

Crafting Contemporary Indigenous Studies Collections in the Age of Algorithms

A Case Study

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Contemporary collection development increasingly relies on automated and algorithm-based purchasing via vendor-offered approval plans. This in turn can result in an unintended collection bias that privileges content that emphasizes a settler/colonizer narrative. This chapter serves as a case study describing how two librarians at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, sought to expand the utility and relevance of the Indigenous Studies collection and deemphasize the settler/colonizer narrative that all too often cast Indigenous people as historical objects. Their efforts included collecting and understanding the unique needs and identities of Indigenous stakeholders within both the university and the surrounding community, utilizing that information to refine the automated purchase algorithm, and expanding the existing Indigenous Studies collection to include nontraditional items identified as of value and merit to Indigenous stakeholders

This case study is an attempt to describe how two non-Indigenous librarian colleagues (one a white settler, the other African American) at one academic institution enhanced their organization's Indigenous Studies collection.¹ Specifically, the librarians focused on circulating non-archival Indigenous Studies materials used by a very small minor-granting program within the Department of Interdisciplinary, Gender, and Ethnic Studies. Emphasis was placed on capturing and understanding the demographics of likely collection users, ensuring that the collection was meeting user needs, correcting identified collection gaps or weaknesses, adjusting the at-times complex automated purchasing profiles to enhance the utility of items collected without subject specialist intervention, and exploring opportunities and stakeholder interest in the collection of non-monograph, non-periodical items.

Neither librarian held significant personal or professional experience within the field of Indigenous studies. In the experience of the authors, it is not uncommon for librarians to be assigned collection responsibilities in subject areas with which they have limited or no prior expertise, which means collection developers must remain vigilant to ensure their personal ignorance does not negatively impact the development of the collection. Librarians therefore must engage in continuous learning about both their assigned subjects and the specific makeup of the communities that will use the collections themselves. For example, the librarians involved in this project were intentional about both not contributing to the historical and ongoing contemporary erasure of Indigenous people² and ensuring the UNLV collection met the needs of both university-affiliated and community Indigenous stakeholders. It is the authors' hope that our ongoing efforts to gain a better understanding of our particular Indigenous community's needs can be replicated and improved upon by other non-Indigenous librarians tasked with curating meaningful and contemporary collections for their Indigenous stakeholders. Further, the authors believe that their approaches and techniques have merit and carryover for any librarian seeking to enhance an ethnic studies collection with which they themselves have limited context.

The Institution and Internal Stakeholders

The University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV), is a large urban R1 public university located 1.7 miles from the world-famous Las Vegas Strip. Founded in 1957, UNLV is the premier research university in the southern half of the state and is both well known and regularly nationally ranked for its extraordinary high undergraduate diversity.³ Additionally, the institution maintains official designations as a Minority Serving Institution (MSI), an Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institution (AANAPISI), and a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI).⁴ Signature programs include William F. Harrah College of Hospitality, the International Gaming Institute, the Center for Gaming Research, the Howard R. Hughes College of Engineering, and the Top 60-ranked William S. Boyd School of Law.

While the overall diversity of the institution is high, Indigenous representation is relatively low. Of the 31,142 undergraduate, graduate, and professional students enrolled in fall of 2020, only 84 (0.3%) identified as Native American or Alaskan Native while an additional 250 (0.8%) identified as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander.⁵ This small student population may be a contributing factor to why UNLV does not have a dedicated Indigenous Studies graduate degree or undergraduate major. UNLV does, however, offer an undergraduate minor program in American Indian and Indigenous Studies with a heavy emphasis on interdisciplinary approaches. The program self describes as

The American Indian and Indigenous Studies minor focuses on the experiences of American Indian and Indigenous people in the Americas from an interdisciplinary and comparative perspective, which includes Anthropology, Art, English, History, Political Science, Sociology, and Gender and Sexuality Studies. This minor will provide an academic and scholarly foundation for students to study and interpret the needs and social/cultural, political, educational, and historical conditions of American Indians and Indigenous peoples in North America. It will help prepare students to work in settings that require an understanding of tribal sovereignty and serving and interacting with this diverse population.⁶

Faculty who teach courses within the minor are on loan from a variety of other departments including History, English, and Anthropology. Graduate students, who also sometimes provide course instruction, are similarly affiliated with other programs but may have either a personal interest in the topic or an interdisciplinary dissertation that partially draws on Indigenous Studies scholarship. Because of this, the Indigenous Studies curriculum at UNLV is heavily dependent on the individual and often-changing research interests of both the faculty and graduate teaching assistants. This in turn creates a relatively volatile collection environment, which must continually change to meet the research and course needs of scholars who are regularly entering and exiting the organization, necessitating ongoing and proactive collection assessment.

Community Stakeholders

Because the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, is a public institution, it was important to the authors that the collection meet the needs of the broader Indigenous community as well. This community is surprisingly large and diverse and includes both Indigenous people native to Nevada and those from further afield. Both the UNLV main campus and the recently established medical campus are situated within the city of Las Vegas, the center of government for the surrounding Clark County. The county itself is situated on unceded traditional territory of the Southern Paiutes (Nuwu) Indigenous People, descendants of the Tudu, or “Desert People,” who lived along the Colorado River since at least 1100 AD and, over time, spread north and west into what today is southern Nevada, Utah, and California.⁷ Specifically the county straddles the traditional territories of three Southern Paiute Bands, including the Las Vegas Band, the Pahrump Band, and the Moapa/Parnigat Band (sometimes referred to as two separate bands, the Moapa and Pahrangat, depending on

the historical record).⁸ Additionally, the county is also home to three federally recognized reservations: the Fort Mojave Indian Reservation, the Moapa River Indian Reservation, and the Las Vegas Indian Colony. The Las Vegas Indian Colony includes both the tribe's original thirty-one-acre urban reservation set in the center of downtown Las Vegas and the Snow Mountain Reservation of the Las Vegas Tribe of Paiute Indians, a 3,800-acre stretch of land outside the city that was returned to the tribe by Congress in 1983.⁹

As well as a small population of Paiutes,¹⁰ Clark County is home to one of the fastest growing Native American populations in the United States.¹¹ Census estimates indicate that between July 2017 and July 2018, the number of Native Americans living in Clark County grew at a faster rate than any other county in the nation,¹² while in 2019 it was identified as the county with the fastest annual growth rate of Native Americans among counties with populations of 20,000 for three of the previous five years.¹³ Close to half of the approximately 50,000 Native American county residents also identified as mixed race,¹⁴ meaning individuals may represent both Indigenous and settler identities as well as a mix of multiple Indigenous backgrounds. Other key Indigenous demographics within the county include Maori, Mexican aboriginals, and, perhaps most famously, Native Hawaiians. Indeed, the high percentage of Native Hawaiians who live in Las Vegas or regularly visit it has contributed to the city's long-established nickname, "the Ninth Island."¹⁵

Challenges to Collecting Non-archival, Non-original Indigenous Collection Material in an Age of Algorithms

The increasing use of algorithm-based approval plans, essentially automated purchasing plans that radically decrease or entirely eliminate subject specialist mediation of purchases, has created significant challenges for the managers of Indigenous studies collections and, indeed, all interdisciplinary collections. The vast majority of approval plans use one of two library classification systems, either the Library of Congress Classification System (LC) or the Dewey Decimal Classification System (DDC), as the first stage in sorting potential automatic purchases. Because UNLV is an academic institution, the authors' collection and approval plan vendor uses the LC system, rather than the DDC, which means that collection materials relevant to this topic area are most likely to appear in classification area E—History of America. This classification is at once both too narrow and too broad. Too narrow because it excludes Pan-Indigenous identities and sets parameters based on population boundaries that reflect colonizer and settler understandings of national borders rather than reflect the territorial and cultural boundaries recognized by Indigenous people themselves. Too broad because it seeks to establish a single identity for a continent's worth of unique cultures, linguistic groups, and histories. The subclassifications (e.g., Indian wars, Pre-Columbian America—The Indians, etc.) dealing explicitly with Indigenous history only further entrench these limitations and can be seen as

contributors to the implication that Indigenous people are historical artifacts, rather than contemporary global citizens. This call number–focused algorithm also ignores the many significant texts by and about Indigenous peoples in categories such as G (Geography, Anthropology, Recreation), K (Law), B (Philosophy, Psychology, Religion), P (Language and Literature), and N (Fine Arts). While this content might be purchased via approval plan or by other collection managers overseeing the related subfields, this approach still leaves libraries at risk of unknowingly developing collections that put undue emphasis on Indigenous cultures as a historical or primitive object by, for example, over-collecting in areas such as anthropology or pre-Columbian culture and under-collecting in areas such as literature or contemporary social justice movements (Red Power, Water Protectors, Mauna Kea Protesters, etc.).

Alternative ways of organizing materials do exist, of course, but they are not generally included as part of vendor algorithms. For example, transitioning from call numbers to subject headings would allow for significantly more specificity when establishing automatic purchasing criteria. Collection managers could approve or restrict content on multiple intersecting criteria, such as geographical region, year range, and theme. Algorithms by subject heading could also potentially permit the use of Linked Data to ensure culturally relevant naming conventions¹⁶ or alternative organizational systems that better suit certain classes of material, such as the Brian Deer System and its Aanischaaukamikw Cree and Xwi7xwa variants.¹⁷

As automated purchasing increases, information professionals must pressure large-scale book suppliers to establish profile processes that meet the needs of collection managers working with collections that trouble the dominant settler worldview. Failing to do so leaves collection managers stranded with the same four options available to them now: collect broadly (perhaps more broadly than their stakeholders need), severely restrict the automated purchase price point and push all other purchases to review slips, hand select all additions to the collection, or transition to patron-driven acquisition models. The first option carries fiscal side effects that few institutions can afford to brush off, while the second and the third options necessitate significant investments of time on the part of the librarian, who may well have collection responsibilities as only a small percentage of their job description. The fourth option responds with agility to user needs, but runs the risk of developing an overly specific collection with minimal generalist or entry-level content and transforms a significant amount of collection development work into unpaid labor foisted onto the backs of patrons.

Conducting the UNLV Indigenous Studies Stakeholder Needs Study

The authors considered different ways to gather the demographic information necessary to serve this population. UNLV has a data warehouse that allows employees to find students by demographic data, so the authors could have contacted a list of those who self-identified as Indigenous during registration. However, by using that list only,

the authors might miss potential participants who did not self-identify at time of UNLV enrollment. This approach likewise wouldn't have captured nonstudent UNLV stakeholders or stakeholders in the broader community. Additional complications arise when considering the historical limits on who legally qualifies as Indigenous, such as unenrolled Native American individuals or Indigenous Peoples whose tribes or bands lack federal recognition (for example, North Carolina's Lumbee or Oregon's Umpqua). To avoid these complications and reduce the risk of unintentionally excluding potential participants, the authors elected to develop a survey instead. This approach would permit respondents to self-identify regardless of pre-existing governmental or institutional registration. The authors then considered using a pin-drop feature to have survey participants indicate their geographic origins on a world map, as well as list which tribal affiliation was encompassed in those areas to their knowledge. This approach proved to be beyond the survey tool's capability, so instead a text-entry option was utilized.

The electronic survey tool was created and sent out through both e-mail and social media platforms to relevant community organizations such as the Las Vegas Indian Center, the Las Vegas Hawaiian Civic Club, the Office of Student Diversity and Social Justice, and the UNLV Native American Student Association. Questions included their university affiliation, if they identified as Indigenous, what tribal group or groups they identified with, areas of study interest, research agendas (if applicable), and what coursework or scholarship they would like supported around specific Indigenous communities. Additionally, a question was included inviting survey participants to identify nontraditional resources for possible collection. Identifying as non-Indigenous did not disqualify survey participants, as the authors recognize from personal experience that many scholars hold interests outside their own ethnic backgrounds.

In addition to responding to the survey, faculty associated with the American Indian and Indigenous Studies minor were interviewed individually to ascertain emerging trends in the field, assess their individual perception of the current collection, and better understand the needs of students in anthropology, literary studies, and history courses that include Indigenous studies content. Following these discussions, we identified five major areas of emphasis: the emergence of "colonizer studies" (which posits the colonizer as the "other"), Pan-Indigenous identity as an increasing departmental priority, urban Indigenous identities, Indigenous environmental activism, and desire for the university to take a leading role in increasing the total number of Paiute language speakers. While some of these areas of emphasis were expected, others represented previously unrecognized areas of focus that the libraries could support. For example, the authors were unsurprised to learn that the department had largely moved away from focusing on historical Indigenous communities and instead focused on contemporary movements, people, literature, and so on. However, the authors were surprised to learn how globally minded the department was given the program's previous heavy emphasis on exclusively Great Basin communities.

Changes to the UNLV Indigenous Studies Collection

Data gathered through the survey instrument, as well as information gleaned from faculty interviews, revealed little reason to reduce the scope of the current Indigenous Studies collection profile. While the institution had previously sought to focus primarily on the Indigenous Southwest, rooting courses and research projects in regional identity, changes to the curriculum driven by the personal identities of both faculty and students have resulted in a Pan-Indigenous approach that the collection already supports. Indeed, most project participants indicated a high level of enthusiasm and appreciation for the availability of both contemporary monographs and periodicals. The desired enhancements for the collection instead primarily focused on non-monograph and non-periodical items.

Respondents overwhelmingly indicated that they were interested in the library collection not only as a way to learn about Indigenous cultures in the academic context, but also as a way to actively engage in their own communities and culture on a personal level. For example, many survey participants latched on eagerly to the survey question regarding the possible purchase of equipment for the library makerspace, indicating a strong desire for sewing machines, beading equipment, weaving tools, and other items used to craft or repair jewelry and regalia. As a result, a significant amount of the grant funds went not for books, as was expected, but instead for equipment that could be both used on site and checked out so that it could be carried to community events, such as the beading and sewing workshops offered by various ethnic affiliate organizations. Other participants indicated a preference for the collection of Indigenous language tapes to facilitate the learning of languages not offered through the university or local community groups. This interest in turn led to ongoing discussions regarding the feasibility of leveraging the University Libraries' capacity for grant-funded OER and self-publishing to develop virtual multimedia Indigenous language textbooks in conjunction with native speakers.

Due to the emphasis on nontraditional collection materials, changes to the automated acquisitions plan for Indigenous Studies largely occurred on the macro fiscal level. Some funds were removed from the approval plan overall and set aside for the ongoing purchase or replacement of sewing, beading, and weaving supplies and language development tools. To accommodate this loss, the approval plan per item price point was slightly lowered. This did result in an increase in librarian labor, as the need to review more slips and potentially override purchase deferrals on a weekly basis increased, but the savings in reduced purchases of already overrepresented topics and colonizer perspectives was ultimately deemed a reasonable trade-off.

Future Considerations

In preparation for this project the authors assumed that any new purchases would mostly be standard library collection items: books, DVDs, CDs, and so on. However, the level of interest in nontraditional items for use in the makerspace (regalia, beading equipment,

sewing machines, etc.) has resulted in a number of unexpected cataloging and storage questions. For example, how does a library store salmon leather or elk teeth? How does one catalog the tools necessary to handle those things with care? What policies enshrine cultural nuance, much less the cultural nuances relevant to dozens, perhaps hundreds, of different peoples? Does the library provide its own collections-related programming? Or should the library collaborate with the community organizations already engaged in this work? Is it instead the library's role to provide materials that support participation in these pre-existing programs? These questions, among others, are still being addressed.

Similarly, some requested content is simply not yet available from vendors. Particularly problematic has been the collection of Indigenous language learning materials. While some materials are available to support the acquisition of languages such as Navajo, Cree, and Lakota, far fewer resources are available for those interested in learning the tribal subdialects. Only the University of Nevada, Reno, for example, offers courses in the Paiute language, specifically the Northern Paiute dialect. The University of Nevada, Las Vegas, is still in the process of trying to replicate this program, but even this effort will not necessarily enable course graduates to speak fluently with local Southern Paiute speakers.

While the authors continue to wrangle with these and other questions, they remain committed to the ongoing work necessary to develop an Indigenous Studies collection that truly speaks to the needs of UNLV stakeholders. This work will be perpetual as the community served changes and, with them, their needs change as well. With the abatement of COVID-19 restrictions, for example, the librarians hope to engage more directly with the local Indigenous communities. Possible points of collaboration that had been planned but then cancelled due to the pandemic beginning in early 2020 included attending or sponsoring the UNLV Pow Wow, the Mx. Native UNLV pageant, the Las Vegas Paiute Tribe Snow Mountain Pow Wow, and the Las Vegas Indian Center crafting series. In addition to the library providing financial support to these organizations, the events were intended to serve as both outreach and collection enhancement opportunities, with attendees able to directly request materials of interest to both themselves and their communities. An additional long-term goal emerging from this study is the creation of a permanent Indigenous Studies librarian position. This new role would serve as a collection developer, instructor, and primary library liaison to both the Paiute community and members of the various Pan-Indigenous communities who reside in the greater Las Vegas area. Both librarians also advocate and support any calls for the establishment of a degree-granting fully independent Indigenous Studies department on either the graduate or undergraduate level and the associated increase in dedicated collection funding the establishment of such a program would warrant.

Notes

1. The term *settler* has in recent decades been used as shorthand for any non-Indigenous individual living on lands from which their ancestors and culture did not originate, regardless of ethnicity. The authors of this chapter reject the tendency to emphasize a native-settler binary that emerged among primarily white scholars in the mid-2000s and note the significant experiential difference between

- settlers who willingly left their homelands to reestablish themselves in colonies or ex-colonies and those who were forcibly transported away from their homelands in enslavement.
2. Crystal Echo Hawk, "The False Narratives, Invisibility, and the Erasure of Native Peoples Must End," *Indian Country Today*, August 7, 2018, https://indiancountrytoday.com/opinion/the-false-narratives-invisibility-and-the-erasure-of-native-peoples-must-end-LTlMfzcJzUeeO_ELS7c4nQ [page discontinued].
 3. "U.S. News & World Report: UNLV Most Diverse Campus in the Nation," University of Nevada, Las Vegas, news release, September 12, 2017, <https://www.unlv.edu/news/release/us-news-world-report-unlv-most-diverse-campus-nation>.
 4. "Minority-Serving Institution," University of Nevada, Las Vegas, <https://www.unlv.edu/diversity/msi>.
 5. "Facts and Stats," University of Nevada Las Vegas, <https://www.unlv.edu/about/facts-stats>.
 6. "Minor in American Indian and Indigenous Studies," University of Nevada, Las Vegas, <https://www.unlv.edu/degree/minor-american-indian-indigenous-studies>.
 7. Delen Goldberg and Jackie Valley, "Las Vegas' Smallest Sovereign Nation," *Las Vegas Sun*, July 20, 2015, <https://lasvegassun.com/news/2015/jul/20/las-vegas-smallest-sovereign-nation>.
 8. Douglas Deur and Deborah Confer, "People of Snow Mountain, People of the River: A Multi-agency Ethnographic Overview and Compendium Relating to Tribes Associated with Clark County, Nevada," Pacific West Region: Social Science Series, Publication 2012-01, National Park Service, US Department of the Interior (Washington, DC: US Department of the Interior, 2012), 48.
 9. Deur and Confer, "People of Snow Mountain," 48.
 10. Goldberg and Valley, "Las Vegas' Smallest Sovereign Nation."
 11. "Native American Population Grows in Clark County," Nevada Indian Commission, October 23, 2019, <https://nevadaindiancommission.org/native-american-population-grows-in-clark-county/>.
 12. "Native American Population Grows."
 13. Michael Scott Davidson, "Native Americans Move to Las Vegas, but Struggle to be Recognized," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, October 14, 2019, <https://www.reviewjournal.com/local/local-las-vegas/native-americans-move-to-las-vegas-but-struggle-to-be-recognized-1870174/>.
 14. "Native American Population Grows."
 15. Kristy Totten, "Las Vegas Is Hawaii's 'Ninth Island,'" KNRP, National Public Radio member station, September 6, 2018, <https://knpr.org/knpr/2018-09/las-vegas-hawaiiis-ninth-island>.
 16. D. Vanessa Kam, "Subject Headings for Aborigines: The Power of Naming," *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 26, no. 2 (2007): 18-22, www.jstor.org/stable/27949465.
 17. Alissa Cherry and Keshav Mukunda, "A Case Study in Indigenous Classification: Revisiting and Reviving the Brian Deer Scheme," *Cataloging and Classification Quarterly* 53, no. 5-6 (2015): 548-67; Raegan Swanson, "Adapting the Brian Deer Classification System for Aanischaaukamikw Cree Cultural Institute," *Cataloging and Classification Quarterly* 53, no. 5-6 (2015): 568-79; Ann M. Doyle, Kimberley Lawson, and Sarah Dupont, "Indigenization of Knowledge Organization at the Xwi7xwa Library," *Journal of Library and Information Studies* 12, no. 2 (2015): 107-34, [https://doi.org/10.6182/jlis.2015.13\(2\).107](https://doi.org/10.6182/jlis.2015.13(2).107).

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