

Associate Professors Awarded Spencer Foundation Grant to Advance Indigenous Perspectives in Classrooms and Communities



Associate Professors Melissa Tehee, Ph.D., and Breanne Litts, Ph.D.

Melissa Tehee, Ph.D., associate professor in the Department of Psychology at Utah State University, and Breanne Litts, Ph.D., associate professor in the Department of Instructional Technology and Learning Services (ITLS), were recently awarded a Spencer Foundation Large Research Grant to support their work advancing cultural awareness and Indigenous knowledge in K–12 classrooms across Utah. The accurate representation of diverse cultures, knowledges, and histories remains a persistent challenge in K-12 education.

Through this research, Tehee and Litts aim to address these issues from an Indigenous perspective using a community-focused approach. This approach emphasizes close collaboration with tribal knowledge holders—individuals within Native or tribal communities who carry vital cultural, linguistic, and traditional knowledge—and other partners to co-develop educational tools and curricula that present Indigenous perspectives in interactive, respectful, and meaningful ways. These tools and curricula can then be presented in classrooms across Utah.

“Education rooted in Indigenous knowledge helps students understand histories, values, and ways of knowing,”

Tehee shared. “When I think about the effect this work can have on future generations, it’s really about showing up intentionally in the spaces where young people are beginning to form their identities. Those early moments of learning matter a lot.”

Tehee and Litts have combined their complementary strengths to bring this project to life, integrating Litts’ expertise in technology and learning design in diverse cultural contexts with Tehee’s background in clinical psychology and her lived experience as a citizen of the Cherokee Nation and current director of the American Indian Support Project, which advocates for the psychological well-being of American Indians and other Indigenous peoples and to advance knowledge pertaining to Indigenous psychology.

Together, their interdisciplinary perspectives have shaped the project’s direction and reinforced its commitment to collaborative engagement with the community. “Collaboration and community are at the heart of everything we’re doing,” said Litts. “By centering Indigenous perspectives and continuing to build momentum around a range of cultural perspectives, we create real impact.”

Tehee and Litts have already developed and implemented learning tools outlined in their Spencer Foundation grant. One of these tools is an interactive game called the Pemmican Experience, which teaches K-12 students how to make pemmican—a traditional Indigenous food with cultural significance among tribes in Utah and across North America. Tehee presented this tool at the National Council of Social Studies Conference in Washington D.C. last December.

Darren Parry, former Chairman of the Northwestern Band of the Shoshone Nation, was a key partner in creating the Pemmican Experience alongside Tehee and Litts. He brought his own lived experience as a citizen of the Shoshone Nation and prior experience working with K-12 schools.

“What has stood out most to me was seeing how students engaged with the [Pemmican Experience] and the story behind it,” Perry said. “My hope is that this research curriculum that Melissa and Breanne are creating will continue to reshape how Indigenous histories and values are taught in schools. I want students to see Native knowledge as living, relevant, and deeply connected to values that still matter today.”

Along with their efforts to create interactive educational tools and curricula for schools, Tehee and Litts are

working with the Nebo Title VI American Indian Education Program to develop youth-created, community-facing educational resources.

“We are working to create a multicultural fashion show for our school district,” said Eileen Quintana, program director for Nebo School District. “This event will celebrate the beauty of our community and teach through clothing styles, art, and music. Many of the obstacles and negative interactions between groups could be eliminated if we spent more time together and learned about each other’s culture, values, and contributions to society and that’s exactly what we’re doing here.”

Tehee and Litts emphasized that the tools and resources they have developed are intentionally designed to evolve over time through the integration of feedback from students, educators, and communities. This will ensure that they remain impactful and meet the needs of their intended audience.

“When we shape these tools through feedback and collective experience, they progress into lasting sources of learning and meaning,” Tehee explained. “I look forward to the day when these younger students start showing up in my undergraduate classes and already have a basic understanding of other cultures.”

Tehee and Litts continue to build momentum through their work, and they hope to have a lasting impact on all generations.

“When I look to the future of this project, I envision a world in which everyone—not only Indigenous peoples—feels deeply connected to their culture and takes pride in it,” Litts said. “I hope this project helps create space for people to openly share their perspectives, learn from one another, and develop greater understanding and respect across cultures.”

Learn more about the project at <https://centeringculture.org/>.