

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

November 11, 2019

Statement of Support for Native SOAR (Student Outreach, Access and Resiliency) Students

We write in solidarity with the Native SOAR students who recently expressed their concerns about comments made by President Robbins during a meeting with them. In an effort to relate to the students, the President drew on stereotypes about Native Americans and made claims of Native ancestry. He has since apologized, and the students have accepted his apology.

Indigenous scholar and activist Dr. Kim Tallbear (Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate) has done extensive work disentangling the colonial logics inherent in DNA testing. She and other Indigenous scholars have noted that DNA testing for Native ancestry falsely simplifies tribal and familial relationships. As Dr. Tallbear puts it, "People think that there's a DNA test that can prove if somebody is Native American or not. There isn't."

When non-Native people, especially those in positions of power, make claims about Native ancestry, these claims should be understood as acts of cultural appropriation, with potential to cause harm. Appropriating tribal identity erases the work that students, faculty, and communities have done to make themselves no longer invisible on their own lands. As educators, we have a responsibility to enact what these land acknowledgements reference, namely to create an atmosphere where Native peoples are not just recognized but valued and respected for their distinct ways of being and knowing.

It is our hope that the University's senior administrators will take this opportunity to learn about Native students and their concerns regarding both historical and continuing trauma, as well as their intellectual contributions and hopes for the future. This may be an opportune time to ensure that Native knowledges, languages, philosophies, epistemologies, and ontologies are incorporated into the required undergraduate curriculum.

We call on all university leaders, especially those with the most power and authority, to take concrete actions to expand their knowledge of and competence in matters related to race, ethnicity, and identity. To do otherwise is to undermine the university's assertion that diversity and inclusiveness are among our core values. It is our hope and expectation that senior leaders will continue with ongoing diversity and cultural competency training, including campus conversations.

We must ensure that “Diversity Unites and Moves Us Forward” is not simply a platitude on a webpage, but an actual lived experience, for *all* members of our community.

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The University of Arizona sits on the original homelands of indigenous peoples who have stewarded this land since time immemorial. Aligning with the university’s core value of a diverse and inclusive community, it is an institutional responsibility to recognize and acknowledge the people, culture and history that make up the Wildcat community. At the institutional level, it is important to be proactive in broadening awareness throughout campus to ensure our students feel represented and valued.