

**Brown University**  
**DANCING TOWARDS SURVIVANCE: INDIGENOUS ARTS AND SCIENCES**

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**Project Problem**

According to the Black Hills Knowledge Network, the Oglala Lakota Sioux of Pine Ridge Reservation face high rates of obesity and teen suicide within a broader context of poverty. As reported by Red Cloud Indian School, "the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation covers more than 2.8 million acres in southwestern South Dakota, making it the second-largest reservation in the United States and larger than Delaware and Rhode Island combined." Despite the size and scale of these conditions, the Oglala Lakota Sioux have access to one hospital and two small health centers, which makes where the Lakota live a federally recognized "medically underserved area." Despite this lack of health access, representations of the Lakota in media tend to portray their poor health as the result of a damaged and deficient "culture." Health experts, in turn, have attempted to solve Lakota health issues by importing Western medical doctors, prescriptions, and institutions from outside the Lakota community in ways that regard indigenous ways of knowing health as backwards, unscientific, or non-existent.

My project, *Dancing Towards Survivance*, however, seeks to develop culturally and structurally relevant educational courses drawn from Lakota concepts of Art and Science to lift up community health standards. I will examine how Oglala Lakota People already have embedded ways of talking and disseminating ideas around health that honor Lakota lifeways while also lift health standards by maximizing the present health resources in the community. In particular, I will: 1) look to Lakota uses of the medicine wheel; 2) examine ideas around western biology in relation to Indigenous science; and, 3) explore dance as an alternative and culturally relevant form of education around health and healing.

**Project Prospects for Future Impact**

Indigenous groups have recently revived programs using Indigenous ideas of health to promote healthy lifestyles and utilize western medicine when needed. For example, Ho'oulu 'Aina created the Kokua Kalihi Valley Clinic in response to the absence of accessible and appropriate health care services in Hawaii's indigenous population. Here, members work with one another to ensure holistic health amongst one another by using cultural health practices as part of a larger movement to sustain Indigenous health practices. My project proposes to do similar work in rural South Dakota.

Lakota youth and elderly are already organized in educational and embedded community tribal settings such as sporting events, powwows, bingo halls, and tribal council meetings. Despite the frequency of such gatherings, more can be done to mobilize these events towards community health and empowerment. While Lakota youth frequently participate in dance and sports during community functions, they often do not regard the values and concepts they learn in them as Art and Science.

The concept of the medicine wheel as well is often not seen as a usable form for understanding health and medicine because the medicine wheel has been invalidated within western education and school systems. Historically, Western Medicine/Colonialism has taught Native People to replace Indigenous ways of knowing health with western ideas of medicine dependent on isolating disease, individual responsibility, consumer fixes. Recently and increasingly however, Western health advocates, have turned to dance to help reinforce western medical ideas of health. Dance for Parkinson's Disease (otherwise known as Dance for PD), for example, works specifically with individuals to treat their illness using dance as a part of therapy. Dance for PD's ultimate goal that is to strengthen western norms of healing and what it means to be healed or reach therapeutic comfort.

Whereas Dance for PD uses dance to bolster western medicine, my project proposes to use indigenous Science and knowledge to educate the Lakota youth and elderly about the human body and mental health. Future generations of Lakota youth deserve to be taught ways in which they can use their cultural understanding towards basic understandings of biology and healing.

This project provides Indigenous students with the tools needed to strive and succeed within modern society, utilizing the skill of Indigenous knowledges surrounding forms like dance and biology to make conceptions around health care relevant. The Projects for Peace and it's mission to support grassroots and philanthropic projects aligns perfectly with the aims of lifting up Indigenous voices and pedagogy.

I am prepared to do work within this community because I grew up from within this community, and my first hand experience to lack of artist opportunity and relevance to scientific knowledge is my reasoning for fulfilling this gap within the place I call my home. Additionally, Professors Adrienne Keene and Nic John Ramos have prepared me to do community research and outreach. Professor Keene adapts teaching methods that are culturally relevant for Indigenous Scholars and Professor Ramos has helped me develop a perspective drawn from the History of Race and Medicine.

### **Project Expected Outcomes**

Using grant funding to hold community gatherings from June 28 to August 3, 2018, my project I will have three foci. The first focus will be on the body, deconstructing what it means to be "healthy and normal" using Indigenous frameworks to reroot our understandings of biology, and teaching alternative forms of medicating and treating ourselves in methods that are holistically healthy and culturally relevant. We will be discussing some of the health statistics negatively affecting the community and provide resources and new skills to help combat these problems.

The second focus, healing and alternative forms of medication, works towards providing outlets for Indigenous students to express themselves that validates and encourages their creative expression. This is critical in teaching kids how to use their art to reduce issues around mental health and stress the importance of self care. By installing a positive antidote of art within their minds, it provides new coping mechanisms to deal with pain and trauma; a solution that does not end with taking one's own life.

The third foci will expose students to dance, both from traditional and mainstream culture, in a structured weekly dance class. Although not each week is a traditional technique of dance to the Lakota, it is important to offer different styles in order for Indigenous artists to put their own cultural and personal twist on western methods. Representation matters when educating Indigenous students because it shows they can take their indigenous selves to new forms of dance. Students will work with Indigenous choreographers to familiarize and strengthen their technique, and with these developed skills they will be competitive in their art on or outside of the reservation. It is important to show Indigenous students that they too can succeed, and will allow them the opportunity to be taught by someone who looks like them. By the end of the project I would like for the participants to feel comfortable in sharing their new tools and skills with their community at the 34th Annual Oglala Lakota Nation Powwow.

The weekly structure of the project is designed to allow participants the opportunity of networking with each guest choreographer. Each week will have two days of dance and health related lessons, while the other three days are made intentional for building and sustaining new and long lasting relationships.