

FROM THE INSTRUCTOR

This essay, the capstone for WR 100, asked students to weigh in on a debate currently confronting U.S. Indigenous communities. In her essay, Danielle Slawny chose the rich topic of casinos run by tribal communities. She researched and analyzed the arguments on both sides before presenting her own nuanced—and yet clear and powerful—point of view.

One of the things I like best about Danielle's essay is the way she threads the case study of the Seneca Nation throughout her essay: it gives unity to an essay that is chock-full of data on a wide range of subtopics. And yet, Danielle doesn't let this approach become too rigid; she draws on examples from communities in New Mexico and Wisconsin to amplify and broaden her argument, and as a result, her use of the case study feels natural and unforced. It was a pleasure to think alongside Danielle throughout the drafting process, and her essay's elegant prose and engaging, complicated ideas make it a pleasure to read again now, many months later.

Marie McDonough

WR 100: Indigenous Culture and Politics of Resistance

FROM THE WRITER

After a semester of reading articles and watching documentaries, the WR 100 class “Indigenous Cultures and the Politics of Resistance” left me with the understanding of how the U.S. government attempted to erase, silence, and exploit Indigenous peoples, as well as other subsequent shortcomings of U.S. government policies. While researching Native American gaming communities, I discovered that these policies have long-term consequences that influence the effectiveness of gaming as a tool to revitalize Indigenous communities; there is a web of subtle hardships plaguing Indigenous communities that must be considered when Native American tribes introduce casinos as an economic tool.

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DANIELLE SLAWNY

TAKING A GAMBLE: CONSIDERING POTENTIAL PROBLEMS AND EFFECTS ON INDIGENOUS GAMING COMMUNITIES

In 2002, the Seneca Nation united to open their first casino, pushing back community fears about degrading Native culture, risking tribal tensions, and eroding healthy lifestyles in favor of pursuing profit opportunities for the tribe. Their motivations mirror those of many Native American communities today: tribes often face enormous obstacles to economic and social success, including high rates of poverty, domestic abuse, drug abuse, and exploitation. In this light, legalized gaming on reservations seems like one potentially lucrative source of income. The story of the Seneca Nation, with their eventual financial success and their subsequent community problems, illuminates the nature of the relationship between Native Americans and casinos: although gaming is believed to help Indigenous communities prosper economically, few tribes have dramatically improved in economic status by using casinos, while most remained at or near the same economic level (Riley). This economic plateau exists because without considering cultural and social obstacles, Indigenous communities continue to face a poverty crisis even with the addition of casinos to their economies. While Native American gaming has the potential to help tribes on a monumental scale, urging greater regulation and consideration for potential cultural and social problems is necessary to make gaming a truly viable long-term solution.

Native American communities view casinos as promising with regard to eventual profits and other economic gains. After studying tribes in New Mexico, Thaddieus Conner and William Taggart conclude in their essay “The Impact of Gaming on the Indian Nations in New Mexico” that casinos have overall lowered unemployment, created consumption, and encouraged development for many Native tribes. In comparing data taken from 1990 and 2000, Conner and Taggart found that in gaming communities, the decrease in unemployment was 3.22%, while in non-gaming communities, unemployment decreased only 1.57% (58). In this way, the quality of life available to Indigenous peoples increased due to the introduction of casinos and gaming. Specifically in the Seneca Nation, Naomi Riley reports in “The New Trail of Tears: How Washington Is Destroying American Indians,” casinos have produced \$1 billion since 2002, with the average annuity to adults standing at about \$8,000 every quarter, plus a \$30,000 payout for children when they graduate high school (Riley). With the introduction of gaming, the financial assets of tribes and tribal communities increased in a way previously unattainable. This massive potential for economic gain has obviously proved extremely attractive to many Native American communities, who are often strapped for cash and consider financial need as a key barrier to tribal success. Critically, however, Native American communities often face enormous hurdles in successfully translating gaming’s profit potential into poverty reduction and a better community.

For one, Katherine Spilde and Jonathan Taylor note that there are often rampant tensions between tribes and state governments in terms of regulating casinos (25-26). States can believe that gaming activity on reservations detracts from economic activity in surrounding regions—by shifting the consumption onto reservation land—thus decreasing the economic activity taxable by the state

(Spilde and Taylor). To address these tensions, the federal government passed the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act (IGRA) in 1988, which upheld tribal autonomy with regard to gambling and made tribes answerable only to the federal government but encouraged the development of contracts between state and tribal governments to implement casino-style gaming on reservation land. These contract negotiations and the tensions between states and tribes sometimes pose a critical challenge for Native American communities because they have led to state encroachment on tribal sovereignty, lack of political capital for programs to address Indigenous issues, and discrimination toward Native American tribes. For example, Wisconsin tribes clashed with Governor Tommy Thompson during contract negotiations in 1996 when Thompson forced tribes to pay annual fees for their hunting and fishing rights, eroding tribal privileges and degrading the tribe's political power (Rausch 426). Spilde and Taylor, however, clarify that this tension need not exist, because under their investigations state revenue and economic activity have increased in the long-term after gaming development; what's more, they find that IGRA regulatory frameworks help encourage investment in casinos because they make the legality surrounding them more predictable (26-28). In this way, successful implementation of gaming continues to require states and tribes to work together to reach mutual understanding and implement casinos in a way that encourages economic activity for both parties.

Even in cases of highly successful tribe-state negotiations, however, many casinos in Indigenous communities fail due to market conditions, lack of local demand, or poor management, which wastes the valuable money that the tribe invested. In particular, poor management of casinos often leads to disastrous consequences for tribal finances. James Schaap argues that while some tribes rush to capitalize on gaming because of the high nation-wide demand, many times these tribes neglect to properly adapt their expectations to the economic conditions of the immediate area and fail to have a successful long-term marketing and management strategy (378). The location of many tribes in rural, economically underdeveloped areas often makes reservation casinos inaccessible to mass consumers; many successful casinos are found in or near metropolitan areas. Finally, even successful casinos can fail to impact their community based on the success or failure of the payout structures for each tribe, which can either generate growth and infrastructure investment or merely band-aid poverty, lack of education, lack of jobs, and drug addictions. In the case of the Seneca Nation, the tribe implemented a payout structure for their casinos; unfortunately, because of the lack of structural and educational support for Native youth, many tribal members often had no financial literacy and thus could not fully benefit from the money. Specifically, youth would often spend their money on big purchases all at once without considering the long-term implications, or fail to properly budget and sustain their income, with the result that the casino payments left them more financially troubled than before (Riley). In this way, Native casinos are subject to a minefield of potential disasters, each of which can substantially harm the welfare of the tribe.

These underlying social and community obstacles are not to suggest, however, that gaming is doomed to failure as a scheme for Native American revitalization; instead, it is clear that more regulatory support from tribal, state, and federal governments is needed to correctly implement casino-style gaming. As in the case of IGRA negotiations, *all* stakeholders—including tribal community members—need to be involved in the process to create successful structures for profitable gaming. In the Seneca Nation, tribal leaders implemented a financial literacy program for young adults (Riley). Although the program is seeing mixed returns, as teenagers refuse to take it seriously at first, engaging them as stakeholders is critical for helping them navigate responsible and sustainable financial management. What's more, the Seneca Nation's casinos have encouraged those

tribal members with college degrees and specialized talents to stay on reservation land in involvement with the gaming management, slowly ending “brain drain” from Indigenous territories and encouraging professional class growth (Riley). By universalizing policies such as these, it can be possible for tribal citizens, tribal leaders, specialized professionals, and even state governments to come to mutually beneficial terms to spark infrastructure growth. The key is simply making sure that every stakeholder understands their responsibility in the process, so that the proceeds from casinos can benefit the community as a whole.

Making all stakeholders responsible for their part in the casino’s success is a process more easily said than done, however. In particular, these stakeholders can only be engaged in a more meaningful way than currently unsuccessful attempts if the deep cultural attitudes towards community involvement in casinos are changed. As Lane Thompson observes in “Solving a Paradox of Indian Gaming: Cultural Solutions to Problem Gambling in Native American Communities,” one root of current social problems surrounding casinos lies in the systematic failure in Native American communities to inform tribal members of the potential dangers of reservation gaming, including gambling addictions and increased drug traffic, which is critical for shaping the way tribe members see their role in the community (Thompson 358-362). A primary way to do this is by educating children at a young age on the separation of traditional tribal beliefs—such as folklore surrounding luck and spirit guidance—from practical wisdom in order to help avoid proclivity toward gambling and excessively wasteful spending of money (Thompson 363). Emphasizing financial responsibility and obligation to the community will teach children their role in the casino’s success as well as in the larger tribe. Finally, adult stakeholders must be engaged in the solution as well through tangible changes to the management and payout structure of reservation gaming. Ensuring that community members not only share economic rewards from casinos but also the group responsibility of making the casino successful will allow previously negative attitudes to change and all community members to actively participate in the casino’s success. If education outreach programs or community oversight boards composed of tribe members were to be implemented in response to the social problems that stem from casinos, it could be emphasized that a tribal member’s responsibility doesn’t end once they receive a gaming paycheck and that every tribe member’s collective effort is needed to make the reservation a better place.

Therefore, consideration of gaming in Indigenous communities requires a multifaceted approach, taking into account a broad range of cultural, social, and political problems. Tribes must be prepared to engage all stakeholders in making reservation casinos a success, including non-tribal state actors who must agree to and benefit from the negotiated IGRA compact, tribal youth who must be given a sense of their financial and community responsibility in handling payouts, and the tribe’s adults who need to be actively engaged in casino and community management. The Seneca Nation casino outlines exactly what issues may arise when gaming communities neglect necessary actions to ensure the success of the casino. Changing attitudes from being passive payout recipients to active tribal leaders, supporting each other, and working to make the casino a success will be no easy task. But all stakeholders must maintain an active and positive role in the gaming process if Indigenous tribes are ever to turn a casino’s pure financial success into true improvements to the quality of life in Indigenous communities.

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