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ARTICLE

Resisting Termination: Native American College Student Activism and the National Indian Youth Council, 1953-1970

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Abstract

The history of student activism during the twentieth century in both K-12 and higher education contexts has a robust literature base; however, Native American student activism has largely been overlooked by historians of education. Predating the well-known American Indian Movement (AIM) by nearly a decade, the National Indian Youth Council (NIYC) successfully created an organizing base during the 1960s from which other Indigenous activist movements emerged, many of which still operate today. By focusing their efforts on student-run publications, direct action, and community-run education, the Indigenous college students and young adult activists constituting the NIYC contributed significantly to a larger social movement opposing and ultimately upending the federal policies of termination imposed on American Indian tribes that lasted from 1953 to 1970.

Keywords: higher education; National Indian Youth Council; Native American; student activism; termination

It's not as simple as mathematics … [where] everything is all defined.
—Melvin Thom, 1970, on seeking human freedom through activist work

"I tell you this in very simple words: the white power structure is hellbent on turning every American Indian into a white middle-class suburbanite fink." Melvin Thom (Walker River Paiute) did not mince his words in his speech before numerous middle-aged and elder Native activists at the Fifth Annual Wisconsin Indian Leadership Conference in Eu Claire in June 1967. "By white power structure, I mean the politicians, bureaucrats of BIA [Bureau of Indian Affairs], PHS [Public Health Service], OEO [Office of Economic Opportunity], churches, Indian interest organizations, and all other people who have preconceived notions of what the Indian should do and think," Thom continued.[1] As one of the ten founding members of the National

Indian Youth Council (NIYC), established just six years earlier, and now its executive director, Thom had garnered a reputation in Indian Country and among the NIYC membership for being "rocklike and unrelenting," but also "honest, committed, and sincere."[2]

Melvin Thom—or Mel, as his close friends knew him—and the other founding members organized the NIYC in 1961 in response to the devastating economic and political impacts of the federal termination era during the mid-twentieth century. The federal legislation concerning American Indians and Alaska Natives in this era represented a policy cornerstone of the "white power structure" that Thom boldly denounced and zealously opposed in his speech before his elders in Eu Claire, Wisconsin.[3] Formed by both female and male Indigenous college students from around the United States, the NIYC laid significant groundwork on college campuses and in communities across the country by promoting economic and social equality for American Indians. Predating the well-known American Indian Movement by nearly a decade, the NIYC successfully created an organizing base during the 1960s from which other Indigenous activist movements emerged, many of which still operate today.[4]

In many ways, Mel Thom's 1967 speech, titled "A Challenge to the Future," reflects both the aims of and challenges experienced by the NIYC during the 1950s as it struggled to form a coherent coalition, and during the 1960s as it worked to transform the educational and other material conditions of American Indians. From 1954 to 1961, Mel Thom and the other founders of the NIYC grappled with defining Indigenous self-determination and distancing themselves from white-led and -sponsored organizational structures. From 1961 to 1968, NIYC leaders and members emphasized the need to challenge what they considered to be the National Congress of American Indians' (NCAI's) antiquated model for opposing federal Indian policy—for example, politicking and legislating in Washington, DC.[5] As opposed to their Native elders, NIYC organizers advocated the use of bold rhetoric in quarterly circulars and organized, highly visible direct action that sought to promote Indigenous futures grounded in self-determination. At the same time, Mel's 1967

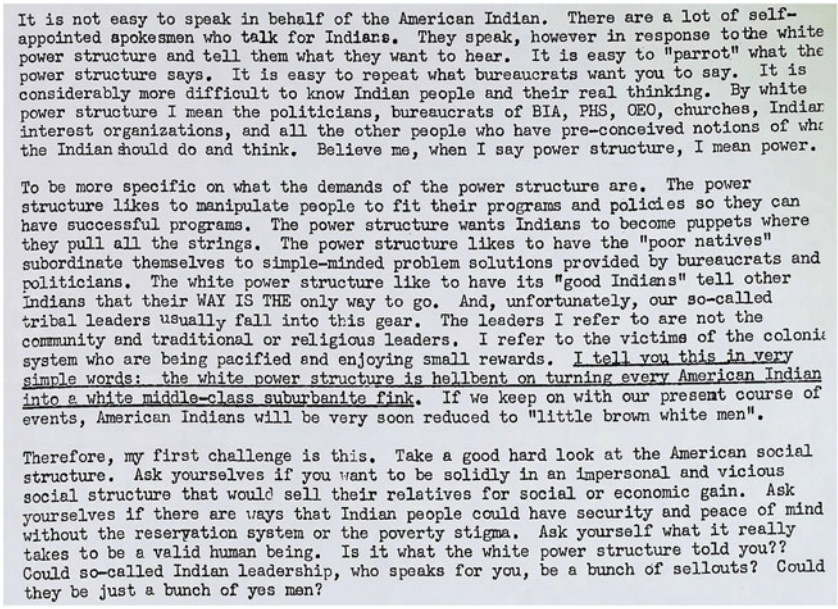
[1]Melvin Thom, "A Challenge to the Future" (speech, Eau Claire, WI, June 16, 1967), box 3, folder 31, MSS-703-BC National Indian Youth Council Records (hereafter NIYCR), Center for Southwest Research (CSWR), University of New Mexico Library, Albuquerque, NM.

[2]Stan Steiner, *The New Indians* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 41; Bradley G. Shreve, *Red Power Rising: The National Indian Youth Council and the Origins of Native Activism* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2011), 99.

[3]Thom, "A Challenge to the Future"; and "Bureau of Indian Affairs Records: Termination," National Archives and Records Administration, June 4, 2024, https://www.archives.gov/research/native-americans/bia/termination. The National Archives states, "Termination was a U.S. government policy aimed at ending federal supervision over American Indian tribes"; however, like much of federal policy affecting American Indians, its aims, as well as its impact, was much more complicated. In this paper I provide a more in-depth explanation of termination.

[4]Articles of Incorporation, Sept. 26, 1962, box 1, folder 1, NIYCR; Troy R. Johnson, "Roots of Contemporary Native American Activism," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 20, no. 2 (1996), 127-54.

[5]Daniel M. Cobb, *Native Activism in Cold War America: The Struggle for Sovereignty* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 54-55; Bradley G. Shreve, *Red Power Rising: The National Indian Youth Council and the Origins of Native Activism* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2011), 89-92.



It is not easy to speak in behalf of the American Indian. There are a lot of self-appointed spokesmen who talk for Indians. They speak, however in response to the white power structure and tell them what they want to hear. It is easy to "parrot" what the power structure says. It is easy to repeat what bureaucrats want you to say. It is considerably more difficult to know Indian people and their real thinking. By white power structure I mean the politicians, bureaucrats of BIA, PHS, OEO, churches, Indian interest organizations, and all the other people who have pre-conceived notions of what the Indian should do and think. Believe me, when I say power structure, I mean power.

To be more specific on what the demands of the power structure are. The power structure likes to manipulate people to fit their programs and policies so they can have successful programs. The power structure wants Indians to become puppets where they pull all the strings. The power structure likes to have the "poor natives" subordinate themselves to simple-minded problem solutions provided by bureaucrats and politicians. The white power structure like to have its "good Indians" tell other Indians that their WAY IS THE only way to go. And, unfortunately, our so-called tribal leaders usually fall into this gear. The leaders I refer to are not the community and traditional or religious leaders. I refer to the victims of the colonial system who are being pacified and enjoying small rewards. I tell you this in very simple words: the white power structure is hellbent on turning every American Indian into a white middle-class suburbanite fink. If we keep on with our present course of events, American Indians will be very soon reduced to "little brown white men".

Therefore, my first challenge is this. Take a good hard look at the American social structure. Ask yourselves if you want to be solidly in an impersonal and vicious social structure that would sell their relatives for social or economic gain. Ask yourselves if there are ways that Indian people could have security and peace of mind without the reservation system or the poverty stigma. Ask yourself what it really takes to be a valid human being. Is it what the white power structure told you?? Could so-called Indian leadership, who speaks for you, be a bunch of sellouts? Could they be just a bunch of yes men?

Figure 1. Excerpt from Melvin Thom's "A Challenge to the Future" Speech, 1967.
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speech was emblematic of the heated debates and constant struggles NIYC leaders and members had experienced over their movement's identity, priorities, and even definitions of self-determination since its inception, but especially during the years 1967-1968 (Figure 1).

In the past two decades, an increasing amount of scholarship on college student activism has illuminated its importance in (re)defining the mission and values of universities as educational and political institutions. This body of scholarship has likewise explored the struggles college student activists have historically experienced in building coalitions around shared values and praxis.[6] With few exceptions in this

[6]James D. Anderson and Christopher M. Span, "History of Education in the News: The Legacy of Slavery, Racism, and Contemporary Black Activism on Campus," *History of Education Quarterly* 56, no. 4 (2016), 646-56; Timothy Reese Cain and Rachael Dier, "Protests and Pushback: Women's Rights, Student Activism, and Institutional Response in the Deep South," *History of Education Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (2020), 546-80; Scot Danforth, "Becoming the Rolling Quads: Disability Politics at the University of California, Berkeley, in the 1960s," *History of Education Quarterly* 58, no. 4 (2018), 506-36; Linda Eisenmann, "A Time of Quiet Activism: Research, Practice, and Policy in American Women's Higher Education, 1945-1965," *History of Education Quarterly* 45, no. 1 (2005), 1-17; Karen Graves, "'So, You Think You Have a History?': Taking a Q from Lesbian and Gay Studies in Writing Education History," *History of Education Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (2012), 465-87; Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, "The 1960s and the Transformation of Campus Cultures," *History of Education Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (1986), 1-38; Angela Ryan, "Counter College: Third World Students Reimagine Public Higher Education," *History of Education Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (2015), 413-40.

extensive historiography, Native American college students are absent.[7] What did mid-twentieth-century Native American college student activism look like? How did it develop? How did Native American college student activism mirror or diverge from other college student activism during the 1960s? What were Native students' unique aims and challenges? This paper offers a series of answers to these questions.

I argue that mid-twentieth-century Indigenous college student and young adult activism, represented herein primarily by words and actions of the NIYC founding leadership, contributed significantly to a larger social movement opposing federal American Indian policy, formally referred to by Native peoples, their allies, and American historians as *termination*.[8] I demonstrate that the founders of the NIYC gained significant experience from both Native and white-led American Indian clubs, workshops, and youth councils for Indigenous college students during the 1950s. I also explore the ways the founders of the NIYC, a small group of like-minded young Native American college students, were eager to free themselves from what they perceived as the constraints to Indigenous self-determination: white leadership and sponsorship, as well as an overreliance on Native elders' penchant for parliamentary governance and procedure. I show that the NIYC's activism defined Indigenous self-determination through three primary modalities: student-led and distributed publications, direct action, and community-run education. In these ways, NIYC leaders and other Native American college student activists sought to improve Native America's educational, economic, and political conditions.

Student Activism, Self-Determination, and Tribal Sovereignty in Education Historiography

The history of student activism during the twentieth century in both K-12 and higher education contexts has a robust literature base. Among the earliest efforts to document student activism in academic literature is a history examining the Berkeley student revolt in 1964.[9] Other historians of education subsequently expanded the scholarship on student activism, examining Black student activism on college campuses in the Midwest, Northeast, and the American South, for example.[10] In the last ten years, there has been a significant increase in the number of historical case studies

[7]The exceptions are Cobb, *Native Activism in Cold War America*; Sterling Fluharty, "'For a Greater Indian America': The Origins of the National Indian Youth Council" (master's thesis, University of Oklahoma, 2003); and Shreve, *Red Power Rising*.

[8]National Indian Youth Council Resolution, n.d., box 5, folder 30, NIYCR; James E. Officer, "Termination as Federal Policy: An Overview," in *Indian Self-Rule: First-Hand Accounts of Indian-White Relations from Roosevelt to Reagan*, ed. Kenneth R. Philp (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1986), 114-28; Michael C. Walch, "Terminating the Indian Termination Policy," *Stanford Law Review* (1983), 1181-1215; Charles F. Wilkinson, and Eric R. Biggs, "The Evolution of the Termination Policy," *American Indian Law Review* 5, no. 1 (1977), 139-84.

[9]Philip G. Altbach and Patti Peterson, "Before Berkeley: Historical Perspectives on American Student Activism," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 395, no. 1 (1971), 1-14.

[10]V. P. Franklin, "Introduction: African American Student Activism in the 20th Century," *Journal of African American History* 88, no. 2 (2003), 105-09. Franklin edited and authored a contributing essay to a special issue on Black student activism during the 1950s, '60s, and '70s, which included work by Dionne Danns, Stefan Bradley, and Holly Fisher, among others that covered student activist movements in diverse

aimed at contextualizing mid-to-late twentieth-century student activist movements, and to demonstrate their utility in pushing historically white educational institutions to reconsider their approaches to racial and gender diversity and inclusion.[11] This includes work that has demonstrated how racialized groups of Puerto Rican students in Chicago and Asian American students at the University of Illinois challenged district and campus administrators to recognize and respond to community demands.[12] At the same time, with a few exceptions, there has been a notable absence in the historiography of Native American college student activism.[13]

Current scholarship in the history of education recognizes the movement among Indigenous peoples and organizations during the 1960s and 1970s for self-determination.[14] However, besides merely mentioning the policy of termination, current scholarship does little to contextualize the complex intertribal coalitions that brought about significant changes to education for Native American youth across the United States in the postwar era. Among the most relevant work on the termination era, its impact on education among Native peoples, and subsequent movements to end termination are case studies examining the Rough Rock Demonstration School in Navajo Nation, and the Survival Schools run by the American Indian Movement (AIM) in the Twin Cities.[15] As the editors of a special issue on histories of American Indian education published by *History of Education Quarterly* in 2014 noted, "an immediate problem arises" when conducting inquiries into histories of Indigenous education: "The relevant [secondary] literature lies scattered across the journals and publishers of diverse disciplines."[16] For the present study, this holds true.

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geographic locations. Also see field-defining work published the same year by Joy Ann Williamson, *Black Power on Campus: The University of Illinois, 1965-1975* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

[11] Anderson and Span, "History of Education in the News," 646-56; Timothy Reese Cain and Rachael Dier, "Protests and Pushback: Women's Rights, Student Activism, and Institutional Response in the Deep South," *History of Education Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (2020), 546-80; Jon N. Hale, "Future Foot Soldiers or Budding Criminals? The Dynamics of High School Student Activism in the Southern Black Freedom Struggle," *Journal of Southern History* 84, no. 3 (2018), 615-52; Jon N. Hale, *A New Kind of Youth: Historically Black High Schools and Southern Student Activism, 1920-1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2022); Joy Ann Williamson-Lott, "The Battle over Power, Control, and Academic Freedom at Southern Institutions of Higher Education, 1955-1965," *Journal of Southern History* 79, no. 4 (2013), 879-920; Joy Williamson-Lott, *Jim Crow Campus: Higher Education and the Struggle for a New Southern Social Order* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2018).

[12] Sharon S. Lee, *An Unseen Unheard Minority: Asian American Students at the University of Illinois* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2022); Mirelsie Velázquez, *Puerto Rican Chicago: Schooling the City, 1940-1977* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2022).

[13] Cobb, *Native Activism in Cold War America*; Shreve, *Red Power Rising*.

[14] Jon Reyhner and Jeanne Eder, *American Indian Education: A History*, 2nd ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017), 251-52; Joel Spring, *The American School: From the Puritans to the Trump Era*, 10th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2018), 442-43; Wayne J. Urban, Jennings L. Wagoner Jr., and Milton Gaither, *American Education: A History*, 6th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2019), 273.

[15] Julie L. Davis, *Survival Schools: The American Indian Movement and Community Education in the Twin Cities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); Teresa L. McCarty, *A Place to Be Navajo: Rough Rock and the Struggle for Self-Determination in Indigenous Schooling* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002).

[16] Adrea Lawrence, KuuNUx TeeRIt Kroupa, and Donald Warren, "Introduction," *History of Education Quarterly* 54, no. 3 (Aug. 2014), 254.

Only a handful of published works examine the history of the federal termination era and its impact on education for Indigenous children and youth. Their collective treatment of Native student activism, however, is nonexistent.[17] Similarly, few studies have touched on the origins and influence of the NIYC, on schooling run by and for Indigenous communities, or their impact on self-determination and tribal sovereignty articulated by intertribal coalitions. Exceptions to this include the work of Daniel Cobb, Sterling Fluharty, and Bradley Shreve. Cobb's work on Native American activism during the Cold War traces the history of Native American activism generally from 1950 through 1989, situating a range of Native activist movements and organizations within the larger US domestic and international spheres. Cobb's scholarship convincingly demonstrates that no one type of activism existed in a vacuum or offered a "correct" model for enacting social change, and that activism alone couldn't realize political transformation. Because of the breadth of Cobb's historical treatment of Native American activism, some of the finer details of Indigenous college student activism are left wanting.[18] Both Sterling Fluharty and Bradley Shreve have produced superb histories on the NIYC and should be credited with drawing attention to the fact that it was the NIYC, not AIM, that articulated the first iterations of "Red Power" during the twentieth century. Furthermore, both Fluharty and Shreve are the first historians to identify the Indian clubs and workshops of the 1950s as being integral to the development of twentieth-century Native American activism generally. Furthermore, Shreve's is the first monograph to explore the origins of the NIYC and to offer detailed accounts of the networks and relationships that helped produce the organization in 1961.[19]

At the same time, more scholarship is needed on Native American education history generally, and on the origins, goals, and challenges of Native American college student activism specifically.[20] While the scholarship of Fluharty and Shreve detail how tribal differences significantly complicated the development of a pan-Indian activist coalition during the 1950s and 1960s, I locate the primary sources of their shared struggle in the opposition to racialized white power structures. I center the development and growth of Native American college students' activism on their collective opposition to federal termination policy, which directly affected hundreds of federally recognized American Indian tribes economically, politically, and socially. This study relies on personal correspondence, organizational circulars, grant reports, published and unpublished speeches, newspaper articles, and oral history interviews, many of which will be new to readers, from four different archives to bring the past into

[17]Donald Lee Fixico, *Termination and Relocation: Federal Indian Policy, 1945-1960* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986); Guy B. Senese, *Self-Determination and the Social Education of Native Americans* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1991); Margaret Connell Szasz, *Education and the American Indian: The Road to Self-Determination since 1928*, 3rd ed. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999).

[18]Cobb, *Native Activism in Cold War America*.

[19]Fluharty, "'For a Greater Indian America'"; Shreve, *Red Power Rising*.

[20]Ned Blackhawk, *The Rediscovery of America: Native Peoples and the Unmasking of U.S. History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023). In his introduction, Blackhawk elucidates the pressing need for more histories of Native America. He claims that histories of Native peoples both challenge predominant framings of US history, and incorporate essential, diverse perspectives and voices into the larger narrative of American history.

sharper focus.[21] This study contributes to the historiography of American education by contextualizing mid-twentieth-century Indigenous activism amid federal termination policies and ongoing efforts to simultaneously assimilate Indigenous peoples into the preexisting white capitalist social order and erase Indigenous culture, language, and treaty rights guaranteed by the US Constitution. This includes a detailed look at the significant youth-led movements across high school and college campuses that promoted culturally relevant and community-run education for Indigenous students, developed Indigenous students' sense of belonging, fostered leadership skills, and articulated bold visions for the future of what was, in the 1950s and 1960s, a burgeoning notion of "Indian Country."[22] I show that, once independent of white and Native adult-led organizations, the NIYC's activism defined Indigenous self-determination and opposed the colonial white power structures represented by federal termination policy in three primary modalities: publications, direct action, and community-run education.

Establishing Context: Termination's Economic and Political Impacts on Tribes

After World War II, tens of thousands of Native American GIs returned home just as the United States fell sway to Cold War paranoia, corporations grew hungry to exploit resources they mined from reservation lands, and the US Congress was saturated with anti-communist and white Christian nationalist rhetoric.[23] The midcentury rise in corporate greed and resurgent nationalism contributed to US corporate leaders' and policymakers' desires to see Native peoples—who had served the United States faithfully in European and Pacific theaters of war—"set free" or "liberated" from their purported imprisonment by the US government that was embodied by their tribal trust status. From the *Reader's Digest* to the Oval Office, pleas were made to see *Native* Americans become "*just* Americans."[24]

The rhetoric of "freedom" and "liberation," however, was merely utilized by white business and political leaders in the context of postwar Indigenous affairs to destroy the New Deal order and continue their efforts to assimilate Native peoples into a

[21]I extend many thanks for assistance locating boxes and folders for this paper to the archivists and librarians at the J. Willard Marriott Library Special Collections at the University of Utah, the L. Tom Perry Special Collections at Brigham Young University, the University of New Mexico Center for Southwest Research & Special Collections, and the New Mexico State Records Center and Archives.

[22]Irvin Morris, *From the Glittering World: A Navajo Story* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 82.

[23]Kevin M. Kruse, *One Nation under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* (New York: Basic Books, 2015); Senese, *Self-Determination and the Social Education of Native Americans*, 1, 86-87; Szasz, *Education and the American Indian*, 106-7; Charisse Burden-Stelly, *Black Scare / Red Scare: Theorizing Capitalist Racism in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023), 15-40. While beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth acknowledging the ways a predominantly white, male, Christian Cold War Congress wielded anti-communism as a political tool against communities of color in service of capitalist gain.

[24]Emphasis added. Fixico, *Termination and Relocation*, 21, 183-84; Szasz, *Education and the American Indian*, 112. This included messages from President Truman himself, as well as the Hoover Commission he authorized to conduct research on the state of Indian affairs.

predominantly white and Christian American society.[25] No American leader, however, promoted the end of tribal affiliation and status more than Arthur V. Watkins, a Republican senator from Utah. A conservative Mormon—deeply motivated by the racist tenets of his faith, anti-communism, and a desire to limit the federal government's influence and spending—Senator Watkins was hell-bent on ending treaty relationships with Indigenous tribes across the country, believing them to be responsible for crippling Indigenous peoples' self-determination by maintaining their dependency on treaty annuities. Never mind, of course, that any annuities tribes received were constitutionally protected.[26]

As chair of the Senate Subcommittee on Indian Affairs, Senator Watkins used his influence to bring his own beliefs to bear on what was broadly considered by white American leaders to be the "Indian problem." In the spring of 1953, House Concurrent Resolution 108 (HCR 108) encouraged the termination of federal recognition of Indigenous tribes "at the earliest possible time," claiming that American Indians should be "granted all the rights and prerogatives pertaining to American citizenship." With Senator Watkins as the architect, Republicans and Democrats signed on, passing HCR 108 on August 1, "convinced that Indians were assimilated enough into mainstream society to handle their own affairs and no longer had a need for specialized government services."[27] That the vast majority of Indigenous people across the United States at the time were denied the right to vote for the congressional representatives who decided to end federal recognition of tribal status was a negligible point for the Eighty-Third Congress that supported the resolution.[28] HCR 108 initiated a string of other federal statutes and policies, including Public Law 280 (1953), which transferred federal law enforcement authority on tribal lands to states, and Public Law 84-959 (1956), initiating the relocation of Indigenous peoples from rural reservations

[25] Erika Marie Bsumek, *The Foundations of Glen Canyon Dam: Infrastructures of Dispossession on the Colorado Plateau* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2023), 131; Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, eds., *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989); Senese, *Self-Determination and the Social Education of Native Americans*, 17-18; Szasz, *Education and the American Indian*, 112-13; Charles F. Wilkinson, *Blood Struggle: The Rise of Modern Indian Nations* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 66-71.

[26] Arthur Watkins to the LDS First Presidency, April 13, 1954, box 11, folder 11, MSS 146, BYU; National Indian Youth Council Resolution, n.d., box 5, folder 30, NIYCR; Bsumek, *The Foundations of Glen Canyon Dam*, 131; Wilkinson, *Blood Struggle*, 66-71.

[27] Fixico, *Termination and Relocation*, 11-12; Wilkinson, *Blood Struggle*, 66-71; H.C.R. 108 (67 Stat. B132), 83rd Cong. (1953). Fixico documents how termination era policies are responsible for the theft of over 3 million acres of tribal lands between 1953 and 1970.

[28] John H. Allen, "Denial of Voting Rights to Reservation Indians," *Utah Law Review* 5 (1956): 247-56; Maggie Blackhawk, "Foreword: The Constitution of American Colonialism," *Harvard Law Review* 137, no. 1 (2023), 1-152; Cathleen D. Cahill, "'Our Democracy and the American Indian': Citizenship, Sovereignty, and the Native Vote in the 1920s," in *Unequal Sisters: A Revolutionary Reader in U.S. Women's History*, ed. Stephanie Narrow et al. (New York: Routledge, 2023), 443-50; Matthew G. McCoy, "Hidden Citizens: The Courts and Native American Voting Rights in the Southwest," *Journal of the Southwest* 58, no. 2 (Summer 2016): 293-310. While many Native Americans were technically granted the right to vote by way of the Snyder Act (1924), otherwise known as the Indian Citizenship Act, most Native people were not granted the right to vote until the Voting Rights Act was passed in 1965. States like Alaska, Arizona, and Utah passed literacy laws that denied the right of Indigenous peoples to vote through the late 1950s.

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to urban centers around the country. These statutes and their policies collectively contributed to what is commonly referred to as the "termination era" by Native peoples and Indigenous studies scholars that lasted from 1953 until 1970.[29]

The termination era contributed to intense economic, political, and social turmoil for all Indigenous peoples. In some cases, HCR 108 and subsequent policies contributed to the wholesale restructuring of tribal economies and complicated political relationships (both within tribes among their own members and between tribal, federal, and state governments).[30] Termination also reinvigorated white policymakers' push for Indigenous children and youth to attend off-reservation boarding schools and participate in boarding school-like educational programming.[31] In accordance with Public Law 84-959, federal officials relocated thousands of Indigenous youth and families to Oakland, Salt Lake City, Denver, and Chicago, among other urban centers, to join the capitalist economy. Meanwhile, over 1.4 million acres of Indigenous land were sold or appropriated for corporate development and environmental waste. For the federal government and their corporate partners, termination policies were a form of "self-determination." From their perspective, economic self-help and assimilation into the white-dominated political economy was the surest way to secure Indigenous futures.[32]

Amid this bleak socioeconomic and political backdrop, however, thousands of young Indigenous people also began attending institutions of higher education wherever they were permitted, in many cases searching for a "remedy for [relocation] estrangement," or to offset the dire financial circumstances they found themselves in because of termination-era policies.[33] As Indigenous peoples from various tribes came together on college campuses, they formed intertribal clubs and coalitions to cultivate a sense of belonging and foster shared academic and social interests. The result was the beginning of an educational and political movement intent on contesting federal termination policies and both corporate and government notions of "self-determination." What grew from these clubs, and what the remainder of this paper focuses on, was a

[29]Fixico, *Termination and Relocation*, 11-12; Wilkinson, *Blood Struggle*, 66-71; H.C.R. 108 (67 Stat. B132), 83rd Cong. (1953); Public Law 280 (67 Stat. 588) enacted Aug. 15, 1953; Public Law 84-959 (70 Stat. 986).

[30]Ned Blackhawk, "I Can Carry On from Here: The Relocation of American Indians to Los Angeles," *Wicazo Sa Review* (1995): 16-30; Andrew Curley, *Carbon Sovereignty: Coal, Development, and Energy Transition in the Navajo Nation* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2023); Senese, *Self-Determination and the Social Education of Native Americans*, 53-54.

[31]Bsumek, *The Foundations of Glen Canyon Dam*, 133-34; Farina King, *The Earth Memory Compass: Diné Landscapes and Education in the Twentieth Century* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2018); Henrietta Mann, *Cheyenne-Arapaho Education, 1871-1982* (Niwot: University of Colorado Press, 1997); Senese, *Self-Determination and the Social Education of Native Americans*, 87-88, 138, 159; Sarah Shillinger, *A Case Study of the American Indian Boarding School Movement: An Oral History of St. Joseph's Indian Industrial School* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2008).

[32]Vine Deloria Jr., *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (1969: repr., Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 26, 47; Fixico, *Termination and Relocation*, 101, 156-57, 167, 181; Wilkinson, *Blood Struggle*, 85, 133. Public Law 84-959 (1956) is also known today as the Indian Relocation Act. While ostensibly pitched to Native people and families as an opportunity to relocate for work temporarily and on a voluntary basis, historians like Donald Fixico and legal scholars like Charles Wilkinson have carefully documented the ways many were manipulated into permanently relocating to urban slums around the US. Furthermore, those Native peoples who did voluntarily relocate from 1956 onward were often making choices for their economic or social wellbeing that had been severely constrained by other federal policies.

[33]Fixico, *Termination and Relocation*, 156-57.

renewed sense of purpose among young Indigenous peoples, and a desire to define "freedom" and "self-determination" on their own terms.[34]

The National Indian Youth Council: "Promot[ing] the Highest Principles of Citizenship"

The "bombardment" against Indigenous culture, language, and spirituality via educational institutions took on a new form during the termination era. The federal government and their white Christian allies, among other aid organizations, began "favor[ing] scholarships as the most efficient way to train Indian leaders who could emancipate their tribes through termination and quicken the assimilation process."[35] By the mid-1950s, approximately two thousand Indigenous students were enrolling annually at institutions of higher education; a small number were able to access the benefits of the GI Bill, while others were the recipients of private religious grants. However, American Indian students' 4 percent graduation rate in the first part of the decade reveals the displacement, racism, and alienation they experienced at US colleges and universities that were trying to assimilate them midcentury.[36] The development of "Indian clubs" on college campuses as well as workshops sponsored by Indigenous leaders within the National Congress of American Indians aimed to challenge Native students' sense of alienation, their assimilation, and their displacement. This section documents the development of Native American college student activism during the mid-twentieth-century and highlights a variety of challenges young activists faced as they struggled to articulate their own ideas about what self-determined educational, economic, and political opportunities could look like for Indigenous peoples and communities.

The Indian Clubs and Workshops

In 1954, borrowing from an idea originating at Oklahoma University, Charles Minton decided to sponsor an "Indian club" on campus at the University of New Mexico with the goals of fostering American Indians' identity and helping them develop a stronger sense of belonging where there had been none previously. Minton, a leader in the

[34]Senese, *Self-Determination and the Social Education of Native Americans*, 138, 158-59; Shreve, *Red Power Rising*.

[35]Fluharty, "The Origins of the National Indian Youth Council," 14; Meredith L. McCoy, *On Our Own Terms: Indigenous Histories of School Funding and Policy* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2024), 92-93. McCoy acknowledges and documents the historic federal underfunding of Native students, despite making promises to do so in ways that affirmed tribal self-determination.

[36]Fluharty, "The Origins of the National Indian Youth Council," 14; Kasey Keeler, "Putting People Where They Belong: American Indian Housing Policy in the Mid-Twentieth Century," *Native American and Indigenous Studies* 3, no. 2 (2016), 70-104; Quil Lawrence, "Native Americans living on tribal land have struggled to access veteran home loans," *All Things Considered*, NPR, Aug. 10, 2022; Max Nesterak, "The 1950s plan to erase Indian Country," *APM Reports*, Nov. 1, 2019, https://www.apmreports.org/episode/2019/11/01/uprooted-the-1950s-plan-to-erase-indian-country; Bobby Wright & William G. Tierney, "American Indians in Higher Education: A History of Cultural Conflict," *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* 23, no. 2 (1991), 11-18. Most Native American veterans were unable to access either the educational or home mortgage benefits of the GI Bill.

https://doi.org/10.1017/heq.2025.17

Southwestern Association for American Indian Affairs (SWAIA), helped launch the Kiva Club, with Herb Blatchford (Diné)—future executive director of the National Indian Youth Council—serving as its first president.[37] Within a year of its formation, the Kiva Club helped spawn other American Indian student clubs on college campuses in the Southwest, including the Tribe of Many Feathers at Brigham Young University (BYU). Although fundamentally white-controlled enterprises—they were sponsored and financially supported by campus departments and centers—Indigenous students themselves exercised tremendous agency in shaping their clubs' communications, programming, and values. In many ways, the so-called Indian clubs of the 1950s helped promote open dialogue and generated camaraderie among Indigenous students in higher education in ways that ultimately contradicted the assimilative aims of white policymakers who were funding Native students' postsecondary studies at the time. Whereas white education administrators and church group sponsors believed the campus clubs would merely give Indigenous students the leadership skills needed to promote assimilation, club leaders instead identified ways to sustain their Indigenous cultures, languages, and traditions within otherwise hostile spaces.[38]

By 1956, two major coalitions had begun working to harness the leadership skills of Indigenous young people to direct American Indian affairs while simultaneously providing them with mentorship. The first was SWAIA, who under Charles Minton organized the Southwestern Regional Indian Youth Council (SRIYC), which elected officers from a variety of college campus and state-run Indian Youth Councils in Arizona, Colorado, Oklahoma, New Mexico, and Utah.[39] While leadership meetings were held haphazardly, the SRIYC worked with SWAIA and held an annual conference in 1957 at the University of New Mexico. Subsequent annual conferences were held each spring at different university campuses through 1967; leadership held committee meetings, Nizhoni dances were presented, and SRIYC officers ran workshops on topics of relevant interest to high school and college-aged Indigenous youth. In general, Indigenous students conducted workshops on health, community development, segregated and integrated education, termination and relocation policy, public speaking, and strategies for navigating higher education.[40] The second coalition consisted of university anthropologists, Christian clergy, and NCAI leaders, who organized and held the Workshop on American Indian Affairs for Native Students (WAIANS),

[37]"Chronology of the National Indian Youth Council and the Indian Youth Councils That Preceded It" (hereafter Chronology), box 1, folder 31, NIYCR; Fluharty, "The Origins of the National Indian Youth Council"; Shreve, *Red Power Rising*. Kiva Club's organization closely mirrored that of the Sequoyah Club, a student-run organization that began at the University of Oklahoma in 1914. The Kiva Club still operates today at the University of New Mexico.

[38]Chronology, box 1, folder 13, NIYCR; Robert F. Gwilliam to Spencer W. Kimball, Oct. 31, 1957, box 4, folder 17, UA 552, L. Tom Perry Special Collections at Brigham Young University (hereafter BYU); Charles E. Minton, "The Place of the Indian Youth Council in Higher Education," *Journal of American Indian Education* 1, no. 1 (1961): 29-32.

[39]Chronology, box 1, folder 13, NIYCR.

[40]"The Second Regional Indian Youth Council," program, April 18, 1958, box 8, folder 11, SWAIA 1976-037, New Mexico State Archives and Records (hereafter NMSAR); "The Third Regional Indian Youth Council," minutes, April 23, 1959, series 1, folder 2, SWAIA 9683, NMSAR; "Fourth Regional Indian Youth Council," minutes, April 27, 1960, series 1, folder 2, SWAIA 9683, NMSAR.

the first of which was organized in Colorado Springs in 1956. Unlike the SRIYC conferences that invited all Indigenous youth who were able to attend, however, WAIANS events were intended to enroll only a handful of the most academically accomplished Indigenous students. WAIANS provided an "elite experience" to those accepted, where Indigenous youth learned anthropological and sociological theories and developed capacity for cultural analysis and critique among leading academicians and Indigenous leaders within the NCAI.[41]

All the Indigenous young adults who co-founded the NIYC in 1961 held leadership positions within the SRIYC or had attended WAIANS between 1956 and 1961. While largely sponsored and managed by white educators and policymakers, the Indian clubs and workshops of the late 1950s provided significant opportunities for young Indigenous people to share ideas about the most pressing problems among tribal communities and nations, build connections with like-minded individuals, and develop communication and organizational leadership skills. For the NIYC's first president, Melvin Thom, who attended BYU in Utah during the 1950s, the SRIYC provided him the chance to speak out against federal Indian relocation policies, learn to draft and pass resolutions, and even subvert Christian religious "indoctrination," which he and other Indigenous students were subjected to at the time.[42] Herb Blatchford, the first executive director of the NIYC, as well as Karen Rickard (Tuscarora) and Clyde Warrior (Ponca), two other founding members of the NIYC, likewise benefited. Their attendance at WAIANS gave them access to education and training in discourses of activism that young African Americans were engaging in around the country and provided them with the necessary theoretical frameworks to guide other young Indigenous student activists in the decades that followed.[43]

American Indian Chicago Conference

During the Fifth Annual Southwest Regional Indian Youth Council in Norman, Oklahoma, in April 1961, a "Preliminary Statement" was released by the American Indian Chicago Conference Committee (AICCC) soliciting feedback from anthropologists and tribal leaders on a "sample 'Declaration of Indian Purpose.'"[44] The AICCC was a joint venture between the NCAI, led by D'Arcy McNickle (Flathead), and University of Chicago anthropologist Dr. Sol Tax. They planned to host a major convention in Chicago in June 1961 to "capitalize on Kennedy's electoral victory" in 1960—the first Democrat elected to the executive branch in nearly a decade—to contest termination-era policies. Their plan was to take inspiration from "the peoples of Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East," where sociopolitical movements for national

[41]Chronology, box 1, folder 31, NIYCR; Fluharty, "The Origins of the National Indian Youth Council," 17-18; "Newsletter," Jan. 1959, box 55, folder 8, Clark S. Knowlton Collection, NMSAR.

[42]"Indians Elect Thom, Cook, to Posts," *Daily Universe*, April 27, 1959; Melvin Thom, interview by Gregory C. Thompson and Floyd A. O'Neil, Aug. 7, 1970, interview no. 625, Doris Duke Oral History Collection, J. Willard Marriott Library Special Collections, Salt Lake City, UT.

[43]Cobb, *Native Activism in Cold War America*, 53; Fluharty, "The Origins of the National Indian Youth Council," 17-18.

[44]Chronology, box 1, folder 31, NIYCR; "Sample Declaration of Indian Purpose," correspondence, 26 April 1961, box 1, folder 8, NIYCR.

self-determination and liberation from colonial powers were exploding.[45] Indigenous college students quickly learned about and made plans to attend the eight-day convention at the University of Chicago that summer. In the meantime, future NIYC leaders took time between the Fifth SRIYC in April 1961 and the American Indian Chicago Conference (AICC) in June 1961 to carefully read through and provide critical commentary on the thirty-five-page dossier attendees were expected to make comments on during the conference.[46]

Historian Daniel Cobb has argued that the AICC ultimately "represented the culmination of a decade's worth of struggle against termination … [but] if it symbolized a defining statement for one generation of activists, it signaled a point of departure for another."[47] The point of departure was led by the future officers and members of the NIYC. NCAI leaders and white academics sought to promote a cohesive, liberal affront to US termination policy-making, one grounded in legalism but that lacked significant critiques of the class, gender, and racial status quo. Some young Indigenous student activists, while respectful of their elders' political positions and approaches to activism, realized there was only so much they could do within NCAI to bring about the changes they desired. Other student activists like Mel Thom and Clyde Warrior took a more radical approach. They believed their elders' and their white friends' activism represented nothing more than mere equivocation to "the Great White Father," whose actions would do little to nothing to improve the material conditions of American Indian families.[48] While Mel Thom labeled the AICC youth caucus's vocal antagonism to the initial demands listed in the Declaration of Purpose as "arch-conservative" when looking back in 1970, for 1961 the initial demands were radical. Ultimately, what most of the youth caucus that formed during the AICC wanted was to move beyond defining American Indian identity "based on [the] white man's terms." Indigenous youth were uninterested in paternalistic "economic self-help" that demanded their assimilation into mainstream white America; they wanted freedom, the kind "the civil rights movement" was promising to African Americans and other racially and politically marginalized peoples.[49]

For the twelve Indigenous college students who formed the youth caucus, the AICC essentially represented a culmination of their collective Indian club and workshop experiences; they were determined to lead a movement for Indigenous self-determination and sovereignty independent of their elders and without any white supervision or assistance. Among the positive developments gained from the conference was the adoption of the youth caucus's statement of purpose, which became, practically verbatim, the preamble to the final "Declaration of Indian Purpose." According

[45] Cobb, *Native Activism in Cold War America*, 30-31.

[46] "Sample Declaration of Indian Purpose," correspondence, April 26, 1961, box 1, folder 8, NIYCR. On page 26, one NIYC officer crossed out the entire section on the federal Relocation Program and wrote "Be abolished" in the margins.

[47] Cobb, *Native Activism in Cold War America*, 31.

[48] Cobb, *Native Activism in Cold War America*, 51-54, 59; Troy Johnson, Joane Nagel, and Duane Champagne, eds., *American Indian Activism: Alcatraz to the Longest Walk* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 13-14, 130-31; Shreve, *Red Power Rising*, 91.

[49] Thom, interview no. 625; Senese, *Self-Determination and the Social Education of Native Americans*, 101-02.

to Stan Steiner, the first journalist to write a history of the NIYC and its origins, the youth caucus statement that became the preamble reflected "the first demands of the new Indian nationalism." Furthermore, lessons learned included the caucus members recognizing that as youth they had power in moving with a collective voice, and that the knowledge and skills they'd gained from their previous years of training provided them with the language and political savvy to forge a movement grounded in a "pan-Indian ideology" that simultaneously contested white colonialism and protected their cultural heritage.[50]

Getting Organized: The Summer of '61

The day after the AICC ended, on June 21, 1961, Shirley Witt (Mohawk), an undergraduate student at the University of Michigan, wrote a letter to Melvin Thom expressing interest in maintaining contact. Shirley's letter was accompanied by a list of other young Indigenous students who'd "exchanged ideas" within the youth caucus they'd formed during the conference and who were similarly interested in remaining connected.[51] Likewise, Herb Blatchford addressed a letter to Thom within a week of the AICC, similarly indicating that "unity should not be allowed to dissipate" among those who'd worked well together in the youth caucus.[52] While these letters recognized Thom's leadership at the AICC, they also started a chain of correspondence that put Shirley Witt (Mohawk), Herb Blatchford (Diné), Melvin Thom (Walker River Paiute), Joan Noble (Ute), Karen Rickard (Tuscarora), Clyde Warrior (Ponca), and John Winchester (Potawatomi) in conversation throughout June, July, and August 1961. The young Indigenous students (and recent graduates) exchanged ideas via mail about forming a national Indian youth council aimed at serving the desires and needs of young American Indians. In his letters to the "tentative charter membership" throughout the summer, Thom asserted that they should aim to create an entirely Indigenous-run organization, independent of the kind of white sponsors the SRIYC relied on to operate. Furthermore, Thom posed questions to the group to consider in preparation for their planned gathering in Gallup, New Mexico, in early August: What would they call themselves? Who would lead the organization? What would their purpose and objectives be? How would authority be distributed and exercised? Where would they be centralized or located? Would they have an annual meeting? How would membership be classified? Who would sponsor the organization? What type of projects would they be involved in?[53] The young activists' correspondence reveals much about the nature of student organizing, and the multitude of considerations the young Indigenous leaders had to weigh as they focused their efforts on making a meaningful impact on the future of Indian Country (Figure 2).

[50] American Indian Chicago Conference, "Declaration of Indian Purpose," box 1, folder 9, NIYCR; Shreve, *Red Power Rising*, 91-92; Steiner, *The New Indians*, 37-38.

[51] "Shirley Hill Witt," biography, box 6, folder 7, Social Networks and Archival Context, University of Virginia Library, https://snaccooperative.org/ark:/99166/w6qs7z3v; Shirley Witt to Melvin Thom, June 21, 1961, box 1, folder 11, NIYCR.

[52] Herb Blatchford to Melvin Thom, June 28, 1961, box 1, folder 11, NIYCR.

[53] Melvin Thom to Charter Membership, July 25, 1961, box 1, folder 11, NIYCR. See Folder 11 for complete collection of archived letters.

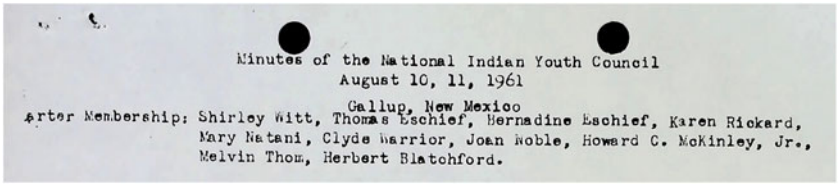
Minutes of the National Indian Youth Council
August 10, 11, 1961
Gallup, New Mexico
Charter Membership: Shirley Witt, Thomas Eschief, Bernadine Eschief, Karen Rickard,
Mary Natani, Clyde Warrior, Joan Noble, Howard C. McKinley, Jr.,
Melvin Thom, Herbert Blatchford.

Figure 2. The National Indian Youth Council's Charter Membership, 1961.
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From August 10 to 11, 1961, ten young Indigenous correspondents and leaders from the Southwest, Pacific Northwest, the Great Plains, the Midwest, and the Northeast gathered in Gallup with the purpose of establishing an organization that would serve the needs of "adult Indian youth" around the United States. Apart from their participation in a watershed moment in Indigenous political activism in the United States, these Indigenous folks shared various leadership and participatory experiences in a variety of clubs and workshops run for American Indian youth during the late 1950s. Each person present at the Gallup meeting had at least five years of experience during high school and/or college where they refined the communication and leadership skills they utilized to organize and incorporate a national Indian youth council. Although Melvin Thom was a day late to the Gallup gathering, it did not prevent him from forwarding a message to Clyde Warrior in advance of his arrival that was read into the meeting minutes at the end of the NIYC's first official session on August 10. Thom's note, edited and later adopted as an official preamble to the NIYC charter, contains a final line that reveals much about the desires of the founders of the NIYC and the half-decade of experience they gained organizing on behalf of Indigenous youth. It also outlines what would be their primary purpose going forward: "We believe in a greater Indian America, one which the Indian people, recognizing our future position as leaders, and promoting the highest principles of citizenship [*sic*]."[54]

After the Gallup meeting in August 1961, the NIYC's founding members officially incorporated themselves as a nonprofit organization, elected four charter members to leadership positions, and then spent the remainder of 1961 and most of 1962 attempting to turn the NIYC into a youth-led movement advocating Indigenous self-determination.[55] NIYC leaders' correspondence with one another and the fledgling membership during the first eighteen months of the organization's existence reveal their collective dedication to organizing young Indigenous students around the country, the humor they exercised and found while doing their work, and the significant challenges they faced in the process. While all the NIYC leaders were separated by

[54]"NIYC Meeting Minutes," Aug. 10-11, 1961, box 1, folder 11, NIYCR. Charter members included Shirley Witt, Thomas Eschief, Bernadine Eschief, Karen Rickard, Mary Natani, Clyde Warrior, Joan Noble, Howard C. McKinley Jr., Melvin Thom, and Herbert Blatchford.

[55]"Minutes of the NIYC," Aug. 10-11, 1961, box 1, folder 11, NIYCR; Chronology, box 1, folder 13, NIYCR. Mel Thom was elected president; Shirley Witt, 1st vice president; and Joan Noble, 2nd vice president. Herb Blatchford was elected executive director.

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geography, they engaged in regular, almost weekly, communication with one another. As a group, they owed a tremendous debt to both Herb Blatchford and Shirley Witt for maintaining clear communication and holding the group to its priorities. Their two principal projects from 1961 to 1962 centered on finding Indigenous groups to donate money to the NIYC and getting an edited periodical that they initially titled *Aborigine* written, printed, and distributed. While NIYC leaders and charter members were extremely motivated to accomplish their financial goals, those goals were also the source of their greatest frustration. NIYC leaders intended for *Aborigine* to be their means for conveying information to young Indigenous students, promoting intertribal fellowship, and cultivating Indian identity, but they quickly discovered that writing, printing, and distribution were all extremely costly endeavors.[56]

Despite numerous setbacks and revisions to their recruitment strategies and plans to produce an official publication, NIYC leaders stayed resolute, mostly with humor. The correspondence during this time reveals inside jokes that developed between the student activists and quips they directed at one another. For example, in response to concerns about collecting membership dues (and their struggles to do so), Shirley Witt wrote that in lieu of paying her own $4 fees, she "was considering sending along a wampum belt instead." In another letter, Herb Blatchford wrote to Clyde Warrior addressing the trouble he believed they might have recruiting members in Utah at BYU due to a recent "situation" that is only alluded to but never described. As she prepared to interview Princess Redwing of the Narragansett Tribe for an essay in the first volume of *Aborigine* in September 1961, Shirley Witt sarcastically joked to Herb, Joan, and Mel that "yes, there are tribes in New England!"[57] This correspondence reveals that in the process of organizing a student movement, NIYC leaders found humor—even joy—in developing their collective capacity to lead and "promote the highest principles of citizenship" among themselves and project them outwards to the new members they sought to recruit to the movement for Indigenous-led self-determination (Figure 3).

Resisting Termination: "Making Clear the Inherent Sovereign Rights of All Indians"

Once their organization was formally established, NIYC leaders dedicated substantial personal resources and time to growing their membership and building sufficient momentum toward "attaining a greater future for [the] Indian people," as Mel Thom wrote in 1962.[58] Throughout the 1960s, NIYC membership climbed and the NIYC leaders' organizing tactics shifted. Consistent over the course of the decade, however, was the NIYC leaders' commitment to defining American Indian self-determination on their own terms, not on the terms imposed on them by federal termination-era policies or the "social workers, cops, schoolteachers, [and] churches" that oversaw and

[56]NIYC Correspondence, box 1, folder 11, NIYCR.

[57]Shirley Witt to NIYC Leadership, Sept. 9, 1961, box 1, folder 11, NIYCR. For more on Indigenous humor, see Vine Deloria Jr., *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988). Deloria has written that "one of the best ways to understand a people is to know what makes them laugh… . In humor life is redefined and accepted."

[58]Statement of the National Indian Youth Council by Melvin D. Thom, March 1962, box 5, folder 30, NIYCR.

Figure 3. The National Indian Youth Council Logo, 1962.
Image reproduced from the National Indian Youth Council's Articles of Incorporation accessed via MSS-703-BC, box 1, folder 1 with permission from Center for Southwest Research, University of New Mexico Libraries.

supported them, as Clyde Warrior stated before a hearing of the President's National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty.[59] During the 1960s, the NIYC transformed from a small but mighty coalition of activists into an organization with thousands of members across the United States. NIYC activists grew their membership through three principal approaches to resisting federal termination-era policies and the "white power structure[s]" that sustained them. By publishing quarterly circulars, engaging in direct action, and pursuing community-centered educational reform, Native American college student activists contributed to the wide-scale effort to dismantle termination-era federal policy.[60]

Publications: "A Sounding Board for Ideas"

Publishing Native American writing was a primary goal of the NIYC from its inception. For the organization's leaders, publishing circulars for the NIYC was about distributing information and providing an outlet for Indigenous college-aged students to educate themselves on contemporary economic, educational, and sociopolitical issues as they related to Indigenous affairs.[61] Publishing occupied a great deal of the NIYC's attention during the early 1960s, a priority very likely shaped by the precedent of quarterly publications being central to organizing Indigenous adults since at least the mid-1940s.[62] Despite extreme challenges raising sufficient capital to fund its publications through

[59] Clyde Warrior, "We Are Not Free," *Americans Before Columbus*, May 1967, box 5, folder 30, NIYCR.
[60] Thom, "A Challenge to the Future."
[61] "Minutes of the NIYC," Aug. 10-11, 1961, box 1, folder 11, NIYCR; "Why ABC?" Oct. 1963, box 1, folder 13, NIYCR.
[62] *Quarterly of Southwestern Association for Indian Affairs*, Winter 1966, box 8, folder 19, NMSRA. Also see SWAIA records, box 8, folder 6, and series 1, folder 1. The NCAI and the Indian Rights Association—largely made up of white academics and social activists—published regular newsletters and quarterly journals beginning in the 1930s and 1940s to keep membership informed and generate dialogue. The SRIYC, under

1963, the NIYC as an Indigenous college student-led organization and movement ultimately created "the first Red Power publication." It was instrumental in garnering national attention to the broader movement for Indigenous rights, growing NIYC membership in its first decade, and bolstering intertribal Indigenous student activism across the United States.[63]

Although the young Indigenous officers and board members had every intention of publishing a quarterly journal when they formed the NIYC in August 1961, financial constraints forced them to settle on an annual "magazine"—which was more like a newsletter—they called *Aborigine* and began printing in 1962. Eventually, they would publish a full-fledged newspaper beginning in May 1964.[64] Correspondence between NIYC officers and board members reveals the significant challenges they faced in funding the publication and distribution of *Aborigine* in 1961 and 1962; at various times they petitioned the NCAI, BYU, and the University of Chicago for donations.[65] Largely as a result of the financial constraints the NIYC faced, its initial plan, to publish a thousand copies of *Aborigine*'s forty-two-page debut issue in October 1961, was reduced to just a couple hundred copies of fewer than thirty pages when it was finally released in March 1962. Until it was discontinued in fall 1965, *Aborigine*, whose issues were mailed directly to members, published profiles on NIYC charter members, interviews with Indigenous leaders, and essays authored by NIYC officers (Figure 4).[66]

During the NIYC's inaugural annual conference held at Fort Duchesne in Utah (Uintah Ute reservation), resolutions were passed calling for Senator Arthur Watkins's immediate resignation and explicitly rebuking the federal government's termination of tribes. NIYC officers also made plans to create a new publication, one that ultimately replaced *Aborigine* in both scope and reach.[67] In October 1963, the NIYC released the first issue of its new newsletter, titled *Americans Before Columbus* (*ABC*). In addition to including a statement laying out the rationale for the newsletter, the issue also included NIYC president Melvin Thom's first column—in what became a regular series—titled, "For a Greater Indian America." According to NIYC officers, "*ABC* [was] a start in helping us to inform ourselves … [and to] become a sounding board for ideas." The newsletter also had the goal of "giv[ing] information about the many opportunities available to Indian young people" at the time. Unlike previous NIYC publications, *ABC*

direction from SWAIA, also adopted this approach, which is why it's not too far-fetched to assume NIYC officers and charter members (who were deeply involved in SRIYC) believed publishing was so important.

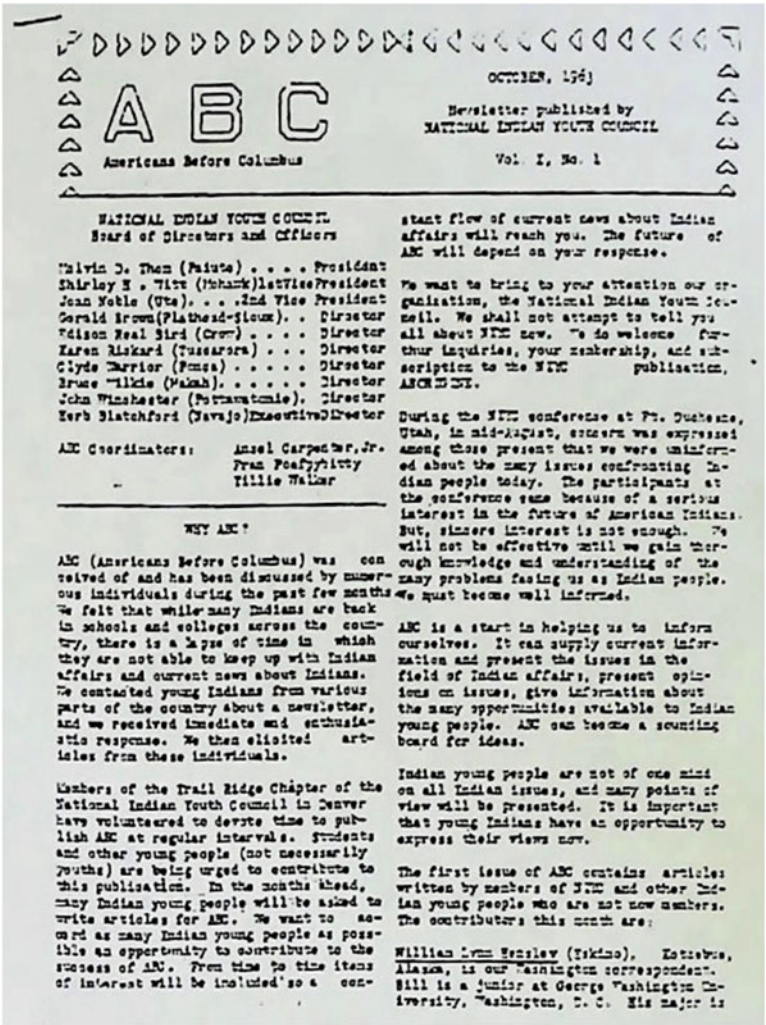
[63]"Minutes of the NIYC," Aug. 10-11, 1961, box 1, folder 11, NIYCR; NIYC Correspondence, box 1, folder 11, NIYCR; Shreve, *Red Power Rising*, 95.

[64]Chronology, box 1, folder 31, NIYCR; Shirley Witt to Herb Blatchford, Oct. 3, 1961; *ABC* 1, no. 1, May 5, 1964, box 1, folder 13, NIYCR; Shreve, *Red Power Rising*.

[65]NIYC Correspondence, box 1, folder 11, NIYCR. They didn't want sponsors, they wanted donations. BYU expressed strong interest in sponsoring the publication, but only if BYU staff were able to take over the "club" and shape its agenda.

[66]*Aborigine I*, March 1962, Microfiche, CSWR, University of New Mexico Library, Albuquerque, NM; NIYC Correspondence, box 1, folder 11, NIYCR.

[67]Chronology, box 1, folder 31, NIYCR; "Resolution Calling for Senator Arthur Watkins' Resignation," resolution, Jan. 29, 1964, box 5, folder 30, NIYCR; "Resolution Opposing Termination," resolution, July 1964, box 5, folder 30, NIYCR. The resolutions opposing termination were published in both *Aborigine III* and subsequent editions of *ABC*.



ABC

Americans Before Columbus

OCTOBER, 1963

Newsletter published by
NATIONAL INDIAN YOUTH COUNCIL

Vol. I, No. 1

NATIONAL INDIAN YOUTH COUNCIL
Board of Directors and Officers

Melvin D. Thom (Paiute) . . . . President
Shirley K. Hitt (Mohawk) 1st Vice President
Joan Noble (Ute) . . . 2nd Vice President
Gerald Brown (Flathead-Sioux) . . Director
Edison Real Bird (Crow) . . . . Director
Karen Rickard (Tuscarora) . . . Director
Clyde Warrior (Ponca) . . . . . Director
Bruce Wilkie (Makah) . . . . . Director
John Winchester (Potawatomie) . Director
Herb Blatchford (Navajo) Executive Director

ABC Coordinators: Ansel Carpenter, Jr.
Fran Peaflyhitty
Tillie Walker

WHY ABC?

ABC (Americans Before Columbus) was conceived of and has been discussed by numerous individuals during the past few months. We felt that while many Indians are back in schools and colleges across the country, there is a lapse of time in which they are not able to keep up with Indian affairs and current news about Indians. We contacted young Indians from various parts of the country about a newsletter, and we received immediate and enthusiastic response. We then elicited articles from these individuals.

Members of the Trail Ridge Chapter of the National Indian Youth Council in Denver have volunteered to devote time to publish ABC at regular intervals. Students and other young people (not necessarily youths) are being urged to contribute to this publication. In the months ahead, many Indian young people will be asked to write articles for ABC. We want to accord as many Indian young people as possible an opportunity to contribute to the success of ABC. From time to time items of interest will be included so a constant flow of current news about Indian affairs will reach you. The future of ABC will depend on your response.

We want to bring to your attention our organization, the National Indian Youth Council. We shall not attempt to tell you all about NIYC now. We do welcome further inquiries, your membership, and subscription to the NIYC publication, ABC NEWS.

During the NIYC conference at Ft. Duchesne, Utah, in mid-August, concern was expressed among those present that we were uninformed about the many issues confronting Indian people today. The participants at the conference came because of a serious interest in the future of American Indians. But, sincere interest is not enough. We will not be effective until we gain thorough knowledge and understanding of the many problems facing us as Indian people. We must become well informed.

ABC is a start in helping us to inform ourselves. It can supply current information and present the issues in the field of Indian affairs, present opinions on issues, give information about the many opportunities available to Indian young people. ABC can become a sounding board for ideas.

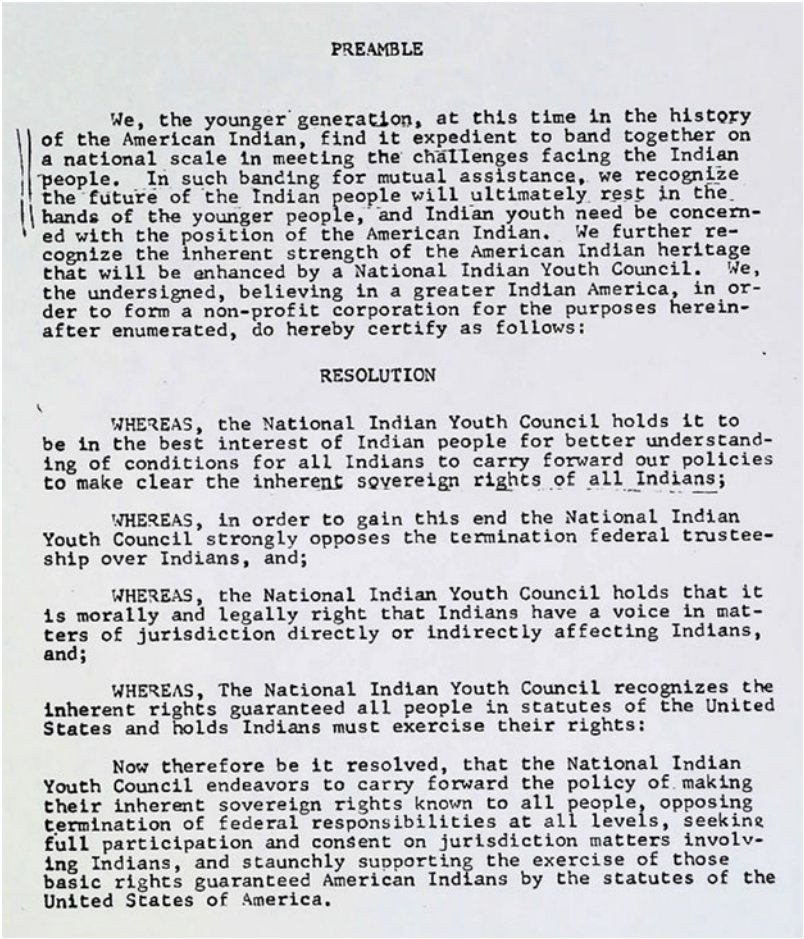
Indian young people are not of one mind on all Indian issues, and many points of view will be presented. It is important that young Indians have an opportunity to express their views now.

The first issue of ABC contains articles written by members of NIYC and other Indian young people who are not now members. The contributors this month are:

William Iven Hensley (Tikigaq), Kotzebue, Alaska, is our Washington correspondent. Bill is a junior at George Washington University, Washington, D. C. His major is

Figure 4. Americans Before Columbus, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1963.
Image reproduced from microfiche accessed via MSS-703-BC, box 1, folder 13 with permission from Center for Southwest Research, University of New Mexico Libraries.

covered NIYC members' academic and social accomplishments, printed information about college scholarship applications, and adopted a more "combative rhetoric" that denounced the systems of power that created the abysmal conditions most American Indians found themselves living in on reservations and in urban spaces alike. In May 1964, the NIYC partnered with the United Scholarship Service to turn *ABC* into a newspaper and distributed the publication to schools and colleges across the United States. Melvin Thom assumed editorial control of *ABC* in 1965 and moved the



PREAMBLE

We, the younger generation, at this time in the history of the American Indian, find it expedient to band together on a national scale in meeting the challenges facing the Indian people. In such banding for mutual assistance, we recognize the future of the Indian people will ultimately rest in the hands of the younger people, and Indian youth need be concerned with the position of the American Indian. We further recognize the inherent strength of the American Indian heritage that will be enhanced by a National Indian Youth Council. We, the undersigned, believing in a greater Indian America, in order to form a non-profit corporation for the purposes hereinafter enumerated, do hereby certify as follows:

RESOLUTION

WHEREAS, the National Indian Youth Council holds it to be in the best interest of Indian people for better understanding of conditions for all Indians to carry forward our policies to make clear the inherent sovereign rights of all Indians;

WHEREAS, in order to gain this end the National Indian Youth Council strongly opposes the termination federal trusteeship over Indians, and;

WHEREAS, the National Indian Youth Council holds that it is morally and legally right that Indians have a voice in matters of jurisdiction directly or indirectly affecting Indians, and;

WHEREAS, The National Indian Youth Council recognizes the inherent rights guaranteed all people in statutes of the United States and holds Indians must exercise their rights:

Now therefore be it resolved, that the National Indian Youth Council endeavors to carry forward the policy of making their inherent sovereign rights known to all people, opposing termination of federal responsibilities at all levels, seeking full participation and consent on jurisdiction matters involving Indians, and staunchly supporting the exercise of those basic rights guaranteed American Indians by the statutes of the United States of America.

Figure 5. NIYC Resolution Opposing Federal Termination Legislation, 1964.
Document reproduced from MSS-703-BC, box 5, folder 30 with permission from Center for Southwest Research, University of New Mexico Libraries.

publishing operation to his home reservation in Walker River, Nevada, where it continued through 1973 (Figure 5).[68]

The NIYC's publications were instrumental in growing its membership, as well as building national awareness about Indigenous college student activism specifically and Indigenous youth perspectives on American Indian affairs generally. Furthermore,

[68]Chronology, box 1, folder 31, NIYCR; "Why ABC?" Oct. 1963, box 1, folder 13, NIYCR; *ABC 1*, no. 1, May 5, 1964, box 1, folder 13, NIYCR; Shreve, *Red Power Rising*, 94-95; *Americans Before Columbus*, 1969-Current, Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/sn95061732/; Also see Seonghoon Kim, "'We Have Always Had These Many Voices': Red Power Newspapers and a Community of Poetic Resistance," *American Indian Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (2015): 271-301. Kim notes that *ABC* was the first Red Power newspaper of several that started around and were distributed throughout the 1970s.

Table 1. NIYC Membership Numbers

Date	# of Members	Change Rate (%)
August 1961	10	-
October 1961	82	8.2
1963	120	1.4
1970	5,000	41.6

Note: The NIYC saw a significant increase in membership after it began publishing *ABC* and engaging in direct action during the mid-1960s.
Source: Correspondence, box 1, folder 11, NIYCR; Bradley Shreve, *Red Power Rising*.

producing publications on its own, independent of academic or white organizational sponsors, allowed NIYC members the freedom to speak their minds without reservation or fear of sanctions. Between March of 1962, when the first issue of *Aborigine* was released, and 1970, the NIYC grew sixtyfold to over five thousand registered members. The publication of newsletters, and later newspapers, was foundational to the NIYC's growth and to an increase in Indigenous student activism. At the same time, during the last half of the 1960s publishing took a backseat to direct action as the NIYC's preferred method for contesting the federal government's termination and relocation policies (see Table 1).[69]

Direct Action: "Giv[ing] to a Cause"

NIYC members were not necessarily newcomers to civil disobedience when they launched their first "fish-in" campaign on the Makah Reservation, located at the northwestern-most point in the state of Washington in February 1964.[70] ("Fish-ins," of course, were reminiscent of and a play on the "sit-ins" utilized by activists in the Black freedom movement.) They had, for example, participated in "freedom rides" in the American South alongside Black college students who belonged to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Furthermore, in August 1963, Clyde Warrior had represented the NIYC in the March on Washington where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., John Lewis, Daisy Bates, and others spoke to throngs advocating for both civil and economic rights for African Americans.[71] As historian Bradley Shreve

[69]Chronology, box 1, folder 31, NIYCR; *Aborigine I*, March 1962, Microfiche, CSWR, University of New Mexico Library, Albuquerque, NM; Shirley Witt to Herb Blatchford, Oct. 31, 1961, box 1, folder 11, NIYCR; Statement of the NIYC, *Aborigine I*, March 1962, box 5, folder 30, NIYCR; also see NIYC Correspondence, box 1, folder 11, NIYCR; and Shreve, *Red Power Rising*, 139, 185. The NIYC paused publishing of *ABC* in 1967-1968 due to insufficient funds but renewed operations under the leadership of Gerald Wilkinson in 1969. Shreve states that the organization counted approximately forty members by January 1963, but a letter from Shirley Witt to Herb Blatchford in late 1961 states that paying members totaled eighty-two, with more planning to register.

[70]"A Sample: Declaration of Indian Purpose," April 26, 1961, box 1, folder 8, NIYCR; Cobb, *Native Activism in Cold War America*, 31-57; Shreve, *Red Power Rising*, 89-92. NIYC's leaders, for example, had engaged in civil disobedience to secure what they saw as Native American youth interests in the AICC's June 1961 Chicago Conference, where they adopted the Declaration of Indian Purpose.

[71]Chronology, box 1, folder 31, NIYCR.

has pointed out, NIYC officers and other Indigenous peoples in the 1960s knew about numerous direct action tactics, including the famous sit-ins Black activists utilized across the American South during the height of the civil rights movement.[72] NIYC members' visible and vocal resistance to the suppression of Indigenous fishing claims, however, marked a new era in Indigenous student activism and in the NIYC's approach to resisting termination. In Mel Thom's own words, he and other NIYC members felt compelled to do something after witnessing police brutality toward Black, Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Native people. They were also tired of US political leaders not listening to Native communities. As a result, they decided to "give [themselves] to a cause."[73] What made NIYC Indigenous student-directed fish-ins unique in 1964 were the shared connections to Black freedom struggles in the American South, their divergence from past Indigenous organizational approaches to anti-colonialism, and their propensity for creating intertribal solidarity. The fish-ins were the beginning of a broader movement for "Red Power."[74]

Since the advent of European colonialism, Indigenous resistance to colonization has been persistent; however, from roughly 1890 through the 1950s, Indigenous peoples did not lead significant public demonstrations. This, of course, was not without good reason; though the NCAI also strongly discouraged its vast intertribal membership from engaging in any type of public spectacle.[75] However, as NIYC officers and charter members who attended the AICC in June 1961 had shown, via strong opposition to first drafts of the Declaration of Purpose, they were not satisfied with the status quo and were willing to buck tradition to secure self-determination. This willingness accelerated after the NIYC's first annual conference at Fort Duchesne in August 1963, where Hollywood actor Marlon Brando spoke to the thirty-nine attendees. Brando, who had demonstrated support for the African American civil rights movement, expressed strong interest in seeing American Indians adopt similar protest tactics in their effort to contest federal termination policies. Even though some NIYC members found Brando to be a bit of a "problem" for them—because of his failure to recognize unique

[72]Bradley G. Shreve, "'From Time Immemorial': The Fish-in Movement and the Rise of Intertribal Activism," *Pacific Historical Review* 78, no. 3 (2009), 403-34.

[73]Melvin Thom, interview by Floyd A. O'Neil, Aug. 7, 1970, interview no. 624, Doris Duke Oral History Collection, J. Willard Marriott Library Special Collections, Salt Lake City, UT. In his interview, Thom went on to say that all racialized groups had been "forced" to do civil disobedience and "submit [themselves] and others to the penalties to call attention to injustices."

[74]Shreve, "'From Time Immemorial'"; Shreve, *Red Power Rising*, 119-20, 212; Charles T. Powers, "Bitter Look at the Uses of Red Power," *Kansas City Star*, Fall 1968, box 5, folder 30, NIYCR; Steiner, *The New Indians*. The origins of the slogan "Red Power" date to 1966, when NIYC president Clyde Warrior began using it with the aim of modeling SNCC's own slogan. In a national context, Stan Steiner's 1968 book *The New Indians* popularized the slogan, while Charles T. Powers indicted it and sought to connect it to white Americans' worst anti-communist impulses.

[75]Nick Estes, *Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2019); Shreve, *Red Power Rising*, 119; US Congress, Indian Reorganization Act, 25 U.S.C. § 461 (1934). Until 1934, Native peoples faced the threat of military retaliation for resisting the federal government. Furthermore, the NCAI once prominently displayed a banner stating "Indians Don't Demonstrate."

distinctions between the Black and Indigenous freedom movements—they did hear his message and ultimately took it to heart, though in their own way.[76]

As a result of termination policy, the federal government had transferred much of its jurisdiction over fish and wildlife directly to the states. For many tribes, this led to confrontations with state law enforcement agencies who sought to diminish the fishing and hunting rights that tribes' treaties had granted them access to and that federal officials had historically respected. Termination of fishing rights was undoubtedly a touchy subject for NIYC president Melvin Thom, whose fellow members in his own tribe, the Walker River Paiute, had been denied access to the Pyramid and Walker lakes since the early 1920s.[77] In December 1963, the NIYC's Melvin Thom and Herb Blatchford were contacted by a handful of tribes in the Pacific Northwest about ongoing fishing disputes in the region. A massive protest for fishing rights, led by a diverse intertribal coalition of Indigenous peoples, took place on January 1, 1964, on the Nisqually Reservation, located fifty-five miles south of Seattle. After learning about the protest, NIYC leaders decided to launch their first direct action campaign.[78] They held a press conference on January 21, 1964, in New York City, where Mel Thom, Clyde Warrior, and Bruce Wilkie (Makah) stood alongside Marlon Brando before a variety of news services. NIYC leaders boldly announced: "Indian people have their backs to the wall … the present termination policy and forced assimilation policy must be halted." They subsequently declared the NIYC's intent to engage in direct action (Figure 6).[79]

After seeking the approval of the Makah Tribal Council, the NIYC officially determined to stage fish-ins, in what was the organization's first public political battle opposing termination-era policy. In February 1964, over forty Indigenous college-aged individuals and young graduates protested termination policies by fishing the Puyallup River. According to Stan Steiner's account some years later, Indigenous women in the NIYC, like Shirley Witt, played a prominent role in the demonstration. Marlon Brando, who fished in a show of solidarity with NIYC leaders but did not "lead" the demonstration, was arrested on March 1, 1964. His arrest brought "national exposure" to the fish-in, which Witt said that NIYC members were eager to "capitalize" on. In the aftermath, NIYC activists were subjected to racist attacks in the press. Undeterred, the NIYC's civil disobedience near the Makah Reservation illuminated the American Indian civil rights movement for white America.[80]

[76]Chronology, box 1, folder 31, NIYCR; Shreve, *Red Power Rising*, 127. NIYC members occasionally expressed frustration that Brando could not see the distinction that whereas African Americans were fighting for equality denied to them because of Jim Crow laws, the opposite was true for American Indians: the law was largely in favor of tribes in the form of treaties, and Indigenous student activists were merely asking the federal government to honor them.

[77]Jack D. Forbes, ed., *Nevada Indians Speak* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1967), 264-65; Shreve, "'From Time Immemorial,'" 408-09.

[78]At Nisqually, over a thousand Indigenous people from fifty-six tribes protested for fishing rights; dozens were arrested.

[79]Chronology, box 1, folder 31, NIYCR; Dorothy Kilgallen, "Brando's Indian Pitch a Bit Baffling," *Washington Post*, Jan. 30, 1964; Drew Pearson, "Why Marlon Brando Stormed Capitol Hill," *Detroit Free Press*, Feb. 2, 1964.

[80]Chronology, box 1, folder 31, NIYCR; "Brando Arrested While Leading Indian 'Fish-in,'" *Los Angeles Times*, March 3, 1964; Steiner, *The New Indians*, 223; Shreve, *Red Power Rising*, 128-29, 138.

Figure 6. NIYC Leadership Meets Actor Marlon Brando, 1963.
Image of Clyde Warrior, Joan Noble, John Winchester, Melvin Thom, and Marlon Brando (left to right) reproduced from the Uintah Basin Standard, accessed via Utah Digital Newspapers.

The NIYC's fish-in along the Puyallup River was not its last, as the organization's leaders and countless members, in a strong showing of intertribal solidarity, participated in similar demonstrations from 1964 through 1966; however, the February 1964 fish-in was emblematic of the sharp turn Indigenous college students and young graduates had taken in their approach to anti-colonial resistance. In just three years, the NIYC had evolved from a group committed principally to dialogue and fostering camaraderie to one that embodied the principle espoused and practiced by Black civil rights activists across the United States: that of putting one's own body on the line for freedom. While the fish-ins did not make any immediate changes to laws or policies, their contribution to spreading awareness about the harmful impact of termination on Indigenous peoples' treaty rights as they relate to the protection of traditional Indigenous ways of life is undeniable. During the remainder of the 1960s, the NIYC focused its energy fighting against termination and for self-determination defined by Indigenous people themselves. For the NIYC, this meant an increasing dedication to forcing the federal government to uphold tribes' treaty rights, to fighting rural and urban poverty, and to securing equal educational opportunities for American Indian children and youth.[81]

[81] Chronology, box 1, folder 31, NIYCR; the NIYC's direct action in the Pacific Northwest is considered to have contributed to legal victories beginning in 1969 (see *Sohappy v. Smith*, a favorable ruling for the Yakama along the Columbia River), before termination policies themselves were terminated beginning in 1970. For more, see Shreve, "'From Time Immemorial,'" 433.

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Education Sovereignty: "Testing Promising Approaches"

In April 1966, the US Senate created the Special Subcommittee on Indian Education in response to proposed amendments to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. In July 1967, Senator Robert Kennedy (D-MA) was named chairman of the committee, and quickly came to the realization that "the 'First American' had become the last American with the opportunity for employment, education, a decent income, and the chance for a fulfilling and rewarding life." On August 31, 1967, Kennedy announced the Special Subcommittee's intent to "examine, investigate, and make a complete study of any and all matters pertaining to the education of Indian children." While Robert Kennedy didn't live to see the report's completion, his brother, Edward Kennedy, oversaw its publication and dissemination. In November 1969, *Indian Education: A National Tragedy—a National Challenge* was released.[82] As the federal government became increasingly vocal about concerns with the quality of education for racialized and politically marginalized peoples in the United States, so too did young Indigenous activists. In fact, in many respects, they took the responsibility for examining American Indian education and making improvements to it themselves. During the last third of the 1960s, running parallel to the efforts of federal officials—or perhaps, despite them—NIYC officers launched their own national campaign to promote Indigenous educational sovereignty.

At the same time that the NIYC met in Denver to hold its annual board meeting in 1966, the US Congress was assembling the financial capital and political will to investigate American Indian education. It was during that board meeting that NIYC leaders agreed to transition from fish-ins to speaking out on and working to solve issues around poverty. In the NIYC's view, poverty among American Indians correlated with termination, and leaders had spent most of the year up to that point raising money to conduct an academic study to document the correlation. At the time, there was also a growing awareness among NIYC officers that economic conditions and education were inextricably linked.[83] Clyde Warrior and Melvin Thom, in their new roles as NIYC president and executive director respectively, spent the summer of 1966 engaged in public advocacy, condemning federal termination policies and colonialism and drawing attention to rural and urban poverty and its impact on American Indians. Joan Noble and Shirley Witt, who were invited to speak at various college campuses, similarly spoke out against termination's impact on the economic livelihoods of tribes. At the same time, as a group, the NIYC was actively searching for ways to secure funding to support its collective effort to help tribes ensure that treaty rights were upheld.[84]

Enormous changes took place between the NIYC board meeting in July 1966 in Denver and its meeting held in San Francisco the following summer in 1967. In January 1967, the NIYC was notified that it was a co-recipient with the United Scholarship Service of a $150,000 grant that would be dispersed over three years to

[82]Special Subcommittee on Indian Education, S. Rep. No. 91-501 (1969).

[83]Chronology, box 1, folder 31, NIYCR; Thom, interview no. 625. The NIYC raised $5,400 during 1966 to study termination's impact on tribes.

[84]Chronology, box 1, folder 31, NIYCR; Shreve, *Red Power Rising*, 143-44; Steiner, *The New Indians*, 65-72; "Thom Elected Tribal Chairman," *Indian Voices*, January 1966, box 5, folder 30, NIYCR.

study schools serving American Indian children. As a result of the cash infusion, virtually overnight, the NIYC was forced to transform from an ad hoc student-run organization into one that mimicked the fully staffed and more bureaucratic organizations it had intentionally steered clear of in years' past. In part because of its financial award, the newly appointed commissioner of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), Robert Bennett (Oneida), sought an audience with NIYC leaders in February 1967. Whatever Commissioner Bennett expected going into his meetings with NIYC officers, he likely was unprepared for the affront that awaited him. NIYC executive director Melvin Thom pulled no punches; he accused Bennett of promoting the Interior Department's self-ingratiating economic self-determination mission among tribes while ignoring the poor educational conditions of Indigenous children and youth, all while continuing to extract resources from reservation lands. Thom also took the opportunity to tell Commissioner Bennett they had enough of white men trying to solve the "Indian problem"; this included removing children to boarding schools and adults to "ghettos in the white man's community."[85]

The NIYC's leadership soon after partnered with UC Berkeley's Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development (FWLERD) to begin conducting research on and reforming education for Indigenous young people. In the midst of their studies and preparations to conduct community-based educational interventions, the NIYC was also awarded $27,500 from the Ford Foundation to use in developing educational programming among Indigenous tribes. The reports NIYC leaders compiled in 1967, as well as their correspondence with program directors of the FWLERD at UC-Berkeley, reveal the issues they sought to prioritize.[86] NIYC members, long enamored with the Rough Rock Demonstration School started by Navajo with assistance from Ruth and Robert Roessel, were keen to develop eight community demonstration schools of their own in various places across the country.[87] In 1967, NIYC leaders believed the Rough Rock Demonstration School model could and should be duplicated, and that it held immense promise to thwart the ongoing white Christian assimilation of American Indian children and to prevent them from being removed from communities and placed in off-reservation boarding schools.[88] In conjunction with this project, their two main goals were to (1) improve the "self-concept of Indian

[85]Chronology, box 1, folder 31, NIYCR; Wes French, "Meet Explores Indian Dilemma," *Rocky Mountain News*, Feb. 8, 1967, box 3, folder 31, NIYCR; Christopher K. Riggs, "American Indians, Economic Development, and Self-Determination in the 1960s," *Pacific Historical Review* 69, no. 3 (2000): 431-63.

[86]Chronology, box 1, folder 31, NIYCR; Melvin Thom to NIYC Members, March 1, 1967, box 3, folder 31, NIYCR; Glen P. Nimnicht to Melvin Thom, March 21, 1967, box 3, folder 31, NIYCR. I do not know whether Berkeley's history of collecting human remains of Native Americans was known to the NIYC at this time. It is worth noting, however, that this became a major point of contention for future Native American activist groups, including AIM. For more on this topic, see Chip Colwell, *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits: Inside the Fight to Reclaim Native America's Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

[87]Glen P. Nimnicht to NIYC, Feb. 23, 1967, box 3, folder 31, NIYCR; Glen P. Nimnicht to NIYC, March 21, 1967, box 3, folder 31, NIYCR.

[88]Glen P. Nimnicht to NIYC, Aug. 9, 1967, box 5, folder 38, NIYCR. In this exchange, Nimnicht, the UC Berkeley FWLERD director, references the removal of Havasu children to off-reservation boarding schools beginning in the second grade. NIYC members undoubtedly had Robert Dumont's (Assiniboine) keynote address at their August board meeting fresh in their minds. Dumont, director of the American Indian Center in Chicago, asked them, "What goes into the building of a tradition of Indian education[?]" He then answered

children," and (2) "test promising approaches in [Native] language development."[89] Key to identity development, the NIYC asserted, was the quality of the curriculum being used to teach Indigenous students, which had for too long either "ignore[d]" or "exotic[ized]" American Indians, their histories, literatures, cultures, values, art, and languages.[90]

With grant money, partnerships, and an increasing number of staff to manage, however, the young Indigenous leaders of the NIYC faced significant internal challenges as they pursued their educational reform agenda from 1967 to 1968. The NIYC was plagued by debates over how best to use its new funding and where its time and efforts were best spent. In some respects the NIYC board meetings were productive and focused—for example, they regularly discussed the core issues of community-school development, college programs, and intercultural education. However, a larger question loomed regarding what the NIYC's general strategy and identity would be. Board members were divided over whether the NIYC should be a key agency in national Indian affairs or work exclusively on the ground with American Indian communities; most were convinced it was a mutually exclusive decision. The NIYC board also grew disenchanted with Mel Thom, who spent most of his time in late 1967 and 1968 working in Washington, DC, in collaboration with the Poor People's Campaign. Certainly, the board's view of Thom became less favorable once he drew the ire of both the Carnegie Corporation and Ford Foundation for alleged mismanagement of grant funds and for his highly visible and persistent militant activism.[91]

Amid these internal challenges, the NIYC released a report in April 1968 that highlighted numerous things it had learned from working on the various community education projects it had started in 1967. Among the most significant problems it identified from its education-related work was that "the powerful (BIA) and the powerless (Indian people) [were] attempting to be equal parties by skirting the issues of power." In its estimation, Indigenous people were already starting at a disadvantage. Other major problems the report observed were social disorganization (as best represented by the continued operation of off-reservation boarding schools), the desperate need for trained education personnel, and the "extreme absence" of [relevant] curriculum for Indigenous students (Figure 7).[92]

NIYC members came to recognize that educational planning for Indigenous peoples was "extremely complex," largely because of the variables involved, colonialism

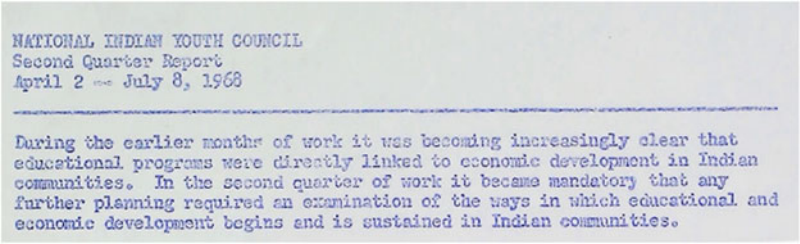
his own question: "The involvement of Indian communities as defined." See Robert V. Dumont, "The Quality of Indian Education and the Search for Tradition," keynote address, Aug. 26, 1967, box 5, folder 38, NIYCR.

[89]"Progress Report on Indian Education," July 18, 1967, box 5, folder 38, NIYCR.

[90]"American Indian Arts & Humanities Curriculum Project," report, Aug. 9, 1967, box 5, folder 38, NIYCR.

[91]Chronology, box 1, folder 31, NIYCR; Melvin Thom to NIYC Members, Jan. 18, 1968, box 1, folder 38, NIYCR; Thom, interview no. 624; "Educational Planning & the Indian Education Study," report, box 1, folder 38, NIYCR; Shreve, *Red Power Rising*, 178. Thom believed Carnegie and Ford's problem with him was largely because of his involvement in the Poor People's Campaign. In an oral history interview in 1970, he stated that Indian communities were reticent to support movements like the PPC because they're "conservative" and most tribes never tried to communicate anything about the movement to their people.

[92]"Educational Planning & the Indian Education Study," report, box 1, folder 38, NIYCR.



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Second Quarter Report
April 2 — July 8, 1968

During the earlier months of work it was becoming increasingly clear that educational programs were directly linked to economic development in Indian communities. In the second quarter of work it became mandatory that any further planning required an examination of the ways in which educational and economic development begins and is sustained in Indian communities.

Figure 7. Excerpt of NIYC Quarter 2 Report to the Ford Foundation, 1968.
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chief among them. Furthermore, they learned that "community" is never singular, and that even within one tribal group there are many communities. As applied to their work establishing demonstration schools, they came to understand that the model adopted by Rough Rock was not necessarily the best approach in every tribal community. In the 1968 report, they made special note that any schooling for American Indian children must involve collaboration and cooperation between communities and schools. The NIYC concluded by presenting four future directions its education-related activist work could take: (1) summer camps for middle school-aged students, (2) teacher institutes, (3) cross-cultural studies, including the development of relevant materials for instruction, and (4) school development—specifically, working with communities to identify appropriate models for educating Indigenous children.[93]

Even though they were equipped with in-depth knowledge of the educational challenges tribes and Indigenous peoples faced, and seemingly shared a sense of determination about what needed to be done to reform the system, NIYC members never fully realized their vision for complete educational sovereignty. In July 1968, NIYC president Clyde Warrior passed away unexpectedly after suffering from complications related to cirrhosis of the liver. Warrior's death was a huge blow to NIYC morale, and, in conjunction with renewed financial troubles of the organization, the NIYC's education-related work largely came to a halt. Shortly after Warrior's funeral, Melvin Thom resigned as NIYC executive director and returned home to devote more time to his role as chairman of the Walker River Paiute tribe. The combined financial crisis and leadership vacuum almost led to the NIYC's complete dissolution during the winter of 1968 and spring of 1969. While some of the education programming the NIYC was involved in continued through 1970 on a shoestring budget, Warrior's death signaled the end of one generation of Native American college student activism and the birth of another on the horizon.[94]

[93]"Educational Planning & the Indian Education Study," report, box 1, folder 38, NIYCR.

[94]Chronology, box 1, folder 31, NIYCR; Thom, interview no. 625; "Alcohol Victim Lauded: Memorial Rites Recognize Indian Leader," AP News, Sept. 10, 1968, box 5, folder 30, NIYCR. In the article, Melvin Thom is quoted as saying: "When an Indian drinks, he's a free man… . They will keep on dying until people recognize them and respect them for what they are."

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Epilogue

When Gerald Wilkinson (Cherokee/Catawba) assumed the responsibilities of executive director of the NIYC in 1969, apart from salvaging what was left of the organization, he did his very best to maintain the focus on the NIYC's three major strategies for resisting termination during the 1960s: he renewed the publication of *ABC*; worked hard to secure grant funding to support educational programming and scholarships for Indigenous students in higher education; and, though Wilkinson's proclivity for direct action never matched that of Mel Thom or Clyde Warrior, he still had a penchant for public demonstrations. In December 1969, for example, the NIYC co-hosted a winter powwow at Fort Totten in Washington, DC, with leaders of the American Indian Movement (AIM).[95]

The powwow, which took place just three miles from the seat of US federal power, was organized in large part as a response to the release of Senator Edward Kennedy's completed Indian Education report. The findings of the report were brutal: in the nearly half-century since the release of the infamous Meriam Report in 1928, very little across Indian Country had changed.[96] By co-hosting the powwow, the NIYC and AIM demonstrated their shared commitment to Indigenous culture, tradition, and values, as well as the fusion—both intergenerational and intertribal—of a form of youth activism that sought to resist colonialism, whiteness, and their ongoing impact across Indian Country. A little over six months after the Fort Totten powwow, the federal government announced it would allow termination-era policies to expire. While many organizations, people, and voices were responsible for termination's final downfall beginning in 1970, Native American college student activists and the NIYC must be counted among those that contributed significantly.[97]

During the first decade of its existence, the NIYC transformed from a small organization pursuing equal citizenship for Indigenous peoples to a mass movement intent on securing Indigenous peoples' and tribes' rights, pursuing increased tribal sovereignty, and articulating self-determination for themselves independently of federal policy. Having started with just ten members in 1961, the NIYC claimed nearly five thousand by 1970. While AIM drew exponentially more media attention to the fight for Indigenous civil rights in the decade that followed, the NIYC laid significant groundwork in building a vast organizing base from which AIM and others could draw to engage in their activist projects. In an interview with Floyd O'Neil in August 1970,

[95] Chronology, box 1, folder 31, NIYCR; *ABC*, Oct. 1969, box 1, folder 13, NIYCR; Gerald Wilkinson to NIYC Members, Fall 1976, box 4, folder "National Indian Youth Council," Bradley H. Patterson Files, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Grand Rapids, MI, https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0142/1103402.pdf. By 1976, Wilkinson was using "community organizing" as opposed to "direct action" in official communications about the NIYC's agenda. The NIYC also added "Scientific Research," and "Litigation" to its scope of work.

[96] Special Subcommittee on Indian Education, S. Rep. No. 91-501 (1969).

[97] President Richard M. Nixon, Special Message on Indian Affairs, July 8, 1970, https://www.epa.gov/sites/default/files/2013-08/documents/president-nixon70.pdf. President Nixon's speech did not in itself restructure termination policy; however, it signaled a federal policy shift and is widely recognized as concluding the formal termination era. The Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act (1975) is widely considered to have formally concluded the federal termination policy era.

Melvin Thom confidently declared that Indian committees, communities, and people were "here to stay." Why? In Thom's appraisal, it was "because of the young people."[98]

Nathan Tanner is a PhD candidate at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He extends his thanks to Chris Getowicz, Jennifer Johnson, Chris Span, Yoon Pak, and the anonymous reviewers whose feedback improved this manuscript considerably. Nathan also extends his thanks to the archivists and staff at the University of New Mexico's Center for Southwest Research, New Mexico State Records Center and Archives, and the J. Willard Marriott Library at the University of Utah.

[98] Thom, interview number 624.

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