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# Convergence and Conflict: An Abstract

*Melissa K. Nelson*

In this presentation I share examples from my work as an explicit scholar-activist, which includes being a professor of American Indian studies and an indigenous-rights activist. I explore the areas of convergence and some areas of conflict with embodying these two roles. One of the most important “productive paths” that link Native and academic communities is the work of repatriation and the Native American Graves and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). As Native Americans and academics, we have an ethical responsibility to make sure our universities are compliant with the NAGPRA federal law and that Native communities are fairly and adequately consulted regarding the care, storage, and repatriation of their ancestors and cultural heritage that are housed in university museums and departments. I then discuss the unique orientation of San Francisco State University as having the term *social justice* explicit in our university mission and the rich activist heritage our campus has going back forty years to the Third World Strike and civil-rights activism, including the historic Indian occupation of Alcatraz. This explicit emphasis on social justice and community empowerment makes my scholar-activist work easier to conduct than would be possible at other universities. In doing this work between communities and universities, I emphasize the new “Three Rs” of American Indian studies: respect, relationship, and reciprocity. Being a facilitator is important to this work of developing respectful relationships with the diverse Native communities that are our students, colleagues, and

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community partners. One way to encourage increased collaboration between community issues and departmental goals is to have Native advisory councils. These councils of community scholars can attend faculty meetings in order to share issues and events. Community-service learning programs are also integral to bridging this gap and ensuring that students have real-life experiences and that urban Native agencies receive trained volunteer support. Collaborative community-based research is another critical point of convergence.

Potential areas of conflict for scholar-activists include experiencing split loyalties in terms of commitment to one's academic institution and commitment to Native communities and causes outside of the academy, especially when an acute conflict occurs between a university and a Native community, for example, over a sacred site on university lands or about museum policies. Where does the scholar-activist stand? Under what risks and costs? Tensions also arise with identity politics and the arbitrary and often-invented divisions between urban and rural Indians, recognized and unrecognized tribes, North and South, and traditional and modern. Who represents whom? An immense diversity of Indian community activism exists just as there is great diversity among indigenous scholarship. Inevitably, some groups will converge for mutual causes and efforts, while others will find conflict regarding different causes, approaches, methods, frameworks, and identities. The collaborative possibilities between Native scholarship and Native activism are a diverse spectrum and, ultimately, a healthy one with great potential for innovative and meaningful work, but also it is a spectrum fraught with significant philosophical and structural challenges.