

# Best Practices For Participatory Leadership In Higher Education

The Indian Tribal Educational & Personnel Program (ITEPP) est. 1969

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## History and Overview of ITEPP

### History of ITEPP:

In the late sixties, a group of Northern California Native American visionaries met with Humboldt State University (HSU) administrators and faculty to discuss the distressing educational attainment and achievement of Native students. They were alarmed by the high public school drop-out rates, which were three times greater for their communities than the state average. Of particular concern was the lack of Native educators employed by the state's public schools. This disparity led visionaries to dream up a program that would stimulate the increase of educators who understood the cultural values and needs of tribal communities, and specifically would be trained to advocate and incite systemic change within public schools. In 1969, with faculty from the School of Behavioral Social Sciences, the Native advisory board developed the Indian Teacher and Education Project (ITEP) via Federal funding to establish an accelerated Native American teacher credentialing program at HSU. This model has been nationally recognized as a best practice for supporting and building capacity for systemic change. Thus, the model was sustained by state funding.

Over the decades the campus has seen an increase in Native student enrollment with a broad range of career interests. Students that were not training to become educators felt isolated and longed for a space on campus that valued them, provided professional mentorship, and guidance. In response, the program was renamed the Indian Tribal and Educational Personnel Program (ITEPP) to reflect the inclusion of Native students enrolled in all majors. Since 2014, ITEPP has been tasked to track the educational success of all Native students on-campus, not just those previously eligible to participate in ITEPP, and provide professional culturally relevant academic advising and career planning across all three academic colleges. The staff closely follow trends in enrollment, academic success, and gaps for Native students. By providing strong academic advising, co-curricular programming and retention services, the campus has seen an influx in the retention and educational success of Native students across all majors.

### Research Overview:

As part of my thesis: *Indigenous Participatory Leadership as a best Practice in Higher Education*, I worked with the ITEPP staff to assess and evaluate the program. The purpose of the study was to find the impact(s) and outcome(s) of using Indigenous models of participatory leadership in a higher education setting. The thesis outlined and reviewed leadership models used at universities and colleges and the impact leadership has in creating equitable outcomes for students, specifically those who identified as Native American. ITEPP has a long-standing relationship with the community and Humboldt State University (HSU) campus. The program's sustainability and success in supporting students through their educational journeys, led me to want to review the program in depth to find out why this is. Qualitative and Quantitative data was collected through



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surveying current students and alumni. The students and alumni surveyed spanned from the very first ITEPP cohort to the newest Freshmen and Transfer students. The collected data was compared to both HSU's institutional data and from the California State University System, which encompasses the entire State. The findings affirmed the significance of utilizing Indigenous participatory leadership in higher education. Additionally, the data outlined 10 best practices of ITEPP that are adaptable for other programs and organizations.

### Best Practices

#### 1. Academic Advising

A key element of ITEPP is culturally relevant academic advising. The Advisors use a narrative approach, which embraces students' lived experience and cultural backgrounds. Advisors spend time and get to know each one of the students utilizing advising sessions. Advising sessions are a means to develop and strengthen relationships while building trust between the Advisor and the student. Navigating the academic process can be difficult for first-generation college students, particularly underrepresented students. Advising within academic programs and major departments is often time-limited, due to the volume of students needing assistance. The two full-time advisors significantly impact the retention and graduation rates of ITEPP students. The culturally relevant advising model is unique to each student, it prepares them for academic success and begins before they arrive on campus. ITEPP staff reach out to stakeholders and community member on and off campus to provide a wide array of support for students. The advisors provide holistic support that extends from their academic, personal, and professional lives.

#### 2. Relational

ITEPP was designed and established in response to community-based needs. The program continues to respond to changing environmental and social demands. ITEPP leadership maintains strong relationships with the students, campus, and community to continually shape and design the program and its goals. This long-standing program consistently engages and responds to community members and assess the needs of professionals post-graduation. This practice aids in the ability to refine the program without compromising or losing the original focus. Relationships with the campus, surrounding community, and Tribal Nations provides students and alumni the ability to connect, find jobs, scholarship, and research opportunities. ITEPP staff incorporates professional development for students, and demonstrates how to build and sustain valuable relationships. The strength of a relational model is the level of accountability participants, staff, and alumni hold one another to. A practice that is modeled in traditional cultural community structures. ITEPP focuses on being accountable to the community, students, and campus. Students positively respond to the sense of accountability to

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their Tribal communities and to ITEPP. Cultural relevance supports and drives student's desires to graduate and contribute to their communities.

### 3. **Mentorship and Navigating Academics**

Navigating Higher Education can be difficult for Native Students, as it often conflicts with their cultural value systems. The effects of boarding schools have negatively impacted the relationship Native American communities have with the current educational system, particularly at the university level. Education was originally structured to rid Native peoples of traditional beliefs, language, and culture and into the newly formed mainstream culture. Native college students, who have been successful in school, still maintain a distrust of the educational system. ITEPP is structured to support students, by providing and fostering skills conducive to successfully navigate college. Beyond academic advising, students are provided with strong mentorship from peers, faculty, staff, and the community. Many ITEPP students expressed they have experienced "imposter syndrome" at some point in their educational careers. Imposter syndrome, is an internal experience feeling that success was not earned but rather almost as if it were by sheer luck, they were successful<sup>1</sup>. ITEPP's support aid students in overcoming feelings of inadequacy and anxieties surrounding their ability to successfully navigate higher education. The support and

mentorship provided by ITEPP helps students to see the importance of education in their careers and the betterment of their communities. ITEPP assists students in gaining the skills necessary to navigate major changes, financial aid, housing, graduation, and other university processes. Mentorship keeps students on track both in their studies and their goals, while helping them achieve independence.

### 4. **Financial Support and Jobs**

Low-income, first-generation students often find it difficult to navigate the job market and how to finance their education. A common misconception is that Native students are fully-funded at the university level. Often this creates the narrative that Native students do not need financial support, which can leave students inadequately prepared. ITEPP staff have strong connections with the potential funders as well as the Office of Financial Aid at HSU. Additionally, ITEPP staff intentionally build strong relationships across campus. Creating a network of liaisons across departments and divisions helps support Native students build campus engagement and a sense of belonging and ownership. The staff provide opportunities for funding and internships as well as workshops that demystify the application processes. The staff utilize the strong relationships they cultivate with students when writing letters of support or recommendations. They can provide a

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<sup>1</sup> Cuncic, A. (2020, May 01). How to Stop Feeling Like an Outsider When You Have Social Anxiety.  
<https://www.verywellmind.com/imposter-syndrome-and-social-anxiety-disorder-4156469>

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personalized letter that speaks holistically about the student and incorporates cultural contributions. The professional staff at ITEPP also assist students with resume building, interview preparation, and job searches. This service continues well beyond graduation. The director secures funding annually to secure student staffing opportunities. On-campus jobs allow students to work around their school schedules so that they may prioritize their education. Jobs on campus also support engagement, belonging, and build leadership skills. Student staff become strong mentors to incoming students.

### 5. Professional Skills and Leadership

Students gain a variety of skills in their majors and disciplines but there is often a gap in what is needed to be successful post-graduation. As mentioned above, skills are provided through professional development, internships, conference attendance & presentations, professional guidance, and mentor programs are presented and coordinated by ITEPP's professional staff. Students who participate in ITEPP are provided with opportunities to take on leadership roles. Skills developed in leadership roles are invaluable and are often assessed in program evaluation in an attempt to refine and improve. Alumni and current students both state that skills they develop in leadership and professional capacities significantly influences their personal and professional lives post-graduation.

### 6. Social and Emotional Engagement

Being the only Native student in a space such as a classroom, lab, or residence hall can be an overwhelming experience. Native students who attend non-Tribal institutions often experience racism, isolation, invisibility, and othering. These experiences can lead to adverse feelings of pursuing higher education and can decrease the retention rate. Students expressed that the social and emotional engagement they receive at ITEPP prepared them for the campus at large. The students and staff at ITEPP make participants feel welcomed, valued, and understood. Sharing meals with staff and students at the ITEPP house creates a place where they feel safe, can share experiences, and develop strategies for academic success.

### 7. Cultural Support and Relevant Programming

Mainstream curriculum and lack of Native representation on campus can make the university a negative experience for many students. Native students can feel invisible, othered, or marginalized on college campuses. The cultural support ITEPP staff provide helps students to feel seen, heard, and have a sense of belonging at HSU. ITEPP staff demonstrate a clear understanding of the cultural wealth Native students hold and use this as the framework to support and guide them. Students have strong connections to family and community. Cultural responsibilities, family, and community commitments often take priority to school. ITEPP staff understand that sometimes education has to take a backseat to these important

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responsibilities. Navigating the balance of school, family, and community can be difficult for Native students. ITEPP staff aid students in balancing priorities, to ensure they are successful in cultural, family, community and academic pursuits. The culturally responsive programming ITEPP provides, creates visibility of Native cultures and issues to the campus. And, at the same time reaffirms the importance of embedding and valuing traditional Indigenous knowledge in the learning process. The visibility and inclusion created through culturally relevant programming supports students educational and personal experiences on campus. Co-curricular cultural programming creates opportunities for students to meet and engage with other students, staff, faculty, and administrators. Programming provides opportunities for current students to connect with Alumni and community members. The network and connections students create often lead to opportunities for future employment and collaboration. It affirms the importance of community and relationship building, based on accountability.

### 8. Physical Space

A key component of ITEPP is the physical space on campus. From the beginning of the program, ITEPP has had a house designed to be an inclusive, safe, and cultural restorative space. This was highlighted throughout all student groups as having a significant impact on their educational experience. Access to computers, internet, and printing in the ITEPP house lessened the stress of students completing their assignments and

ultimately their degrees. It provides a space for after-hours study groups and co-curricular programming. ITEPP is home to the Cultural Resource Library, open to the community on and off-campus. The library is filled with culturally relevant resources to support all disciplines. The most frequent finding is students appreciated having a safe space on campus to call their own. Students expressed the need for having a space that provided coffee, snacks, supplies, and the camaraderie they needed to have a sense of belonging on campus.

### 9. Community On and Off Campus

ITEPP has a significant network on and off campus. The Council of American Indian Faculty and Staff (CAIFS) is an organization that consists of Native faculty and staff on the HSU campus. ITEPP has cultivated relationships over time and established liaisons in various divisions to support students. CAIFS and liaisons provide assistance to ITEPP students across campus. These individuals are viewed as an extension of ITEPP and students feel comfortable seeking their help. The off-campus community is extensive and spans throughout the nation. Alumni and other community partners continually engage in conversations with ITEPP to best support students. The community network also provides opportunities for students to engage in internships, scholarship, and research activities while in school and during school breaks. Students utilize the off-campus community network post-graduation to search for jobs and research opportunities. Many students identified



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ITEPP's network as having contributed to finding their first jobs out of school.

### 10. Centralized Communication

As technology has increased the amount of information students receive is overwhelming. Information overload has caused students to miss opportunities that are best suited for them. ITEPP has always been a hub for information and communication for Native students. Students know that ITEPP staff will keep

them up to date with the University's dates and deadlines as well as any other pertinent information. ITEPP sends out a weekly newsletter that highlights events, deadlines, jobs, speakers, advising hours, reminders, and other culturally reflective information. This easy to read, targeted, and concise weekly newsletter is what students utilize to help keep them on task. Students state that this is significant because many would have missed out on opportunities for scholarship, programming, or important deadlines.

### Summary:

It has been over a century of honoring the vision of those who began the healing process from the historical trauma incited by the devastation of boarding schools designed to assimilate and eradicate Native peoples in the name of education. ITEPP continues to refine and expand services by utilizing a participatory leadership model, where the Native community, students, alumni, staff, and leadership share decision-making and accountability. The strength of decades of community support and resilience shines forth in ITEPP by graduates leading the overhaul of oppressive policies, structures, and legislation across the nation.

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