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LAND AND WORKERS ACKNOWLEDGMENTS TO PROMOTE JUSTICE ON HIGHER EDUCATION CAMPUSES [ABSTRACT]

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ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	Land and labor acknowledgements are part of a slow growing movement to address historic injustices and legacies of racialization and colonization.
Background	Land and labor acknowledgements are important because they serve as a way to recognize and honor the historical presence and contributions of Indigenous peoples on the land, as well as the exploited labor of marginalized communities
Contribution	This presentation will provide information about the practice of land and labor acknowledgments, share guidance and best practices, discuss how these efforts can be part of a significant institutional commitment to justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI).
Keywords	land acknowledgement, labor acknowledgement, DEI, decolonization, justice in higher education, addressing historic injustices

SUMMARY

Land and labor acknowledgments are asseverations recognizing the history, legacy, and relationship between people and the land and/or labor that contributed to an institution. Land and labor acknowledgments can serve as a powerful introduction to convocations, graduations, conferences,

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Land and Workers Acknowledgments

sporting events, or other activities in higher education, particularly in the United States, with its well-documented history of systematic oppression.

A land acknowledgment is a statement that recognizes the Indigenous people who were the original stewards of a place and who, due to centuries of displacement, depravity, and dispossession, may no longer be living on the lands in which they have ancestral ties. Land acknowledgments are not new but are part of a traditional custom that dates back centuries in many Native nations and communities. Further, land acknowledgments should not be considered a simple recognition of historical events but part of a commitment to acknowledging and eradicating colonialism and a commitment to fostering greater mindfulness towards justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI).

Land acknowledgements are a traditional practice that recognize the original inhabitants of a land. The practice has been around for centuries in many Indigenous cultures. In recent decades, land acknowledgements have become more common in Australia, Canada, and the United States with the modern land acknowledgement movement dating back to Australia in the late 1970's with the Welcome to Country ceremony often associated with the Indigenous Australian political movements and the arts. The practice became more commonplace in the 1990's and early 2000's after being promoted by the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation. In Canada, land acknowledgements became common after the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission final report in 2015 and the United States has seen land acknowledgements growing in popularity since 2020.

A labor acknowledgment is a relatively new practice that recognizes the uncompensated labor of individuals living in servitude whose work allowed an institution to prosper. Labor acknowledgments show gratitude for the labor of enslaved people who were kidnapped or born in bondage, immigrant workers, undocumented people, imprisoned laborers, and those who may have been trafficked, indentured, or otherwise coerced. Simply put, labor acknowledgments address the human toll associated with the development of a space or place. The labor acknowledgement movement is most commonly found in the United States where it has gained traction in recent years alongside complex discussions about racial justice and the legacy of slavery.

Land and labor acknowledgements are not without their critics. Specifically, there is criticism in the literature, particularly by Indigenous scholars, who assert that land and labor acknowledgments are often hollow and performative, lacking substantive action. Accordingly, it is imperative that institutions take measures to ensure that land and labor acknowledgments are not tokenizing, vague, stereotyping, or without action.

Land and labor acknowledgment should not be prepared in isolation and instead must reflect the voices of the impacted people, be prepared in consultation with campus and community members, link to accurate historical records whenever possible, include responsibility ownership by the institution, and be complemented by action. Some best practices can include scholarship creation for deponents, the introduction of new courses, development of an endowed faculty position, a historical display in a library or museum, a statement placed on the institutional website as well as included in written and verbal form at important campus events which acknowledges institutional responsibilities, installation of a historical marker, and the establishment of an annual campus event honoring the life and legacy of the Indigenous people and forced labor that is part of the institutional reality.

Most importantly, land and labor acknowledgments address violent histories propagated by settler colonialism in support of raising public consciousness and addressing cultural disparities and legacies of oppression. These activities must come from a place of respect and be driven by the motivation to seek reconciliation. According to the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, "Making a land acknowledgment should be motivated by genuine respect and support for Native Peoples. Speaking and hearing words of recognition is an important step in creating collaborative, accountable, continuous, and respectful relationships with Indigenous nations and communities."

While most institutions would be served by land and labor acknowledgements, land grant institutions are particularly well suited to land and labor acknowledgements. Land grant institutions established in the United States by the first Morrill Act in 1862 and the second Morrill Act in 1890, which established a number of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), were used to create public institutions that taught agricultural and mechanical arts. The Morrill Act involved granting 30,000 acres of land to each state for the establishment of these institutions with much of this land taken from Indigenous tribes through seizure, forced treaties, and agreements.

The purpose of this presentation is to inform individuals about the practice of land and labor acknowledgements, share guidance and best practices, discuss how these efforts can be part of a significant institutional commitment to JEDI, and reflect on how land and labor acknowledgements are a truth-telling endeavor serving as a starting place for accountability and positive change.

While land and labor acknowledgment are primarily found in Australia, Canada, and the United States, where the practice has been slowly gaining traction, interest in land and labor acknowledgements should be global. Many countries have legacies of colonialism that include the displacement of native people and also have venerated institutions that were built in part by enslaved, indentured, or imprisoned laborers.

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