

Confluence Podcast Transcript: Ruth Plenty Sweetgrass-She Kills

Ashby Kinch: This episode is part of a series featuring faculty fellows in the Willow Grant, which “aims to *increase* success of Native American STEM Faculty and *advance knowledge* about issues impacting their career progression.” The project is in its 6th year of exploring Indigenous Research Methodologies and ways of indigenizing academia while supporting the advancement of Indigenous scholars in various professorial roles at both tribal and non-tribal universities. The Willow Alliance is a collaboration among faculty from Salish-Kootenai College and the University of Montana. The project is led by Dr. Ruth Plenty Sweetgrass-She Kills, from Nueta Hidatsa Sahnish College and funded by the National Science Foundation through its Alliance for Graduate Education and the Professoriate (AGEP). Listeners can learn more about the grant at the link in the show notes.

The Graduate School is pleased to present this podcast series focusing on the stories of individual faculty members and key personnel, who tell their stories of finding their way in an academic context that is not always well-aligned with Native cultural and intellectual values. But their stories demonstrate creative and successful approaches to supporting indigenous research and developing a new cadre of Native faculty, who play a vital role in developing the intellectual and cultural capacity of the state of Montana.

Ruth Plenty Sweetgrass-She Kills: When I was a senior in high school, we had to study the Garrison Dam. And so we had to write a paper, whatever kind of format we wanted. And I actually wrote a poem, um, about, uh, it was a, an interview I had conducted with my grandmother and she was talking about life before the dam. And so I wrote a poem. I spent a lot of time with my grandmother at the kitchen table and hearing her stories about being a young woman and the time before the Garrison Dam, so that was why I interviewed her.

Teetering gray towers of outdated news encircle us like warm protective arms of a mother. Hazy yellow light hangs lazily above our heads.

Grandma's oxygen machine, moans, monotonously, muffled mechanical complaints that go unnoticed.

Bubba, Sally and Henry sniff rusty orange carpet for comfortable nap spots. Grandma leisurely chews fry bread I made. Her stories slowly begin to tumble out over thin, chapped lips in a proud parade, gaining momentum and fluidity like a creek, joining the smooth flow of a river. Through Grandma's eyes, lush, bountiful, bottom lands, succulent wild fruits and berries, delicious wild potatoes and turnips, clear water, narrow Missouri River, one big extended family living in the fertile valley. Through her ears, children's high-pitched laughter, the vibrant green leaves, whispering childish secrets in the wind, stories that visitors and guests reenact with hand gestures.

Pa, home at lunch, singing with his round hand drum. Alba Woods, a time of work and simple happiness is remembered. Old, expressive hands covered in soft, wrinkled brown flesh unfold Grandma White Duck's brilliant purple wool shawl, through dime size moth holes, my grandmother, a skinny young girl, dark downcast, eyes, obedient, listening ears, tiny ankles that don't stretch the elastic in her white anklets.

The East side of the house shelters escaping hot afternoon's summer sun, she sits with Grandma White Duck and Lone Woman. Dark-skinned grandmothers in white high-top moccasins with long peppery braids sprawled down colorful calico dresses, tell stories and gossip in their only tongue, Hidatsa. In her cushioned office chair at the head of her round magazine-covered table, she's almost finished with her third piece of fry bread. The remnants of her fried potatoes are wiped off the white plate with her last corner of bread. As Grandma folds the remaining fry bread in a protective sheath of thin, shiny aluminum foil. our reflections become distorted like the reflections in a shattered mirror. Grandma's long fingernails that are super-glued on the tears, scratch a picture on a white styrofoam container. Their home, many visitors with an open welcome. A big soft straw bed topped with many warm hand-sewn quilts for Grandma White Duck.

Her grandfather, a gentle man, corn silky fine brown hair that was to be trimmed with long, sharp scissors by Grandma's young, inexperienced hands. His hand-rolled cigarettes lined in a perfect row on his crate furniture.

The greatest challenge, a game of checkers at which he would always win. But one time, even though he looked the board over with extreme care, Grandma was stealthy enough to jump him five times in a row and win a single game.

When Grandma Boyd was sick and bedridden, to help raise her spirit, Uncle presented her with some succulent pears, which she loved and continued to love with a passion.

Pa attempted to bribe her to see the doctor with a beautiful brown hat. She stubbornly refused to see the doctor. She kept the hat. On his arrival for another visit, Uncle would slice her a large, juicy blood-red chunk of liver or kidney with his jackknife. With hesitant hands, she would take it.

Teetering, gray towers of outdated news encircle us like the protective arms of a mother. Hazy yellow light hangs lazily above our heads. Grandma's oxygen machine moans monotonously muffled mechanical complaints that go unnoticed. Bubba, Sally and Henry whine to go outside. Grandma sits back in her chair with a reminiscent grin. Her words opened the window of time. I know her world, Alba Woods. I look at my beautiful grandmother. My heart swells with pride and admiration.

Slowly, silently, grandma gets up to let the dogs out. The window closes.

Ashby Kinch: So thank you for joining us on Confluence, Ruth.

Ruth Plenty Sweetgrass-She Kills: Yes. Thank you for the invitation.

Ashby Kinch: So, um, you had a laborious journey getting here. We were hearing the story of all the trials and travails. But welcome back to Western Montana where you come have a, a long history and you're here for a Willow project meeting. And so I'd kind of like to hear your story about how you came to be involved in the, in the Willow Project and why it means so much to you.

Ruth Plenty Sweetgrass-She Kills: My story starts at Nueta Hidatsa Sahnish College. I ended up doing my undergraduate work there and I was a research assistant. With that perspective, I saw how when we would have partnerships with other non-tribal institutions, there was often an inequitable distribution of resources and the funding, also. I think it's important to understand that uh, I'm an enrolled tribal member of a federally recognized tribe. So I'm enrolled at the Three Affiliated Tribes, which reside on the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation in North Dakota. We have one of the tribally chartered tribal colleges in the state of North Dakota, which is Nueta Hidatsa Sahnish College.

It was formerly called Fort Berthold Community College. That's where I earned my undergraduate degree. I was a research assistant there. When I was doing research, we often partnered with non-tribal institutions. We had funding coming from federal agencies, from state agencies. We did a lot of partnerships and often there was an inequitable distribution of research, uh, funding as well as other resources. And a lot of times, the research questions were directed by the non-tribal institution.

So even though to some degree the research, um, was intended to serve our tribal communities, the questions weren't always the ones we might have asked. And the research wasn't always done in ways that we would've done the research. So as I completed my degree and looked at what were the next steps, there was a suggestion of going to graduate school.

And I ended up coming to the University of Montana with the intention of returning home to my tribal college with advanced degrees so I could be a PI on research proposals and make sure that there was more equity in the distribution of research funding, as well as that we had more of a voice in the research questions that were being asked in the methodologies that were being used.

So I came to the University of Montana to do my master's degree. I completed that. And then I ended up going into my PhD program in the College of Forestry. Based on my experiences in my undergraduate program at a tribal college and then my graduate work at a non-tribal institution, I was very interested in the academic experiences of American Indians who had pursued degrees or earned degrees in the field of natural resources.

Through that research, one of the things that kept coming up over and over again in the interviews was the importance of having Native American faculty in the classrooms and as mentors. And there was so few Native American faculty specifically in STEM fields. So when I completed my PhD, uh, there was a call for

proposals that came out. And at that time I was working in the College of Forestry as the Native American Natural Resource Program Coordinator. So I was a staff person here. And I had the idea of: let's put together a proposal to develop some kind of a program or a model to better support the success of Native American faculty in STEM. So that's where the, the first seeds really started for Willow. There was two people, myself and another faculty member who wanted to submit proposals.

And so you know how the university works. The ORSP at that time had to decide which proposal we were going to move forward with. And they selected my idea. We had to put together a proposal team and it got funded. So here's where we are.

Ashby Kinch: Yeah. The rest is history.

Ruth Plenty Sweetgrass-She Kills: Yeah. It's becoming history.

Ashby Kinch: Yeah. It's present tense. Yeah. You're still doing it. And so that, what I love about that story too though, is, um, it combines, you know, two things we really like to elevate on, um, on our podcast, which is: you had this focus. So one part of that story is your native identity and the importance of injecting into the system of science education, a different value system. But you must have also gotten the bug for doing research. What were you studying? What got you kind of passionate about that side of it?

Ruth Plenty Sweetgrass-She Kills: Okay. So in my CV, at the time, I was working for my tribal college in the science department. And I ended up doing a research experience for faculty, which was an NSF-funded project through the Organization of Tropical Studies. So I did summer research down in Costa Rica. Which was crazy because I took my children with me. They were two and four, and we go into the place with the highest density of vipers in the world, and I had high school level Spanish. Ended up not doing the research I had originally proposed.

At the end of that experience, we presented our research at a conference at Howard University. And I met a woman who heard about my project and she said, "You know, I've got funding at the University of Montana for Native students, and if you want to continue to work at a TCU (Tribal Colleges and Universities), you really should have an advanced degree." So I'm like, "Oh, okay, sure."

She helped me with some of the application process. I didn't at that time know about the importance of establishing a relationship with potential faculty mentors. As part of the application process, she set up an interview with a faculty member. I come bopping into his office and I have on jeans and a cap, and I sit down and we're just chatting, you know, chatting about the kinds of research that I had done prior to that. And he told me a little bit about some of the research he had done and he said, "You know, I think this is a good fit. Let's, let's do this."

So I finished the application process and then I start attending conferences as a graduate student and people would say, "Well, who do you work with?" And I was "Fred Allendorf."

And they were like, “You work with Fred Allendorf?” And I learned that he was called the grandfather of conservation genetics. And so I'm like, oh my gosh. Yeah. I didn't realize the magnitude of being able to work under Fred Allendorf. And that relationship was established, or you know, that connection was made by Penny Kukok. Penny Kukok.

Ashby Kinch: Yeah. And Penny, you know, stalwart in our, um, community for many, many years. And, and of course Fred was, you know, Regents Professor and just a, an incredible figure in our wildlife biology. And, and like you say, conservation biology is, you know, he revolutionized the study. So yeah, what an incredible way to have landed in graduate school.

So, it's a really great thing, you know, thinking from the graduate school's perspective, we're trying, we like to elevate that: A, the relationship between the mentor and the mentee and also kind of demystifying the application process. So, you know, you got through it just fine, but be great if other graduate students in there kind of knew how important that relationship was and kind of getting off on the right foot and establishing a good mentor relationship. Um, I mean obviously you've had good mentors going all the way back to your college experience. What role have they played and how has that funneled into your thinking on the, on the Willow grant? I know a key part of that is building out sort of faculty capacity and thinking about the role mentoring plays in that.

Ruth Plenty Sweetgrass-She Kills: When you asked your question, one of the things that came to mind also that I think is important to recognize is there's faculty mentorship and the importance of the faculty relationship for just the application process. But also one thing that is important is relationships with staff. And so one of the people that I worked a fair amount with was Mary Kaminsky. And she was also, I would say, I don't know if you'd say a mentor or a support person, but it was really important that I had good communication with her and she, I would say, uh, played a, a strong role in my graduate studies as far as more of the personal side of, not necessarily the research or the classroom, but getting through graduate school.

Ashby Kinch: You're absolutely right. It's an ecosystem. It's not, it's not like the faculty is the only lens on the full experience. It's program, uh, administrators, program support, graduate school staff. So yeah. Thank you for bringing her up.

Ruth Plenty Sweetgrass-She Kills: Well, part of why I mention staff is because at tribal colleges, our faculty have many roles besides just teaching. And they advise many students. But the staff is really important too. And so at non-tribal institutions, there's not always a lot of Native American faculty members, but they're often, you do see on campus more Native American staff. And not very often do you see Native American administrators. So that would be a plug for--

Ashby Kinch: We're moving in the right direction lately.

Ruth Plenty Sweetgrass-She Kills: But sometimes in non-Native institutions, Native American students, that's where they get the Native American mentors is through Native American staff. So those were two things I wanted to mention.

Ashby Kinch: Yeah, yeah. No, you're, the spirit of it is exactly that. And I think you're role, especially in having set out in this goal to return to a tribal college. You're doing it. And it's just awesome you're playing a role in that cultivation of a, of your home, uh, home college. Right?

Ruth Plenty Sweetgrass-She Kills: One of the things that I think is important about TCUs is that their goal, their mission is specifically to serve their tribal people. So that is going to be specific to, for example, the Mandan and Hidatsa people. And that means the coursework is going to incorporate culture and worldviews of the Mandan and Hidatsa and Arikara people. So it's very specific in that sense. You can't get that at a non-tribal institution. They want to grow their own people, their own communities' infrastructure. And that's a beautiful dream. That's a beautiful vision. And that started in the '40s because of the inability of non-tribal institutions to serve Native American students in the ways that they needed to be served, which we still see that today. And it's like we had to take the reins. And it's a beautiful challenge to be part of that, to be part of making that dream continue and to grow and to thrive.

And what are those next steps? How do we want to teach? What do we want to teach? How do we integrate our culture and our language? And thinking about, I had mentioned before, research. What do we want to know? How do we want to ask those questions? How do we want to do that research? And then, who has access to what we develop? To what we learn? Who has access to that data? Those are the parts of being at a tribal college that I, I really love.

Ashby Kinch: Well, and I, I would say sort of one of the benefits of, um, higher education institutions, in general, but you know, specifically in this case, we're talking about innovation. Where does it take place? Right? So, um, in this case, Indigenous peoples are bringing a different set of values and a different set of questions and integrating them into existing knowledge structures of various kinds. So on this campus, there's a lot of, you know, strong intellectual work going on in the Indigenous research methodology area.

Ruth Plenty Sweetgrass-She Kills: I love being an Indigenous scholar. I love to ask questions. I love to do research. But I also find myself really giving pause and thinking about, who am I doing this work for? Who do I want to have access to this work? And is it appropriate to integrate some of the things that I'm doing into Western Science? Into Western Academy? Does it serve the people in the communities that my work is meant for? So sometimes I give pause to some of the things you described.

Ashby Kinch: Well, tell me more about that. What, what's the pause? Is, is it that, because you're still doing science, right? You're still pursuing scientific studies, you're still seeking publications, you have an accomplished career. Um, it's, it's more about the end goals.

Ruth Plenty Sweetgrass-She Kills: I think part of it is sovereignty. I want future generations of Indigenous people, Indigenous scholars, Indigenous nations, to have the sovereignty to do the kind of research that they want to have, the kind of education system that they want. I want our knowledge and values and philosophies to be incorporated in that work in the ways that are meaningful to us. And sometimes I think there's so much that needs to change at a systemic level, systems level, that it makes me wonder if that system isn't the right space. And so maybe we just need to have a different space.

And to some degree, I think TCUs are a good space for some of that work. And I love to see when we have young scholars coming up. And you mentioned innovation. And so I can only think and dream so far. And seeing the things that these young scholars want to have happen, I think that's exciting.

So I, I don't know what's going to happen in the future, but I want to make sure that they have a choice and they feel safe and they feel represented and they, they have that voice and that sovereignty.

One of the things that I, I really liked about working under Fred was thinking about change and from a evolutionary perspective,

Ashby Kinch: Right? Really long time scales.

Ruth Plenty Sweetgrass-She Kills: Long time scales, and huge changes. And sometimes I think people, when they think about evolutionary change and evolutionary time, they often think it means super-duper slow. But that's not true. And that was one of the things that I loved, that I learned from Fred, or from being in organismal biology and ecology, was that sometimes there's these bursts--

Ashby Kinch: stochastic! Everything happens at once.

Ruth Plenty Sweetgrass-She Kills: Just enormous changes that happen in a very, very short amount of time. And so, although sometimes we just tolerate that change is going to be slow or that we expect change to be slow, it doesn't have to be. And sometimes amazing ginormous changes happen very quickly. For example, our pandemic. We had huge changes in the way we do things that not necessarily were positive. There were some things that, um, some results that were positive. But change isn't always slow--

Ashby Kinch: --or good.

Ruth Plenty Sweetgrass-She Kills: Or good. And we don't always have to have that tolerance for change to be slow. And sometimes it is okay to expect things to change more quickly. Sometimes you just get tired of the status quo. And so you, you can either stay in that system and try to make systemic change or you can leave that system and go elsewhere where there's a, a better fit.

Ashby Kinch: Well, so tell me about a current project you're working on.

Ruth Plenty Sweetgrass-She Kills: One of my current projects, which is actually a collaboration between Nueta Hidatsa Sahnish College the University of Montana. It's funded by the USDA and it is about the Missouri River. And so I know you had talked about the connection with river.

Ashby Kinch: Rivers. Yeah. The show's Confluence. We love rivers. That's one of our big thematics.

Ruth Plenty Sweetgrass-She Kills: The project is, one of the goals is to develop a consortium of tribal colleges and universities along the Missouri River. So the Hidatsa people consider the Missouri River our Grandfather. There are 15 TCUs along the river. And one of the goals of creating this consortium, or one of the ideas is that we will have the opportunity to have conversations about what's important about the river—both ecologically, environmentally, but then also culturally. Those conversations have never really happened, especially in an academic space. When we start having those conversations, that'll open up, “Well, what data do you have? What kinds of questions do you have? Are there things that we can share? Are there resources that we can share?”

So our partnership with the University of Montana, Kyle Basinski, is to identify some of the other kinds of agencies that have data related to the Missouri River that may be helpful to answering questions that TCUs and specifically tribes have about the Missouri River. So that was just one little tiny thought when you asked about other research.

Ashby Kinch: That's not a tiny thought. That's a big thought. And it's, it's such a powerful, I mean, it's so powerful on so many levels, right? That first of all, we love rivers, of course. But you know that, that the way rivers flow and contour across the geography, has, of course, a cultural geography as well as a, a scientific, you know, geography. And so it's that cultural geography that will play such a key role in what kinds of questions each of those tribes would ask about, about up and downstream effects of all the things that, that they're doing. And so that's what a powerful sort of unifying, you know, it's not a symbol, it's a real thing. Right? But it has symbolic levels to it. Even just the idea that you're gathering everyone around a river is a powerful mechanism.

Ruth Plenty Sweetgrass-She Kills: Well, one piece of the project that I think is important to remember is these relationships that tribes have with the Missouri River is centuries, if not thousands of years old. And so you talked about your background in the way that you view the world and you think about questions. And we've seen dramatic changes with—

Ashby Kinch: dams.

Ruth Plenty Sweetgrass-She Kills: Exactly. And so that's one of the, the pieces of the research that we're starting to look at is the, for us, the impact of the Garrison

Dam. And is that still a relevant piece of concrete? Is it still doing what it was intended to do? And should it have even been built in the first place? What were some of those ecological implications, those cultural implications of the Garrison Dam?

And I think the removal of the Garrison Dam is important for a number of reasons. Part of that is ecological, and part of that is cultural. My grandmother, Francis Boyd, was born and raised in Alba Woods, which is a community that ended up being flooded on our reservation because of the Garrison Dam. As her oldest granddaughter, I would hear her stories about what life was like prior to the dam in Alba Woods. And we had large community gardens. We had access to timber, we had access to wild plums, to Juneberries, which over here they call 'em either serviceberries, you know, they have a lot of different names. And the way she talked about it was with so much love and so much fondness and their sense of community was so great.

My wish that I keep putting out into the universe is I want to see that dam removed and I want to, in my lifetime, have my feet on the same soil that my grandmother's feet were on.

Ashby Kinch: That's a beautiful wish.

Ruth Plenty Sweetgrass-She Kills: Wish big! Wish big!

Ashby Kinch: Listeners, let's make that happen. And, um, where are we in the, the collaborative project? We are proposing a research study that would be NSF funded or...?

Ruth Plenty Sweetgrass-She Kills: So the consortium?

Ashby Kinch: Mm-hmm.

Ruth Plenty Sweetgrass-She Kills: We had two years of funding. And of course that was right as we were in the midst of COVID. So some of the work we had proposed was more challenging to complete. We had the two years of funding. We are finishing up, um, with our second year, so we're going to be requesting a no-cost extension. We have a mini grant from the NSF Includes Project. It is a Native food energy water systems project to gather those 15 TCUs to have a conversation, initial conversation and say, "This is something we would like to move forward. Do you want to be part of it?"

And let's, you know, look at what would be make sense as far as what would be the funding needs, what would be the agency or other source of funding that we would like to pursue. So that's where we are right now. We did develop a course, a special topics course that we are offering our sister TCUs to offer simultaneously. So then we can share some of the teaching load and then also share in those conversations from each of our individual perspectives.

Ashby Kinch: That's fantastic. Yeah. Well, good luck with that collaboration. That sounds really amazing and like high-end impact in terms of especially raising visibility of that whole continuity of the, of the river through all of these communities.

Ruth Plenty Sweetgrass-She Kills: Another project that I'm working on in my role as the Food Sovereignty Director at my tribal college is seed repatriation. So we are agriculturalist people traditionally, and we grew corn, beans, squash, sunflowers, and melons. The plains are very windy and so to prevent cross-pollination or hybridization of corn, you have to grow corn at least one mile from any other varieties of corn. And due to land access issues related to numerous policies as well as just--there's a lot tied to that--we are unable to grow more than one variety of corn each year. So our traditional seed cache struggles to grow out all of the varieties of corn.

We have around 18 to 20 different varieties of corn. We have about six varieties of beans, which have less issues with hybridization. I don't know how many varieties of squash. We've been collecting seeds from other institutions and agencies and are currently partnered with the USDA agricultural research station in Mandan to multiply out our seeds, especially focusing on corn, because they have the land as well as the human capacity to hand pollinate multiple varieties of corn.

So over the next five years, they will be growing out multiple varieties of corn to augment our existing seed cache, which is accessible to Mandan and Hidatsa and Arikara tribal members.

Ashby Kinch: And then I guess, I guess you're here in town for the Willow Project, reconnecting with colleagues on that. Where is that project, uh, in its life cycle and, and what are you, what are you learning from the work on the Willow?

Ruth Plenty Sweetgrass-She Kills: One of the comments I want to make about the Willow Project is I want to, with the, some of the current issues and another Willow project--uh, the reason we're called the Willow Project is because the Hidatsa people are also known as the People of the Willow. And the reason is the willow are so numerous and abundant along the rivers. The vision is to have Native American faculty be just as numerous as the willow. And our willows are also medicinal. And so we think about the role of Native American faculty for both the ecosystem that they're in—so in their institutions—as well as being those mentors for the upcoming Indigenous scholars and for each other. So I just wanted to give that context because I know right now, or recently in the news, there's another Willow project. And I think that a name can be very important how that name comes about or is earned. And so, um, I wanted to put that out there. And then I don't remember the other part of your question.

Ashby Kinch: Well just, yeah--

Ruth Plenty Sweetgrass-She Kills: Where we are with the Willow Project?

Ashby Kinch: Yeah. Where you are and, and, and, you know, reflecting on what lessons learned and, and things that you're able to share with others that would, would, um, you know--suggest the impact of this kind of collaboration.

Ruth Plenty Sweetgrass-She Kills: Sure. Yeah. One of the things that's been rewarding has been the use of the application of Indigenous research methodologies. And it's been an exciting part of the project because, like you mentioned, indigenous research methodologies have really started about 20, 30 years ago. And you see that growth in the literature of the application of Indigenous research methodologies. So, we've contributed to some of the literature with our project's development of the six R's framework.

And one of the things that I think is, is interesting about this project that has been, I guess, I don't know if you'd say a challenge or a learning point, is we are an alliance of TCU and non-TCU institutions. And their experiences of faculty are very different because the institutions themselves are very different. What's expected for promotion or tenure or if tenure exists is very different.

And so it's, it's a challenge to create something that fits both systems that are very diverse. And one of the pieces that your wife works on is a review of the institutional support program. So what are the policies and procedures that are in place for faculty, for Native American faculty, in particular? And there there's a great diversity. So those are interesting pieces to try to navigate.

Ashby Kinch: Yeah. So, um, the six R's for our general listener: relationship, reciprocity...

Ruth Plenty Sweetgrass-She Kills: Respect, relationship, relevance, reciprocity, responsibility and representation. And that was one of the things when you mentioned the representation, I think that's a huge piece that, um, to me, is important when we are having this conversation about the non-tribal institutions, tribal institutions, the visibility, and also the representation on campus.

So thinking about, when you look at the proportion or the, the statistics of faculty, there should be a reflection of the overall population that you're serving. So does the population, the number of Native American faculty on a campus also reflect the broader community population? And I don't think that's probably true.

Ashby Kinch: I, I think that would only be true at TCUs, right? That TCUs are probably the only place that's coming close. But we, you know, unfortunately, I know the numbers here. We're getting better. We're close, actually, at the undergraduate level in terms of undergraduate population relative to state proportion. We are a national, um, leader in our number of graduate students as a percentage, but we're nowhere close to the population and, and the graduate number gets smaller. And then it's where the Native faculty members, that's where we're the smallest. Yeah and in the graduate sphere, we're normally talking about modeling, relationship modeling. Like: what does it look like for a Native faculty member, um, to, as a mentor for an undergraduate, to see that path that they can take to move themselves

into a new, um, sometimes it's a new research area that they never would've thought of.

Ruth Plenty Sweetgrass-She Kills: So one of the things that we, we talked about was the, The service to community, the um, and, and so thinking about Native American faculty or Native American students, you know, why are we in academia? And part of that is to serve our communities or with the intention of going back to our communities a piece that is really important, and I hate the word that I keep saying peace, but a component, and that sounds so Western.

We didn't talk a whole lot about the importance of family. And so in previous research that I've done as well as with the Willow Project family is something for Native students as well as Native faculty that is really important and can either contribute to our success or can be a responsibility that isn't factored into the work that we do by our institution or by our advisors.

We have those commitments, we have those responsibilities, and we aren't able to just step away from those. And so I just wanted to make sure to acknowledge how important our communities, but especially our families are to our individual success, satisfaction, fulfillment.

Ashby Kinch: Yeah. And, and it's such a powerful for faculty, um, who go through the Indigenous mentoring project training that Jen Harrington and Maryland have developed. You know, um, that bit about family is so important to the grounding of that. And I've watched that in the room when faculty encounter that idea. You know, family's important to a lot of people, right? It's not like, you know, that's a pretty universal thing, but it, what you just described that much more broad kin network and all of the complexity that goes with it. I think that's a key part of that Indigenous mentoring training to have people realize it's not just this little small nuclear family. And it's not, especially not families like my own, um, which are very comfortable with sending their kids off, you know, all over the place. You know, the, the close-knit quality of that means, you know, if there's a death in a, in a family, they're gonna be gone. They're gonna be back in their home community for a period of time, for example. And, and you do have to have systems that can accommodate for that, that can, that can adjust to that demand that need.

Ruth Plenty Sweetgrass-She Kills: One other thing that I wanted to share that I is something unexpected. You know, you mentioned to my research, um, it isn't until only recently that I've really started to consciously think about how being an Indigenous scholar, how teaching, how doing research, how publishing can really be an act of justice and work towards justice. And, um, so like I said, I, you'll be--I'm sure at some point you'll be seeing some publications about the dam and good other things that I would like to see change.

Ashby Kinch: Yeah. And it's important I think to have those moments in your career where, um, you really. I'm not talking about you. I'm just, in general, faculty member face this problem. They chase the, the golden, uh, brass ring of tenure, and then they get it, and then, you know, maybe they have some momentum, but somewhere in there you have to pivot and say, what's it all about? What am I actually--And so

you do see a lot of people make that pivot and say, I want, I wanna see my work play out in some real-world way. Some people have that right from the beginning, but, you know, um, some people really want to see that rich, you know, um, uh, nexus of, of community and social values be brought to bear on their actual work that they do. And so it's, it's awesome to see you bringing your formidable intellectual talents to that really important community program.

Ruth Plenty Sweetgrass-She Kills: Well, I don't know if they're formidable intellectual talents, but maybe it's just my orneriness. Um, and then that helps too. Well, one of the things when you talk about how some families just send their kids off, you know, our kids weren't sent off. Our kids were taken.

Ashby Kinch: Taken, yeah.

Ruth Plenty Sweetgrass-She Kills: And sometimes didn't come back. Yeah. You know, my colleague and friend Marsha Small, does research on Indian boarding schools and finding the ones that didn't come back. So...

Ashby Kinch: Yeah, that, that was a very powerful conference last fall here on campus about the boarding school, uh, era. And, um, yeah. And, and really important research happening, um, all over the country. But here at, um, too, on, on just the telling each of those stories, starting to recuperate each of those stories. 'cause all those people, you know, suffered and it's, it's time to make sure those voices get heard.

Ruth Plenty Sweetgrass-She Kills: Yeah. So it's interesting being a scholar and being in an education system that has not always had a good history with my people.

As we integrate or utilize indigenous research methodologies, sort of simultaneously decolonizing our research as well as indigenizing our research. So deconstructing to some degree the way we do our work, but also reconstructing it with Indigenous philosophies and values and being guided by Indigenous research methodologies has been really important to the Willow Project.

Ashby Kinch: Um, well that's, it's been so wonderful talking to you. Um, Ruth, thank you so much for joining us on Confluence.