

Best Practices in Authority Work Relating to Indigenous Nations in the U.S. (May 2023 version)

Published by the Latin American and Indigenous Peoples of the Americas (LAIPA) Funnel, May 2023

Introduction

Many cultural institutions in the territory referred to as the United States (U.S.) recognize the importance of striving for racial justice in every aspect of our work. For metadata-focused library workers, one focus of addressing longstanding injustice within cataloging and classification is ensuring population groups are referred to in our controlled vocabularies by terminology which reflects their preferred group names. Oppressive colonial practices sought to deny Indigenous peoples their right to name themselves; our collective goal is towards redressing historical imbalances of power in naming, acknowledging and upholding the identifications Indigenous peoples choose for themselves.

Best Practices in Authority Work Relating to Indigenous Nations in the U.S. is intended for settlers and other non-Indigenous people with limited experience and knowledge about the complexity around Indigenous sovereignty and group names. For Indigenous peoples, groups include nations, tribes, and distinct native communities which may or may not be recognized by the federal government, but exclude groups with vague claims to native identity for the purpose of misrepresentation. To recognize the distinct identity of Indigenous nations as sovereign entities, and for the ease of reading within this document, we refer to these groups as nations.

This document is specifically constrained to discussing authority work relating to Indigenous nations in the U.S. There are Indigenous peoples throughout the world and while the overarching principles outlined here may apply broadly, different contexts will necessitate different practices. Terminology relating to Indigenous peoples is ever-changing; the members of LAIPA consider this an initial version of this document and publish it with the intention that it will continue to be revised in the future. We are publishing these best practices under a Creative Commons license in the hope that other organizations will adapt these best practices for other contexts internationally. We are extremely grateful for the Indigenous-written resources consulted to draft this document and for the thoughtful feedback received by Indigenous and non-Indigenous members of the library community on draft versions.

Considerations before engaging in this work

The questions below are designed to provoke thought and reflection on your personal knowledge and on relationships between your institution and Indigenous nations in your area. It's not necessary to have complete answers for each of these questions before embarking on this work, but it's important to have context for your inquiries and recognize the complexity of these issues.

No one approach to this work will be correct; cultural humility and flexibility will be necessary. Naming issues are complex, but don't let the challenges keep you from doing the valuable work to make our systems better.

Institutional relationships

- Who are the Indigenous people within your institution? How can they be included in these discussions?
- What kind of relationships does your institution have with local Indigenous nations? What kinds of relationships does your institution have with nations on whose ancestral land your institution is located? What kind of relationships does your institution have with nations whose histories are represented in your collections?
- What have those relationships looked like in the past?
- How can you build relationships that are meaningful and sustainable?
- What kinds of resources does your library collection have relating to local Indigenous nations? How are these resources described and displayed to users? When was the last time they were reviewed? Are search terms relevant to the materials and respectful to users?
- Are resources up-to-date and reflective of the needs of those communities?
- Is material relating to those nations well-publicized, well-described, and freely available to those in relevant Indigenous nations?
- Does your collection have material relating to Indigenous traditions which should *not* be shared freely? Are they described and stored appropriately?
- How can your institution share decision-making power with Indigenous nations?

Indigenous nations in your area, past and present

- What is the history of Indigenous peoples in your area?
- What are the dynamics between different Indigenous nations in your area, historically and currently? What are the dynamics between Indigenous peoples and settlers/other non-Indigenous people in your area?
- Was the land in your area ceded by treaty or is it unceded?

- Are the Indigenous communities in your area recognized by national, state, or tribal governments? How have the rights of those communities been respected or contested by U.S. and state governments?
- How well resourced are the Indigenous nations in your area?
- What are the primary concerns of the Indigenous nations in your area?

Process issues

- Who else might be doing (or have already done) similar work in your area? This might include neighboring libraries/archives/museums, state or local organizations, government libraries, and/or tribal libraries.
- How will you share the information you've collected?
- What will you do if you get conflicting information about preferred terminology from nation members?
- Does your institution have the capacity to compensate Indigenous individuals or organizations in acknowledgement for consultation?

How to ensure your work is useful for other institutions

Well-documented efforts that follow basic authority control principles can ensure that other organizations can reuse your work and that tribal organizations are not contacted multiple times for basic information. While your work may not need to conform to the complex standards that have been developed by the Subject Authority Cooperative (SACO) program, being aware of some overarching principles can help ensure consistent and thoughtful approaches to consultation and documentation.

Traditionally, resources published by researchers or scholars outside the nation have been considered authoritative by the Library of Congress (like, for example, resources published by the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs or books like *Encyclopedia of Native American Tribes*). However, the current movement in librarianship is toward recognizing the autonomy of Indigenous nations, including in naming practices. For the purposes of Indigenous nations, the most authoritative sources are the people themselves (this would include resources published by the Indigenous nation which include their own name, such as websites or reports).

A lack of documentation by libraries in the past has made efforts to use appropriate names more difficult; keeping track of the sources of terminology will help us ensure we're keeping terminology up-to-date. SACO standards request evidence of consensus around preferred terminology, preferably from multiple resources. However, consensus may not always be possible. When consensus is not possible, documenting various sources of differing names is particularly valuable.

Keep in mind that there will frequently be more than one opinion about terminology preferences, and that no one person can speak for an entire nation. When choosing a preferred term, do your best to select the term used by the greatest number of persons in that nation, and the term that is least offensive to members of that nation.

When compiling information about terminology, be sure to document the following:

- Preferred term for nation
- Alternate names
 - Include information about historic names and federally recognized name
- Alternate spellings
- Where information was found about each alternate name/spelling
 - Include specifics such as URL of website, title and page number of printed resources, timestamp of audiovisual material, or name and title of person contacted
- When information was published (for static resources) and/or consulted (for resources that can be revised like websites)

Where to look for information about terminology

These resources are primarily focused on those within the U.S.; some resources for Indigenous communities outside of that area are provided. This is not an exhaustive list. None of these resources will be sufficient individually; you'll want to find multiple sources to confirm what nations have been referred to by other groups (exonyms) both historically and currently, as well as the current preferred terminology (endonyms). Current geopolitical borders do not reflect the areas of Indigenous nations, so be aware that you may need to look for resources outside the borders of states or countries to get complete information about a particular nation.

- Indigenous nations' websites (endonym terminology is frequently discussed in the culture/history section of sites)
- Indigenous nations' Facebook pages, which may be the best place to look for up-to-date information
- National Congress of American Indians [Tribal Directory](#)
- Association for Manitoba Archives-Manitoba Archival Information Network [List of Indigenous Subject Headings](#)
- Bureau of Indian Affairs [List of Federally Recognized Tribes](#)
- National Conference of State Legislatures [List of State Recognized Tribes](#)
- National Association of Tribal Historic Preservation Officers [THPO Directory](#)
- [Canadiana](#) (maintained by Canadian Research Knowledge Network)
- [First Nations, Metis and Inuit – Indigenous Ontologies \(FNMIIO\)](#) (maintained by National Indigenous Knowledge and Language Alliance (NIKLA) and the Canadian Federation of Library Associations (CFLA))

- Povos Indígenas no Brasil [List of Indigenous Peoples](#) (maintained by the Instituto Socioambiental)
- [Archive of the Indigenous Languages of Latin America](#) (maintained by the University of Texas Austin)
- Wikipedia (especially the sources cited)
- Encyclopedias and other reference sources

Find more information on what kinds of resources are considered authoritative by the Library of Congress on this [page of frequently asked questions about subject heading proposals](#).

Doing authority work thoughtfully

There are some important things to recognize as you do authority work in collaboration with Indigenous nations.

- The organizations of Indigenous nations have staffing and resource limitations; you should not expect immediate responses to queries.
- Cultural protocols may require further consultation within nations, which can lead to longer turnaround times.
- The priorities of Indigenous nations will likely not match your institution's priorities.
- Indigenous individuals or organizations may be reluctant to work with settler-run institutions without a history of sustained, thoughtful relationship building.
- Libraries and other cultural institutions do not have a good track record when it comes to respecting tribal data sovereignty. It's important to consider and learn about what implications authority work might have, and to ask for and accept guidance.
- This work is long overdue in libraries and archives; you should not expect gratitude for work our institutions should have been doing regularly.
- Always recognize and give credit for the contributions, large or small, made by Indigenous nations and individuals during this process.

For more information

There are many excellent reflections on how to respectfully cooperate with Indigenous nations. Listed below is a small selection written by Indigenous people, as well as an introductory guide to tribal nations and their unique status in the U.S.

- [Want to reach out to an Indigenous scholar? Awesome! But first, here are 10 things to consider.](#) Jesse Popp in *The conversation* (2021).

- Pulling together : a guide for Indigenization of post-secondary institutions. Section 3: Engaging with Indigenous Communities. “Building Relationships.” Asma-na-hi Antoine, Rachel Mason, Roberta Mason, Sophia Palahicky, and Carmen Rodriguez de France (2018).
- Practicing Pikyav: a guiding policy for collaborative projects and research initiatives with the Karuk Tribe. Karuk Tribe (2015).
- Tribal Nations & the United States: an introduction. National Congress of American Indians (2020).

Email template / example

An email template and a more detailed example email are included below to provide a potential starting point for discussions about appropriate names for nations. Emails such as these should be part of a greater outreach effort by your institution as informed by your research into the questions listed in the “Considerations before engaging in this work” section above.

Email template:

Hello [*name if available*]

My name is [*name*] and I am the [*position title*] at [*institution name*]. We are currently working on a project at [*institution*] to update our library’s subject headings to accurately describe Indigenous peoples. [*Names of resources, people, or organizations consulted.*]

We would like to use [*proposed subject heading*] in our catalog and propose an official change to the Library of Congress Subject Heading. Is this a name that you would use to describe the [*name used by tribe*] as well as [*name(s) of related tribe(s)*]?

Please let us know at your earliest convenience if the proposed name is acceptable. You may contact me with any corrections, questions, or suggestions at: [*contact information*].

As an expression of our gratitude for your help, [*offer of compensation*].

We look forward to ensuring our collection accurately represents your nation and to working together with you in the future to provide greater access to members of your community. Thank you for your time and willingness to help us in this effort.

Sincerely,

[*name*]

Email example:

Greetings! We are writing from [*university library*] to ask if you would be interested in advising us about the official terms issued by the Library of Congress that are used in libraries to refer to people of your Nation. We do so after consulting about procedures and protocols with faculty from [*university's Indigenous studies program*]. We got your contact information from [*name and position*].

Most U.S. libraries use standardized subject terms in our catalog records. These terms come from the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) vocabulary. Using these terms means resources about the same or similar subjects can be found consistently, not only in our catalog but across library collections. While this vocabulary is managed by the Library of Congress (a part of the U.S. federal government), [*library*]'s staff is able to formally propose and advocate for changes when terms are outdated, inaccurate, offensive, or derogatory.

The LCSH vocabulary includes the “authorized term” (the one that is used in the catalog record) as well as variant terms, which generate references in the library catalog. For example, if I browse for the subject “Movies” in our library catalog, I am directed to search for the subject “Motion pictures.”

We do not believe the currently authorized term in LCSH is the correct way to refer to your people, but as non-Indigenous people we do not presume to know what the most appropriate term is. We are hoping you will be willing to advise us.

We recognize names, spellings, and orthographies differ across the languages of [*the nations being consulted*]. If we can find general agreement on a preferred form, we will propose a revision to the Library of Congress, along with any other forms as references. If there is evident disagreement on a preferred form, we can still propose adding those to provide for additional access.

While we cannot guarantee any proposed changes will be accepted by the Library of Congress, we will make every effort to advocate for them.

These are the specific questions we have:

- Is there a best term or phrase for libraries to use to describe [*the nations being consulted*]?
- What other terms are also valid that might be needed as references?
- What terms should libraries use to describe the people of your nation?
- Are there terms that should not be used in library catalogs?

We would be happy to receive your feedback on any of these questions. If you would like to have a meeting or phone call to discuss the process and possibilities, we would be glad to schedule something.

We are reaching out at this time to other individuals, including *[list names here]*. We would welcome additional suggestions for others whose feedback we should seek.

Sincerely,
[name]

Information about LAIPA

LAIPA is the Latin American and Indigenous Peoples of the Americas funnel, one of the specific topic-oriented funnels coordinated through the SACO (Subject Authority Cooperative) program. SACO is part of the Program for Cooperative Cataloging (PCC), an organization of libraries primarily in the U.S. and Canada coordinated on a volunteer basis in cooperation with the Library of Congress.

While LAIPA members cannot act as experts about individual Indigenous nations, contacting LAIPA may be a good starting point if you have procedural questions about name or subject authority work relating to Indigenous peoples. Contact the funnel through the funnel email address (laipafunnel@gmail.com) or by emailing the chair, Sara Levinson (saralev@email.unc.edu).

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