

WE NEED TO FOCUS ON THE DAMN LAND: Land Grant Universities and Indigenous Nations in the Northeast

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1910 Postcard of Morrill Hall, University of New Hampshire. [NH Historical Society](#).

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Executive Summary

Recent research reveals the complicated relationship between New England's land grant universities and the Indigenous tribes whose land they occupy. In the Fall of 2020, undergraduates from Smith College partnered with FINE to investigate how land grant universities view their historic relationships with local Indigenous tribes and to answer the question "Can food create a bridge between Indigenous communities and land grant universities?" They explored whether these universities are changing their policies and actions, or considering returning the land through reparations, partnerships, or other pathways. The students conducted 18+ hours of interviews with staff, faculty, and students from the six public land grant universities, speaking with Native and non-Native stakeholders in a variety of positions and academic disciplines. They found that food was not often directly present in official Indigenous programs at land grant universities, as more pressing needs for university Native American programs must be addressed first. Researchers provide recommendations to New England land grant universities and other stakeholders for improving their relationship with Indigenous communities, including building genuine partnerships, supporting Indigenous projects and farmers, and funding Indigenous faculty and community research participants.

Background and Methodology

This past spring, Farm to Institution New England collaborated with a group of Smith College students to investigate the relationships between land grant universities in New England and the Indigenous communities whose land they occupy. The relationships between land grant universities in New England and local Indigenous tribes are rooted in cultural and physical genocide as well as countless other atrocities that still manifest today. Universities have played a unique role in the theft of Indigenous land and have a long history of exploitative research practices. Today, many universities are making steps towards repairing their relationships with Indigenous communities. However, the size, number, and influence of these efforts and programs varies vastly between universities. For this research, the team focused on the six public land grant universities of New England (University of Massachusetts Amherst, University of New Hampshire, University of Vermont, University of Maine, University of Connecticut, and University of Rhode Island). Even among such a small sample, the team was able to see a broad spectrum of progress toward repairing university relationships with Indigenous peoples.

The research team conducted 18+ hours of interviews with eleven staff, faculty, and students from the six public land grant universities, speaking with Native and non-Native stakeholders in a variety of positions and academic disciplines, in addition to desk research. The interviewees will not be mentioned by name in this report in order to preserve their anonymity. Although the interviewees represented a variety of positions and strategies, when reviewing common themes the team was able to compile four overarching principles for those looking to undertake projects to build or repair relationships between universities and Indigenous communities, as well as a set of recommendations for universities, FINE and other groups around policy and funding, partnerships, programs, and research.

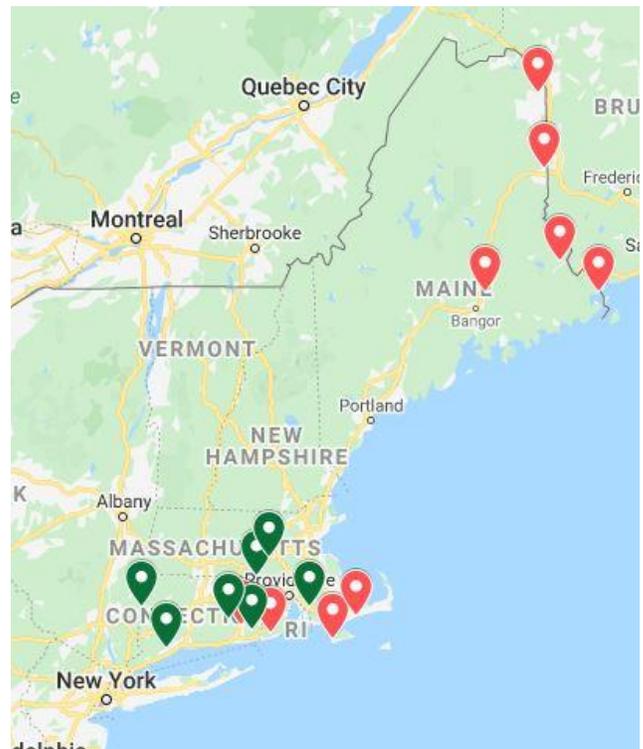


Figure 1: [New England reservations](#).

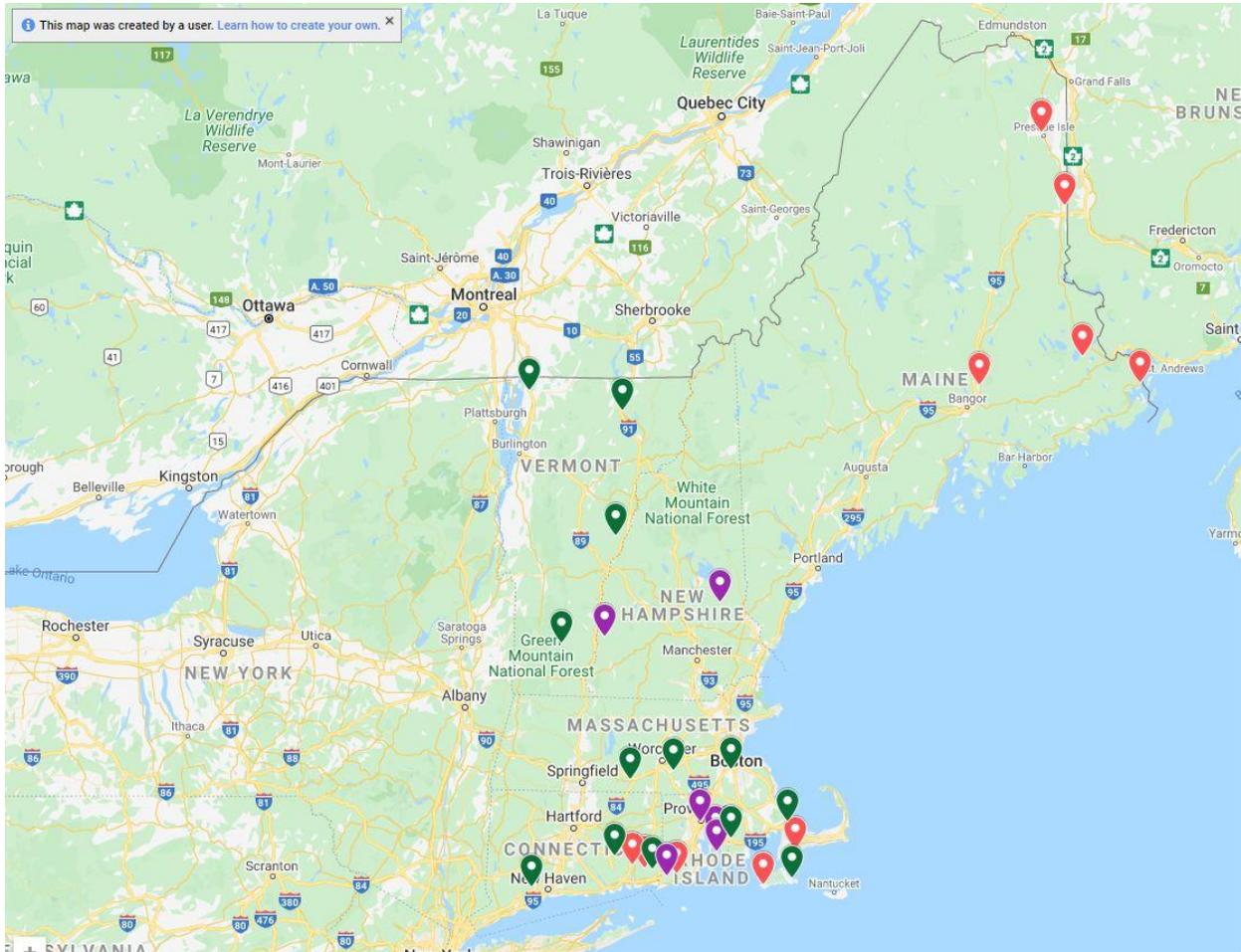


Figure 2: [New England tribes.](#)

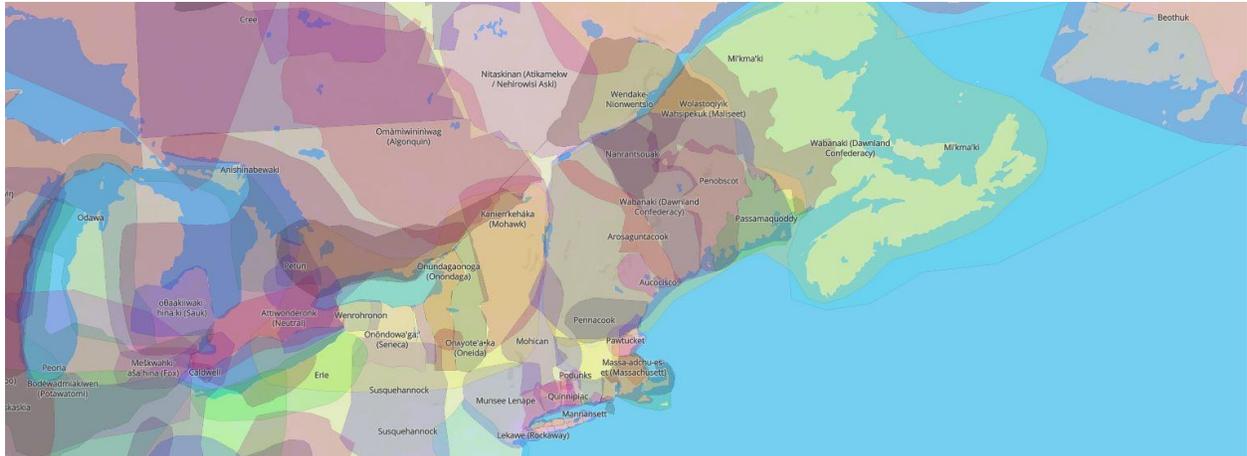


Figure 3: New England homelands. Image: [Native-Land.ca](#)

Overview of the six New England land grant universities

University Name	Location	Land acknowledgement	Number of students	Free tuition for Native students?	University Sponsored Native/ Indigenous Program
University of Maine	Traditional lands of the Penobscot Nation. Orono, ME.	Official land acknowledgement statement. The president also signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Penobscot Nation.	11,741	Yes	Native American Programs and Center. This includes a minor in Native American Studies, the Wabanaki Youth in Science (WaYS) Program, a leadership institute, student organization, etc.
University of New Hampshire	Traditional lands of the Abenaki, Pennacook and Wabanaki peoples. Durham, NH	No official land acknowledgement.	15,500	No	Native American and Indigenous Studies Minor.
University of Vermont	Traditional lands of the Abenaki peoples. Burlington, VT.	No official land acknowledgement.	12,257	No	Summer program for Abenaki high schoolers.
University of Rhode Island	Traditional lands of the Narragansett peoples. Kingston, RI	No official land acknowledgement.	16,828	No	Partnership with the Tomaquag Museum to build a new museum site on URI campus.
University of Massachusetts	Traditional lands of Nonotuck peoples. Amherst, MA	Land acknowledgement through the Five College consortium. No official land acknowledgement.	30,657	No	Josephine White Eagle Cultural Center. Certificate in Native American and Indigenous Cultural Studies. Native Advisory Council.
University of Connecticut	Mohegan, Mashantucket, Pequot, Eastern Pequot, Schaghticoke, Golden Hill Paugussett,	Land acknowledgement through the Native American Cultural Program. No official land acknowledgement.	32,669	No	Native American Cultural Programs (NACP). UConn Indigenous Nations Cultural and Educational Exchange. Native American and Indigenous Studies Students Association (NAISA).

	Nipmuc, and Lenape peoples' territory. Storrs, CT				
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Case Studies

University of Maine (UMaine)

- UMaine has multiple programs and several staff members that engage with Native issues. The university has an official land acknowledgement statement and has signed an Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Penobscot Nation, a federally recognized tribe whose reservation is close to the UMaine Orono campus. The MOU outlines principles for research practices and for the handling of Penobscot collections and cultural heritage materials.
- UMaine has a Native American Program and Center that does academic, advocacy, and support work for Indigenous students and the broader community. For example, they have a Native American Studies minor, a Wabanaki Youth in Science (WaYS) Program, and all new signs at the university are written in both English and Penobscot. UMaine also provides free tuition for Native American students.
- UMaine has more existing infrastructure for Native issues than the other schools we studied; however, there is still work to be done. The Wabanaki tribes in Maine have many medicine, community, and family gardens, as well as fisheries; these primarily serve as food sovereignty projects, but some are commercial enterprises. UMaine is considering adding a position that would support some of these tribal programs as well as grant and infrastructure development. This could be an opportunity for the university to leverage their access and bring resources to tribes.

University of New Hampshire (UNH)

- In recent years, the University of New Hampshire has started to invest in Native Studies as an academic discipline; in the spring of 2020, the university launched an interdisciplinary minor in Native American and Indigenous Studies (NAIS). However, we did not come across any faculty at UNH that identified themselves as Indigenous, and the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts (which oversees the NAIS minor) says there are no plans to hire new faculty for this program. According to one of our interviewees, UNH has never successfully retained a Native faculty member.
- We spoke to the Indigenous New Hampshire Collaborative Collective, a group not formally affiliated with the university, but that includes students, staff, faculty, and outside community members. The INHCC advocated for three years to start the NAIS minor,

although they had also hoped for hiring of new faculty members and an increase in student resources, such as more library books.

- Our interviewees at UNH identified the lack of state or federally recognized tribes in New Hampshire as a hurdle to further progress on Native issues at the university; one interviewee stated that many people in the community did not even realize that there are still Native people living in the state.
- One interviewee we spoke to noted that an effort from several years prior to push the university to adopt a land acknowledgment had failed; however, in the months since we began this research, the university has adopted a formal land acknowledgement, approved by tribal elders. Additionally, in 2020 the university began to celebrate Indigenous Peoples' Day, rather than Columbus Day. These actions, as well as the addition of the NAIS minor, are a hopeful foundation for future actions and programming within the university.

University of Vermont (UVM)

- From our research, we found that UVM as an official institution does not seem to be actively involved with Abenaki tribes nor with Native American studies more broadly. The administration has, however, recognized their role in a UVM eugenics survey in the 1920s and 30s that negatively impacted Abenaki members and others for generations in Vermont. UVM removed the name of a past president from one of their libraries due to his involvement in that eugenics survey. While an apology is a first step, the general consensus is that more needs to be done by the university to make amends. Many Abenaki members are hesitant to partner with the university or other official entities and do not want their names to be put on a list, which partially stems from the past ways they have been treated by the university.
- The current situation at UVM has not improved significantly. In recent budget cuts, UVM cut the position of one of the only professors who taught about Native American studies. The university does not have an official Native American Studies program. Individual departments have land acknowledgement statements, but there is no official statement from the university, although interviewees noted that there is an ongoing effort to create one.
- In January 2021, university staff, faculty, and other community members formed an Indigenous Peoples' Working Group. This group is still in the beginning stages of building relationships with local tribes and working to identify actionable steps from the university. In addition to this group, there is a student group known as the Indigenous Peoples' Collective. One interviewee noted that while there are people at the university working on Indigenous issues, there is a lack of a central space for resources, education, and advocacy.

University of Rhode Island (URI)

- While there are land acknowledgments from individual colleges at the university, there is no institution-wide statement. However, according to one interviewee, there has been an increase in interest and awareness around Native issues at the university in recent years. This increase was partially sparked after National Archeology Month in October 2019, when URI held a historical walking tour of its Kingston campus in collaboration with the Tomaquag Museum. The event was titled “Walking Through Time: The 3,000-Year History of the URI Campus”, and was created in a collaborative effort between URI’s anthropology, sociology, history, and archeology departments. Since then, the university has added a one credit course on the Native history of URI’s campus.
- In addition, URI has recently leased 18 acres of land to the Tomaquag Museum, a museum of Narragansett culture and history. The Tomaquag Museum has plans to build a new museum site on this land. The current museum site exists in too small a building and in too remote of a location; this new museum site will be centrally located, and in a new and sizable building. The museum hopes to open a small dining area that serves traditional Narragansett foods. They also plan to have a garden of traditional crops on the museum site that can supply this dining operation, and that can serve Narragansett tribe members.

University of Massachusetts - Amherst (UMass Amherst)

- UMass Amherst has a long and complicated history with its Native neighbors that is impossible to retell fully here. Two of the major sticking points that were mentioned by current faculty, however, were a statue of Nonotuck chief Metawampe near the Integrated Learning Statue and the university’s former mascot, the “Redman.” While the university changed its sports teams’ mascot in 1972, there were never any reparations or other material apologies. Additionally, the statue of Metawampe still stands on campus, with the inscription “Legendary spirit of the Redman.”
- UMass itself currently has no formal land acknowledgment, although there is a Five College Consortium land acknowledgement. However, the university’s Native Advisory Council is currently working with local Native nations to write a land acknowledgement statement that specifically addresses UMass’ history.
- Additionally, the university does not have a formal Native American and Indigenous Studies department; students enrolled in a Master’s or doctoral program can complete an NAIS certificate through the university, while undergraduates can complete an NAIS certificate through the Five College NAIS Program. One interviewee mentioned that there were not enough conversations happening around UMass’ specific history with its Indigenous neighbors, and that they managed to escape more pressure by being able to point to initiatives through the Five Colleges.
- We did not hear about any food-specific programs happening at UMass, although our interviewees did identify this as a possible area for immense growth, given UMass’ ranking as the best college dining in the country. However, there are currently several

sustainability initiatives focusing on Indigenous issues with researchers from UMass, especially through the Northeast Climate Adaptation Science Center. This shows that people are already interested in sustainability and Indigenous issues at UMass, which hopefully shows potential for growth at the intersection of food, sustainability, and Indigenous issues.

University of Connecticut (UConn)

- UConn's Native American Cultural Program (NACP) has a land acknowledgement on their UConn webpage. However, UConn itself does not have an official land acknowledgement.
- The NACP's primary goal is to serve the Native and Indigenous students at UConn, but also to educate UConn's surrounding communities on the Native histories, cultures, traditional ways of life, and more. They try to balance research and advocacy with the end goal of securing free tuition for Native and Indigenous students. However, the NACP is very underfunded and under-resourced. The NACP operates out of a small space and has no permanent staff, which impedes their ability to build meaningful relationships with local Indigenous communities.
- A central focus of NACP advocacy right now is for the administration to conduct a cluster hire of Native and Indigenous faculty across disciplines. In the past, the university has struggled to retain Native faculty. According to interviewees, UConn's administration has historically fluctuated in its support of its Native and Indigenous community. Currently, NACP has some support from the administration and is pushing for the monetary support it needs. The NACP is also pushing for UConn to offer free tuition to Native students.
- The UConn Indigenous Nations Cultural and Educational Exchange (UCINCEE) is a grant-funded program that seeks to create educational and cultural exchange with tribal communities in Connecticut through a mentorship program. The program welcomed its inaugural cohort in 2021. UConn students were selected as UCINCEE mentors and have undergone training to learn how to meaningfully and respectfully engage with Indigenous communities. The UCINCEE mentors will also begin to form relations with approximately 8-10 Mashantucket Pequot high school students, to help them with a variety of activities ranging from college prep to homework help.

Overarching Principles

Start small

As one interviewee said, "We can't go back. We can't fix the past. We can do small things." Many interviewees expressed the difficulty of advocating for change in academia, and the lack of funding which constrained their research and programming. Despite these hurdles, all of them expressed the necessity to do something. Interviewee after interviewee said that their institution's history with Native peoples was full of self-serving, extractive researchers and broken promises; as such, several of them noted that it is much more beneficial to make a smaller

commitment that can actually be fulfilled, rather than promising grand plans which fall through. Fulfilling small commitments makes sure you are actually helping Native nations, rather than being performative. It also helps start the process of building trust, by showing that you are reliable.

Slow down

Many interviewees noted the slow pace of change in academic institutions, as well as in tribal governance. However, we heard from some interviewees that it may be beneficial for institutions to slow down even further. In the last several years, many universities have realized the necessity of investing in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion programs; but many of these institutions tried to implement these programs too quickly, without proper research, and failed. One interviewee called for universities to take time and do their research; to realize that they have hurt Native communities for hundreds of years, and that this cannot be fixed overnight. Slowing down is another way to show that your institution is actually committed to engaging with this work long-term, rather than virtue-signalling.

Listen

Institutions and individuals need to actually listen to Native people and communities. There is a long history of (often well-intentioned) researchers assuming that they know what Native peoples need, and embarking on research or programming without first asking the communities they are attempting to serve. One interviewee noted that Native communities are much more likely to partner with institutions if they have a specific need that the institution can fill, such as funding, land, lab space, etc. Native communities know their own needs and desires; institutions and researchers need to listen and engage on the community's terms, rather than trying to push through their own ideas.

Give the land back and put your money where your mouth is

It is important to recognize that there are students, faculty, staff, and other community members at every one of these universities (and at most other institutions!) that are already trying to do the work to have the universities repair their relationships with Native communities. The problem is not a lack of people, programs, or willpower; overwhelmingly, it is a lack of funding and resources. This holds true for many programs initiated by Native communities as well.

Since these land “grant” universities are built on stolen land, a powerful (and materially beneficial) action that universities can do is to start giving that land back. One example we saw of this was the partnership between URI and the Tomaquag Museum, where URI has leased 18 acres for expansion of the museum. This action is particularly important in New England, as many tribes do not have reservation land, or have very small reservations. Having a land base can be crucial for many projects, particularly those focused on food.

The most impactful action that any institution can take to ensure justice for Native communities is to fund and support the people already working for it.

Recommendations

The following recommendations represent feedback received from interviewees. The researchers acknowledge that these recommendations reflect conversations with only a subset of stakeholders impacted by this work and that this is the beginning of a much larger conversation that needs to center the voices of Indigenous communities. While we did formally interview several Indigenous people, with the exception of one, we only spoke to those who were affiliated in some way with one of the land grant universities. Speaking with Indigenous community members unaffiliated with the universities would be key to understanding the other side of these potential partnerships. These early recommendations are important considerations for FINE, institutions, and anyone interested in working with Native American peoples and tribes.

Policy and Funding

- Financially support Native and Indigenous faculty, activists, programs, etc., on university campuses and beyond.
- Push state governments to fund universities and their Native programs and initiatives.
- Support policies for state and federal recognition of Native tribes.
- Offer free tuition for Native students.
- Hire Indigenous people and fund their research.

Partnerships

- If an organization or institution wants to partner with a Native or Indigenous tribe, they need to build a genuine relationship with that group. Given the long and fraught history of treatment of Native and Indigenous people in the US, it will take time to build trust with a Native tribe or nation. Relationships should be long term, visible, and committed. It is also important to respect the choice of tribes or nations who do not want to partner with an outside organization at all.

Programs

- Support existing programs.
- Engage in projects that Native communities are actually asking for.
- Create internship programs specifically for Native young people.
- Create a list of Indigenous farmers to buy from.

Research

- Conduct community engaged research, rather than being extractive.
- Pay people for their time.

Conclusion

The original research question that motivated this project was “Can food create a bridge between Indigenous communities and land grant universities?” However, very few of our interviewees spoke directly about food. We found two distinct reasons for this. Firstly, not many universities have the foundation or infrastructure for genuine, reciprocal, long-term projects (of any type, but especially around food) with local Indigenous communities. These universities will need to focus on creating this foundation, through actions such as recruiting and supporting Native staff, faculty, and students; creating and funding Native student centers or cultural programs; and investing in relationship-building with Native communities. The second reason was that food programs did not seem to be a priority for the majority of people we talked to; it is important to listen to what each of these communities is actually asking for, and act accordingly.

And finally, not every community will want to partner with universities around food initiatives. There are food sovereignty projects all around New England and beyond, such as the Abenaki Land Link Project, the Narragansett Food Sovereignty Initiative, Gedankina’s Cultivating Mother Corn initiative, and The People’s Garden on the Penobscot Reservation. However, as these are food sovereignty initiatives, it may not be in every tribe’s best interest to partner with universities on them. In short, what FINE and other organizations can do is support universities in building foundations for future work, start building relationships with Native communities, and listen and follow through if/when they ask for your support.

About the Authors

Maeve McCurdy graduated from Smith College in May 2021 with a degree in Anthropology and a concentration in Climate Change. She is currently the Operations Manager at 350Vermont. **Fee Pelz-Sharpe** also graduated from Smith in 2021 with a degree in American Studies and a concentration in Sustainable Food. They are currently a first grade teacher with Tulsa Public Schools. **Sofia Perrotto** graduated from Smith in 2021 with a degree in Sociology and a concentration in Climate Change. She is currently a writer at SPOTLIGHT: Climate Displacement in the News. The team was advised by **Paul Wetzel**, FINE’s Director of Research and Evaluation, **Hannah Leighton**, provided additional support.

Appendix I: Interview Questions

"I am part of a team of Smith College students working on a project for Farm to Institution New England about the food systems of New England land grant universities and actions that these universities might be taking to grapple with their histories with Native nations in the area."

1. Please tell us a little bit about yourself, your role at (*Insert Institution*) and what department you primarily work with.
2. Do you know anything about the specific history of your university as a land grant beneficiary?
 - a. What responsibilities do you think your university has given their status as a land grant school?
3. Can you talk about your school's history/relationship with the local Indigenous [*insert specific name*] communities/tribes?
 - a. How are these discussions part of the campus culture/dialog or not? Who talks about this?
4. Broadly speaking, what actions is your university taking to repair or build relationships with (*Insert Native Nations*)?
 - a. What departments on campus are most actively involved in this work?
 - b. What actions is your university taking with regards to its food systems?
 - c. If you have an established program, how did it come about? What steps did you take?
5. What actions do you think would be most meaningful for your university to take? Where are your priorities?
6. How do any of these relate to food systems?
 - a. a. How do you envision the role of food in the relationship between your university and the [*insert name*] tribe?
7. What do you see as the biggest challenges to implementing these changes? 8. Do you have anything else to say that we didn't ask you about?
8. Who else should we talk to? At your university, other schools, programs, individuals, etc.