

Frequently Asked Questions Regarding Land Acknowledgment

Updated September 2021

Why is it important to offer/have a land acknowledgment? Aren't land acknowledgments just empty gestures?

A land acknowledgment is a statement of respect for Indigenous nations, histories and cultures. Offering a land acknowledgment makes visible the Indigenous people who are the original occupants of a place and their enduring, spiritual ties to the land. It recognizes that Indigenous peoples lived and thrived in this place long before European colonization and settlement and affirms their continued presence today.¹ A land acknowledgment promotes awareness of the historical context leading up to now and encourages listeners to consider how their own backgrounds are linked to different histories and systems of oppression.

Offering land acknowledgments is already common practice in Canada, Australia and New Zealand, other countries where colonialism displaced Indigenous peoples from their land. Land acknowledgment statements are now becoming increasingly common in the US.

Millions of Native people were living and thriving throughout the Americas when Christopher Columbus arrived in 1492. Within a few generations, Europeans obliterated many communities through violent conflict or the diseases they brought with them, and the institutional systems of power they imposed vigorously oppressed Native people and the expression of their cultural lifeways and languages. Since 1777 the US government and Indigenous nations have signed more than 300 treaties regarding the land, the majority of which have since been violated by the US. Between genocide, forced assimilation and forced removal onto reservations, millions of Indigenous people now have little significant access to their ancestors' homelands, which are now densely settled and privately owned. Many disputes over the protection of resources and access to sacred lands continue today.²

Even the most well-written and well-delivered land acknowledgment can appear to be just empty words, but it is an important first step towards reconciliation. A land acknowledgment should be accompanied by concrete steps to build more constructive relationships with Native peoples in the area, such as supporting Native organizations by donating your time and/or money, asking how your organization can help theirs and developing concrete plans in consultation with them, and compensating Native individuals for their labor.

¹ They are now “dual citizens of their tribal nation and the country that invaded, displaced, subjugated, massacred, enslaved, acculturated, and continues now to oppress through social, economic, legal and political means.” Lorén Spears, <https://www.tomaquagmuseum.org/belongingsblog/2020/3/22/a-guide-for-land-acknowledgements-by-lorn-spears>).

² For more information, see Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2014.

Why are other tribes, such as the Wampanoag, not named in RISD's land acknowledgment?

RISD's land acknowledgment focuses on the Narragansett for a few reasons. At the time of contact, [the Narragansett was a powerful tribe that controlled nearly all of what is now Rhode Island](#), including College Hill. Other Native people living within [Narragansett homelands](#) paid tribute to the tribe, and the land on which RISD was built was recognized by other tribes and by European settlers as Narragansett land. It clearly falls within the plot two Narragansett sachems deeded to Roger Williams in 1636. (You can learn more about that transaction and Indigenous thoughts on land ownership here and [here](#).)

[As Narragansett activist and Brown/RISD dual-degree student Sherenté Harris BRDD 23 PT recently pointed out](#), since Europeans arrived in Rhode Island, “The Narragansett have had nearly all of their lands taken from them. The Narragansett have been massacred, illegally detribalized, and have had their women and children forcibly indentured and assimilated. This history of oppression has led to the Narragansett today being the most impoverished demographic within Rhode Island. By taking this first, small step of recognizing whose land you are standing upon when on College Hill in Providence, you are actively recognizing history's ties to present-day systemic forces of oppression.”

Today the Narragansett people are still very much a part of Rhode Island, with about 2,400 enrolled members—a figure just a bit larger than the total number of undergrad and graduate students currently enrolled at RISD. The Narragansett is the only tribe in Rhode Island recognized by either the federal or state government, meaning that the governments of both the US and Rhode Island consider the Narragansett Nation a sovereign government. (There are currently 574 federally recognized tribes in the US.) RISD is built on Narragansett homelands. To name other tribes from the region in a RISD land acknowledgment is to erase Narragansett history in their own lands, literally adding insult to injury.

We also appreciate and honor the importance of our relationships with Indigenous people from neighboring states. The Wampanoag are located in what is now known as Massachusetts. Both the Mashpee Wampanoag (centered in Cape Cod) and Gay Head Wampanoag (also known as Aquinnah Wampanoag; located on Martha's Vineyard) are recognized by the US government. Additionally, there are six tribes that are acknowledged by the Massachusetts Commission on Indian Affairs: the Chappaquiddick Wampanoag (Andover), the Chaubunagungamaug Nipmuck (Fiskdale), the Hassanamisco Nipmuc (Grafton), Herring Pond Wampanoag (Plymouth and parts of Cape Cod), the Pocasset Wampanoag (Fall River) and the Seaconke Wampanoag (Seekonk). Nipmunk homelands extend from what is now central Massachusetts into northern Rhode Island and northeastern Connecticut.

Federally recognized tribes in Connecticut are the Mashantucket Pequot and the Mohegan, and the state recognizes both of those nations as well as the Golden Hill Paugussett, the Eastern Pequot and the Schaghticoke.

If you are hosting a program or visitor with ties to a neighboring tribe—or any tribe, for that matter—by all means acknowledge and honor this history in your introduction or other accompanying information. But please do not add other tribes to the land acknowledgment itself. RISD is built on Narragansett lands.

How can I prepare to offer a land acknowledgment? How can I engage with invited guest speakers?

You can prepare to offer a land acknowledgment by reading the supporting materials and contextual information provided in the guide [Offering a Land Acknowledgment: Guidance for Use](#). Consider the land acknowledgment itself carefully. What is it asking you to think about and do in terms of your specific role as a community member at RISD? While you will not be speaking about this extensively during a program or event, beforehand you can, as the guide suggests, think about the ways you (and your department) are and can actively address the many violent legacies of colonialism in your daily work, amplify Native voices and histories and highlight ongoing critical contributions of Indigenous people across our state, region and nation. This reflection will prepare you to offer the land acknowledgment in a meaningful and respectful way.

If, as noted in *Offering a Land Acknowledgment*, you choose to include brief contextual information after sharing the land acknowledgment, consider what is most meaningful regarding “specific Indigenous historical or current information that relates to the occasion, program or location.” You may need to gather information so that this contribution accurately relates to and describes the work of your program, department or area. To be informed, you can also read up on relationships with Narragansett and Indigenous community members, specific initiatives, and other efforts other parts of the college are working on. (Some examples can be found at <https://sei.risd.edu/programming>, but this might also be a good reason to initiate conversations within your department.) Be honest about where your department is in taking specific actions and developing relationships. It is more important to convey actual realities and efforts than to speak theoretically or grandly.

As part of planning before an event, it’s a good idea to let invited speakers, panelists, facilitators and collaborators know you will be sharing a land acknowledgment. You can provide information about the Narragansett Nation, discuss any questions they may have and provide resources. In fact, this is a good occasion to communicate the “contributions of Indigenous people across our state, region and nation,” about which some of your collaborators may not be aware. As mentioned above in FAQ #2 (see above), please do not name other tribes in the land acknowledgment itself that you offer on behalf of RISD, as RISD is built on Narragansett lands.

If an invited individual is a Narragansett tribal member, they may ask—or you may ask—if they’d like to offer a greeting, prayer or their own land acknowledgment. If it’s appropriate, you can follow with RISD’s land acknowledgment. Some speakers and facilitators, especially those participating remotely, may ask to contribute a land acknowledgment related to places where

they live after they learn you will be offering one. You can invite them to share after you offer a land acknowledgment on behalf of RISD.

Finally, you can refer questions you are unable to answer or points for further discussion to media@risd.edu. In this way, you are playing a part in supporting awareness, reflection and action.

In what other ways is RISD supporting Indigenous communities?

RISD is committed to opening access to higher education for Indigenous communities and will continue to focus on making deep impact through college access events in the coming year. The college has made a concerted effort to support incoming Indigenous students over the past five years, increasing the percentage of need met for these students from 70 percent in 2015 to 90 percent in 2021. In addition, RISD participates in College Horizons, which is dedicated to increasing the number of Native American, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian college students as well as the Choctaw Nation's Higher Education Program. The Choctaw Nation is the third largest federally recognized tribe in the US.

The RISD Museum is also engaged in researching our Native North American collection, continuing work related to the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, including consultation with, and repatriation to, Native American tribes. The Center for SEI in partnership with RISD faculty and Brown University is working to expand the learning experience to better incorporate Native American and Indigenous studies. Supporting this effort is RISD's annual Indigenous and First Nations Artist Series, which brings to campus two indigenous or First Nations artists each year. (Updated May 2021)

Rhode Island School of Design Continuing Education (RISD CE) has also established a new partnership with the [Tomaquag Museum's Indigenous Empowerment Network](#), through which four scholarship recipients from the Native American Indigenous were able to participate in RISD CE art and design classes in summer 2021. RISD CE plans to continue offering scholarship money to Native American teens and adults interested in art and design throughout the year. (Updated September 2021)

If you'd like to learn more about Indigenous issues today, here are just a few resources to get started:

News: [Indian Country Today](#) and [Indianz.com](#)

Podcasts: [The Red Nation](#) and [All My Relations](#)

Nearby programs and events: [Tomaquag Museum](#) and [Haffenreffer Museum](#)

Additional resources: [Indigenous Environmental Network](#), [Native Arts and Culture Foundation](#)

This document was prepared by Gina Borromeo, chief curator and curator of ancient art; Amy Pickworth, assistant director of museum publications and senior editor; and Mariani Lefas-Tetenes, assistant director, school and teacher programs. It is based on research, learning and

conversation with John Brown, Sherenté Mishitashin Harris, Leah Hopkins, Elizabeth James-Perry, Hebe-Tee-Tse Lee, Taylor Payer, Lorén Spears, endawnis Spears, Mack H. Scott III and other Indigenous colleagues and experts during the development of the land acknowledgment as part of the RISD Museum's Americas Research Initiative. We thank and acknowledge them for their expertise and collaboration up to now and going forward

NOTES FOR FUTURE UPDATES:

Add to FAQ next time we update the PDF?

If an event is virtual, participants can find the land they are on and then share in the chat. People can look online for their local tribal government to confirm/check information they find on <https://native-land.ca/>