoples develop and implement the methodology, pedagogy, and curriculum to reflect Indigenous perspectives, knowledge, and experience. Aspects of critical race theory are applied to a historical overview and

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impact assessment of colonization processes on Alaska Native peoples. And there is opportunity to process emotion that arises when participants gain a new understanding about colonizing processes.

The methods used include self-reflection, shared knowledge, talking circle, and small or large group sessions. I covered the talking circle previously, so will offer examples of the other methods.

An example of a shared knowledge session would be to lay a six-foot roll of butcher paper across a table. Mark the upper left corner with *beginning of time* and the upper right corner with *today*. Then add a few benchmark centuries across the top of the sheet to establish a relative timeline. And finally ask the participants to fill in the major events that shaped or re-shaped the experience of their people. These could include natural disasters, epidemics, and facets of the history of colonization. Once the sheet is filled there is a group review and discussion of everything that was put on the historic timeline, with focus on particular areas determined to contain critical concepts we planned to cover as a part of the curriculum.

An example of a self-reflective session would be to have each participant take an eleven by eighteen sheet of paper and silently portray in art or written form the way in which assimilation policies impacted their community, family, and personal life experiences. These sessions are often used in preparation for small group, large group, or talking circle sessions.

An example of a small or large group session would be to break up the participants into three small groups to share outcomes of their self-reflective sessions. This format provides more time for each participant to share and these small group sessions often become key moments in the progression of healing processes among participants. Use of the *kiidhah zhee*, with groups of men or women is also another example of a small group session.

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Decolonization takes many forms throughout the institute process, but these cover the basic outline of the pedagogy that is used.

5. Ceremonial closing

A ceremonial closing is another critical component to the pedagogy. A closing circle provides the opportunity for each person to share reflections on their time at the institute, begin the adjustment process back to their life outside of the security and supportiveness experienced in a ceremonial space, and to say farewell to others. It is a critical component, so that people are better prepared to re-immense into the often times stressful realities they face in their home communities.

To appropriately close out our time together, there is some form of prayer, often times incorporating several traditions to honor the diversity of spiritual and cultural traditions represented at an institute.

These five core components shape NWAI pedagogy. Beyond the core components, there is sometimes a sixth added, which enables the institute to integrate a specific area of training or expertise. It is also important to highlight that the pedagogy, when properly orchestrated, is designed to have a substantial degree of transparency, so that participants can garner insight into how to lead a similar program or session themselves in the future.

Again this section should be viewed as a conceptual and pedagogical overview as opposed to a thorough description and analysis. It lays the groundwork to be built upon in future publication or through the life experiences of those who run similar programs.

Curriculum

The NWAI curriculum contains a basic foundation of knowledge, which is held by the leadership team through previous participation in institutes, as well as formal and

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informal training, education, and life experience related to the topic areas and pedagogy. The dynamic aspects of the pedagogy provide for the flexibility to adjust the curriculum content to the unique needs and knowledge level of the group in real time. As a shared learning environment we adapt to the knowledge that emerges from within the group as well. The Nwai curriculum broadly consists of these four core curricular areas:

1. **The impacts of rapid social, cultural, and political changes on the lives of Alaska Native peoples**

Through shared knowledge, small group, and talking circle methods we convey our stories, knowledge, and perspectives on the challenges and successes of our people. We cover the history of colonization, with an emphasis on the concepts of assimilation, Indigenous human rights, historical trauma, and self-determination. We explore beyond the individual events and connect pieces of history to personal and communal experiences to better understand how they affect our people and communities today.

2. **Translating our culture, language and traditional values into a means of healing in our work, communities and lives**

There are often intense and perpetual feelings of grief, loss, and pain that accompany historical trauma and contemporary marginalization. It is important to address these issues so we can continue on our journey of healing and self-determination. The institute provides an opportunity for discussion on and practice of healing for our selves and our communities. We know that healing on a community level first begins with our personal wellbeing.

3. **Using community based organizing, language, traditional values, arts, activities, and media as tools for change**

Media, arts, and community based organizing can be highly effective for creating change within our communities. We utilize guest presenters, often Alaska Native elders of the healing and self-determination movements, to frame these conversations and share the tools they incorporate into their work. This is the

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curriculum area that incorporates specialized training and skill sharing as a stand-alone session.

4. Strategizing and Visioning in our work

This curriculum area is focused on sharing insight into the effectiveness of visioning and strategizing to accomplish short and long term goals on a personal and communal level. The visioning and strategy sessions can be focused on personal, institute group, or home communities, depending on the explicit purpose of the institute.

These core curricular areas broadly cover the curriculum content of the institute. The detailed content is held by the leadership team in memory and shared through oral tradition.

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Outcomes

There have been many direct and indirect outcomes of NWAI. I will focus here on two outcomes that reflect the value of the program from the perspective of the participants and also to academic researchers. A primary purpose of the institute is to support participants to move further upon their journey of healing and increase knowledge and skills to support wellness within their families and communities. At the end of the weeklong institute, participants were given a survey that included nine open-ended questions (Appendix B). Participants were given time after the closing ceremony to fill it out. One of the evaluation questions focused on the value participants found in NWAI and another on what they found most beneficial. The following are selected participant comments from the evaluation forms, chosen to represent a diversity of perspectives (names have been removed to protect confidentiality):

Did you find being at the NWAI valuable to you, your work and your life and if so, please share with us how?

“Very Valuable. I am beyond blessed with such stories and information from all the participants. All different viewpoints were amazing and introduced for all to understand and dialogue. Being set free of non-communication about frustration and hurt from the past honestly helped my confidence and happiness, courage, and most of all healing. Evon, Cathy, and Earl provided so much opportunity for each and every one of us. Not many people are blessed with such amazing opportunity for healing.”

“All the information shared here is valuable. An experience that will last a lifetime.”

“What I will take home with me is, never give up, try, try again.”

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“This whole experience has been both valuable to my personal life and my role as the ICWA/Wellness Coordinator for our Tribe. Many ideas, emotions and spirits were shared. We all have a better understanding of our roles in life in helping to promote ‘wellness’!”

“My life, I feel so encouraged to keep being who I was created to be. I’ve also been able to enjoy hearing all the things from different places! Very blessed! Taikuu. Very encouraged to promote healthy living and substance abuse awareness (my job).”

“It is always good to have an open space to share and learn about new ways to promote wellness. This is really helpful for my job because I could learn from others what is most effective. It will also help with my social skills and how to deal with possible negative people.”

“I found it very valuable, not only personally but professionally, too! This was truly a blessing and I’m so thankful to be a part of this!”

“I’ve been on the wellness team at home since we started and I’ve learned how to do a few exercises. Just being here and learning from one another, so in my life, my goal is to try and not complain as much. This helped with my work on ‘Boy Scouts’ and how to communicate better with others.”

In your opinion, what were the most useful/helpful parts of NWAI? Why?

“Seven Generations—So much feelings run through my brain as we stood there. Being able to understand our past and self determination before doing certain events.”

“All the info from the participants.”

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“Evon’s ability to bring humor, understanding, patience, consideration, but also structure and guidance with each and every step.”

“Discovering and trying to heal from my past hurts in order to help our communities.”

“I think the most helpful was the reflection time and the discussion. Because I could take those things and somehow incorporate that into my life and community.”

“Learning what healing means. Identifying healing in people and how to get healing started. Our/my people are hurting and healing is absolutely needed to have a community grow.”

“The useful parts were taking responsibility for my own healing and the way others are taking their steps.”

“The most important is/was the River of Life project. It puts questions into mind and makes you think of life itself. Also the Seven Generations make you think and wants you to behave for your sake and your grandchildren’s sake.”

These participant comments reflect insight into the impact of the institute overall and of particular sessions. They support the notion that at least some of the intended outcomes were achieved. A longitudinal study could determine impact over time and could be the focus of future research on the institute model.

A second outcome emerged from the video recording of the NWA. In addition to the hour-long film we produced on NWA (<https://vimeo.com/162776958>), we worked with Dr. Wexler to produce two short videos for use in a National Institutes of Mental Health (NIH) funded applied research project in the Northwest Arctic (R34 MH096884). These

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videos help facilitators to share health concepts and frame conversations at the community level.

Conclusion

The Northwest Arctic Institute is a weeklong culturally based prevention program designed for Alaska Native peoples. It is built upon foundational concepts and processes that align with the broader discourse on decolonization and underpinnings within a critical Indigenous pedagogy. Nwai methodology, pedagogy, and curriculum are complex, iterative, and dynamic. This approach establishes the possibility for adaptation to meet unique geographic, cultural, and participant diversity, as well as to address unique curricular focuses.

Nwai emerged from twenty years of previous applied Indigenous research, which took the form of many different types of weeklong retreats and camps within Alaska, nationally, and internationally. I foresee new manifestations of this framework taking shape in the coming years, carrying new names and part of new initiatives.

Many of the session methods were inherited from around the world and circulate in many forms locally and globally. When asked by past participants if they can use the methods and curriculum they experienced at one of the programs in their work, the answer is most often yes, although protocol, self-preparation, and care needs to be taken into account when leading the explicit culturally based therapeutic and ceremonial components.

My hope is that this paper serves to further the discourse on healing and self-determination among Alaska Native and Indigenous peoples, as well as among all others who care to take a closer look into dynamics surrounding health challenges faced by indigenous peoples in the north. It reflects a piece of my life story and I share it with the best intentions.

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APPENDIX A



Northwest Arctic Institute
April 14th-19th, 2013
Taste of Alaska Lodge

Program Application

Building and supporting a community among young Alaska Native leaders from the Northwest Arctic who are committed to personal, family, and community well-being

Maniilaq Wellness invites you to apply to the *2013 Northwest Arctic Institute*, a gathering of young Alaska Native leaders.

Who should apply:

Alaska Natives currently living in the Northwest Arctic between the ages of 18-35 years old who are interested in the health and well being of our communities:

Hunters, Artists, Students, Professionals, Educators, Parents, Council Members.... and anyone who is interested in improving the lives of our people.

******Please note the application deadline is FEBRUARY 28th, 2013******

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What is the Northwest Arctic Institute (NWA)?

The Northwest Arctic Institute (NWA) is simply put; a gathering of young, innovative, inspired, hard-working young people who want to make positive change for our communities.

We seek creative and innovative approaches to promoting and living a healthy fulfilling way of life at the personal, family, and community levels.

This gathering will provide a space that is balanced in the personal and communal aspects of what it is to make positive changes in our lives and in support of others. A core focus will be the translation of our values into our work and our lives, as well as sharing practical skills and experiences in our communities.

This is not your typical kind of conference! We want to build real relationships amongst ourselves by engaging in meaningful dialogues, sharing our experiences of our histories, visioning collectively about our futures and creating space for us to reflect on what is working and where we need to make changes, individually and collectively.

The 2013 NWA will be held outside of Fairbanks at the Taste of Alaska Lodge. The Lodge is an ideal retreat setting to create a productive, relaxed, and distraction-free atmosphere for learning and visioning. You can find more information about the Lodge at <http://www.atasteofalaska.com>



Second AILL Cohort, January 2009

Can you imagine the powerful possibilities when we gather together and share our knowledge and the strengths and struggles we have as Alaska Native peoples?

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The Northwest Arctic Institute is a Rare Opportunity

This unique training will prepare a community of young leaders to effectively address the challenges that the Indigenous community is facing in Alaska. Just as importantly, the training will build trust, common understanding, and mutual support among a community of young Alaska Native leaders. We seek to:

- Raise awareness
- Garner new tools and strategies for change in our communities
- Learn from presentations by guest presenters
- Find support within our peer group
- Share stories of challenges, learning, and success
- Build a solid community with other young Alaska Natives
- Determine our needs and strategize
- Bridge geographical isolation



Third AILL Cohort, November 2009

Topics

We will cover the impacts of rapid social, cultural, and political changes on the lives of Alaska Native peoples

Over the course of five days, we will be sharing our stories, knowledge, and perspectives on the challenges and successes of our people. We will focus on building relationships among the group and provide a combination of historical contexts of our communities as well as opportunities for discussion and reflection.

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We will be exploring beyond the individual events and connect pieces of history to better understand how they effect each of us and our communities day-to-day.

Translating our culture, language and traditional values into a means of healing in our work, communities and lives.

There is often an almost overwhelming feeling of grief, loss and pain that accompanies the history of colonization. It is important to address these issues so we can continue on our journey of healing.

This gathering will provide an opportunity for discussion and practice of healing for our selves and our communities. We know that healing on a community level first begins with our personal well-being, and as Alaska Native people we must work to stay healthy and maintain a balance in our relationships with ourselves, our relatives and our land.

Using community based organizing, language, traditional values, arts, activities, and media as tools for change.

Media, Arts, and Community Based Activities can be highly effective for creating a movement and awareness in our communities. We will have guest presenters as well as ample time to continue our dialogue around a sustainable movement in Alaska.

Strategizing and Visioning in our work.

Together we will bring clarity to the directions we need to go as Alaska Native people. We will strategize and plan for activities we can do once we return back to our communities and envision our connections moving forward.

Who We Are

Northwest Arctic Institute is a partnership between Maniilaq Wellness, Gwanzhii, and the Indigenous Leadership Institute. The NWA I is closely related to the Arctic Institute for Indigenous Leadership (AIIIL). Visit us on Facebook for more information! (Search: Indigenous Leadership Institute.)

Our Values:

- **We seek to honor the traditional values and knowledge of our peoples**
- **When we share what we know, we are made stronger**
- **Sustainability in our movement is key for ourselves and our communities**
- **Always consider future generations in making decisions for today**

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Next Steps

NWAI has a limited capacity and we can only accept 24 participants into this first cohort. We plan to accept one man and one woman from each village in the Northwest Arctic region. Please understand that if you are not accepted for this cohort it is most likely due to a limitation on the spaces we have available.

We need for you to apply as soon as possible. Please answer the following questions in order for us to get to know a bit about who you are and where you are coming from...

APPLICATION

NWAI 2013 Participant Questions

Legal Name:

Preferred Name:

Tribal Affiliation/Village:

Address:

Home Phone:

Cell Phone (can this number be used for texts?):

Work Phone:

Email address:

Gender:

Birthdate:

Age:

Please write a short personal bio of approximately 100 words. (Please write in the third person).

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In one or two paragraphs, please share your vision for your community.

What would you like to get out of attending the Northwest Arctic Institute?

Is there anything in addition to these questions that you would like us to know about you?

Do you have any medical conditions, limitations, allergies or special needs we should be made aware of while we are planning this gathering? Do you have any food allergies?

What is the quickest and most convenient way to reach you? Do you have a Facebook page?

Scholarships:

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Maniilaq Wellness will cover meals and lodging for this week-long gathering.

We will also cover travel costs, however if your workplace or your tribal organization can contribute, that will help keep our overall costs on budget. Please advise if you will need assistance in covering your travel.

_____ Yes, I will need my travel covered

_____ No, myself or my organization will be able to cover my travel

Please submit your completed application

via e-mail to:

noaddress@gmail.com

Or

via postal mail to:

Maniilaq Wellness

P.O. Box 256

Kotzebue, AK 99752

(907) 442-XXXX (fax)

Any questions you may have about this event, please contact:

Noaddress@gmail.com

(907) 442-XXXX or (907) 412-XXXX

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APPENDIX B

2014 Northwest Institute Evaluation

Name: _____

We need your help. This event was a learning journey, and we want future events to build on it. To do that we need your honest feedback and feed forward. Please share your honest feelings, constructive criticisms and ideas and be as specific as possible. An excellent response for us is:

- 1) **Specific:** when, where, how, what, why, who?
- 2) **Feelings:** How did what happened impact you? How did you really feel when it happened. The deeper your honesty here, the more it helps us.
- 3) **Feed Forward:** Thinking *forward* to next time. What can we do better? Be specific!

So, tell us your thoughts on:

The Basics:

Site and logistics: Did you feel well cared for? Did you have any needs that weren't met?

Content & Exercises: Which were most valuable to you? Which were least valuable? Which gave you something you will take home with you?

Guest Presenters:

Kitchen Team and Food: What did you like? What didn't you like? Do you see a way that food could have worked better for you?

Content & Exercises

Did you find being at the Nwai valuable to you, your work and your life and if so, please share with us how?

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How did you feel about the flow of events? Were there any sessions or activities that you feel should be changed, added or dropped from this event? Why?

In your opinion, what were the most useful/helpful parts of the *NWAI*? Why?

Moving Forward

Are there people that you would like to invite to an event of this nature in the future? Please list names now so we can follow up with you about them for future events. Also, are you interested in working in tandem with other alumni to help publicize future gatherings?

Are there any ways that you might want to be involved in or support this work in the future?

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Additional comments:

Thank you again for your thoughts, ideas, and contributions. Your voice matters.