

NARRATOR: RIT is consistently ranked one of the top 200 colleges for Indigenous students by *Winds of Change* magazine. Today on Intersections: The RIT Podcast, Nicole Scott, director of RIT's Native American Future Stewards Program speaks with Abigail Reigner, a second-year mechanical engineering student who is the regional student representative for the American Indian Science and Engineering Society. They discuss life as Native Americans in higher education, learning about Native cultures, and some of the unique ways RIT partners with tribal nations and organizations.

NICOLE: We're going to start with the land acknowledgement. The land that we gather on, that we are doing this podcast on, is the traditional territory of the Onöndowa'ga:' or "the people of the Great Hill." The Seneca are known as "the keeper of the western door," and together with the Mohawk, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida and Tuscarora, the Seneca make up the sovereign Haudenosaunee Confederacy. So, we begin with a land acknowledgment because that helps us establish – or it recognizes the Indigenous people who had a relationship to the land. And Abigail, what does that mean to you, coming here as a student and hearing the land acknowledgment said before a big event?

ABIGAIL: I think it's very important. I don't know if a lot of other students necessarily understand why we have to do it, but it's important to acknowledge the land we're on because it's not our land. It's land that was forcibly taken from a people that were then exploited and just not treated as they should be. And it's one of the things – it's the least we can do to return the favor of being on their land that they took care of for us.

NICOLE: Personally, I like it because I think it shows that unique relationship that Indigenous people have to the land because when you see the land and you hear about the culture you can see that connection. Because this weekend we went to Ganondagan with a small group of students, and our interpreter there was going through all of the ways that, as a Seneca woman, she was brought up with the teachings and how every part of this Earth was incorporated into who she is as a Seneca woman and I thought that was beautiful.

ABIGAIL: Yeah, and I think you can probably like kind of attest to this, too, but I think the culture, at least of the Comanche, is just so different from these. I just think it's like the whole Northeastern kind of tribal culture is just so much different. And at least in the Southwest, for us it's a lot more how we live and a lot less spirituality. We do have the significance of a lot of things, especially bison, but it's definitely like they cover almost everything that they use in their daily lives, the strawberries, the sunflowers, everything has a meaning. Whereas I feel like, in the Comanche at least, it's just kind of those bigger things that really encompass our lives that really get recognized.

NICOLE: So, Abigail, as a student here at RIT, when you – when people find out you're Native, what is their reaction? Because I could tell you the reaction I get.

ABIGAIL: I think for me, and you just knowing me and you just looking at me, I think it's pretty obvious: "Oh, you don't look Native..." I think that's the generic one for a lot of

people with the lighter skin, people who don't "look Native." And it's sad because they're not really seeing you as who you think you are. And I think that's one of the things, especially with being biracial, is just having like a foot in both worlds and not knowing which one you're a part of because you'll never be fully emerged in either. I usually get positive reactions. A lot of times if I get to know a person, later down the line they'll ask me some questions because they just don't know a lot about Native Americans. I think it's only 27 states in the U.S. that teach some kind of Native American history in K-12 education. There's a huge knowledge gap between what some people know and what some people don't. I think I've seen that knowledge gap in a variety of ways, and it's very interesting the questions that'll come out of it.

NICOLE: Working with students for the last seven years I do see how students when they get here and they're either biracial or they didn't grow up on the reservation, they don't feel like the Future Stewards Program is for them. They think it's for students like myself who – I am fully Native, both parents are Navajo and I grew up on the reservation. So, coming from that background I can see how the Future Stewards Program would benefit me, but if I were to come maybe – I had a student who was blond-haired, blue-eyed, and it took her a while to feel like she could come to FSP. But I always tell students, "If you are ready to claim your indigeneity, you're comfortable with it, you want to learn more, then that's what we're here for." I see many benefits to my job, but my favorite has to be helping students navigate finding out who they are and learning more about their culture. And then sometimes, they reconnect. I have had a few students who weren't enrolled, who didn't even think they could be, or felt comfortable in claiming that identity who have gone back and then enrolled into their nation. So that goes back into our mission of recruiting, retaining, returning, and rebuilding. But you had said that you get questions, is that like, "What is Native?"

ABIGAIL: Yeah, and one of my roommates is actually from Puerto Rico so she doesn't really – when I told her that I was Native American, she had no idea of really what that meant. She asked me to explain the different parts of not just the culture, but the history of what it means to be Indigenous in North America, you know, that sort of thing.

NICOLE: How do you start learning about Indigenous peoples? Because there's so much to know; there are so many of us. There's over 500 recognized tribes, and you just pick one and figure out where to go from there? Look into the Haudenosaunee. I feel like I will start plugging them because really U.S. history began with the Haudenosaunee people. And the U.S. government is based off of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy so I think people should start with them.

ABIGAIL: I think so, too.

NICOLE: But do you – if someone were to ask you, "Where do I start?" is there a specific place you'd recommend?

ABIGAIL: I know at least my tribe has a museum that you can use to learn about different things within our culture. So, I know that's really good if you're looking to get

into a specific tribe. But I think I would agree because the way it's just portrayed, in movies and in media – I did a project on this for a class last year. When it comes to portraying Native Americans in media, you often get the image of the Southwestern plains Native Americans, especially the Comanche, and I thought that was so funny. I was like, what a coincidence? I never even realized that. But, yeah, that's not where U.S. history began. That's not where Native history was its strongest, I think, especially in terms of the government and coming to America and that sort of thing. I agree that a lot of the Eastern cultures have a lot more to do with the beginning of the creation of the U.S. And I also think another good place to start, just because I'm not sure it particularly gets enough recognition, is those Pacific Northwestern tribes and those West Coastal tribes just because so many of them have been erased, especially if you look at California who I think originally they had about 500 of their own individual tribes and now there's so few and there's so few and far in between. And last year I got to stay with the Pechanga for AISES and it was just so incredible hearing their story.

NICOLE: That was the AISES leadership conference?

ABIGAIL: Yes.

NICOLE: Can you tell us a little bit about what AISES is?

ABIGAIL: AISES is short for the American Indian Science and Engineering Society and what it is is just a place for engineers and people in STEM fields to come together and communicate and network and also there's a job fair. But some really unique aspects of AISES is incorporating a lot of different tribes' cultures and different aspects of Native culture as a whole and incorporating Indigenous issues into our conference and having sessions on those. So, I got to the conference last year as a freshman and I think we were only in our 6th week (of classes). So, I got to the conference and I was kind of walking around the career fair and I was just walking around and I actually got to the booth for GE Aviation. And I was just talking to them a little bit about what I was doing here and what kind of projects I had been working on in high school. And they were like, "Oh, do you want an interview?" So, I ended up taking the spot for the interview with them and I was offered an internship over the summer with them, which to me at the time was absolutely mind-boggling because I really wasn't expecting anything. I really genuinely was not expecting to get anything out of the conference besides more involvement and interaction with other Indigenous STEM students, and it turned out that the people there even at the professional level are so there for the students that they are willing to offer you opportunities as long as you're willing to step up to the plate and take it, which to me was absolutely incredible and I hadn't been expecting that at all.

NICOLE: I really like that story because it shows, yes, we do ask freshman students to attend the conference just so that they can see what it all involves. But then when you came back, I think it was the night we had our alumni dinner, and you said, "I have this interview with GE." And I thought, "That is so cool," and then you got it!

ABIGAIL: So, Nicole, we talked about our trip to Ganondagan. Could you talk a little bit more about what that is and the different ways that we partner with different organizations and tribes around here?

NICOLE: So, it's funny because when we went to Ganondagan, actually that Wednesday before we went to the Ganondagan State Historic Site, when I came seven years ago my first day was the groundbreaking of the museum. And that was the first day I met Pete Jemison, who has become this mentor of mine and who has helped me navigate all of these different tribal relationships. He's a state historic site manager, but he's also very well connected within his own community, he's Seneca. One of the big tasks that I had to do my first year was planning this Native American Advisory Council meeting, the NAAC as it's called. It's a meeting between the sovereign nation of the Seneca and the RIT administration. The RIT president is involved, and we meet to get a better understanding of what is happening in the community, what issues are keeping students from applying to RIT or to other universities, what do we need to be aware of so that – how can we help counselors navigate children through the application process? So, all of that is talked about at the NAAC and from that first meeting came about the idea of this Native American Outreach Day. And I think it was my second year that we held our first outreach day. And it was basically inviting schools, mini and small groups from different communities. We had the JOM program from the Mohawk nation come – and that was like a six-hour drive. And we bring them to RIT and we show them the campus and we help them with understanding what it takes to apply to RIT and what resources we offer. It really goes back to my own experience as a first-generation student who had no idea what it all entailed. I think back to my story, and it's hard for me to process how I was able to navigate it all. Because my parents, they could help me as much as they could, counselors, but I think the one thing that I really try to help students with when they get here is being that support for them, helping them find that confidence. Because I really think that's where students feel – when they get to RIT it's like, "All these students here, they're smarter than me. I don't see one Native person." So, what we do when we get students here, we really try to involve the AISES group, the NASA (Native American Student Association) group, getting as many of our students into the room as possible so they can see people like themselves in that room. And then another thing that we partner with that involves the Seneca nation is the Seneca Language Revitalization Program, and we have a Seneca Ph.D. student working on that. His name is Robbie Jimerson, and seeing his work and seeing his passion for maintaining and preserving his language, it's really inspiring to show other students like this is what's being done at RIT. These are the resources we have here, and if you want to help your culture live on, I really think education plays a large part of that.

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