



*For science to serve our  
community, our community  
must be fully engaged in science.*



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**hhmi** | Howard Hughes  
Medical Institute



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Inclusive Science  
Initiative

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Exploring  
Culture  
Awareness

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Native American

# Exploring Culture Awareness - Native American

This is an informal guide to help with acknowledging culture change when opening a dialogue between Native Americans and non-Native Americans. The list of “Dos” and “Don’ts” have been assembled by the Native American members of our University community. This should help to encourage non-Native Americans to learn some “Dos” and “Don’ts”.

Native American’s way of life, history and identity are extremely complex and cannot be covered in a quick reference guide, especially ones that are written by non-Natives. Hopefully with our Native American community’s help we can expand/open some world views on campus.-

We are only addressing the ones that are more frequently used. There are certainly more to address, but let’s start with these.

- 1. Understand that being Native means different things to every person.** To some people, it means being Indian. To some, it means being Native. To some it means being American Indian. Native American. Indigenous. Alaskan Native. First Nations. Some folks exclusively use their tribe’s name.
- 2. Do try to find out whose land you are on and honor it.** Go to the reservation and Native community organizations. Visit your local Native cultural center. Learn about the culture and history. This will help with unwanted questions, i.e. “Do you still live in tipis” or “We’re all immigrants”
- 3. Be aware that bereavement customs need more leave-time than you might observe yourself.** This is also the same for memorials and family/community events.
- 4. Do be respectful and patient around time at Native American events.**
- 5. Don’t ask, “What tribe are you enrolled with?”**
- 6. Don’t lightly claim that you have Native American heritage.** Don’t lightly say things like you have an uncle who was a Medicine man or your grandmother was a Cherokee princess. No one is a Cherokee princess. No tribes had that term in the history of Indigenous people. Another part to this, you don’t become Native just because your DNA test says you are. If so, be genuine and learn who you are and be proud.
- 7. Don’t say diminishing or belittling statements towards Native culture.** “Let’s have a pow wow,” “lowest person on the totem pole,” “too many chiefs, not enough Indians,” “Indian giver,” “circle the wagons,” “That’s your Indian name” “Hey Chief” etc. These phrases are disrespectful, and are still being used today.
- 8. Native Culture is NOT someone else’s costume for “playing Indian”.** Halloween costumes and Thanksgiving reenactments stereotype Indigenous Peoples as one big distorted culture and relegate Native Americans to racist stereotypes and cultural caricatures. Avoid treating Native communities and members as logos, mascots, costumes, caricatures, etc.
- 9. Don’t say costume when referring to Native American’s Wacipi (Powwow) outfits and traditional wear.** A dancer’s outfit is called “regalia”. The feathers in particular are sacred and highly valued and cared for. Also, again Native Americans are not exhibits, so do not touch their regalia.
- 10. Be aware of the significance of family structure in Native American culture.** Family structures are different depending on the tribe. Some are matriarchal while others are patriarchal. Family hierarchy plays a big role in the teachings and practices of Native American’s way of life. Also, who is considered a member of the family (e.g., an uncle or an aunt) may be quite much broader than what you are used to.
- 11. Do understand that there are over 550 tribal affiliations in the US.** They are extremely diverse and have different languages and cultural customs. This is why it is important to do your research. Do not lump everyone together, that would be tokenizing, and to say “All Native American’s lived in Tipis” which isn’t true.
- 12. Don’t assume that all tribes get money from casinos.** There are many tribes across the nation, and there’s quite a bit of tribes that are not as fortunate as other Tribal Nations.
- 13. Don’t expect every cultural custom will be explained to you.** For example, when you are at a cultural event Native American’s don’t want to feel like an exhibit and have to explain everything going on.
- 14. Be sensitive during meal times.** Food is a significant part of many communities and cultures. Elders eat first, and those who are able-bodied are expected to get plates for the elders and Veterans.
- 15. Do use the present tense.** Many people make the mistake of using the past tense when talking about Native communities. Many children believe that Native Americans only exist in the past; they have no understanding of current Native cultures and challenges, and we adults often inadvertently contribute to this. The use of only the past tense contributes to the genocidal narrative that we’re anything but still here
- 16. Do be aware that anything that Natives Americans receive from the government is NOT free.** Food, Education, Healthcare, Land etc. All were promised through treaties and the greatest sacrifices Native American ancestors could give, their lives when western society took over. It would be very disrespectful to say such a statement.
- 17. Do be aware that gestures are different in Native American culture.** Examples of what is considered rude include eye contact, talking too loud, and asserting one’s self. Please don’t make the mistake by making the assumption that Native American’s are simple and incapable, but know their reserve is just as complex and sophisticated as the next.
- 18. Be respectful of how Native American’s communicate.** In many Native American cultures, pauses in the conversation are acceptable and should be respected. It is not an indication of disinterest. Often a Native American person has to “bend and turn” a question or concept around to fit their culture or their way of learning. This is important because in academic cultures we are taught to be efficient in how we speak (elevator talks or a 3 Minute Thesis). This is not the case in Native American culture and what may seem like “getting off topic” is a normal part of Native American conversation.