

Becoming Community Podcast. Season one. Episode four. Sarah Gewirtz and Dr. Ted Gordon, Regina Therchik and Sofie Koloski.  
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Sarah Gewirtz: Welcome to season one of our podcast series Becoming Community. My name is Sarah Gewirtz and I am the Information Literacy Librarian for Alcuin and Clemens Library, and in this series we will talk about how the Mellon grants are helping the CSB/SJU community to be more inclusive. Season 1 of our series will focus on the first twin Mellon grants which were awarded to CSB and SJU and were administered between 2015 to 2017. During the season we will talk to faculty and staff who have been involved with the Mellon grants to find out what they did, what their next steps might be, and what their work means for the CSB/SJU community. In our fourth episode we talk to Ted Gordon, professor of sociology and first year seminar, Regina Therchik, CSB junior history major, and Sofie Koloski, CSB senior Hispanic and Peace Studies major, and they will discuss the project Identifying Pathways for Native Student Inclusion at CSB/SJU. Thank you for joining me this afternoon. I appreciate all of you taking time out your busy schedules to meet with me. Tell me about your project? How did you get interested in working with Native Indigenous students? What were your goals? Ted do you want to start?

Ted Gordon: My background in anthropology is working with Native communities on revitalization -- revitalizing their culture and language and understanding how that relates to how they use activism to be able to strengthen their own communities. And so coming here to, being here at Saint Ben's and Saint John's, I know that our institutions have a long and at times complicated history with Native communities and I've been interested in that. And then when the Mellon Grant was received by the institutions and there was a call for proposals to go and target particular underrepresented communities and find ways to make our campuses more inclusive for them, I saw this as an opportunity to better support our Native and Indigenous students. Now at the time I knew that we had Native and Indigenous students from looking at our schools' demographics, but I didn't know any. And I had had some students in the past but at the time I didn't know any students that were Native or Indigenous, and there's no way to know based on just having the numbers available that to be able to connect with Native Indigenous students and to know how they were doing. The literature on Native and Indigenous students in higher education suggests that they're among the more vulnerable student populations and that there was a lot that institutions can do to be more proactive and inclusive in supporting them, but we had no idea how our students were doing here, and I had no way of necessarily knowing any Native and Indigenous students at the time. And so it was actually kind of by good luck -- maybe it was meant to happen in some way -- but a little bit before Thanksgiving in 2018 an email was forwarded to me with an email that was sent by Regina who was looking to put together a panel to discuss some of the complicated issues around acknowledging Thanksgiving and a panel that would specifically look at it from Native and Indigenous perspective. And so Regina reached out to me and then we were able to put together a panel that I think was quite a success, and then after that we started talking about this and realized that this

actually was a real opportunity. And so that's how this got off the ground

Sarah Gewirtz: Ted, could you define what you mean by Native Indigenous students?

Ted Gordon: That's a fantastic question. For this project we've defined Native and Indigenous students as any student who identifies with any Native or Indigenous community anywhere in North or South America. I'm going to be honest and say that when I began this project I was initially just using the term Native and then both Regina and Sofie suggested to me that that actually was too narrow of a term and that there are some Native Indigenous communities especially in the continental 48 states that primarily use the term Native but outside of there Indigenous is a frequent term. Our criteria, for you know, who we are reaching out to is anyone who self-identifies and then through the process of interviewing, those students are then asked about what, how did they identify, what is the particular connection that they have

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Sarah Gewirtz: What were your goals for this project?

Ted Gordon: Our goals are to make Saint Ben's and Saint John's more inclusive for Native and Indigenous students.

Sarah Gewirtz: Regina and Sofie can you tell me why you wanted to participate in this study and I could start with Regina.

Regina Therchik: I wanted to participate in this study because I identify as a Yup'ik woman, my people come from the southwest coast of Alaska, or not the coast from Alaska and previously when I was a freshman here I felt like a minority among minorities as a Native person, and I really reflected on that and wondered like are there other Native people here and I didn't get this opportunity until my sophomore year when I met Ted on a panel but because of this project I've gotten to meet other Native students other Indigenous students from different backgrounds. I was just really happy to have found other people and not feel like I was the only one

Sarah Gewirtz: Sofie?

Sofie Koloski: So I identify as Indigenous. I'm Kaqchikel. My people come from the region of Guatemala, the Highlands I believe, and I was contacted by Ted because Regina was studying abroad. I went in his office, he told me what the project was, I thought it was really cool. I thought it would be an opportunity for me to also meet other Native and Indigenous students on this campus because there's nothing really here for us and there's no programming or anything. So I was just like Regina said, you do feel like I'm a minority among minorities and so I hopped on board and it became like really important to me. I talked with Ted more before Regina came back from study abroad. We started connecting just

like she said, meeting other students that allowed me learn more about myself too as an Indigenous person on this campus, also in this country. That's been the growing process for me.

Sarah Gewirtz: Why did you involve students in the research process?

Ted Gordon: The reason why we needed to involve Native and Indigenous students in the research process has to do with the nature of the kinds of questions that we're asking. Our goal, in order to make a campus more inclusive for Native and Indigenous students, is to first learn about what their experiences are and what their recommendations are. In order to be able to learn about that, there's a variety of different methods that social scientists can use, but the one that would be the strongest approach here would be to conduct interviews where we could really get some rich qualitative data about their experiences. In order to conduct those interviews, one has to be very careful about who's conducting the interviews. I identify as white and I'm professor, so if I go in and interview a Native or Indigenous student and I ask them if they feel included on this campus, they may have good reason to not fully disclose all their experiences with me. Having Native and Indigenous students conduct the interviews has a number of advantages, one of which is as Regina and Sofie had expressed, many of our Native and Indigenous students haven't even met each other, so having the interviews connects them with each other. They then meet each other for sometimes for the first time. And then also there can be a level of trust that's developed. Another important reason has to do with the actual questions themselves. As a professor who identifies as white there are certain questions that I have in mind that I would like to ask, but those might not always be the best questions and there might be more questions out there that wouldn't even occur to me because of my own background and the limited experiences I had. One of the real advantages in working with Regina and Sofie is that they brought questions to the table that I would have never even thought of, and they were able to draw on their own experiences to develop those questions. So that's why working with them was -- there was there would really be no other way to do this kind of research

Sarah Gewirtz: Sofie and Regina, I do want to ask you what type of questions did you bring to the table that as Ted said as a white man, or myself as a white woman, wouldn't have thought of?

Regina Therchik: Questions that I had come up with and think about almost every day when I meet people and I also wanted to ask students that we interviewed :what Indigenous issues do they care about? And honestly for myself to figure out if a person really cares about their identity as an Indigenous person I ask them what do they care about within different aspects of the Indigenous people. Because for me even though I'm a Yup'ik person, like I don't just care about Yup'ik people, I care about other Indigenous people and I want them to succeed and know that they are represented and that they have someone on their side.

Sarah Gewirtz: Great. Sofie?

Sofie Koloski: One of the questions I came up with was a simple question like how do I identify? And I really I was intentional with that

language, just saying "how" instead of "what" because I think the word "what" kind of implies that there's one like one or two ways to identify. I believed, or I've come to believe, through my personal life experiences, that identity is a multi-faceted thing. There's many things that play into identity that intertwine and weave in with each other to create a unique identity of a person. So I think the word "how" kind of strays away from one or two things and it allows the interviewee to respond however they want to and to say as many things they want to.

Sarah Gewirtz: Yeah that's great. It's true: I think we all, if somebody said what do you identify, that's kind of putting it into just one square. Ted what is the stand point theory? why use that theory?

Ted Gordon: Standpoint theory was developed by Sandra Harding who was a feminist and women's studies professor and she developed this as a theory - and a method of research-- that understands that marginalized communities have knowledge that other communities don't have because they have different experiences as marginalized people. She developed this first coming out of women's studies with the basic premise that there are things that men don't experience that women experience and that means that women have knowledge of that experience that men don't necessarily have. And in her theory, the idea is that that experience of being part of a marginalized group can give a distinctive kind of knowledge and that knowledge can then be turned into action. That knowledge can then be used to change the system of inequality itself to make it more equal. And so what that means as a professor identifies as white and who works with serving Native and Indigenous communities that there are lots of things that I don't experience that I will never be an expert in and that it is the Native and Indigenous people that I work with that are the experts in their own experiences. How this relates to our research is as twofold: first it means that we need to be interviewing Native and Indigenous students and finding ways to take their unique experiences and knowledge and transform that into actions that can change our community. It also means that who's conducting those interviews should also be Native and Indigenous students because they can draw on their own experiences to be able to develop questions that I wouldn't be able to develop and to be able to engage in interviews in a way that will elicit that knowledge from the interviewees in a way that I wouldn't be able to do.

Sarah Gewirtz: What is Native and Indigenous inclusive teaching practices? Why is that important to know?

Ted Gordon: These are practices that acknowledge that Native and Indigenous students are in our classroom today and that when professors or teachers are teaching about any kind of content they need to understand that whether they know it or not and whether they know who is Indigenous or who is Native or they don't know that they should operate under the assumption that they have Native and Indigenous students in the classroom. And that means a number of things. There are some specific things depending on the discipline but one of the core important things to keep in mind is that when discussing issues related to Native and Indigenous peoples, that teachers must know that Native Indigenous communities are with us today and be speaking in the present tense about those communities. In addition to that, it depends on the --this might

look different depending on the on the discipline -- but in every field there are Native and Indigenous people who are leaders in those fields, whether it be history, whether it be chemistry, whether it be literature, and in Native and Indigenous inclusive practices mean centering those voices so that students Native and non-Native Indigenous and not indigenous students can see Native and Indigenous researchers represented in the classwork

Sarah Gewirtz: Regina and Sofie how did you find participants to interview? And then can you tell us about that experience? Regina we'll start with you

Regina Therchik: We tried different ways to get participants. One of them was through hosting on social media and word-of-mouth fliers. Interviewing was -- we didn't start interviewing until this year and the experience was like really interesting. It was like getting to know someone and really identifying with their answers to the questions and an overall great experience.

Sofie Koloski: We -- uncertain on how many participants we have, I think six or seven, are the number of interviews that we've had so far -- we're still working on finding more people -- yeah the experience has been really great. I think that's when the work became really important to me, when I started conducting my interviews. A couple of them had been friends and classmates that I've had and so it was really cool to get to know them outside of an academic setting, some of them were really insightful in the sense like they pointed out things that I had never seen or really thought about before, and then I did start to think about which way I changed my perspective on the project, about like the kind of community we have currently have at CSB/SJU institutions, but you know like really great experiences. I and it also was like reassuring for me that I'm a senior I'm about to graduate but like I'm not alone and I wasn't alone this whole entire time and that kind of made me feel good as in my power in numbers you know just so I wasn't the only one who had these kind of experiences, yeah it's been a wonderful experience.

Regina Therchik: I also want to say that like I think that it was such an interesting experience because we're all from different backgrounds, different regions in like both North and South America so I did learn a lot as well.

Sarah Gewirtz: What did you learn from your peers? Regina?

Regina Therchik: When we started this project I had known a couple of people prior to interviewing -- I was just telling them about the project and telling them like if they know someone who's Indigenous or Native to contact me so I could ask if they wanted if they want to participate and these people that I know that I have known for out like some time, they tell me they're Indigenous and it's just a surprise. It's just like relieving to know that there's someone else and it just proves that there's so many different identities within the Native Indigenous community.

Sofie Koloski: One thing I learned is that there is more of us than probably the school knows about. I remember in our early early days of me doing this project Ted had told me that --I can't remember if it was among all four classes currently here or just within the incoming class but that only about 24 students checked the box that identified as Native or Alaskan Native, and then I had kind of like got on this little spiel that first of all like why it was so important for us to put in the word Indigenous because a lot of Latin American Indigenous communities don't use the word "Native" we use "Indigenous". But when that questionnaire comes we only choose one, because we're told to only choose one, and then Indigenous also isn't an option in there, so we choose like Hispanic or LatinX, which is how a lot of other people identify especially from Latin America. I do I identify as Latina and Guatemalan also so I think that from my peers it's helped me learn that there are more a lot of us and the school probably knows about because like we can only check one box and then we all have other identifications also but there's a lot more people than I thought that do identify as you know Native Indigenous, they just have other identities and check a different box. So that's one thing I've learned. It's about other issues that they care about, how they've experienced inclusion, because I mean I've had my experiences of inclusion exclusion on this campus but hearing like some of their other stories it kind of was a little bit of like a refresher to me that just because like I don't experience these things doesn't mean other students are. You know they're not making these up off the top of their heads but these are like everyday experiences that are happening by students.

Sarah Gewirtz: Do you both in some ways maybe feel validated regarding your feelings about what was happening on campus in regards to Native and Indigenous people

Regina Therchik: Yeah, I do feel validated because I can talk to someone who will understand like my like what I'm talking about my background, my situation.

Sofie Koloski: Yeah definitely I do feel validated. Me and Regina have, I can just say I gained a friend out of Regina through this project. Even though Regina and I don't have the exact same experiences, I feel like I can already talk to her in a different way and in a deeper way than I can with other friends, just by knowing that she's a Native person also, she can probably more easily put herself into my shoes as I feel that I can really put myself in a pair of shoes. So even though we don't have the exact same experience there's, like, it still feels a lot more comforting and validating talking to her.

Sarah Gewirtz: What are some themes that came out of the interviews Regina?

Regina Therchik: One of the things that came out was this feeling of tokenization as a Native Indigenous student in the classroom especially. A lot of students I felt like their professors or classmates would ask them to explain something for the entire Indigenous Native community. So it like it makes us, or myself -- I feel like I'm being, I'm representing everyone else who identifies as Native or Indigenous when I'm not. I only

truly know about my background. I don't know about everybody's background.

Sarah Gewirtz: Sofie?

Sofie Koloski: Yeah, tokenization, you usually have to explain it. Yeah, sometimes I think I myself and other Native Indigenous students feel like we're put on a pedestal sometimes, under a microscope or spotlight. Which is just at times fine -- I take pride in talking about my Indigenous identity, putting the awareness out there that we're not just a people of the past but we are a very present people over here. But sometimes it's just a lot, and having to constantly explain ourselves at like an elementary level, like dumb it down. Some people that are like adults can still comprehend it. It's kind of exhausting and a lot of the times we are the only person or one of a couple people known to be a Native Indigenous student. Like when we do speak I feel like - and others feel like this too -- that we all we do represent the whole Native and Indigenous community when that's not at all true, like Native Indigenous peoples span from Alaska to Canada - all the way down to the you know southern cone of South America, and we're all very different with our own cultures and societal values so it's hard to try to like put the awareness out there and talk about it, but also not trying to represent a whole entire people, which would be impossible to do.

Sarah Gewirtz: So what changes have you implemented?

Ted Gordon: We have a number of changes in the works, a number of -- some things have already taken place but there's even more work to do. I can start by sharing some of the things that have already taken place. One event that I'm really excited about was that on February 5th of this year we were able to host a panel through the McCarthy Center,, a panel that featured Native leaders from tribes throughout Minnesota come and speak and it was a well-attended event that got a lot of people very excited about Native and Indigenous issues and so to be able to have something that at that high level of visibility was very exciting. Some other changes that the taking place, here I am excited to announce -- actually for the first time here, I haven't even shared this with you yet -

Sarah Gewirtz: It is an exclusive, podcast listeners

Ted Gordon: The Saint Cloud State has hosted a powwow for the last 25 years and Saint Cloud State has decided that this powwow should now be really, a community that should invite involve a partnership of educational institutions throughout the region. And so this involves Saint Cloud State, it involves Saint Cloud Technical Community College, it includes the school district 742, and it now also includes the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University: that we are now partners in the multi education institution powwow planning committee. So we will be involved in planning the powwow going in the future, and at a certain point, that we may have an opportunity to actually host the powwow here at Saint Ben's and Saint John's. That would be amazing. So that is one thing that I'm very I'm very excited about. There have been a number of partners on campus that have reached out to us with a number of different ideas for ways in which we can increase the visibility of Native and

Indigenous students. Saint Ben's and Saint John's Libraries are planning to have a display in the Learning Commons next spring that will feature the history of the boarding schools and our institution we will actually have a visible recognition of the Native, the history of Native American boarding schools on our own campuses here, history of that has really been pretty hidden before. And next year the focus of the Peace Studies conference will be on Native American and Indigenous resilience and empowerment through education. And so those are some of the ways in which we are increasing the visibility of Native and Indigenous issues on our campuses, increasing opportunities for students to learn about that and increasing the recognition of our institutions' own complex history

Sarah Gewirtz: What are your next steps with this project? Sofie do you want to start?

Sofie Koloski: Me and another Native student, her name is [Lynn?], we've both reached out to Brandyn Woodard on how to get a Native and Indigenous club started. After this project I've actually come to be baffled that we've got a bunch of clubs for a lot of different ethnicities, which is just really awesome, I'm happy to see that we do have an extensive amount of clubs for different ethnicities, we don't have anything for Native Indigenous students, especially when our schools have the kind of history that we do have, I think that's confusing why we don't already have one. We've reached out to Brandyn Woodard just to see the process get started and he gave me a link and a contact, and I know as a senior that I won't get to see that come to fruition and I think that, hope it all means something even though I'm a senior, but I still want to see this happen. For students in the future that'd be really beneficial, so I'm hoping that will happen in the next year.

Sarah Gewirtz: Regina?

Regina Therchik: For like as part of our project we're going to continue on to do more interviews, another year's with funding and also conduct a focus group of participants who interviewed who wanted to be part of it.

Sofie Koloski: And with that we eventually all might want to go to the Presidents and faculty/administration with recommendations of: this is what we can do, this is what's going on right now, this is why we need change, and to get hopefully on that level, institutional level, change that will make this more inclusive.

Regina Therchik: Having faculty who are Indigenous, that would be really cool.

Sarah Gewirtz: Ted is there anything that you want to add in regards to what your next steps will be?

Ted Gordon: One of the next steps that we're working with our administration on is to be able to provide classes that focus on Native and Indigenous histories and cultures. Right now if a student wants to learn about Native and Indigenous cultures there's no class that they could take. The offerings that we have are -- there are classes that may touch on some aspects of Native or Indigenous histories but there's no

class that solely focuses on it for the entire semester. And one basic way to start that would better serve our Native and Indigenous students, it would better serve them to have them see themselves represented in our curriculum, it would better serve them so that they could have classmates who could be educated about these issues, it would better serve everyone in helping our students prepare for careers where they will be working and maybe engaging with Native and Indigenous people, and considering the learning goals for our institution, considering the legacy of our institution operating Native American boarding schools, offering classes that focus on this content is a key change that we need to see in our curriculum, and I'm hopeful that we'll be able to make some progress on that soon.

Sarah Gewirtz: This is a question for everyone but what did you learn from the Mellon grant?

Ted Gordon: One thing I've learned is the power in asking a community to investigate its own problems and being open to learning about whatever it is they may find. Today we've shared some of the things that we've learned from our own project which I think is already starting to transform our community. There's a lot more work to do and I'm hopeful that they were going to be making these changes and it'll be successful. In looking at what other members of our communities have been doing that also have their own mini grants from the Mellon Foundation grant is I can see other members of our community that have found other issues themselves: the experiences of LatinX students, the issue of food insecurity on our campus, where just asking members of our own community to go and investigate problems and then being open to listening to whatever it is they find and take steps to address that has the ability to transform a community. So one thing I've learned is you know it's great to bring in experts from other places to help us learn ways that we could be more inclusive; it's also fantastic to empower members of our own community to change from within.

Regina Therchik: I think I just want to say, and it's not directly related to the Mellon Grant, because of the Mellon grant we have this project and I think it was like really important that as students that Ted gave us flexibility to be in this project compared to other people that we met that we are also doing projects off Mellon grants.

Sofie Koloski: I can tag off that, because we talked about this outside of working with Ted, but one thing we appreciate about you, working with you, is that you do give us the flexibility to be students and have our lives as students, and also their own people but then also come in and work on this project, and I think there's this like flexibility that we have with you. It's definitely made me and I think Regina, too - it's made us more invested in the project, knowing that Ted cares a lot about us and our lives as students. And that does mean a lot and so then it makes us want to put in more work to the project because he's giving us this autonomy, and we give that effort back to the project. Thank you for being you and flexible with Regina and I.

Ted Gordon: Thank you

Sarah Gewirtz: Going forward what advice would you give the entire CSB/SJU community? What can our community continue to do and start trying to do as we move forward? Ted?

Ted Gordon: What we can do is realize that we have in our community such a wide range of experiences, of backgrounds, of skills, that what we have in our own community already is everything that we need to transform ourselves. And we've seen this from some of the different Mellon projects. The ability to come together and ask what questions do we want to solve, and then what are the different kinds of skills that we have? Not just what are the professors experts in, but what are the students experts in? What are the skills that that our students have? What are the strengths that they have that they can bring to the table to help address some of these issues? Because then when we take that approach we then build change from the bottom up which can actually make a lasting and meaningful change.

Sarah Gewirtz: Sofie, Regina did you want to add anything?

Regina Therchik: For students and anyone who doesn't know much about Indians or Native people, -- I know there's a, I recently learned that there's a reservation in Minnesota that is quite wealthy. I just want to point out that they're not all like that, and I feel like because this school is in Minnesota, that perception might be like very popular. And a lot of reservations here don't, are not like that, they are completely different. There's a lot of poverty and different aspects, different things that are brought in by colonization that are used as tools against Native people. So the stereotypes that you hear of Native people having money or being drug addicts or alcoholics or uneducated is all just -- it's not a myth, but your perception of Native people has been tainted by stereotypes. And there's reasons -- there's not reasons, but like there's things that brought people, Native people, to that point, higher structures that are involved here.

Sofie Koloski: Piggy backing off Regina, - yeah just educate yourself. You know I think going through the public schools systems that are in place right now, they only give up to a certain level of accuracy or at least they only give up, they only give a certain side. And I think definitely as I came into college and then through this project and through other life experiences I've learned that whatever I learned in school isn't the whole entire picture and what a lot of people go into the world with. Educate yourself, you know, we're not a people that's from the past. Yes we were bigger numbers in the past but we've been resilient as a people that's in multiple communities and we're still here and we just want our voice to be heard.

Regina Therchik: kind of going off Sofie here, like educating yourself, and that goes along with other marginalized groups on campus. If you have a question before asking, like of course it's all right to ask someone, but if it's like a simple question you could probably just research it yourself. That, doing that, if you'd ask someone it could also make that person feel like they're being tokenized, so keep that in mind.

Sarah Gewirtz: Do any of you have any book recommendations for our listening audience to help them work toward inclusivity for everyone?  
Regina?

Regina Therchik: There's a book by author Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, her book titled the Indigenous People's History of the United States. It teaches you more about the history of US in the perspective of Indigenous people rather than by the people who conquered.

Sarah Gewirtz: Ted?

Ted Gordon: There are actually two books that I would like to recommend. Both are by Anton Treuer who is professor of Ojibwe at Bemidji State. One is the Assassination of Hole in the Day. The other one is Warrior Nation and both of these books are about the history of Minnesota and they're about the history of the Ojibwe peoples in Minnesota as told by a scholar who is a Ojibwe himself and he's able to draw on knowledge and experiences that that others don't necessarily have and he tells a completely different version of the state's history. He explains in a really exciting way how Ojibwe peoples resisted colonization, the steps they took to still be with us today, and one part about this as well that is maybe exciting for members of our own community, is that he also mentions some of the activities of the Benedictines in that and so we can see a Native perspective of our own history in in those books.

Sarah Gewirtz: Thank You Ted, Regina and Sofie for taking time out of your schedule to participate in the Becoming Community podcast. I have learned so much about your project and I'm excited to see the work continue. The following recommended books mentioned in this episode can be found at Alcuin and Clemens Libraries: Indigenous Peoples History of the United States by Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz; Warrior Nation: a History of the Red Lake Ojibwe by Anton Treuer; The Assassination of Hole in the Day by Anton Treuer.

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